

**Could Christ Have Been
A Woman?**

**What's The Relationship Between
Emptiness & Beautiful Nails?**

What is Enlightenment?

An inquiry into the most important spiritual questions of our time

**Jetsunma Ahkön Lhamo
Sam Keen
Marion Woodman
Father Basil Pennington
Mary Daly
Jose Cabezon**

**MEN'S
LIBERATION?**

**WOMEN'S
LIBERATION?**

**GAY
LIBERATION?**

**HOW
FREE
DO WE
REALLY
WANT TO BE?**

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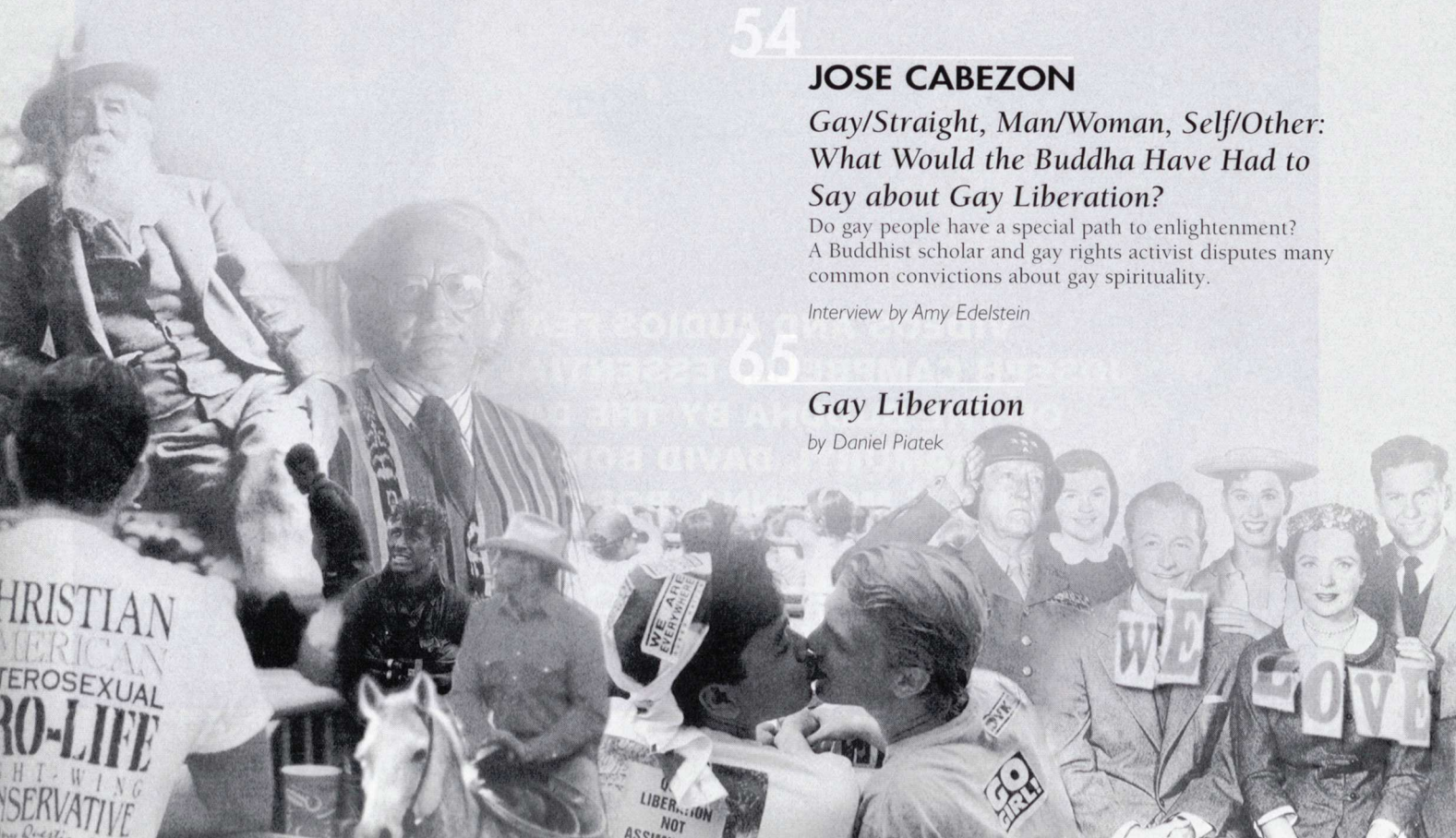
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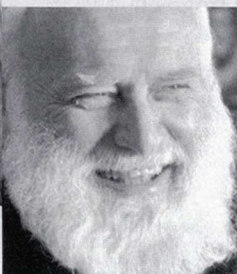
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What is Enlightenment?

"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 magazine 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, Founder

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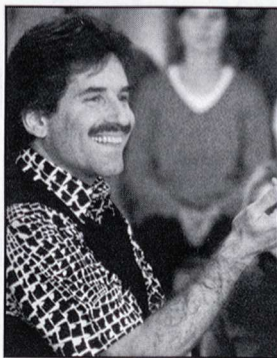
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Andrew Cohen



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 for 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 that 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, India and Australia, including an international center in the Berkshire mountains 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 the author of several books, including *Freedom Has No History*, *An Unconditional Relationship to Life*, *Enlightenment Is a Secret* and *Autobiography of an Awakening*.

The International Fellowship for the Realization of Impersonal Enlightenment 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.

For more information about Andrew Cohen, his teachings and publications please contact the center nearest you.

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LETTERS

to *What Is Enlightenment?*



Issue 15, Spring/Summer 1999

A MORE COMPLETE PERSPECTIVE

Thank you for another superb, even transcendent, issue of *WIE*. Your Spring/Summer issue on "The Self Masters," which included an interview with me, represented a fair, balanced and positive exploration of issues bound to be as controversial as they are stimulating. I hope the issue generates further dialogue about the nature and purpose of everyday life and the path to (or realization of) enlightenment.

To your vast credit, I found the issue refreshingly open-minded in its treatment of the subject matter. This free exploration resonates with the best traditions of both scientific and spiritual inquiry—an approach rare among the many sectarian approaches.

I'd like to address one oversight, more on my part than yours, that might distort my approach to "everyday enlightenment" as expressed in my interview. You noted the action-oriented influence of Dr. Shoma Morita on my approach to "behavioral enlightenment." This is quite correct, but incomplete. One

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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of my most recent and influential teachers is Dr. David K. Reynolds, whose books on the topic of "Constructive Living" have influenced and enriched my own life and teachings. Constructive Living combines both the action-oriented work of Dr. Morita and the more reflective inner work of Ishin Yoshimoto called *Naikan* ("looking inward").

As described in my interview, an important facet of Morita's work can be summarized as: (1) Accept your feelings (as they are, as natural, without trying to fix them), (2) Know your purpose, and (3) Do what needs to be done (whether or not you are in the mood). This seems a useful approach to living well, but taken alone, as Dr. Reynolds has pointed out, it can create problems. For example, applying these three principles for effective functioning might also help one become a more effective assassin.

Yoshimoto's *Naikan* reflection provides a moral foundation and sense of values based upon realistic insight into one's own character. Simply put, this reflection involves one's relationship to others, via

contemplation of three questions: (1) What have I received from this person? (In specifics, not abstractions.) (2) What have I given to this person? And, most important, (3) What troubles or difficulties have I caused this person? (We are already good at noting what troubles others have caused us.)

Such reflection provides a yin/yang balance to the otherwise action-oriented approach to life you focused on in your interview with me. *Naikan* provides spiritual inquiry and insight—shadow-work and self-knowledge likely to generate deeper compassion, a sense of gratitude and a desire to repay the world—without which "effective action toward goals" may become either misguided or result in achievement-mastery irrelevant to our spiritual journey.

I thank you for the opportunity here to offer a more complete perspective to your readers, and look forward to your further explorations of the eternal question, "What is Enlightenment?"

Dan Millman

San Rafael, California

Dear Editors,

Reading your issue of *What Is Enlightenment?* entitled "What Is Enlightenment? Does Anybody Know What They're Talking About?" actually changed my life, I believe. At first when I read this issue it made little sense to me, but one night, when I was sitting up in my room trying to understand, I experienced an awakening.

I'd been thinking about how the words of all these spiritual leaders might relate to my life. Religion was definitely something missing from my life, and something I'd always been searching for. I was given your magazine as a gift because I had started studying Buddhism and considered myself a Buddhist. I tried to keep an open mind, and at the same time to avoid believing in something just because someone else says it's true. That night when I was sitting in my room trying to make sense of what I'd read, I had the most spiritual experience of my life so far. I actually felt something hit me. It was like a beam of energy or light, and suddenly everything was clear. Perhaps you know this feeling. It was like my eyes, mind, and soul had been closed all my life and now had finally opened. I know how the blind man felt when God performed a miracle and gave him sight. I had been "blind" all my life, and for the first time I could "see." I know I witnessed a miracle.

No words can describe the joy I felt. I saw everything for the first time with my new vision, and everything was ineffably beautiful. For the first time ever, I cried tears of joy. For the first time ever, I didn't feel alone. I felt the presence of God and now I have proof that he is real. I learned the true meaning of freedom, and I know I'll never be imprisoned as long as my soul and heart are free. Since that night my life has been so much better in so many ways. I am grateful to the editors of this magazine and the people interviewed in this issue. May you all be blessed with wisdom and happiness.

With love,
Sailinda Lauren Tobutt
Cary, Illinois

MY IDEA OF COOL

Coming from a background of five years as a Silva Mind Control director, the issue of "self-mastery" was never a question for me; the transcendence of that whole paradigm is what landed me in this catastrophe—"the work"!

But I've got to tell you, that Susan Powter is *fabulous*—one of the singularly best interviews you've ever had in the history of your magazine.

Congratulations on publishing it. She is totally my idea of cool.

lee lozowick
Prescott, Arizona

JOY IS THE SPARK

Seldom have I had the experience of words serving to stimulate spiritual and psychological as well as mental and physical growth beyond the world of words. For me this occurred as a result of reading your

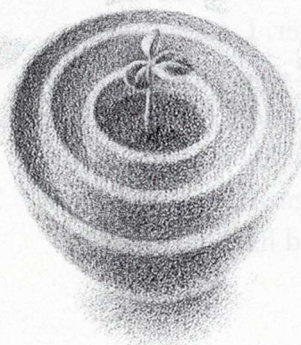
latest issue's several interviews with, and commentaries concerning, practitioners of self-mastery and others who are knowledgeable about enlightenment. I found myself being stretched from comfortable, intellect- and knowledge-based spirituality toward the less familiar turf of physicality and hence challenged to grow in all sectors of the circle of human consciousness.

All eight main interviewees sur-

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prisingly overlapped in that each gave a central place to joy, and preferably transcendental joy. Joy is the common spark that ignites and fuels their realization of spirituality and excellence. Thus, it defeats laziness (Evander Holyfield). It out-muscles negativity (Jack LaLanne). It wears away and prevails over the "shortcuts and easy ways and psychological tricks and motivational techniques that don't work" (Dan Millman). It demolishes the hypocrisy of those who "know" they're enlightened (Susan Powter). It breaks through fear (Anthony Robbins). It enlarges the arena of self-mastery beyond "some particular domain," be it "sensorimotor, interpersonal, introspective, cognitive, in the spiritual domain, or developing command over one's emotional life" (Michael Murphy). It can still the mind's deliberations so that the *spirit* can act (Vernon Turner). It unites, balances and enhances each of several levels of the self—sensory, psychological, mythic and spiritual—allowing us to express the deepest truths about ourselves (Jean Houston).

Blessedly, there may well be something for everyone in the words of these eight different personalities where lightning has struck, and we may, as a tribe, a society and a world speed up our evolution accordingly. Rumi wrote, "Whoever travels without a guide needs two hundred years for a two-day journey." Thank you, WIE, for these living guides from and for our times. There is a lot here to put to use. We can harmonize or choose among them or synthesize them. A runner's high can approximate a mystic's high. Being unstuck means being neither one hundred percent spiritual nor one hundred percent embodied; as Michael Murphy says, "There's the 'I Am' helping out the 'I Can'."

David K. Trumper
Bala-Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

THE DECLINE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

I found your Spring/Summer 1999 issue not only disappointing but truly disturbing. It is, for me, just one more of hundreds of indications of the degrading deterioration in our society, and it is especially sad to find it in a journal that claims to be about philosophical/spiritual rebirth.

Commercialism, profitability, material success, violent sports, obsession with physical prowess and pop psychology masquerade as "inspiration or direction from God." This nonsense merely elevates the crude, vulgar, banal urban pop culture that demeans and masks profound meaning in the mysteries of the human and cosmic condition.

Adding to my disgust with this issue is the device and easy way out of composing articles by the use of interviews printed with all the annoying profanities, double negatives, split infinitives and other unpleasant speech mannerisms used by these high-profile figures, illustrating surely not the way to enlightenment, but rather another step down in the decline of Western civilization.

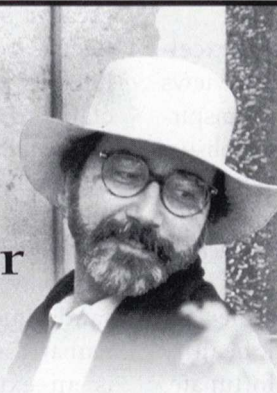
Lucille Salitan
Canaan, New York

BRINGING HEAVEN TO EARTH

I thoroughly enjoyed your latest issue, particularly the way Andrew Cohen expressed the distinction between "I Can" and "I Am." My own personal opinion is that when one balances both the "I Can" and the "I Am," then one must be a truly enlightened being literally bringing heaven to earth—understanding the axiom "a spiritual being having a human experience," understanding the "I Am" through spiritual practices and living a principled and ethical lifestyle by using the power of the "I

Yvan Amar

(1950-1999)



WIE would like to express our sadness at the passing of Yvan Amar, a spiritual teacher and friend who demonstrated in his own life many of the qualities that inspired the creation of this magazine. A devoted disciple of Indian teacher Chandra Swami, he was a pioneer in efforts to cross the boundaries of tradition and bring together teachers and thinkers from all spiritual paths and persuasions. His ashram in southern France was a dynamic gathering place for those who were interested in seeing some of the most influential figures of the modern spiritual world engaged in dialogue on the nature of truth and enlightenment. We deeply appreciate his inspiring example and include the following words of remembrance from four spiritual teachers and friends who have been touched by his courageous and open-minded spirit.

"Yvan had obviously let go the pursuit of ordinary dependent happiness. That's why he was so resplendently joyful under all circumstances. His very life was an homage to his Guru and a testimony to his teaching. He was giving evidence that a common Westerner could reach the other shore and become a light for hundreds of seekers."

Arnaud Desjardins

"Yvan Amar was a champion of relationship, the most articulate voice for the possibility of consciousness between people. His life knew suffering, but he lived it with such dignity that to be in his presence was to enter into the sacred. He was a man whose family life was the greatest demonstration of his enlightenment. He was a teacher who helped many people embrace their humanity and live with meaning and courage."

Richard Moss

"Yvan Amar was a 'secret teacher'—his influence, and the people he connected up, will read like a science fiction story one day. And he continues still. I offer him my total affection and respect."

lee lozowick

"Yvan's love and support for myself as well as countless other teachers, seekers, students and friends was consistently overwhelming and always disarming. A true mystic, his passion for the dharma was all-embracing and was demonstrated in his openhearted reception to all those who came to him. We'll all miss him."

Andrew Cohen

Can." In this way, one is working for the good of others and the self through conscious awareness without wishing oneself off the planet.

Excellent work. Keep up the great questions.

Kathleen Ginn
via email

THE POLARITY DOCTORS

Thank you for another interesting and humorous issue of WIE. The "Self Masters" issue points out, and rightly so, that many people who are spiritually seeking are making a total mess of their lives and trying to cover it up with Vedantic and Buddhist bull about life being an illusion—a projection onto Brahman, unreal, and empty or void.

For the most part, WIE has interviewed people who have been trained or "self-realized" within an Advaita Vedanta or Buddhist negation tradi-

tion. These are world-renouncing, monastic traditions. Teach these ideologies to laypeople living in the world, and the result is always the same—a deeper polarization between the world (seen as unreal, impure) and Brahman (the realized state—pure consciousness). Duality.

You are right to be intrigued by these "Self Masters." They walk their talk. They're disciplined, in control and successful by material standards. Enlightened? Hardly, but they have developed some skills. They don't suffer from the spiritual malaise so prevalent in spiritual circles today—but they have certainly missed a chunk of the picture as well.

I suggest that you interview the polarity doctors, the spiritual practitioners who live quite at home in the world, some amidst great abundance, while remaining

unaffected. They enjoy the world of the senses and still remain self-liberated or, as they would most likely say, in the perpetual process of self-liberating.

I'm speaking of the tantrics, of course. Not the Barry Long, Margo Anand type. Not neo-tantrics, but hard-core, classically trained tantric adepts who aren't obsessed with sex and their own self-image and gratification, but work with abundant energy of liberation in the world and also contribute significantly to society and the liberation of all beings.

Interviewing true tantrikas for a future issue would go a long way toward helping your readership gain a healthy understanding of the enlightenment process.

Dharmanidhi

Spiritual Director,

Tantra College of America
San Francisco, California

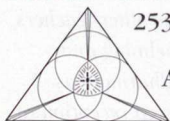
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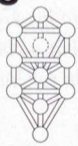
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THE REAL HEROES

Congratulations on another excellent issue. I found your interviews with the "Self Masters" to be inspiring . . . but also annoyingly simplistic. I'm skeptical about anyone who says, "Look at me; I made a million dollars—and so can you," or, "I healed myself—and so can you."

Obviously, these people are blessed with strong and healthy minds. Not everyone is so fortunate. To those who suffer from mental illness, success means accomplishing one thing per day, such as doing the laundry, going to the supermarket, or paying a bill. Healing means accepting one's limitations, and being grateful for the things one has.

The real heroes are the people who live day in and day out with a debilitating and destabilizing illness, yet manage to get through each day without hating themselves or cursing God in the process.

S. Patterson

Bridgeton, Rhode Island

greatest saints? Who gave you the license to desecrate Ramana Maharshi's memory in this way? You claim to be a spiritual magazine, yet you have so little respect and reverence for the living embodiments of spirituality that you feel you have the right to mock them in this way. Shame on you, a thousand times over. I also feel very embarrassed for Frank Zane, who is an extremely sincere spiritual seeker with the greatest respect and love for all masters.

You are digging your own grave with this kind of article, and I do not see any way that your magazine can have a future.

Vidagdha Bennett

Jamaica, New York

The last issue was no better than a tabloid on the newsstands, focusing on people telling me how to feel good. And Ramana Maharshi's head on the bodybuilder's body struck a raw nerve in me. It just didn't feel right.

I look forward to your future issues that give attention to the sacred, to the holy spirit. Though informative, I look to WIE to present me with more inspiration and heart.

Howard Peck

Pennsburg, Pennsylvania

INTEGRATION OR DESECRATION?

I found the trite comic/thoughtful Ramana Maharshi/body-builder photo to be FAR LESS offensive than I imagine some readers did. Still, something about it bothered me, and I am not even a Ramana devotee. Granted, Ramana himself is probably tickled with it, but I am sure some of his devotees would consider it disrespectful. I would have thought that WIE would have been more sensitive. But overall, I was very, VERY inspired by this last issue.

Daniel Stein

West Newbury, Massachusetts

I am appalled and affronted by your latest issue, in which you have pasted the head of Ramana Maharshi on to bodybuilder Frank Zane. By what right do you cut up this picture of one of India's

NO ENLIGHTENMENT

Congratulations on yet another fascinating issue of WIE. Having myself lived in and around several spiritual communities, I have no doubt that the message of the "Self Masters" would be extremely beneficial to many, possibly most, spiritual seekers, who all too frequently demonstrate an alarming level of disempowerment in their daily lives. However, to what extent this might address the discovery or revelation of enlightenment is another matter.

It's clear from all of this issue's

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interviews, with the possible exception of Vernon Kitabu Turner, that the interviewees—truly remarkable individuals though they all clearly are—do not know what enlightenment is, nor indeed whether it even exists. Once Self-realization/enlightenment has occurred, at least three things become very clear: first, there most certainly is something to “get” or realize; second, unless you are absolutely sure you’ve found it, then you haven’t; and third, until you *are* Self-realized, you really have no idea what you’re talking about!

I enjoyed John Wren Lewis’s letter (as I have enjoyed his previous correspondence and articles), where he writes about the efforts he shares with his partner Ann Faraday to describe their enlightenment experiences in everyday terms. I appreciate their worthy attempts to express the feeling of the experience, but I wonder if this really serves any purpose in helping seekers on the path?

Jeremy Lyell
Portofino, Italy

THE NEW GODHEAD

One question regarding the “Self Masters” issue of your magazine: If these people whom you’ve interviewed were not so successful in pulling in the almighty buck, would you have considered them for the “mastery” position? But more importantly, would these people still be doing what they claim to be so “high on” if society were not pouring so much money their way? There’s big dollars in this “mastery” of the small self. Is that what Western spirituality is coming to? The new Godhead of the millennium—MONEY.

Molly O. Myers
Norwalk, Connecticut

IT’S ALL IN THE LANGUAGE

I have just finished reading issue 15

of WIE. Over the course of the last few years, I too have wondered what people mean by “enlightenment,” but I never wondered about the relationship of “being” and “doing.” I was taught and shown that they were complementary.

Both my Pennsylvania Dutch carpenter grandfather and my high school English teacher would have laughed—with gentle and bemused smiles—at your contrasting “doing” and “being.”

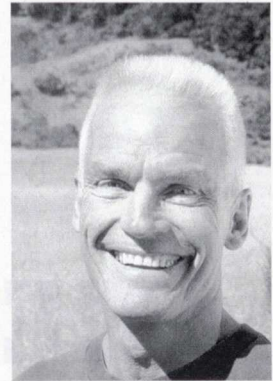
When I was working with my grandfather, helping to build the house I grew up in, I stopped to sharpen a pencil with my pocket-knife. I was about nine years old. Pappy watched me for a moment and, reaching to take my knife from me, said, “That knife is dull and dangerous. It binds up and then slips. It’s not sharp enough to cut the wood, but it’s sharp enough to cut you.” He sharpened it and handed it back. “There,” he said with an air of satisfaction. “Now you know it will do what you want it to.”

My English teacher had the same perspective on language and speech. Whenever she heard us talk about “doing” and “being” as if they were different things, she’d take us to task for using the language as a dull tool. She’d rub our minds against hers—like a blade to a whetstone—and put a sharp edge back on our perception. Many, many times she said: “The verb ‘be’ is a linking verb. It’s also called a ‘copula’—yes, as in coupled, joined or union. It takes a predicate noun or adjective as a complement, not an object. A complement relates to the subject of the sentence, not to the verb, and it follows verbs expressing *condition* rather than direct *action*.

“When you say ‘I am a carpenter,’ be careful! YOU are not a thing called ‘a carpenter.’ You ARE ‘as a carpenter IS.’ Immediately you ask: ‘How are you? What kind of



Lama Ole Nydahl



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INTRODUCTION

MEN'S LIBERATION?

WOMEN'S LIBERATION?

GAY LIBERATION?

HOW FREE DO WE REALLY WANT TO BE?

When I started teaching in India in 1986, I had no notion whatsoever of the relationship between enlightenment and gender. At that time, it was all ridiculously simple. There is only one Self—realize it and be free. When I then went to Europe, within a very short time a community of seekers gathered around me, and the next thing I knew, I had 150 men and women on my hands. “This wasn’t what I had in mind,” I thought to myself, recalling the prophetic words my teacher had told me six months earlier: “I want you to accept responsibility for the work.” That was nearly fourteen years ago, and in the time that has passed since then, I have learned more about the radical implications of the enlightenment experience than I could have ever imagined when it all began back in India in what now seems like another life.

It’s one thing to have an enlightenment experience, a flash of penetrating depth and dazzling euphoria that momentarily reveals the truth of the utter insignificance of the personal in the face of that primordial reality. But it’s another thing altogether to interpret its implications for our humanity. In those moments, the insignificance of any notion of a separate sense of self is totally

TO THIS ISSUE BY ANDREW COHEN

obvious. So what happens when a large group of men and women who have all known this experience come together? Well, that's what I've spent the last fourteen years finding out! Making sense out of the spiritual experience becomes imperative when one endeavors to *live* it. And when a large group of adults who have indeed tasted that divine mystery come together and endeavor to live its nondual truth as their own very human lives, what is revealed never ceases to amaze. Oh the agony and the ecstasy of the spiritual life!

This issue of *WIE* is called "Men's Liberation? Women's Liberation? Gay Liberation? How Free Do We Really Want to Be?" Many of the questions that have inspired this issue have come directly from my experience of daring men and women from different walks of life and different sexual orientations to embody the enlightened vision as *themselves*. And to dare to embody the enlightened vision invariably means: *confrontation with the ego*.

As all true seekers eventually discover, the ego takes up permanent residence in *any* part of our psyche that we allow it to. Even the smallest attachment to any dimension of that which we could call the "personal self" automatically will result in some form of distortion in the human

personality. Precisely because gender identification (and its inseparable relationship with some form of sexual orientation) plays such a significant role in the construction of ego, it is vitally important for the true seeker to become aware of his or her investment in gender identity. Our deep attachment to gender *as identity* almost always creates a painful and self-distorting self-consciousness. For the true seeker, this fact must beg the question, "How would I be if my experience of gender was free from self-consciousness?"

Sincere contemplation and meditation will reveal the potentially enlightening truth that the very thought "I am a . . ." almost always refers to that which keeps us separate from each other and from the universe in which we find ourselves. In fact, from the perspective of enlightenment, *any* attachment to a personal notion of self/identity instantly creates the experience of duality and separation.

So . . . what would our experience of ourselves and each other be like if we surrendered our ego-driven attachment to gender/sexual identification in the pursuit of a truly enlightened human life? This was the point of departure for our fascinating adventure into the world of gender that has become this issue of *WIE*. ■

THIS ISSUE OF *WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?* was inspired by spiritual teacher and WIE founder Andrew Cohen's teaching about the radical possibility of liberation from all rigid and limiting ideas about our gender and sexual orientation—a teaching that he has come to call “liberation without a face.” As we launched into our far-ranging investigation for this issue of the magazine, this original teaching provoked countless questions about what it really means to be a liberated man or woman, tangibly challenging some of the most cherished ideas we have about ourselves and pulling us ever deeper into a thrilling and multifaceted exploration of the relationship between gender and enlightenment. What better place to begin, we thought, than with Andrew Cohen's own penetrating investigation into this often volatile subject, brought out in an in-depth interview with noted feminist author and one of his students, Elizabeth Debold? And so began the creation of this issue: “Men's Liberation? Women's Liberation? Gay Liberation? How Free Do We Really Want to Be?”

The more we immersed ourselves in this exploration of spiritual freedom in relationship to gender and sexual orientation, the more we began to see how wildly diverse the views on this challenging topic could be. For it seems that when it comes to the subject of gender today, some matters that we used to think were pretty black and white are now open for debate. In a recent survey on sexuality and spirituality in a popular spiritual magazine, when readers were polled about their gender, instead of the customary two options, they were given three: male, female or *transgender*. When we spoke with self-identified “gender activist” and postoperative transsexual Kate Bornstein, we learned that she would likely have included a few more, or a write-in option for “other.” For Bornstein, who approaches the challenge of deconstructing gender identity in a rather nuts-and-bolts fashion, going to sleep not entirely certain which gender we are, or experiencing some bewilderment about which public bathroom to use, could

I HAD ALWAYS BEEN CONVINCED that when people talked about women who were identified with being a woman, they were talking about all those *other* women. I was sure that I had gone far beyond the conventional ideas that define “woman” long ago . . . you see, I had been a *feminist*. In college I read everything I could find by radical feminists and went to meetings in women-only centers in the small liberal town of Ithaca, New York, one of the hotbeds of radical separatist feminism in the early 1980s. I was so passionate about the plague of patriarchy, at the time I even felt guilty for not being a lesbian. Nothing seemed off-limits to the nineteen-year-old extremist that I was because, like most girls of my generation, I had grown up with Helen Reddy's anthem for women as my fourth-grade theme song: “I am strong, I am invincible, I am *woman*.” To prove that women were not inferior to, or even *different* from men, at five-foot-two, 115 pounds, I went to Eastern Montana to roughneck on an oil rig alongside all the big, burly guys—only to find myself, two weeks later, leg in traction, explaining to the nurses how it all happened. After this fiasco in “experiential” feminism, I gave myself to the spiritual search, thinking I had come to the close of my women's lib agenda. I went to India to meditate, and took long, daring treks alone across the snowy Himalayas where I slept in caves and dreamt about the great Tibetan yoginis who had achieved enlightenment through arduous practices. And in spite of all signs to the contrary, I remained oblivious to the gendered glasses through which I saw the world.

In time, after much contemplation and some less-than-subtle nudges from my spiritual friends, I began to realize that although my images of womanhood were far from traditional, I was, nevertheless, very much identified with being a woman. Still, I was unprepared for the volatile eruptions that were to surface when we, both men and women on the editorial staff of WIE, leapt in together to wrestle with this multilimbed Goliath of a subject—the relationship between gender identification and spiritual freedom.

Our early research took us through verse after misogynistic verse from the scriptures of all the major religious traditions detailing the subordinate position of women. After one particularly grueling night of reading, we looked at each other, pretty depressed. Then I read: “The perfect Hindu wife should drink the water her husband uses to wash his feet before every rice meal.” By that point, we weren't sure whether to laugh or scream. My boyfriend, attempting to inject some comic relief into our dismal meeting, blurted out, “Honey, how come you never did that for me?” Everyone cracked up. Everyone, that is, but me. Radical feminist Sally Miller Gearhart has a theory that the only way to save the world is to reduce the number of men to ten percent of the total population and at that moment, I have to admit I was beginning to wonder if maybe she might be on to something.

CRAIG

THROUGHOUT OUR RESEARCH, I also had some difficulty seeing clearly what my own ideas of being a man actually were. Having left behind long ago my compulsive need to prove my manhood by climbing every mountain, kayaking every river and skiing off every cliff I could find, I was convinced that in my new incarnation as a sensitive, thoughtful, spiritual *human being*, I was no longer particularly identified with being a man. In the course of our exploration into spirituality and gender—and particularly through Sam Keen's lucid description of the influence of culture on the shaping of male identity—my eyes gradually began to open to how deep the currents of gender run in the male psyche. But it wasn't until one night near the end of our investigation that I experienced firsthand what my own male identity really was—and what it might mean to be free of it.

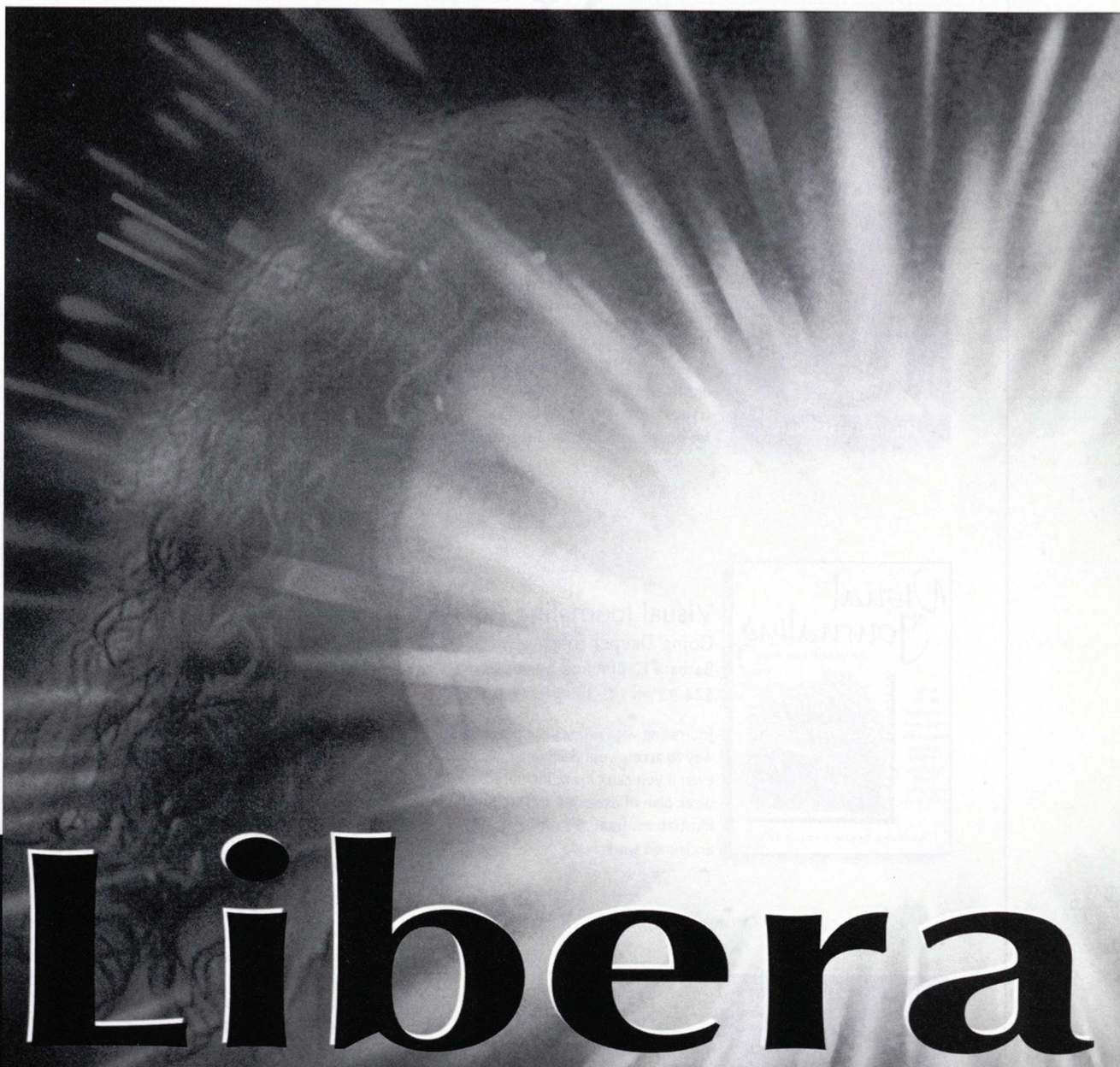
It was a warm, early summer evening and I was sitting on a grassy hilltop with a group of twenty spiritual brothers discussing the influence of "men's conditioning" in the pursuit of enlightenment. We had been speaking for several minutes about some of our particularly binding ideas about masculinity when one man asked a question that stopped all of us dead in our tracks: "What would it mean to step outside *all* of our ideas about what it means to be a man? What if this is one area where we really *don't know*?" As the silence behind my friend's words began to ripple through the group, I thought about the question he had posed. And as I did, suddenly, almost miraculously, a vast space began to open up inside me, as the core male identity, which had only minutes before been so close that I couldn't see it, began to fall away. For perhaps the first time in my life, it was as if all the ideas I had about being a man were laid out before me, crystal clear, and indeed were all part of one thing, one solid mass of identity that said, "I'm in control. I'm on top. I know where I'm going and I know how I'm going to get there." In a word, "I'm a *Man*!" As one after another, men began to describe their own experience of standing completely apart from any idea of being a man, the familiar sense of maleness gave way to a powerful collective recognition that who we really are is a mystery far beyond anything we can grasp.

What would a liberated expression of manhood be? As we sat there beneath the blue sky opening out in all directions around us, the core sense of self to which each of us had clung dissolving into emptiness between us, it was clear that none of us had any idea. But in that wide open space, we all knew that we really wanted to find out.

actually be a sign of real progress! Then, during our visit to the secluded St. Joseph's Abbey, the radiant Father Basil Pennington, celibate Trappist monk for the last fifty years, confidently told us that anybody who's really free *knows* they're bisexual. And then, Buddhist scholar and gay activist Jose Cabezon informed us that in the celibate Buddhist monastic environment, when the "monks engage in sexual acts with each other, they take care not to violate the *letter* of the law." We didn't know quite where to go from here as unexpected revelations came at us from all directions.

Jungian theorists like Marion Woodman teach that for us to reach wholeness, we need to balance the masculine and feminine energies within. Others believe that our ultimate aim is the realization of an androgynous condition, where differences between men and women are no longer necessarily ordained by our biology. Lately, there's been a resurgence of interest in traditional religious views, such as Orthodox Judaism, which emphasize distinct roles for men and women. And there are those in the enlightenment traditions who, like Brooklyn-born Tibetan *tulku* Jetsunma Ahkön Lhamo, teach a path of transcendence, where the significance of gender differences pales in light of the ultimate goal.

Is the goal of the spiritual path androgyny? A balance of the masculine and feminine energies within? Or a leap beyond any identification with our gender whatsoever? And once we get clear on our goal, how are we to know what path will truly help us to get there? Some say the path is to cultivate our masculine qualities if we're feminine or our feminine qualities if we're masculine. Others encourage women to nurture their femininity and men to fortify their masculinity. Some say we're as different as Mars and Venus. Others say our essential nature is the same. For every approach to liberating ourselves from fixed ideas about our manhood and womanhood, we found alternate approaches that recommend a 180-degree counterview. So what is the relationship between enlightenment and gender? What does it mean to be a man or a woman if we want to be free? ■



Libera

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A feminist activist and author speaks with her male spiritual teacher about why women's liberation and spiritual liberation have nothing to do with each other.

An interview with **Andrew Cohen** by Elizabeth Debold



Feminism is the radical idea that women are human beings. Years ago, I bought a button with this slogan on it at a conference because I found the saying both poignant and outrageous—funny, sad and maddening. On the face of it, it seemed nonsensical. Of course women are human beings. Did it need to be said? Yet, there was the rub. Somehow it did. I didn't take this to mean that men held the secret of "human being," but there certainly was some very real way that, in the world in which we all lived, who men were and what they did mattered in a way that wasn't available to women.

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INTRODUCTION

continued

And I stood at ground zero, the center of a seismic movement, a wave of righteous rage and blazing passion that was going to tear up the very ground where we all stood, rip the moldy fabric of society and forge new bonds between women and between women and men to create an entirely new, unknown possibility for both women and men to matter. Nothing else on the planet was important but this. This was the movement for women's liberation in the late seventies and early eighties. I was part of it; I was a feminist. This was utter, complete *revolution*.

Or so I thought. Something happened on the way to the revolution. It didn't happen. Not that the social world hasn't changed somewhat, but the radical promise of women's liberation for all humanity has been swallowed up by the status quo without much more than a bit of indigestion now and again. In my naïveté and fervor, I would never have predicted that. Nor would I have predicted that I would be thrilled to interview a *man* about true human liberation beyond gender. Twenty years ago, had someone made that prediction, I would have laughed—*oh, yeah, right!* Amazingly, much to my surprise and joy, Andrew Cohen's call for the total, absolute liberation of women and men holds the true promise of revolution that the women's movement only hinted at.

Feminism is the radical idea that women are human beings. I don't know when the term "feminism" was first used, but in the popular press, and in my high school, the movement or ideology or hope for women's freedom was known as

"women's lib" (or, too often, "women's lip"). "Feminism" seemed to take the word "feminine" and give it a kick. But a difference has evolved between women's liberation and feminism. In the past twenty years, women's liberation, a movement for social change, became feminism, an ideology. In that transition, it moved (as I did, too) from the streets into the academy, from whispers in the women's room to endless discourse in gender studies, from a nuanced realization of shared experience to an aggressive individualism further fragmented by identity politics. I began to fear that feminism was rapidly becoming a confusing set of ideas that divided us as human beings. Somehow, the passion had gone out of the revolution.

For me, the movement had always been about passion. It seemed perfectly obvious to me, from a very early age, that something was very wrong between men and women. My mother, smart and strong as she was, was a victim and my father, as sweet and funny as he could be, *really* wanted it that way—even to the point of getting pleasure out of his dominance. Even as I sided with my mother, I never lost touch with the pain evident in my father's stance of domination. Women's liberation obviously had to be a movement to liberate women *and* men from the distortions and limitations that turned us into dangerous strangers, the Other to each other. From where I stood, it never was a competition between women and men. It wasn't a zero-sum game: If women win freedom, men then

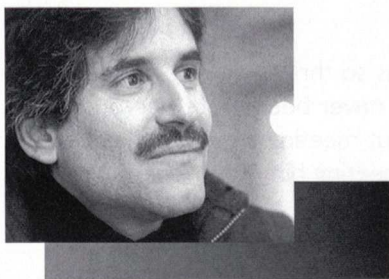
lose. Yes, we were often angry (and some of us, unfortunately, still are) as we came to see just how deep and how oppressive is this system accurately called "patriarchy." And that anger was often directed at men. But feminism's radical idea didn't mean that men were either the enemy or the standard for human being. To me, it meant that I *knew* in the deepest part of myself that what was happening between men and women, who men are and who women are, had to change and *could* change. And that it would transform life as we know it.

But what was that change? Did it mean that men and women were simply human beings and there would no longer be a sense of men as a group or women as a group? Then the differences *among* men and women would be as pronounced as those *between* men and women. Or did men and women being human beings mean that women then could have access to all of what men had (which would make what men were doing now the standard for human being)? Did it mean that women's roles should be valued as basic cultural values, not just relegated to the ghetto of women's work? If so, an unimaginable shift would have to occur at every level of society.

It was beyond the imagination. We were trying to dig into something that was so core in all of us that we had no perspective. How could we tell what was real, true, authentic from what we had learned? The contradictions began to pile up. I remember a colleague working on a landmark case about domestic violence who told me of

another woman lawyer on the case breaking down at one point because nearly every night when she went home, she was harassed and beaten by her husband. Or our constant struggle to keep women a priority while in a relationship with a man. Or the endless, often unvoiced conflict and falsehood among ourselves as "sisters"—and the rifts between us based on differences in race, ethnicity and class. The deeper we went, the more resistance there was—and often that resistance was in ourselves. Feminism's idea lost its radical edge and revolutionary passion as we all found out that change was hard. We wanted what was familiar: We felt secure in playing sexual games, depending on men, having power as mothers.

Feminism has no answer to the question: What self is it that's liberated? Our imaginations couldn't go beyond what we knew—male roles or female roles, traditional masculinity or femininity, or some form of androgyny that is both together. Yes, feminism may be the radical idea that women are human beings, but the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question is: What does it mean to be a human being? Over the last twenty years, feminists have come to different conclusions about what this means. Some are just beginning to say aloud what they whispered in private: My god, do you think it's all *biology*? In this, we are simply intelligent animals who, with our enormous brains, have the possibility to transcend our lower nature, but it's useless to fight those biological drives that set men and women apart. And others have held on to the view that who



Liberation

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we are is all a social construction, that everything that we are—from what we think to how we walk to what we value to how we experience ourselves in our bodies—has been learned from culture. There is nothing that is *truly* masculine or feminine. In fact, there is nothing real, true or authentic about us at all because we've been socially constructed. In this view, liberation comes from creating ourselves anew—getting our own construction permit, deconstructing the old self and making ourselves into whoever or whatever we want to be. One construction is as good as another because nothing in our experience has any inherent truth or reality to it. Our only guide to self-invention, according to postmodern gender theory, is pleasure—whatever feels good, exciting, forbidden. We are free to play or perform genders, to do whatever we want without shame just because it's a thrill. Neither of these views, to me, held forth the promise of human being that I had experienced in being alive. Neither seemed to offer a truly human liberation for men and women together.

By the time I met Andrew Cohen, I had come to a point where my fire for women's liberation was nearly extinguished by cynicism. In my own research, I was more convinced than ever that questioning gender meant questioning the roots of society itself. The questions raised by the women's movement twenty years (and longer) ago went to the core of everything in society. Gender holds the heart of culture. No wonder it was so difficult! I had come to understand the mechanisms by which we become psychologically almost inextricably attached to our identities as men and women. So much, but how much I didn't know, of who we think we are came from cultural conditioning. Because we, as males and females, had such different experiences of culture, our psyches were differently shaped to fit into culture and so created us as if from different planets.

But there seemed to be no way out. I watched friends from the movement turning away from

consciousness raising and collective action into a soothing “gynocentric” form of goddess spirituality. I found myself withdrawing from leadership as I saw feminism become a respectable profession—just another job—through which women competed (particularly with each other) for attention and power. The rifts between women of different classes and different racial/ethnic backgrounds seemed almost wider than ever before. I felt despair over the fact that I had never worked with a group of women who *truly* supported and trusted each other. So many of my friends were either stay-at-home moms or holding interesting jobs while having primary caretaking responsibility for the kids. They said it was just easier that way; besides, their husbands weren’t really interested. Our identities as women had become ingrown, turned in on themselves so that more than ever we identified with being women and hung on to whatever we felt that should mean. The questions were still so important, the stakes so high, but I didn’t see any answers.

My first actual meeting with Andrew Cohen came about after being interviewed for this magazine several years ago. From that experience, I knew that Andrew had a commitment to women’s freedom that was very unusual. I went to a one-day retreat that Andrew was leading in New York City and had a short conversation with him afterward. During the retreat, Andrew spoke a little about what he was discovering about gender conditioning—and each time he did, I almost leapt out of my seat because

I was so thrilled. In my entire life, I had never been more nervous about meeting a person than I was in meeting him. Our meeting was fairly short—mostly because I was so anxious—but it had an extraordinary impact on me. During our talk, Andrew spoke passionately about his commitment to women’s real and profound liberation. He invited me to join him at a longer retreat if I found what he was saying interesting.

I found what he was saying more than interesting; it stirred something deep within me. Reflecting on the conversation, I realized what a huge commitment Andrew was making. Thinking about my experiences with Christianity and Buddhism, while I knew that both Christ and the Buddha taught men *and* women (which was extremely radical at the time), neither of their legacies has made a commitment to ensuring women’s freedom. In fact, in my own family, I had seen how Christianity had become a rationale for accepting oppression. *Oh my god*, I thought, *he’s really going to take this on*. I was deeply moved. Suddenly, I had the sense that the two main forces in my life—women’s liberation and spiritual seeking—might be connected in some very real and mysterious way.

Later, I realized that my experience of meeting Andrew was the first time I had met with a man (or woman) in a position of authority who respected me completely as a human being and wanted nothing from me except for me to express my full humanity. I was actually stunned by that realization. Andrew’s radical idea is

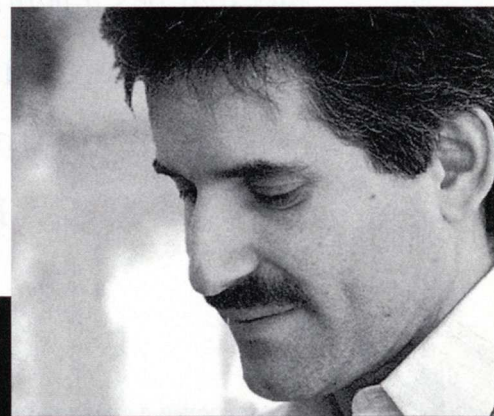
that men and women *both* are human beings—and the reality of being a human being takes us far beyond anything that I could imagine. But it is always available to be experienced. I *had* to be in this. I realized that to not join Andrew in moving toward freedom for women, and women and men together, would make a lie out of my entire life.

I did go on a longer retreat with Andrew (more than one, in fact). And I have the extraordinary privilege to be a student of his. As students, Andrew has asked us to come together as women—to make real the promise of sisterhood that is the lost soul of the women’s movement. I am often reminded in this of the consciousness raising that first broke the isolation of my experience years ago. It’s only by coming together that something can change because our separation—from both a spiritual and cultural perspective—is what holds everything in place. And I’ve come to see my own experience as women’s experience in a way that radically implicates me and who I have thought myself to be. Through Andrew’s commitment to the freedom of women and men together, the revolution is finally alive and burning. In the following pages, Andrew reveals far more than a radical idea. He reveals a radical reality that challenges each of us individually and collectively to go beyond our known identities into the revolutionary heart of an unknown possibility for human being that destroys separation and otherness. There may be nothing else on the planet more important than this.



Elizabeth Debold: *The first question I have, Andrew, is about how our identification with being men or women is so primary; it's so central. Freud observed that this basic identification was the core of personality development and of civilization the way it is now—that it is the basis of who we think we are. You have a teaching that you call “liberation without a face,” in which you state that one of the fundamental obstacles to liberation is this gender identification. Could you explain what “liberation without a face” is all about?*

Andrew Cohen: In the liberated condition, what one is ultimately identifying with transcends any and all notions of self, including gender. And for most of us, one of the most fundamental components of the experience of a separate sense of self stems from overidentification with gender. We have been very conditioned by the cultures that we come from and are usually very identified with the particular gender that we happen to be a member of.

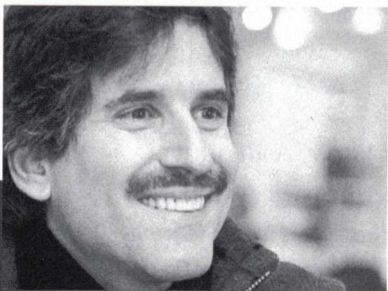


Now in the context of liberation, identification with *any* notion of self is recognized to be an obstacle to true freedom. So the goal would be to get to that point where we ultimately have *no* notion of who we are, yet where we *discover* who we are in every moment through being free from any *prior* notion of who we are, including that of being a man or a woman.

In relationship to these notions of gender, most men who we meet are very attached to the idea of being male, and usually experience a lot of fear and insecurity around the idea of being a man. In the same way, most women who we meet are very identified with their gender, with their sex, and also experience a tremendous amount of fear and insecurity in relationship to the fact that they're women. Most men and most women give a great deal of energy and attention to being a man or

being a woman. And many men and women give a tremendous amount of energy and attention not only to being a man or being a woman, but also to becoming a *better* man or a *better* woman, or to living up to some idea or ideal of the kind of man or woman that they want to be. But in relationship to the possibility of being a liberated person, all of this energy and attention, which stems from a fundamental sense of insecurity, is seen as a big distraction and as a fundamental impediment to a liberated condition.

The teaching of liberation without a face tells us that ultimately, our true nature is free of any and all notions of gender, of any notions of difference whatsoever. And it tells us that in order to discover the natural state, the natural and unselfconscious state or condition of man or woman, all the ideas and all the attachment



“I’m speaking about giving up any and all notions about who we are in relationship to our gender, and then being willing to find out: What does it mean to be a man who’s not attached to being a man, but at the same time is not avoiding or denying the fact that he’s a man? What does it mean to be a woman who’s not attached to being a woman, but at the same time is not avoiding or denying the fact that she’s a woman?”



we have about being a man or being a woman, as well as all the fear and insecurity that go along with that, have to be abandoned. We have to literally allow ourselves to forget who we are while at the same time not in any way deny the fact of our gender—that we are male, that we are female—and then discover *after the fact* who or what is the natural expression of our gender.

What I’m pointing to here is very subtle and very delicate. What I’m speaking about is: What would the expression of male or female gender look like and be like if it was free from any and all traces of self-consciousness? Obviously there are inherent differences between being a man and being a woman; along with the physical differences there are particular expressions of maleness and femaleness. But in order to discover what the natural manifestation of these gender differences actually is, we’d have to become so interested in our own liberation that we’d be willing to give up any and all attachment to being whatever gender we happen to be, and in doing so discover innocently what it’s actually like to be a man who’s not attached in any

way to being a man, or what it’s like to be a woman who’s not in any way attached to being a woman. But at the same time, that man and that woman are not in any way hiding from or denying the fact of their gender and any differences or particular qualities there may be inherent in that. I’m speaking about an unselfconscious, utterly natural state of being that in no way avoids or denies the fact of gender, but that simply allows the natural expression of gender to reveal itself.

What I’m pointing to is something that has to be discovered through surrender, really. It’s through surrender and taking the enormous risk of not knowing. It’s a very big question. I’m speaking about giving up any and all notions about who we are in relationship to our gender, and then being willing to find out: What does it mean—what does it *really* mean—to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to be a man who’s not attached to being a man, but at the same time is not in any way denying or avoiding the fact that he’s a man? What does it mean to be a woman who’s not in any way attached to being a woman, but at

the same time is not avoiding or denying in any way the fact that she is a woman? This is something that is very unknown; it's uncharted territory.

ED: Yes—I think we don't really know what "man" or "woman" is. Can you say more about this fundamental insecurity that you were speaking about, which comes from all the ideas that we have about being a man or a woman?

AC: Well, from the perspective of liberation or enlightenment, any notions we have about being a particular person that we may feel that we are not living up to, or that we feel that we must, that we should or that we want to live up to, create a tremendous sense of insecurity and self-consciousness. And in that state, our relationship to reality and our relationship to our experience is all based upon the ideas in our mind that we're always trying to live up to.

The attachment we have to ideas about who we feel we should be, or who we want to be, or who we might not be, creates a constant distraction for the mind and for our attention. And in a sense, we're always trying to play a role; we're always trying to live up to some idea about who we think we should be in relationship to notions of gender, notions of maleness and femaleness. So many of the ideas that we have about being men and women have nothing to do with our own natural condition. I think that's something that most of us really don't even have a sense of; it's not something we've ever experienced. Again, what I'm pointing to is very subtle: It would be a condition where the man or the woman would be rooted in identification of Self that was free of gender, and yet at the same time they would be aware constantly, in retrospect, of their own reflection in time and space as being male or being female, and would see, after the fact, "Oh, this is who I am; this is what I look like." They would see the reflection, or they would see the action, of a male or a female who was not attached in any way to being a male or a female. They personally would be free from any idea of being male or female in their innermost self. And *then* the expression of what it means to be a man or a woman would be a manifestation of liberation itself, literally.

ED: Only in this reflection would we find out what that is.

AC: Yes, one would be in a state where one was constantly finding out what that is, and there would be an inner revelation of what gender really is and what it means. It would be a sense of innocence for men and women alike. A man would constantly be discovering

what it is, what it really means, to be a man. And a woman, in the same way, would also be in a state where she was constantly discovering what it means to be a woman. She wouldn't be doing what most people do, which is trying to live up to preconceived ideas based on cultural imperatives. It would be something that, in a sense, would be constantly discovered and rediscovered, and defined and redefined, literally in every moment. There would be a sense of innocence, you see, in relationship to the notion of gender. And that's what is missing, almost always, for men and women alike. For most individuals this whole notion of being a man or being a woman is so pregnant with ideas that are painfully fixed and rigid that there is literally no sense of innocence whatsoever, and that's one of the many reasons why it's so difficult for men and women to be able to get along together. It's why it's so difficult to really make any kind of rational sense out of this whole notion of gender anyway.

ED: Or what we're doing here together.

AC: Yes. Yet the goal of liberation without a face is a natural state or a natural condition. And what that is, one doesn't know, but it's something that one would want to find out. Who am I as a man? Who would you be as a woman? Who would we be as man and woman if we were not in any way attached to the fact of our biological difference, and yet at the same time were in no way denying or avoiding that difference or whatever that may imply? That's something we'd be interested to discover. But the only way we'd be able to do that is if we were willing to step beyond any and all notions of gender and of self altogether first, and be willing, once we did that, *to actually stay there*. So it's a big price to pay to find out what a natural condition of man or woman would be.

ED: Especially since our whole culture is based on gender arrangements, it's a big thing to realize that we don't even know what being naturally male or female really is. Our ideas about gender are so present, yet still they have nothing to do, necessarily, with something that's natural or spontaneous.

AC: Well, no. I think not only does it have nothing to do with anything that is natural or spontaneous, but almost all the ideas we have about being a man or being a woman are so burdened with pain, anxiety, fear and self-doubt. For many of us, the confusion around this question is excruciating because it is usually unending.

Women's Liberation and Liberation without a Face

ED: Andrew, I'd like to bring in and speak about some other perspectives from feminist theory and gender theory. There generally seem to be two goals that are offered as the goal of women's or men's liberation: One is the liberal perspective, which basically says that the goal is for men and women to be equal and, in other words, that there should be no difference in what they can do and what they can express.

AC: So the goal would be some form of androgyny?

ED: I think actually it's more that everyone looks a lot more like men. I think that ends up being what it really means, because basically, in this view, the structure of society doesn't change. You put women into the structure that's already there. So what you get, mostly, are people who look more like men, the way we understand men right now. And the other perspective is the radical perspective, which says that men and women are different, and that we hold very different values as a result of those differences. In this perspective, what needs to happen is that those differences need to be acknowledged and made room for so that a bigger range of humanity, of human being, can be manifest, and that would require a radical transformation of the structures that we live in. There's something very fundamental about how we think about ourselves that seems to be bottled in these two different perspectives. Are we equal? Or are we different? And what does that difference mean? I'm wondering, how do these two views relate to your teaching of liberation without a face?

AC: I don't know if I understand the second one clearly.

ED: The second one is where we look at and acknowledge the differences that exist here now, but we also acknowledge that in the system that we're in, since it values men and the way men think and function more than women, both maleness and femaleness are twisted in a certain way.

AC: So the second one respects fundamental differences that apparently exist—

ED: That apparently exist in order to make room for something larger in a human being. But it also argues that fundamental changes need to happen in society in order—

AC: To make room for those differences and to respect those differences.

ED: Exactly. So maybe we could look at these views one at a time.

AC: Well, the first view obviously forces women to conform to questionable patriarchal ideas and conventions. So that would seem to be very skewed. And a skewed approach to a bigger view would, I think, just help to perpetuate more gender confusion. The second view makes a lot of sense. But the question I would have is, from the point of view of liberation without a face: What are those differences really all about—based on a primary interest in liberation first and in gender second? Because when liberation is primary and the significance of gender differences is a secondary matter, then the context changes—and it changes the picture completely.

ED: I think that's where feminism has often gotten stuck. And I think what's happened as a result of that, actually, is that then the differences become paramount; they become the most important thing. And then there's a celebration of, "I'm completely different than you are." I have these qualities. This is what female is or feminine is, and this is what we should be celebrating. But you're celebrating something that's been skewed in the system already, so it becomes very confusing.

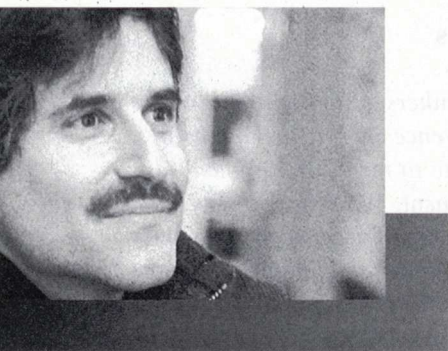
AC: Exactly. But what I'm speaking about takes more. I mean we really have to be willing to find out who we are instead of rebelling for the equal rights, in a sense, that we've been denied, that we do deserve. I'm speaking about something that transcends that completely. And so in liberation without a face, we have to be willing to give up the past. And we have to be willing to give up all the injustices of the past that did exist—that did exist, and that do exist right now. But you see, when we become interested in liberation, we then become interested in that which transcends time. And that points to a very different approach to discovering what equality really is.

ED: In the radical feminist view, you ultimately get to some kind of equality.

AC: Yes, but what that equality is based on is a presumption of fundamental difference, and the inherent difference is about as deep as it gets. The depth that transcends any and all difference isn't there as a foundation, and that's why it would be very different from what I'm speaking about.

ED: Actually, what you're speaking about seems to be the

“In liberation without a face, we have to be willing to give up the past. And we have to be willing to give up all the injustices of the past that did exist—and that do exist right now. But you see, when we become interested in liberation, we become interested in that which transcends time. And that points to a very different approach to discovering what equality really is.”



only way out of the whole conundrum of how do you find out what's true about being a man or a woman given the mess that we're in right now.

AC: Right, in liberation without a face, we're speaking about something very particular, because we're speaking about liberation itself as the primary foundation for the inquiry into any and all notions of difference, including gender difference—that's the foundation. From a place of no difference, from a perspective of no difference, from an interest and passion in no difference, then we look into the world of differences and really see what they're all about.

ED: And from a point of no difference you're not talking about androgyny—are you?

AC: No. I'm not talking about androgyny because there will be differences, because men and women are

not the same. But what those differences actually are going to look like when they're utterly free from self-consciousness is something that I think we have to find out. And even when we discover what they are, what an unselfconscious expression of manhood or womanhood is, we still have to be willing to leave those differences alone and remain firmly established in the perspective and place of no difference. Because the minute any sense of difference becomes too important to us, even if it's subtle, we lose that seat of liberation and we fall back again into the world of differences. So it's a very delicate business.

ED: Absolutely. I can feel my own desire to know: “What are those differences, what would they be?”—and in that you pin something down and immediately lose touch with the delicate perspective that has just opened up.

AC: Right, but I'm speaking about a place where, from the point of no difference, differences are recognized.

They're recognized because they're being expressed, but still there's no attachment to them, and that's the tricky part of it. Because whenever there is this investment in being different, in being a man or being a woman versus being that fullness of Self that's free from any notion of difference and that lacks nothing, then we've fallen out of heaven and we're in the world of becoming once again. And then liberation suddenly has a face again, and the unselfconscious, natural expression of gender isn't possible anymore because then we're attached to our difference rather than to that part of our self that could never have a face, that could never be different, that's free from gender.

ED: *One other question that I've thought a lot about and wanted to ask you is: What is the relationship between movements like the women's movement or the men's movement and the pursuit of enlightenment? Do they relate to each other at all?*

AC: No, not at all.

ED: *Could you say more about that? Don't these movements open up some sense of possibility?*

AC: They open up a tremendous sense of possibility, but one's attention in the men's movement or in the women's movement is on inherent difference. It's on the fundamental, inherent difference.

ED: *It's also on a set of problems.*

AC: Yes, it's on a set of problems, and those problems do exist. Those problems are real. And so, for example, in the women's movement, women are coming together and courageously responding to oppression and subjugation. And in the men's movement, a lot of men are recognizing that they have been forced to conform to a very narrow and rather two-dimensional picture of maleness and manhood that they have never had the freedom to question. But the point is that in both the men's movement and the women's movement, the focus is on becoming; one is still identified with being a woman or being a man, and one is trying to improve, for many of the right reasons, one's personhood as a woman or as a man. But what I'm speaking about here is something very different—although there are many similarities and points where they meet. What I'm speaking about, as I've been saying all along, is putting our attention on that place where any and all notions of gender disappear, and then being in a condition where we're discovering really who and what we are. We're not

rebellious—we're not rebelling and we're not identifying with being wounded. Many women identify with being wounded and being oppressed, and now men are identifying with being wounded because they feel they've been forced to conform to a certain mold that suffocates their humanity. This is all true. But in liberation without a face, one is endeavoring, ideally—and it's not necessarily an easy thing to do—to leave the past behind.

Male and Female Paths

ED: *Andrew, a number of thinkers and practitioners have spoken about a gender difference in spiritual pathways. These pathways seem to relate to men's and women's different experiences of embodiment. Women, they say, best pursue a path of immanence, deeply connecting to their embodiment and the cycles of nature and finding the sacred inherent in daily life; and men, on the other hand, seek transcendence, which often involves a mastery of or sometimes control over mind and body in order to reach the mystery beyond mind. Based on your experience as a spiritual teacher, do you feel that the path and the goal are fundamentally the same for all people?*

AC: I have no doubt that they're fundamentally the same for all people, assuming that the goal is enlightenment. But if the goal is anything less than that, then the path is going to be different, because then the whole notion of gender and difference, and the exploration of and fascination with what those differences are, is going to be a very big part of one's spiritual path.

ED: *What about at the level of practice? Are there different practices that seem to be more effective with women or men?*

AC: Not when we're speaking about enlightenment. If we're thinking about any other kind of human development, then I think obviously the answer is yes. But when we're speaking about seeing beyond the known, all human beings have to walk the same path and pay the same price.

ED: *I've really been curious about some of the female mystics who seem to have had enlightenment or ultimate liberation as their goal, but the kinds of things that they were drawn to in order to get there often seem to be very different from what men are drawn toward.*

AC: Well, I'm not familiar with whoever it is you're referring to, but I'm suspicious of any man or woman

who approaches their own liberation with any kind of gender bias.

ED: *I don't know if that's where they're coming from. I think it's more that they're questioning, where are my shackles, what is it that's holding me? And I think for women, because of our greater identification with our bodies, there's something particular that needs to be untied. And is it untied in the same way?*

AC: Is it untied through more identification with one's body? (Laughs) I don't think so.

ED: *Or fasting or certain things that allow a woman to see through her identification with her body?*

AC: It is true that women tend to be more identified with their bodies because in this crazy world, too often, both men and women measure women's value as human beings in relationship to their physical appearance. But in spite of that painful fact, a path to spiritual liberation that puts too much emphasis on any notion of difference as a starting point is bound to only strengthen the ego or the false and separate sense of self.

ED: *I'm also thinking about, in addition to the women's and men's movements, the gay and lesbian liberation movements, and that there's often an identification with sexual preference or the experience of sexuality as the basis of the spiritual path. What do you think about this approach?*

AC: Well, I see profound disadvantages in this approach, because we're making far too big a deal out of our sexual preferences, and in that we're giving far too much attention to difference. It's just another form of narcissism, and I think it can be a big problem and a tremendous obstacle. There is a danger in becoming too fascinated with any of these differences, because as I've already said, the degree to which we're going to do that is the degree to which we're never going to get near any kind of liberation. You can see there's a tremendous temptation to become very fascinated with what these differences may be and lose touch with something that is far more important.

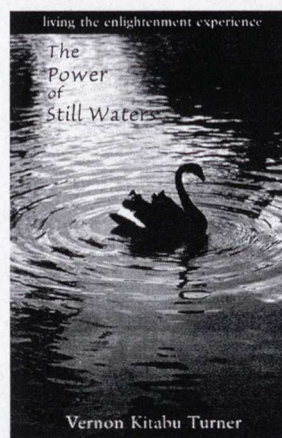
ED: *This is something that is very subtle and very tricky. It seems like an incredibly fine line to walk down.*

AC: Yes, because even in this conversation, when you asked this question about different paths for men and women, I could see that there was an excitement in that

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Mary Daly

NO MAN'S

"Even if I were the only one, I would still be a Radical Feminist!" proclaims the feminist revolutionary Mary Daly in her latest book, *Quintessence*. Described as both "a prophet" and "the grande dame of feminist theology," Daly has, for more than three decades, committed her every waking breath to a single purpose: seeing, naming and dissecting the structures of patriarchy in order

to liberate women's minds, bodies and spirits from its oppression. One of the most revered visionaries of the contemporary women's liberation movement, Daly, who holds six graduate degrees, including three doctorates in religion, theology and philosophy, lectures throughout the world, is the author of seven groundbreaking works of feminist philosophy, and has taught much-

debated women-only courses in women's studies at Boston College since 1974. No stranger to controversy throughout her illustrious career, Daly is making headlines this year because Boston College, now under pressure from a conservative Washington, D.C., legal foundation, is demanding that she begin to admit male students into her classroom—or retire. The *Boston Globe*



LAND

Interview by Susan Bridle

INTRODUCTION

continued

described Daly's latest stand against the Jesuit-run institution—from which she is not budging—as “a battle of principle, a fitting finale to a career that has sought no less than to alter the course of world civilization.”

Six months ago, when we first started working on this issue of *WIE*, we knew we wanted to speak with someone who could bring a penetrating feminist perspective to the subjects of women in religious traditions and the role of gender identity on the spiritual path. We soon found that while much important research has been done in this field over the past thirty years, if you want to speak with someone unrelentingly passionate about liberating women from the confines of patriarchal institutions and unabashedly zealous about establishing a feminist spiritual vision, all roads lead to Mary Daly.

The radical nature of Daly's work infiltrates the very groundwater of the consciousness of patriarchy and attempts to unearth what holds it in place—and what is so close and so taken for granted that most, before encountering her ideas, never consider questioning. She speaks the unspoken, cataloging with razorlike acuity and freight-train force the history of ritualized oppression and violence against women, and drawing clear causal connections to patriarchal religions and gods with male names and male faces. Lauded as “a demolition derbyist of patriarchal ‘mindbindings,’” she has penetrated into the structures of language, thought and image; she tears away veils upon veils; she confronts, rattles, inspires—and demands that the issues she

raises be dealt with. “I came to see that all of the so-called major religions,” she writes, “from buddhism and hinduism to islam, judaism, and christianity, as well as such secular derivatives as freudianism, jungianism, marxism, and maoism—are mere sects, infrastructures of the edifice of patriarchy. . . . That revelation continues to work subliminally, inspiring my humor and stoking the Fires of my Fury not merely against the catholic church and all other religions and institutions that are the tentacles of patriarchy but against everything that dulls and diminishes women. Through me, it shouts messages meant for all women within Earshot: ‘Tell on them! Laugh out loud at their pompous penile processions! Reverse their reversals! Decode their “mysteries”! Break their taboos! Spin tapestries of your own creation! Sin Big!’”

I was naïve enough to think, when I first approached Daly for an interview, that she would be eager to have a platform to express her views in a respected spiritual magazine dedicating an issue to the subject of gender. I couldn't have been more misguided. When she saw the word “enlightenment” on the cover of the sample issue I'd sent her—and even worse, when she saw a photograph of the Dalai Lama—she immediately pegged the publication as a cog in the machine of patriarchy and wanted *nothing* to do with us. Furthermore, the idea of gender includes “men”—a word she is loathe to utter—and even the word “spiritual” is to her but another trapping of the patriarchal ideologies she left behind long ago. But after

numerous telephone conversations in which I pleaded our case, she finally relented, partially through the force of my persistence and partially because she knew that I had been affected by reading her books; she sensed in me a fledgling feminist who could perhaps be “saved.”

When I eventually met Daly in person, in her small, cluttered apartment near Boston College, shelves, tables and chairs tumbling with books, radical feminist manifestos and posters inciting revolution curling off the walls, wide desk piled high, I met a woman who is every bit the radical feminist separatist she is renowned to be. Fierce, unbound by convention, and willing to risk everything for the sake of her mission, she is a woman who has gone so far with her ideas and her commitment to them that she truly seems to have stepped outside of the world as we know it. Championing deep identification as *woman* with distinctly *woman's* experience, she seeks to invoke an “other reality” and establish a “homeland of women who identify as women.”

Thrilled to finally have the opportunity to speak with her, I came armed with some challenging questions that were sure to be provocative and sure to shed light on that delicate territory where *spiritual* liberation meets (or doesn't meet) *women's* liberation. I was also very curious to find out if she *really* believed, as it seemed from her books, that the cause of every possible problem in this world, both inner and outer, is the evil of patriarchy, or, in other words, *men*.

Meeting Mary Daly, if you are a

mary daly

*voyage of a radical
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woman, is meeting a muse, a Siren, who beckons you to step through the mists of time into an enchanted, gynocentric *other* reality, an Avalon of only women's making. If you are a man . . . well, hold on tight.

For Mary Daly is still, at age seventy, a labrys-wielding force of nature who will not rest until the world as we know it is turned upside down. As she writes in her philosophical autobiography, "There are and will be those who think I have gone overboard. Let them rest assured that this assessment is correct, probably beyond their wildest imaginations, and that I will continue to do so."

WIE: In this issue of our magazine, we're exploring gender identity in relationship to spiritual realization or enlightenment. We're speaking with a number of people who have very different perspectives on this subject, and we were very eager to speak with you because you are one of the most radical and outspoken feminists alive today as well as a visionary theologian.

MARY DALY: Well, I would never create a magazine or a journal with that as a subject. It feels foreign. And I'm not trying to put you down, but what makes me feel alien from it is that it's so much in the patriarchal mode. Even to talk about "gender identity"—what the hell is that?

WIE: That's what we're interested in finding out.

MD: You see, I don't care. It really doesn't interest me much. I am a woman. I know that. No one's going to disabuse me of that.

WIE: What is your concept of spiritual liberation?

MD: It's not an expression I ever use.

WIE: Another way to approach this would be to speak about spiritual aspiration.

MD: Radical feminists who talk to me ask me questions in my language. You're asking: "What is your concept of . . . ?" Well, I don't have a concept of that because I'm not one of you. There was a point a few years ago when I stopped using the word "spiritual."

WIE: Why is that?

MD: Because it sounds too much like dichotomizing mind/body. And, in fact, when I do speak of spirit and matter, I often hyphenate it: "spirit-matter," for the

reason that I don't like to dichotomize. I think matter is extremely alive and spiritual in the deepest sense. And so "spiritual" usually just doesn't do because it seems to carry with it that baggage of dichotomizing. So whenever possible I use the word "elemental." By "elemental" I mean a lot of things; the four elements: earth, air, fire, water—but also the ether. And in ancient Greek philosophy the primal sounds of the alphabet were called elemental, and angels were elementals. And the universe, the earth, stars, other planets and the suns were also called elements, or "*stoicheia*." It's something vast. My work follows in that tradition of bonding—recognizing and realizing, meaning also actualizing, our connection with the universe. So, the word I commonly use for the ultimate reality—I won't say "God," that's dead—is "the universe." Sometimes I'll say "spirit," but meaning a principle of life within all being, including rocks. And I have used capital "B," *Be-ing*, to represent the *verb* God.

WIE: *Can you explain that a bit further?*

MD: A thousand years ago, when I was studying standard scholastic philosophy, God was called the "supreme being." And that made him a noun and something on high. Hierarchical. Yahweh. The hairy claw coming down. And that obviously is unsatisfactory. It always has images hanging around that are undesirable. Then I realized, with the help of a friend of mine, Nelle Morton, that "being" is a *verb*, and it should be hyphenated [be-ing]. When you do that, everything changes. I would also say that the universe is a verb. There are other ways of describing this ultimate/intimate reality. It's a mode of existence in which we profoundly realize and actualize our connectedness in multiple ways. It's Be-ing, capital "B," but understood as luminous, joyous, what Aristotle called the harmony of the spheres; representing an aspect of integrity, integrity beyond integrity. I think it's beyond spiritual. I mean, my cat wouldn't be concerned with "spiritual liberation"; she's all spirit, she's absolutely in-spirited. I used to talk about the women's movement in the seventies as a "spiritual revolution," and that's better than "liberation" to me. But then I got over that too and moved on.

WIE: *It sounds like the vision you're describing is a sensitivity to and a connectedness with the life force or presence in everything, animate and inanimate.*

MD: Yes, and it's a recognition of our connection with the entire universe—microcosm and macrocosm. We don't necessarily have to know everything that's out

there—that isn't the point—but it's a sense of striving for connectedness and a joy in that. I look at the sunset here, or experiences of nature, aesthetic experiences, and experiences of creativity and of the power of fighting, overcoming fear.

WIE: *Do you believe that there are differences between men's and women's capacities to realize and embrace what you've just been speaking about?*

MD: Okay . . . I could give you some sort of answer, but it's not the kind of question that intrigues me because *I don't think about men*. I really don't care about them. I'm concerned with *women's* capacities, which have been infinitely diminished under patriarchy. Not that they've disappeared, but they've been made subliminal. I'm concerned with *women* enlarging our capacities, actualizing them. So that takes all my energy. I'm not interested in the differences between women and men. I really am totally uninterested in men's capacities. If you've read my books, you might notice that I don't talk about their capacities. *They* talk about it all the time and they try to make it inclusive: "Oh, yeah, you're included, too."

But I'm talking about something else. I'm trying to name something that can only be recognized by women who are seizing back our power. But the words have been stolen from us—even though perhaps they were originally our words—they're our words, but they've been reversed and twisted and shrunken. I see myself as a pirate, plundering and smuggling back to women that which has been stolen from us. But it hasn't simply been stolen; it's been stolen and reversed. For example, the christian trinity is the triple goddess reversed. The trinity is aptly described as a closed triangle. It doesn't go anywhere. It's clonehood.

WIE: *What do you mean by "clonehood"?*

MD: "The father, son and holy ghost, the three men I admire the most . . ." In catholic or medieval theology, the father generates the son, and the son and the father together "spirate" the holy spirit. That's technical Thomistic terminology. They're coeternal, so although there's this illusion of activity, nothing is happening. It's utterly male in its stagnation and utterly male in its repetitiveness. So it's not surprising to me that ultimately they would come, in their destruction of the earth and of all living beings, to cloning. Because sameness is the name of patriarchy; it's the name of the game.

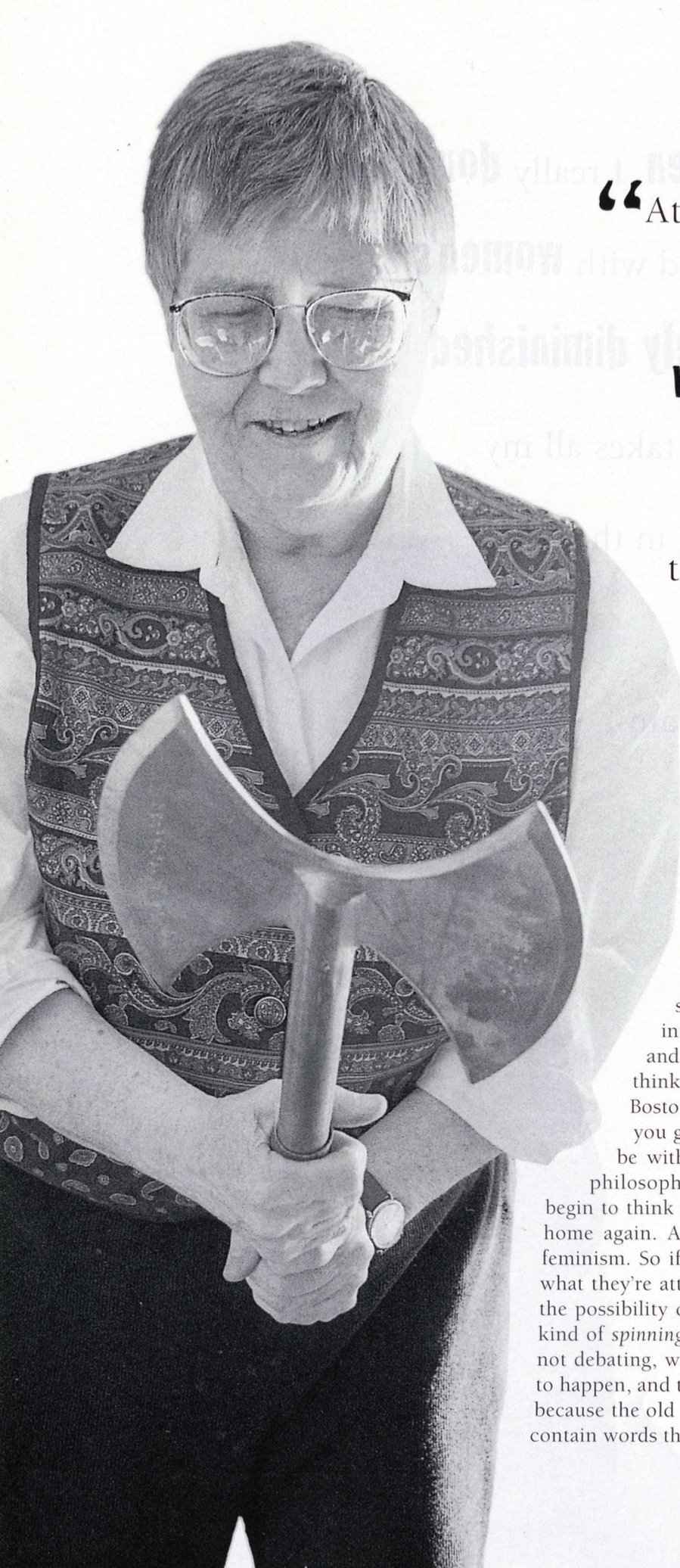
WIE: *You see cloning as a product of patriarchy?*

“I don’t think about men. I really don’t care
about them. I’m concerned with **women’s** capacities,
which have been **infinitely diminished**
under **patriarchy**. That takes all my
energy. I’m not interested in the
differences between
women and men. I really am
totally uninterested
in men’s capacities.”

MD: It’s the living out of patriarchal myth. They live it out through their technology as well as through their religion, their art, their societal structures, their economies and their wars. It’s always the same. Their wars are the same. It’s infinitely the same. “Getting their big gun off,” as Valerie Solanas said.

WIE: While I understand that this isn’t a focus for you, I’d like to come back to the question of differences between women’s and men’s approaches—





“At the **core of my being**
I’m **female**. I know
who I am, and therefore
I could not be other
than a **radical feminist**
once that idea was
available to me.”

MD: You know, I don’t mean to be unpleasant, but we’re coming from different worlds. I was trained in that world of thinking, a certain christian or Western philosophical way, but I don’t want to be drawn into talking that way because I don’t relate to it and it irritates me. What I love is the way women think. And what’s so precious about my space at Boston College is that it’s women’s space. When you get a teacher and students who really want to be with women, and we seize the space and read philosophical works and literature by women, they begin to think like themselves. They feel as if they’ve come home again. And that is the very groundwork of radical feminism. So if our space is taken away from us, which is what they’re attempting to do at Boston College, then so is the possibility of that kind of, I won’t call it dialogue, that kind of *spinning* conversation, of matching experiences. It’s not debating, which is a male thing. Something new begins to happen, and that’s why new words have happened for me: because the old language, the patriarchal language, does not contain words that are adequate to name women’s experience.

And it is so exciting. I'm talking about women's *elemental* experience.

I was brought up in the patriarchal way of thinking. I spent years in school getting degree after degree after degree taught by patriarchs. At Fribourg I was with all male fellow students: two hundred seminarians and priests and me. I know how they think and I abhor it.

WIE: *So would you say that women inherently have a greater capacity to realize the interconnectedness of the entire universe that you've been speaking about?*

MD: Comparisons with men are beside the point. I think women have a great capacity to realize that interconnectedness. I have not seen this in men. There may be exceptions, but I'm not interested in that.

In the early seventies, Susan Griffin wrote a book called *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, and it was totally about the connectedness of women and nature. And I have always emphasized that myself. But one of the horrible, self-censoring and destructive events within women's studies and the so-called women's community that happened—and I'm sure it was imbedded from some alien source—was that any woman who said that women have a special connection with nature, or that there's anything like a "female nature," was called an "essentialist," and that was the "worst" thing you could possibly say. I have been accused of being an essentialist, and so has anyone else I respect.

But I'll also argue that whether or not they're inherent, the fact is that the differences between men and women are there, even if it's just through millennia of conditioning. I, of course, think it's inherent. But even if it were cultural, the fact is that *this* is the way to go if you're biophilic. What I'm concerned with is the war between biophilia and necrophilia. It's love of life versus hatred of life. Necrophilia translates strictly into love of death, or loving the dead—actually f—ing corpses. And in general, patriarchal culture is necrophilic, fixated on hatred of life and love of death.

WIE: *It sounds like you're defining the male mode of expression as necrophilic and the female as biophilic. That's quite an extreme distinction.*

MD: Look, turn on the news anytime and see what is going on. Kosovo—are women doing that? Look at anything; it's so omnipresent that it's laughable that one would not see it. How many women rape? I'm just telling you that if I say that in a simplistic way, everyone

will be on me for being an essentialist. That's why, on a certain level, my book title "Quintessence" is a joke title. I mean it profoundly for what it is. But also, I can always say, "Ah, I'm not an essentialist, I'm a *quintessentialist*"—I'm worse than you ever could imagine!

WIE: *What do you think of the idea that one is a human being or spiritual being first, and then one happens to be male or female?*

MD: "Human being" I got rid of a long time ago. No. Absolutely not. It's alien. I've been through that. I've been there. I've thought about that.

WIE: *What do you feel are the limits of that way of thinking?*

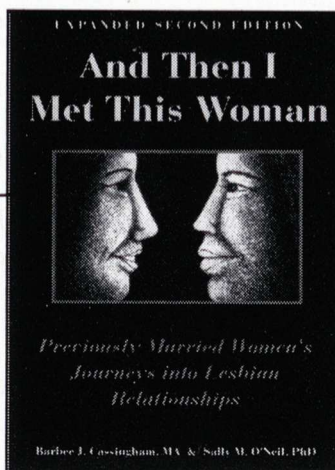
MD: I wrote about human beings in *The Church and the Second Sex*, which was published in 1968. I wanted to liberate "human beings," and I found out that the whole thing was fallacious because there's a false inclusion, as if there were greater similarity between women and men than there is difference. Let me try to put it in a way that may convey some of the landscape. If we lived in a gynocentric society, first of all, it wouldn't be matriarchal; it wouldn't be like patriarchy transposed with big mama on top instead of big papa. It would be totally different, and I believe that it *was* before patriarchy came—this evil. And men would be different, too. They would not have been socialized into this—assuming that they *have* been socialized into it and they're not all mutants—they would be different because the female way of seeing things would be, I don't want to say "dominant" because that's a patriarchal word, but it would be all-pervasive. And you do meet some men like that—I never fully trust it—but you do. Some are less tinged by the patriarchal mode.

So having that in your mind, and living to some extent already in that future, an archaic future that is rooted in a deep past, I have a sense of identity that isn't easily described in this kind of discourse. These kinds of questions are always too crisp. They seem very logical, but they're not. In my opinion, they're not. I would never ask what identity is primary. In the past somehow I made a switch from being "a human being who happens to be female." But I never really believed "happens to be" because at the core of my being I'm *female*. I know who I am, and therefore I could not be other than a radical feminist once that idea was available to me.

You're taking what I consider to be a very primitive set of ideas and asking me to speak about what I might have thought about those ideas twenty or

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thirty years ago. You see, "human being" doesn't really say much of anything to me. I don't know if I'm getting it through to you or not, but I'm not a member of a class called "human being." There is a tremendous uniqueness, but that uniqueness surfaces only when you have a predominantly female mode of being that is at the same time daringly, forcefully breaking out of the patriarchal mode of thinking. So, no, I don't feel at all like a human being. I hate the "human species"—look at it! I hate what it is doing to this earth: the invasion of everything. The last two frontiers are the genetic wilderness and the space wilderness; they've colonized everything else. It's a totally invasive mentality—rapist. That is alien, and insofar as I've internalized any of that, I'm sorry. I'm contaminated by it. We all are. But I try not to be, and with every step I at least try to be biophilic, which is what would be required to break out of the human species.

WIE: In your book *Beyond God the Father*, you call into question the image of the male-gendered God. You write: "The biblical and popular image of God as a great patriarch in heaven, rewarding and punishing according to his mysterious and seemingly arbitrary will, has dominated the imagination of millions over thousands of years. The symbol of the Father God, spawned in the human imagination and sustained as plausible by patriarchy, has in turn rendered service to this type of society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting. If God in 'his' heaven is a father ruling 'his' people, then it is in the 'nature' of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated." Your challenge of the image of the male-gendered God has without a doubt made many people deeply question the idea of a God with a male face, as well as the limiting and damaging effects of this image on our social, political and cultural structures. Now, many feminists have responded to this by replacing the word "God" with "Goddess," and by replacing the image of God as Father with the image of Goddess as Mother. Sam Keen, author of *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man*, whom we also interviewed for this issue of our magazine, said that "we do not begin to get on a spiritual journey until we go beyond the gendered metaphors for God. What in the world could it possibly mean to say Mother Nature? What's motherly about it as opposed to fatherly or brotherly?" While he specifically said that he appreciates the work you've done to dismantle the image of God the Father, he also said, "I think Mary Daly should be as critical of [God the Mother] as she has been of the notion of God the Father." What do you think about this?

“There’s a **reality gap** here. How can I make it clearer? We’re living in **hell**. Talking about a **‘danger of romanticism’** in hoping for something better in the future is a question that comes from **not looking deeply** enough at the **horror** of phallocracy, penocracy, jockocracy, cockocracy, call it whatever—**patriarchy**.”

MD: You see, I don’t care what Sam Keen thinks. Do you understand? If that seems like the epitome of arrogance, so be it. How can I care what he thinks? He doesn’t get it.

WIE: Right. Well, I’m not so much specifically asking about him personally, but about the idea that gendered images for God—male or female—are ultimately limited.

MD: Well, it’s not totally adequate because it assumes that there are two sexes throughout the universe. These are the models for reality, and I don’t know if there are a hundred sexes or if sex would be of any interest whatsoever in some system other than our solar system. How can I know? So it’s limited, but insofar as our experience gives us images, certainly the female is more appropriate for talking about nurturing life, loving and creativity on every level. If you have to choose between the two, female obviously is better. And I don’t even have to choose between the two; I mean, the other isn’t worth consideration anymore. It’s just hanging all over putridly. So, I wouldn’t call the book “Beyond God the Father” now, I’d just say “Beyond God.”

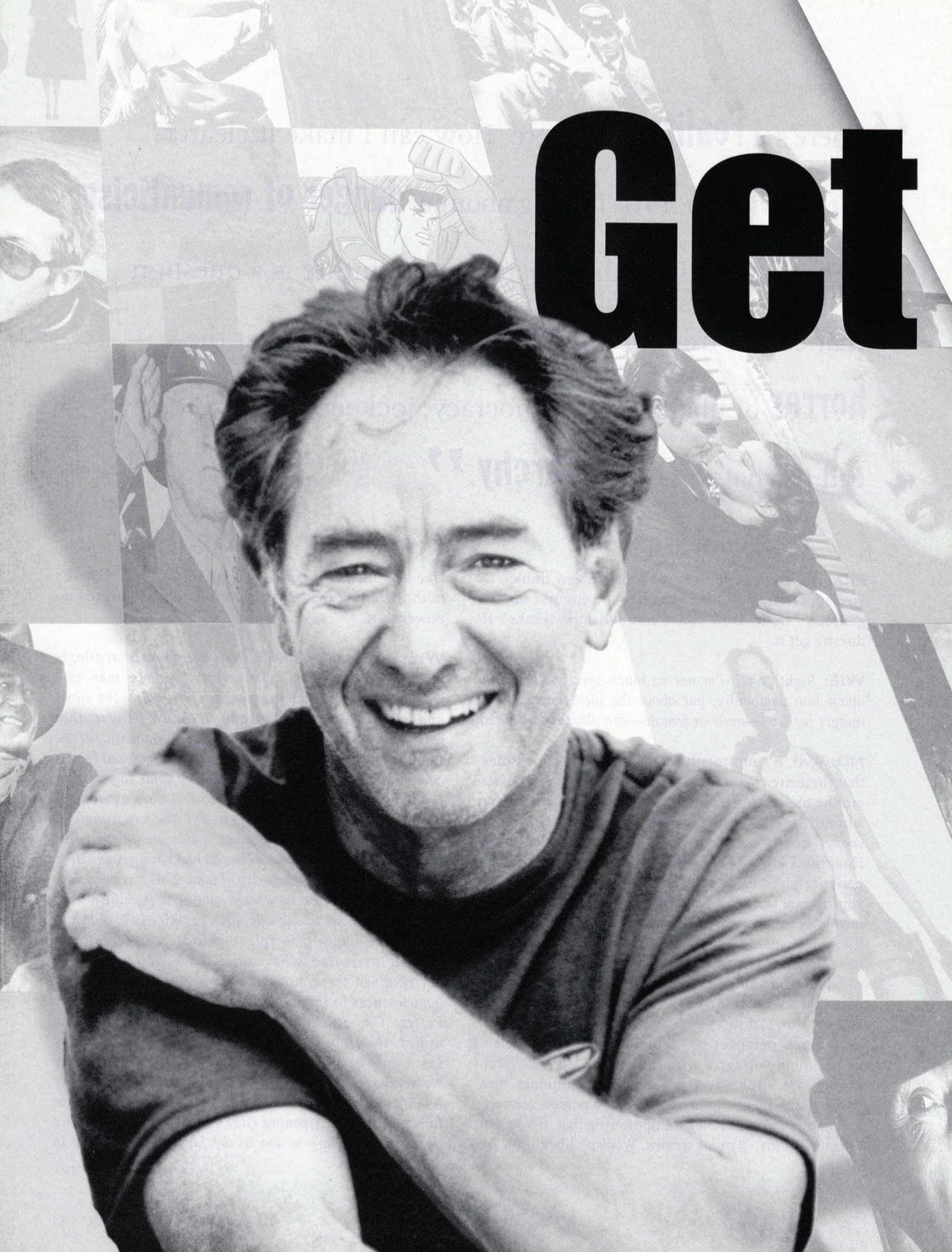
Keen’s perspective, aside from the fact that I would totally disagree with it, is dated. The patriarchs have more sophisticated kinds of arguments now. Particularly the postmodernists: “I’m a person gendered as feminine.” Think how disempowering that is. You can’t get out and say, “I’m for women. Women’s liberation.” It’s

“the liberation of persons gendered as feminine.” There’s nothing in that that makes your blood roar! There’s no power in it.

WIE: As you know, Buddhism is becoming increasingly popular in the West, particularly among men and women who for various reasons are critical of the views and structures of Christianity. Many believe that Buddhism is more in line with modern humanistic ideals. And the Dalai Lama is almost universally revered for his embodiment of what are considered by some to be exclusively “feminine” qualities—qualities such as nonviolence, compassion and concern for the environment. Interestingly, however, a number of statements attributed to the Buddha seem to reveal that he had strong convictions about the spiritual superiority of men. This has been very challenging for Western women coming to Buddhism, and has often been set to one side if not completely avoided. In the Pali Canon [principle Buddhist scriptures], the Buddha is reported to have said: “Ananda, if women had not obtained the Going Forth from the house life into homelessness in the Law and Discipline declared by the Perfect One [acceptance into the Buddha’s monastic order], the Holy Life would have lasted long, the Holy Life would have lasted a thousand years. But now, since women have obtained it, the Holy Life will last only five hundred years. Just as when the blight called gray mildew falls on a field of ripening rice, that field of ripening rice does not last long—so too in the Law and Discipline in

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Get



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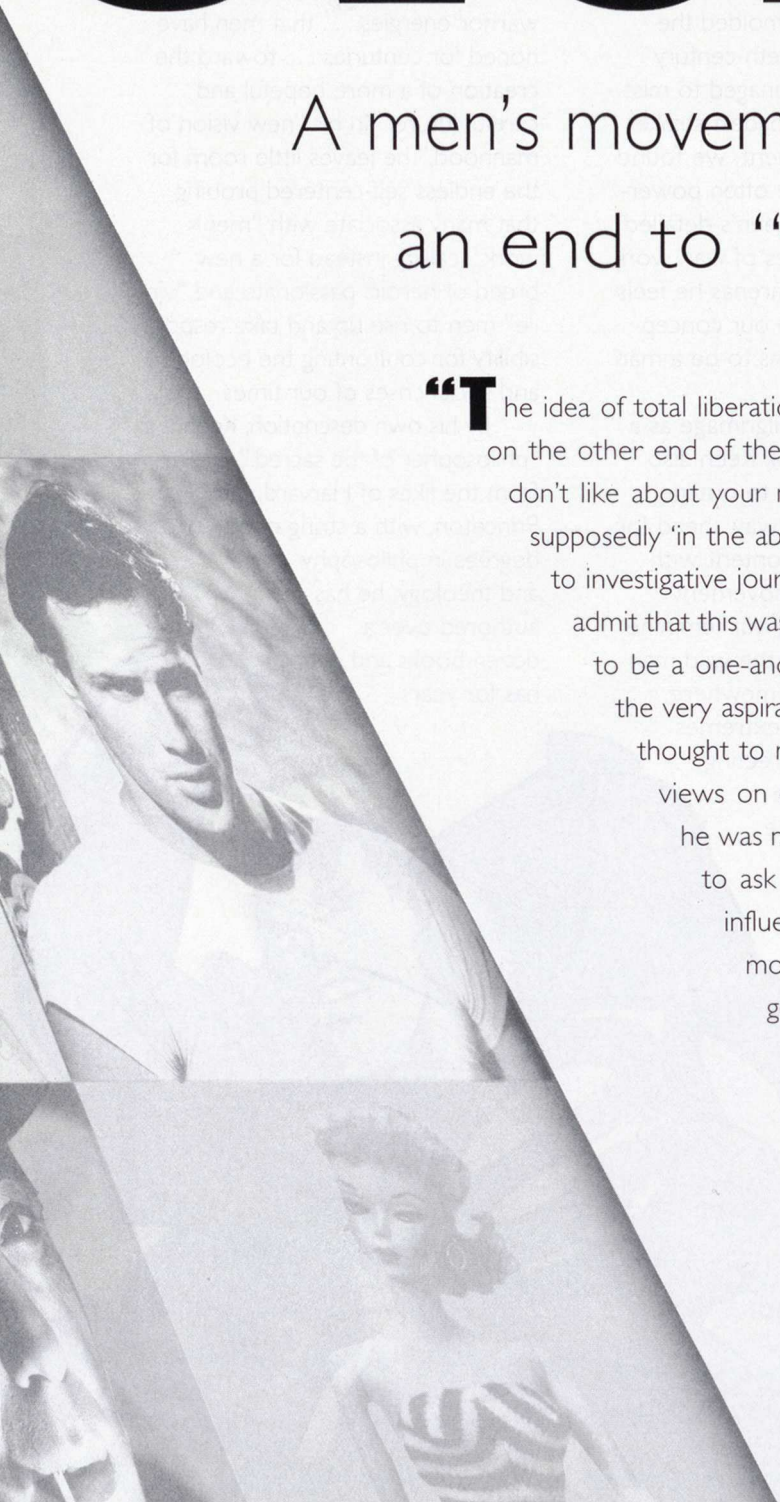
A men's movement pioneer calls for an end to "the gender game."

"The idea of total liberation is a bad and very destructive idea," the gruff voice on the other end of the line announced, adding, "One of the things I frankly don't like about your magazine is the holding up of these people who are supposedly 'in the absolute' and totally liberated." While our commitment to investigative journalism often finds us in unexpected territory, I had to admit that this was a new one. Not five minutes into what was scheduled to be a one-and-a-half-hour interview, and already our magazine and the very aspiration on which it is built were under fire. Fortunately, I thought to myself, I hadn't called Sam Keen to ask him about his views on enlightenment. And having discovered firsthand that he was not a man to mince his words, I was all the more eager to ask this modern-day master of myth—one of the most influential figures in today's burgeoning men's spirituality movement—our questions on the role and influence of gender in spiritual life.

an interview with

Sam Keen

by Craig Hamilton



INTRODUCTION

continued

Our introduction to Keen's work had come only a few months before when, while beginning our research into gender and spirituality, we picked up his book *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man*. A rich, almost lyrical blending of autobiographical anecdote and psychological theory, the book—which in the early nineties had served as a rallying point for thousands of men bent on breaking free of the culture's male mythos—soon had us under its spell. For several weeks, our basement sauna was transformed into a private sweat lodge of sorts, as the male members of our editorial team gathered there by evening with our spiritual

teacher to read aloud Keen's riveting analysis of the social and cultural

influences that have molded the psyche of late twentieth-century man. Having each managed to miss out on all but the broadest strokes of the men's movement, we found our own experience often powerfully illuminated by Keen's detailed tour through the rites of war, work and sex—the three arenas he feels have come to define our conceptions of what it means to be a man in today's world.

Using his own pilgrimage as a template, in the book Keen also goes to some length to outline what he sees as the way ahead for modern men. Not content with the popular men's movement mantras, "embracing our feminine side" or "unleashing the wild man within," he points somewhere between these two extremes to a redirecting of "the fierce

warrior energies . . . that men have honed for centuries . . . toward the creation of a more hopeful and careful future." In his "new vision of manhood," he leaves little room for the endless self-centered probing that many associate with "men's work," calling instead for a new breed of heroic, passionate and "virile" men to rise up and take responsibility for confronting the ecological and social crises of our times.

By his own description, Keen is a "philosopher of the sacred." Hailing from the likes of Harvard and Princeton, with a string of advanced degrees in philosophy and theology, he has authored over a dozen books and has for years



Get Over It!

been a prominent figure in the American human potential movement. It was through his experiences leading workshops at Esalen Institute, as a contributing editor for *Psychology Today*, and as cofounder of a men's group called SPERM (Society for the Protection and Encouragement of Righteous Manhood) that he began to formulate many of the ideas that would fill the pages of his books.

In the larger body of his work, Keen informed me, *Fire in the Belly* is perhaps best characterized as his answer to the psychological dilemmas of modern man and, as such, is not in itself focused primarily on the spiritual dimension of life. It was only in his 1994 book *Hymns to an Unknown God* that Keen attempted to chart the waters of the spiritual quest—a journey he sees as common to both sexes—which only can begin after the psychological “wounds of gender” have been healed.

Describing the book, he writes: “[It] is a map of the path we travel together, when the questions of masculinity and femininity, male

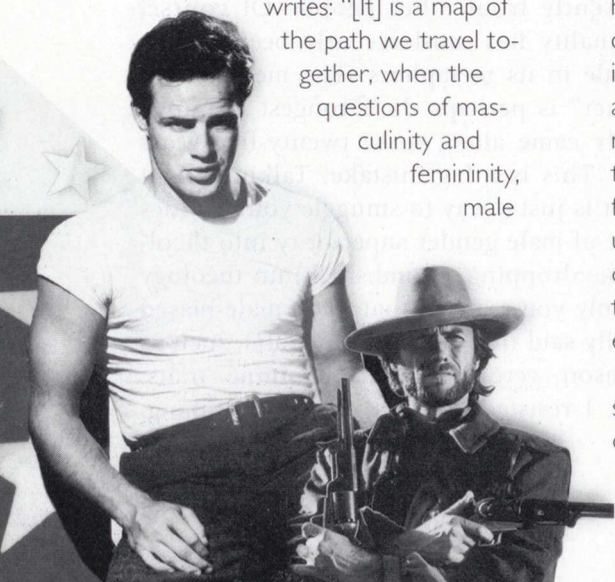
and female roles, have been left far behind.” Keen’s approach to spirituality, along with Jungian analysis and many body-centered “transpersonal” therapies, does not count itself among those spiritual paths aiming for final enlightenment, but falls instead under the broad umbrella of what has come to be called “sacred psychology.” Attempting to bring the individualistic ideals of Western humanism into a spiritual context, Keen and other authorities in this increasingly popular school of thought point to a life of meaning found not in surrendering to a God greater than oneself, nor in an effort to slay the ego through the renunciation of self-centered impulses, but through a personal confrontation with one’s own existential questions and a reckoning with the shadow-world of one’s unconscious. Keen writes: “My quest . . . is driven primarily by a personal-existential need to discover how I fit within the scheme of things, not by a . . . need to understand how human beings fit within the cosmos. . . . The dignity and meaning of my life involve the discovery and creation of my way, my truth, my destiny.” Although some traditional enlightenment teachings do find expression in Keen’s work, the ultimate goal of spiritual life as he defines it is not the dissolution of the separate sense of self, but the empowering of it.

During the course of our conversation last spring, Keen related some of the details of his own personal

struggle first to prove his manhood and later to shed the rigid notions of masculinity in which he found himself bound. Having spent the better part of his life going against his own deeply sensitive nature, he recounted, it was only when a therapist pointed out to him that his “manliness is [his] sensitivity” that he was able to begin to make his own “journey beyond gender.”

Having heard Keen’s description of this pivotal moment in his search, it struck me as perhaps slightly ironic that his phone manner seemed to fall somewhere on the spectrum between John Wayne and General Patton. In the course of our conversation, Keen made it clear that he does not suffer fools—or opposing viewpoints—gladly, as he forthrightly shared his informed and often scathing critique of everything from radical feminism to Jungian psychology to the very men’s movement which gave him his fame.

And while I can’t deny that I was still glad I wasn’t interviewing him about enlightenment, there was nonetheless something about the straightforwardness, and even boldness, with which he spoke that I couldn’t help but appreciate. For one meets few people who have lived their questions as Keen has. And his thinking on many of the central themes surrounding our inquiry into gender and spirituality showed not only an unusual clarity and precision but a passionate conviction and a refreshing depth and breadth of hard-earned common sense.



WIE: In *Fire in the Belly*, you call upon men to undertake a spiritual journey that culminates in “the celebration of a new vision of manhood.” What defines this journey, as you see it?

SAM KEEN: Well, a large part of my work is focused on the way in which the myths of a culture shape and inform the way we live, the way we think about ourselves and the way we feel. What I’m doing in *Fire in the Belly* is dealing with the myth of gender and specifically with the myth of male gender. And you have to understand that when I talk about a spiritual journey in that context, I’m not talking about a *total* spiritual journey; I’m talking about only one aspect of it. My ultimate message for the men’s movement or, as far as that’s concerned, the women’s movement, with regard to spirituality and gender is: Get over it! Because the spiritual journey starts on the other side of gender.

Now let me say what I mean by that because I think my perspective is different from that of most people. I’ve got to start with the idea of myth, that a myth is like the software that is inserted into us by the society, by our family. Nature gives us certain hardware. There’s male hardware and there’s female hardware. But the moment we’re born, people start shoving these software disks in, saying, “Here’s what a real man is. Here’s what it means to be a man. Here’s what it means to be an *American* man,” and things like that. That’s what gender is. And those gender divisions, for roughly the last four thousand years, have been largely circulating around warfare. The division between men and women has been the division between warriors and nurturers. The male has been artificially conditioned to be tough, to be aggressive, to be hostile, to be willing to either kill or die for the tribe. The most poignant symbol of this, of course, is circumcision, which is a way of saying that to be male is to be wounded and to be willing to be wounded, whereas the female has been conditioned to be the servant of the warriors, the bearer of the children, the nurturer of the society, and in that sense to be inferior to the male. So when we’re talking about gender, we’re largely talking about injuries that have been done to male persons and female persons in the effort to perpetuate a way of life based upon warfare, aggression, domination and control. And all of that, from the point of view of the life of the spirit, is a mistake. It’s this we have to rise above in order to begin to have any notion of what the spirit is.

WIE: Would you say, then, that the spiritual path is the same for men as for women? Or is it different?

SK: I would say it’s the same, although it demands that we get over different illusions. The male has got to get over the illusions of manhood, and the woman has to get rid of the illusions of womanhood, to go beyond them, to go beyond the cultural stereotypes that have shaped them and to realize that, at the level of the life of the spirit, there isn’t a difference—that it’s equally difficult for us to transcend those things, to grind up the whole shadow, to delve into our unconscious and to transcend our conditioning. I think of the life of the spirit, in a sense, as that which begins to emerge on the far side of the mythologies that have shaped and informed us.

The first place I can remember that this question was raised was many, many years ago when Reinhold Niebuhr, the theologian, wrote an essay about pride, about how we have to get over pride because pride is a chief sin. And a woman who must have been one of the first feminist theologians wrote and said, “Wait a minute, that may be true for men. But it’s not true for women. Women, by and large, have a problem of *low* self-esteem, of not having *enough* pride because that’s what the culture has done to them; it says that you’re second class.” So in that sense, there is a different emotional agenda that attaches to a woman freeing herself and a man freeing himself, just in large terms.

Let me tell you another way in which this topic is talked about that I think will distinguish how I think about it differently from other people. Of course, Western spirituality has until recently been almost exclusively male in its metaphors. The metaphor of “God the Father” is perhaps the strongest example. And Mary Daly came along some twenty-five years ago and said, “This is a big mistake. Talking about God the Father is just a way to smuggle your politics and your sense of male gender superiority into theology.” It was like dropping a bombshell into theology because suddenly you realized that these male-biased metaphors really said that “masculine” traits, such as control and reason, were better than “feminine” traits. Like all males, I resisted her stuff in the beginning.



“ My ultimate message for the men’s movement and the women’s movement with regard to spirituality and gender is:

Get over it! Because the spiritual journey starts on the other side of gender.”

Then I began to realize she was absolutely right about it. But the problem is that the feminists then said, “Oh, God the Father. That’s right. That’s a *baaad* way to talk. Now, let’s talk about God the Mother. Let’s talk about the *Goddess*.” Now, I think that Mary Daly should be as critical of that as she has been of the notion of God the Father. We do not begin to get on a spiritual journey until we go beyond the gendered metaphors for God. For instance, tell me what in the world it could possibly mean to say *Mother Nature*? What’s motherly about it as opposed to fatherly or brotherly? It’s a metaphor, and it’s a metaphor whose time has passed as far as I’m concerned. I say that we need to get beyond that and to get back to the much more basic kinds of metaphors of knowing, of compassion, of loving.

The second book I wrote was called *Apology for Wonder*. Aristotle says that philosophy begins in wonder. The same thing is true about the life of the spirit. The life of the spirit begins in wonder, the wonder that there is anything, the sense of gratitude to be in a world that is filled with all of these marvels. And if the life of the spirit begins in wonder and awe, then what could it possibly mean to say that’s either male or female? It’s irrelevant. Maleness and femaleness are irrelevant to the basic fact that there is this marvelous universe.

WIE: You were speaking about how we all have strong ideas of what it means to be a good or real man or a good or real woman, ideas that have been implanted into us by culture. And while people generally tend to put a lot of energy into trying to live up to that gender ideal, spiritual liberation teachings stress that we have to be willing to give up all of our preconceived ideas and live in a state of perpetual unknowing, a condition of genuine openness to the discovery of what is. One of the things we’re exploring in this issue is what this kind of unknowing would mean in relation to our gender identity. Would it be possible, for example, for an individual to come to a point in their spiritual development where they were completely freed from any fixation on gender differences while at the same time felt no need to avoid or deny whatever differences might actually exist?

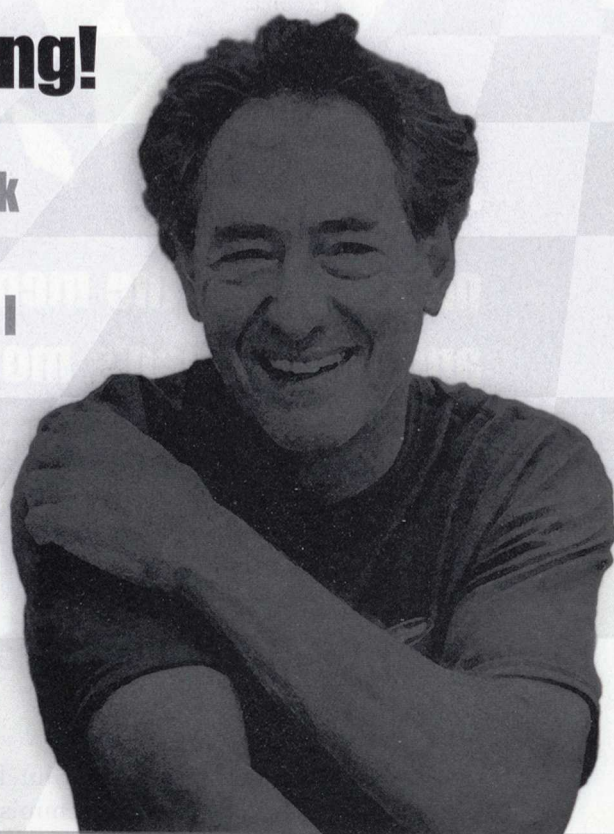
SK: Well, yes and no. In the first place, the idea of total liberation is a bad and extremely destructive idea.

WIE: It is?

SK: Yes, because it’s something to aim at that you’re never going to hit. To be free from the crippling effects of gender is a good ideal and we should work in that direction, but you’re also always living within a society where those distinctions are operative and continue to

“It’s totally unhelpful for me to say, ‘Now I’ve gotta get my **yin balanced with my **yang**!**

Am I too yang or too yin?’ If all I can think of is ‘I’ve got to do **this or **that**,’ if all I think of is ‘**masculine**’ or ‘**feminine**,’ it’s a shotgun to my head.”**



be wounding to you and to others. And part of what it means to live the life of the spirit is to work to overcome that. But no matter how far you go, you’re always going to have an unconscious, you’re always going to have a shadow, you’re always going to have something that has the tendency to draw you back into those distinctions because you were formed that way in the beginning. In a sense, it’s sort of a countercultural act to get free of them.

So in terms of the notion of total liberation, I don’t have the foggiest idea what that would mean. One of the things I frankly don’t like about your magazine is the holding up of these people who are supposedly “in the absolute” and totally liberated. I don’t know whether you remember, but for many years I was the person at

Psychology Today who interviewed all these gurus. And so I’ve had a good bit of experience with a fair number of them—Chögyam Trungpa, Oscar Ichazo, Muktananda and others. And if these are all examples of people who are totally liberated, I say give me slavery because they were people with enormous illusions and who were cultivating enormous illusions in their followers. By and large almost all of them were totally unclear about three important things: sex, money and power. And they could play like they were liberated as long as they had a whole cult of disciples who did everything for them except wipe their asses—and probably that, too. And most of them were on enormous power trips. So I think the idea of total liberation is

sort of like the idea of perfection. It’s an idea that is more crippling than helpful.

WIE: But in your chapter “Taking the Measure of Man” in *Fire in the Belly*, you write about the “Hall of Exemplars,” about the extraordinary men and women who, in their rare demonstration of “elemental virtue[s],” stand as “harbingers of hope” for all of us who aspire to live a greater life. You state that what’s significant about these men and women is that “their lives are our strongest evidence that human beings are spiritual creatures, that we are able to transcend the conditioning of both biology and culture.” So what I’m asking you is: What does it mean to transcend biological and cultural conditioning, specifically where gender is concerned?

SK: Well, let me take one of my good examples: Georgia O'Keeffe. Now, Georgia O'Keeffe, right from the beginning, did not follow the path that one was supposed to follow to be a nice girl. She wasn't sugar and spice and everything nice. She wasn't getting the coffee for anybody. She wasn't asking anybody how she should draw. Right from the beginning of her life, she had a vision and she pursued it. And she pursued it in such a way that she broke many of the taboos of her time. When she wanted to marry Stieglitz, she got married; when she needed to be in New Mexico, she went to New Mexico. Today that would not be all that shocking, but back then it was pretty radical stuff.

WIE: So in this sense of the word "transcendence," you're not speaking about an absolute transcendence as it's been conceived by the great mystical traditions, but more specifically about a willingness to break with the status quo?

SK: Well, yes, but it's about self-understanding, too. And, you know, there are millions of quiet exemplars to look to as well. As a matter of fact, I have much more trouble looking at the official examples than I do at unofficial ones. We all salute these official sort of semi-saints but, I mean, who knows what the Dalai Lama does on the side?

WIE: Coming back to the question of gender differences, a number of contemporary thinkers and practitioners have asserted that women are, by nature, predisposed to pursue a path of immanence—which involves deeply connecting to their bodies and to the cycles of nature and finding the sacred in relationship—while men tend to seek transcendence of all that is worldly, to look beyond

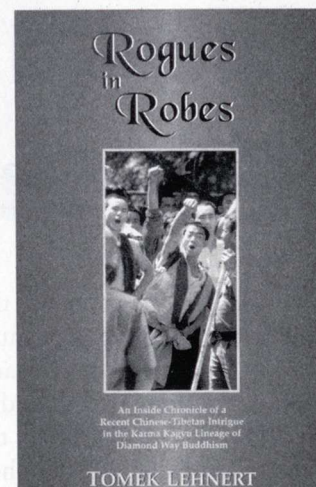
themselves for the sacred mystery that lies at the source of all existence. Seemingly in support of this idea are certain religious traditions that adhere to a kind of tantric model in which there are strictly defined spheres that are said to be divinely ordained for men and women. In Orthodox Judaism, for example, the men devote themselves to study and prayer and the women are expected to find their spiritual fulfillment in bearing children and maintaining the sanctity of the home. According to this paradigm, it is only by each sex giving themselves wholeheartedly to the fulfillment of these preordained roles and then coming together in their differences that divine union can be achieved and God's will can become manifest on Earth. Do you feel that this notion of distinct paths for men and women bears out in practice?

SK: No. I think that's sort of like saying it's intrinsic and God-given that women should wear skirts and men should wear pants. I think it's just about as culturally conditioned as that. I mean, come on, give me a break! Women are more immanent than men?! Tell that to van Gogh! Tell it to Audubon, tell it to John Muir, tell it to Agassiz, tell it to any of the poets. I don't know where people get off making this kind of generalization! I mean, what could that possibly mean? I'm sitting here, as a matter of fact, this very moment, looking out my window at the stream and the beautiful greens with the sun on them—so I guess that kind of makes me like a woman!

Almost every year I take groups into Bhutan. It's marvelous because there you see that men and women, especially in rural areas, practically do almost exactly the same things—the same kind of work. Their bodies even look kind of the same. And it's

The Inside Story about the Karmapa

Head of the Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism



When a Tibetan Buddhist leader dies, he leaves clues as to where he will next incarnate, so that he can be found and trained to take up his duties again. When the 16th Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu lineage, died in 1981, the search for his successor soon began.

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ROGUES IN ROBES by Tomek Lehnert

An Inside Chronicle of a Recent Chinese-Tibetan Intrigue in the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism

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“Anytime you put the blame on one of the genders, you have rendered the other inferior.”

If it's true that men just dominated women all that time and women had no power, then they probably needed to be dominated.”

not a big deal. You get the sense that sexuality and everything goes much more easily. I don't ever hear anybody saying anything that would be vaguely like, “a *real* man does this or a *real* woman does that.” There are some role divisions in the society, of course. Male monastics are uppermost in the establishment. And there are some put-downs of women in the tradition, including the assertion that it's harder for women to get enlightened and things of that kind. But I just think that generalizations like that are repressive. And let me tell you why I think they're repressive, why I'm so passionate about this idea.

As a young man, I was unusually sensitive. I loved birds, I loved nature and I was sensuous. And gradually it occurred to me that this was something I had to be ashamed of, that it was kind of sissy. So I put that stuff away for a long time. Through my teenage years I took Charles Atlas courses and learned to wrestle to toughen myself up so I could be a man. And it wasn't until I began trying to work through some of these ideas that I began to realize, in retrospect, what bullshit that was, what destructive cultural stereotyping it

really was. When this first really began to open up for me was actually during a bioenergetics session with Stanley Keleman. I was going with a woman at the time who was giving me all kinds of trouble. I just wasn't manly enough for her, in my view. And Stanley looked at me one day and said, “You don't get it, do you? You just don't get it. Your manliness is your sensitivity.” And I realized I had been misidentifying where my “Sam Keen” strength was all along, that all these “feminine” parts that I had thought were not worthy of me were really where the juice of my life was, and that I had to learn to be more accepting, more surrendering and softer and more sensuous.

So I think that those notions are really destructive to individual people. In my seminars, I frequently have women come up and talk about how deeply shamed they are because they're aggressive, competent women and they maybe even look kind of manly. They say, “I have all this competence and everything else but, you know, I just feel like maybe I'm not feminine enough.” And I look at them and I say, “You look like a pretty

attractive woman to me. What do you mean?” They say, “Well, you know, I'm not x, y and z, and all these other things.” You see, it's injurious to put these kinds of cookie cutters over ourselves.

WIE: *It seems to be common practice today to label qualities such as compassion, receptivity, sensitivity and intuition as “feminine” and qualities such as aggressiveness, competitiveness, ambition and reason as “masculine.” Near the end of Fire in the Belly, in writing about what you call “the gender game,” you speak at length about these binding polarities that have come to define our conceptions of gender. You state: “Manliness and womanliness are both defined by a process of decision, and denial. Each gender is assigned half of the possible range of human virtues and vices. . . . We do not know what human beings would be like if encouraged to develop their innate promise without the systematic crippling effect of the gender game.”*

SK: Yeah, well, in the first place, I go on to say there that I think that no self-respecting person who's thought about these things should ever use the word “masculine” or “feminine”

and attach any kind of general predicates and virtues to it. That's just nonsense. It's time to get rid of that stuff. It may be helpful on the spiritual journey to ask myself the question: How have I been crippled by my effort to become a man or a *real* man, or a woman or a *real* woman? That's not a bad question to begin with. But there is a far, far more important question which is far more subtle and that is: Who am I? Who is Sam Keen and what does *he* experience and what does *he* need to do and where are *his* injuries? So much of my approach is the effort to go beyond mythology to autobiography, to take my own story and the uniqueness of my own situation, my own gifts and my own wounds, with a kind of ultimate seriousness. In other words, to put it metaphorically, God does not issue something to me that says, "To whom it may concern," nor does he say, "To all men" or "To all women" or "Directive to twentieth-century man." No, the still, small voice addresses me with my name: Sam Keen, do this. Sam Keen, experience that. It's individually tailored, you see. And the fact is that my way of being a man is probably different from your way of being a man. And it's my task to find out what that is. I'm always going to be a man. Biologically, I'm going to be a man. I have the male equipment. But what that means is going to be so governed by my own experience as to be something that would be almost totally, perhaps, strange to you.


WIE: *Along these lines, at another point you state, "Far better to remain with the real mystery of man and woman than the false mystification of the masculine and the feminine." What do you mean by "the real mystery of man and woman?"*

SK: I don't know. I know what the false mystery is. The difference between a false mystery and a real mystery is that you can tell what a false mystery is, but I'm not sure that you can ever say what the true mystery is. It's like when I'm in the presence of a woman who has gone beyond the gender crippling stuff in herself, and I am at least endeavoring to go beyond it in myself, and we face each other, no longer as masculine and feminine, but as unique individuals, then there is the real mystery of that other person. I think I said in the book it's sort of like what Satchmo said when somebody asked him what jazz is; he said, "Man, if you don't know, I could never tell you."

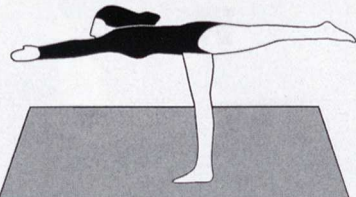
WIE: *Jungian psychology holds that within each of us, male or female, there are both masculine and feminine energies, which need to be brought into balance if we are to become whole. For instance, Marion Woodman in her book Leaving My Father's House states, "We all function with these two different energies. As health and growth depend on both dark and light, so maturity depends on an inner balance between yin and yang, Shakti and Shiva, being and doing." Do you agree with this notion that a fundamental polarity of masculine and feminine energy exists in the psyche?*


SK: No, I think it's boring—it's a boring idea. I could put it this way. There are two kinds of people: those who divide the world up into two columns and those who don't. I am a person who does not believe in setting the world up in terms of two columns and then saying, "But you see, there's a little of the yin in the yang and a little of the yang in the yin, and we have to get the two columns together." Well, why start with two columns? Why start with

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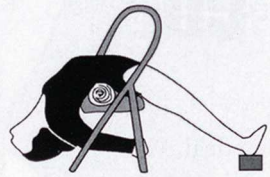

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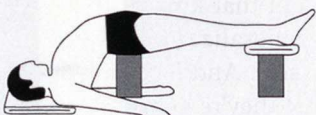

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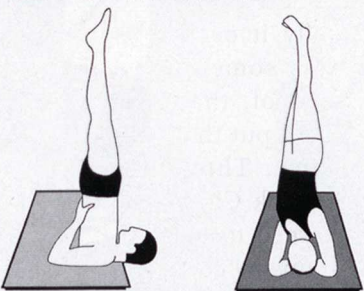

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GAY/STRAIGHT, MAN/WOMAN, SELF/OTHER

What would
the Buddha
have had to say
about gay liberation?

On June 11, 1997, in San Francisco, gay Buddhist activists met with H. H. the Dalai Lama to take the revered Tibetan Buddhist leader to task for his position that gay sexuality was in violation of Buddhist sexual ethics. In his book *Beyond Dogma*, the Dalai Lama cites Buddhist rules that classify homosexual activity as misconduct.

For practicing Buddhists, the indisputable implication of this contemporary publication was that if one were gay and sexually active, one couldn't be a Buddhist in good standing. Faithful gay Buddhists were upset. Among the eight gay and lesbian leaders assembled to discuss this sensitive issue with the eminent celibate monk was Jose Cabezon, former translator to His Holiness, Professor of Philosophy

at Iliff School of Theology and self-described gay Buddhist. I was intrigued by the furor that had erupted and began to wonder—setting aside the doctrinal debate over the modern interpretation of Buddhist law—how relevant is one's sexual orientation to enlightenment, the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path?

an interview with
JOSE CABEZON
by Amy Edelstein



INTRODUCTION

continued

When I thought about gay liberation and Buddhist liberation, I saw technicolor. Loud, flamboyant images, evocative poetry, outrageous creative escapades . . . Allen Ginsberg, John Giorno, the beatniks. Adventurous men who, from the Bowery to San Francisco to the banks of the Ganges and the hill-tops of Darjeeling, brought us mixed metaphors of uninhibited male love and Eastern spiritual pursuit. These unusual men took these metaphors into the public arena, out of the privacy of the bedroom and the silence of the meditation hall. Over one million people called in to hear Giorno's passionate and often provocative dial-a-poems. In places as conservative as Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the 1970s Allen Ginsberg chanted verses about nirvana, *satori* [enlightenment experiences] and male sexual ecstasy while his lover droned in the background on a harmonium, sparking the spirit of the quest in



GAY/STRAIGHT, MAN/WOMAN, SELF/OTHER

countless young poets, myself among them. I thought of Whitman and the transcendentalists. I thought of a movement associated with an endless crescendo of epiphanies, with an ecstatic celebration of the divine in the human body, a movement propelled by a great energy, fueled by defying convention and breaking boundaries—in search, in search of something beyond, something ecstatic, exalted, something both immanent and transcendent.

As these various images swirled in my mind's eye with all their costume and pageantry, I realized I really knew very little about the movement called "gay liberation." What were its tenets? The essence of its goal? And why did it seem that so many gay men have taken to Buddhism, a path laid out by a celibate renunciate? For it seemed that the gay men's movement spoke of asserting one's sexuality, of conscious identifica-

tion with one's difference from others, of finding one's identity as *a man*, while the Buddha taught about quenching the fires of desire, realizing one's sameness with all others and identifying with no-self. If contemporary gay Buddhists are writing about the fundamental importance of their identity and sexual preference to their path, what will the implications be for Buddhism—long criticized by feminists and homosexuals as another homophobic, albeit perhaps more enlightened, patriarchal religion?

Jose Cabezon's name had crossed my path again and again over the years doing research for *WIE*. A respected scholar, he was often referred to me as someone who could answer my questions about Buddhist doctrine and scripture. Cabezon has written, translated and edited six books about Buddhist teachings as well as about religion, sexuality and gender, including an

historical analysis of homosexuality in Buddhist cultures. He has also participated in several interfaith dialogues on religion and gender and is one of very few Western monks to have studied at the illustrious Sera Je monastery in Bylakuppe, India, the Princeton University of the Gelugpa monasteries.

I wondered what Cabezon would have to say. He is a vocal advocate of gay rights and has been a disciplined Buddhist monk. He knows the classical Buddhist texts and has met many of the great modern Tibetan teachers. At the same time, he has studied gay history and is involved with the pressing social issues raised by contemporary gay culture. Is our identification with our sexual preference a key element in our spiritual pursuit? Is the liberation of our sexual identity part and parcel of our spiritual liberation? What is the relationship between being gay and enlightenment?

WIE: *What is your definition of spiritual liberation?*

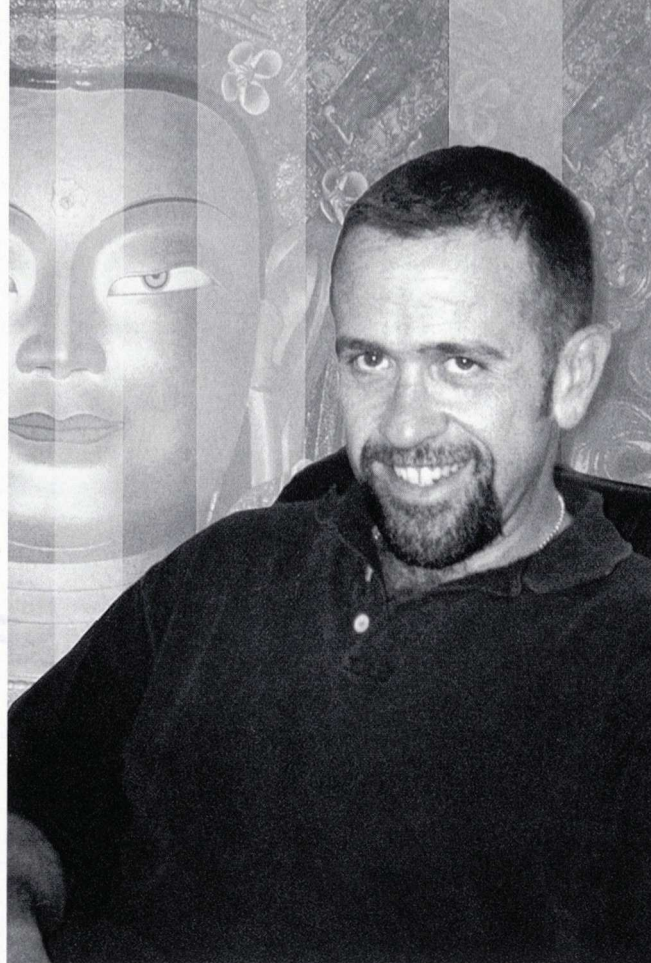
JOSE CABEZON: According to Mahayana Buddhism, spiritual liberation is a state of complete, total and irreversible personal transformation, where a person goes from living in suffering to living without suffering. And once you reach this state, you never fall back to suffering again. Another essential aspect of liberation or, more accurately, of enlightenment, is a dedication to helping others achieve that same state. Even though I think that this kind of radical, uncompromising view is important, to set one's sights on that, at the beginning anyway, can be unrealistic. So I prefer to view liberation in a less radical fashion and to stress an incremental view, which is simply that we make progress, we become better people—more insightful, more compassionate, more loving—and we help others become better people. And this occurs one step at a time by following a spiritual path.

WIE: *How would you define gay liberation?*

JC: Spiritual liberation is principally an internal shift in the way one perceives oneself, the world and others. Gay liberation has a more external focus in that it usually refers to the liberation of gay people in a society that tends to oppress them. This doesn't mean that the two spheres are completely divorced from each other. For example, spiritual liberation has social implications and gay liberation has internal implications. It has been argued, and I think rightfully, that it's impossible for gay people to achieve external social liberation without first achieving some kind of internal liberation as a gay person, for example, acceptance of one's sexual orientation.

WIE: *Can you say more about the ways gay liberation and spiritual liberation relate to each other?*

JC: Someone who is committed to the Mahayana Buddhist path is committed to ending the suffering of others. One aspect of that is ending oppression and



inequality wherever they exist. It seems to me that anyone who is seriously following the Mahayana Buddhist path would have to be committed to various forms of social liberation, including gay liberation, as a natural corollary of the Mahayana path, whether or not one is gay. I think following a spiritual path naturally commits one to things like gay liberation, women's liberation and men's liberation.

WIE: *Our identification with being a man or woman seems to be our most primary identification. Freud went so far as to assert that the core of our personality rests on these gender distinctions. In your anthology Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender, you yourself wrote, "Our nature as sexual and gendered beings is a crucial factor that must be taken into account in the analysis of all areas of human concern." On the other hand, the Buddhist teachings of liberation seem to point to a condition in which we are not referring to any fixed ideas about who we are, where we are living in what could be described as a state of nonduality. How does the seemingly inescapable fact of our gender identity go together with the Buddhist goal of freedom from all fixed and limited views?*

JC: It's one thing to say that the Buddhist path ultimately requires a transcendence of gender distinctions

and another to say that it requires ignoring gender distinctions. There's a difference between those two things, and I think that the latter is not the case. Buddhism makes a distinction between two levels of reality: the conventional level and the ultimate level. At the conventional level, the distinctions that we normally encounter in the world—male/female, Buddhist/non-Buddhist, self/other—are operative. They are valid and useful distinctions at the conventional level. But, like all distinctions, they tend to limit our way of understanding the world. They can become reified and breed ignorance. In the traditional Mahayana texts, there are arguments put forward for breaking up these dualisms and thereby achieving greater levels of insight. But even when one engages in these types of analyses that eventually give rise to what's known as nondual awareness, it does not imply that the dualities themselves are invalid at the conventional level. The conventional world is never annihilated.

WIE: *How important is our gender identity in the pursuit of absolute realization?*

JC: Let's take the example of tantric Buddhism. At the highest levels of the path, the practice of sexual yoga is considered indispensable to achieving enlightenment. So, one's sexual identity as male or female and the internal physiology of the body are extremely important and intimately linked to spiritual practice. Apart from the actual practice of sexual yoga, in tantra, even in what's called the stage of generation, which involves the visualization of deities, one nonetheless visualizes oneself as a being with a sexual identity that is either male or female. But there is a fluidity of gender—people who are biologically male can visualize themselves as female deities and vice versa. So in tantric Buddhism, sexual identity—maleness and femaleness as biological givens—is quite central to the path. Whether this applies to gender identity—that is, to maleness or femaleness as human social constructs—is perhaps less clear.

WIE: *There are many men and women who view their experience of gender and sexual orientation as the basis of their spiritual identity. John Giorno, for example, who has been a practicing Buddhist for over three decades, says his deepest wish is that there would be a Buddhist teaching that specifically addresses the needs of gay people. How do gay Buddhists reconcile the seeming paradox between, on one hand, a belief in and focus on the significance of difference based on our gender and sexual orientation and, on the other, the Buddhist teaching of nonduality, or the essential sameness of our experience of ignorance and suffering?*

JC: In the West, in large part as a result of Freud's influence, we tend to see the development of our identity as intimately linked to sexuality and to sexual desire. Buddhism would question that. From a Buddhist point of view, our conventional sense of self, our ordinary notion of who we are, does not depend upon gender or sexual differentiation. Our sense of self is more basic than, and arises prior to, our identification as male or female, straight or gay. It arises as a result of the distinction between self and other.

WIE: *But many modern Buddhists, men and women, seem to view their experience of gender and sexual orientation as fundamentally relevant to their spirituality, even as being the factor that defines the spiritual path appropriate for them. It seems that in some gay Buddhist writings there is a paradox between this belief in the significance of difference and the goal of the realization of nondifference.*

JC: Yes, that's right.

WIE: *How is that paradox addressed?*

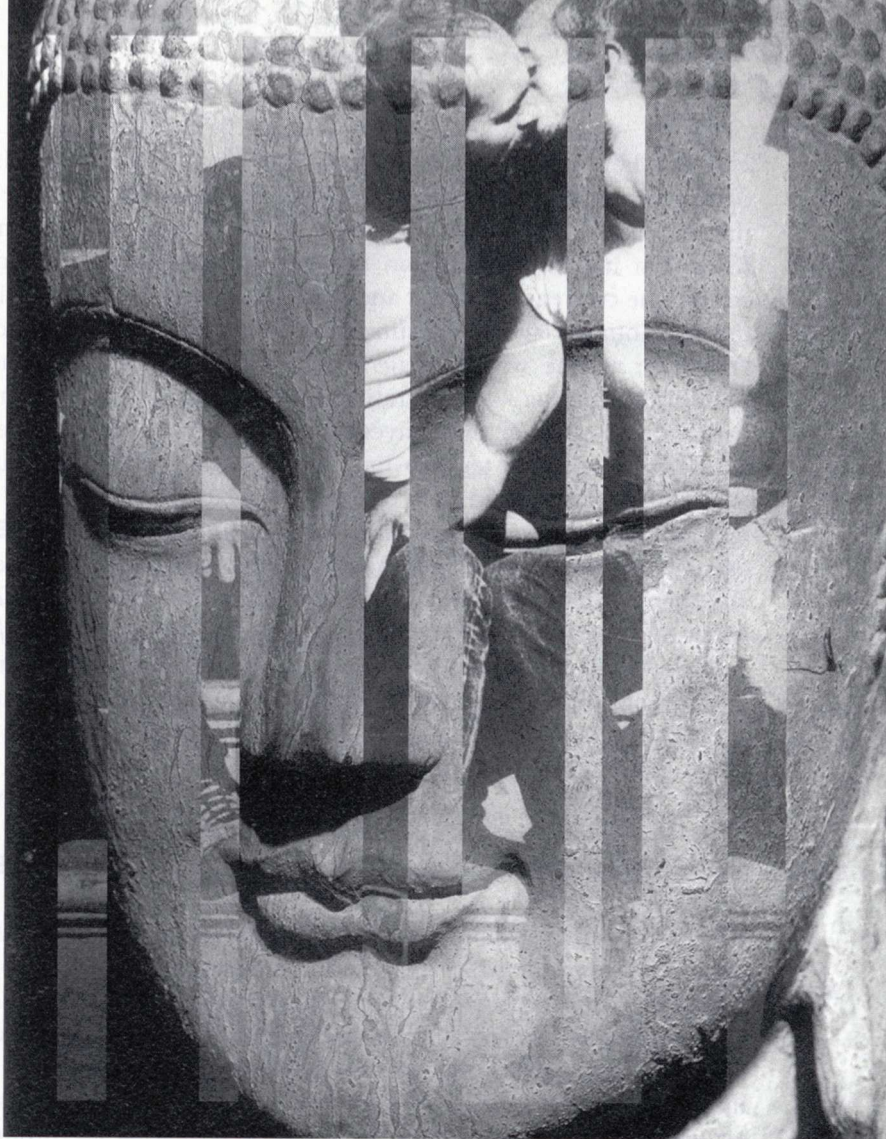
JC: As I mentioned, I think that many Westerners tend to overidentify with their gender and sexual orientation. We tend to think that our true self is intimately linked to who we are as gendered and sexual beings, and so we tend to think that the answer to our spiritual quest must be grounded in our gender and our sexuality. I don't hold this view.

WIE: *Would you go so far as to say that this would be a limited or erroneous point of view from the perspective of ultimate awakening?*

JC: Yes. I would go so far as to say that. Whatever the case at the conventional level, ultimately one's identity as male or female and one's sexual orientation are irrelevant to the spiritual path, in part because at the ultimate level, those distinctions have to be left behind. They have to be transcended. Now, as I mentioned before, that doesn't mean that there isn't a place for these distinctions at the conventional level. For example, sexual orientation can act as a catalyst for bringing people together in mutually supportive spiritual communities.

WIE: *In some of the writings in the gay liberation movement, it is implicitly and even at times explicitly stated that gay men enjoy particular advantages on the spiritual path. Some say that it is because of their familiarity with suffering due to the discrimination and*

“Whatever the case at the conventional level, *ultimately* one’s identity as *male* or *female* and one’s sexual orientation are *irrelevant* to the spiritual path, because at the ultimate level those *distinctions* have to be *left behind*. They have to be transcended.”



rejection they experience in heterosexual culture, or as a result of their intimate contact with death through the devastation of the AIDS epidemic, or because of their willingness to break out of stereotypical roles. Andrew Harvey writes that in many traditions, homosexuals have been especially revered as shamans, priests, oracles, healers and diviners. “Homosexuals,” he states, “were seen as sacred—people who, by virtue of a mysterious fusion of feminine and masculine traits, participated with particular intensity in the life of the Source.” Do you believe that gay men are more spiritual?

JC: I don’t think that one can generalize. So I suppose my answer is no. Certain cultures have tended to revere gay men and women, especially gay men, in this way. But ultimately, I don’t think there is any real reason for doing so. I don’t believe that there’s anything intrinsically spiritual or antispiritual where sexual identity is

concerned. So I don’t think that gay people are in a privileged position with regard to their spirituality. That doesn’t mean that in particular situations at particular historical moments the experiences of gay men and gay women may not make them perhaps more prone to entering a spiritual path or more insightful with regard to certain aspects of the spiritual path, like suffering. For example, some Native American cultures have created the conditions whereby gay men, in particular, are thrown into positions of spiritual leadership in which they thrive.

WIE: Why especially gay men as opposed to gay women?

JC: On the one hand, one could attribute it to misogyny—yet another instance of privileging men over women. But I think it’s more complex than that, and I don’t think that it’s anything intrinsic to gay men. In some

Native American cultures and also in certain Afro-Brazilian religions, it's mostly gay men who have been sought out as shamans and as having special spiritual power. If we wanted to speculate, we could say that maybe the kinds of sexual acts that gay men engage in are considered more transgressive. For example, anal penetration of a man in most cultures is considered an extremely transgressive act. It goes against the ultimate social taboos regarding sexuality. So if a community is looking for a kind of locus of radical difference, it makes sense to look to someone who engages in these extremely transgressive practices.

WIE: *The Buddha prescribed celibacy as one of the essential practices for both monks and nuns in his ordained community. Some modern scholars seem to imply that many Buddhist monks, both historically and in present times, in fact actively engage in homosexuality. John Giorno describes his experience of Buddhist monasteries in contemporary Asia by saying that "homosexuality in Tibetan monasteries is rampant." He says, "Almost every one of the monasteries in all the four traditions, Gelugpa, Kargyupa, Sakya and Nyingma, are totally gay in heart, if not sexually active," and then goes on to describe that the monks actually do engage in sexual acts. He comments that one of his Tibetan teachers told him that this behavior is condoned. You were a Buddhist monk in one of the most respected Tibetan monasteries in the Gelugpa tradition. Would you say that Giorno's depiction of the monastic environment is accurate?*

JC: In most forms of Buddhism, monks take a vow of celibacy. Does that mean that there is no homosexual activity in Buddhist monasteries? No. These are communities of human beings, and I think that especially among younger monks it's not an infrequent occurrence. At the same time, even when monks engage in sexual acts with each other, they take care not to violate the letter of the law. They take their vow of celibacy seriously, or somewhat seriously. For example, the Vinaya—the rules that monks and nuns must follow—prohibits oral intercourse and anal intercourse. So at least in the Tibetan tradition, even when monks, and it's usually younger monks, engage in homosexual activities, they take care not to violate the letter of the vow of celibacy by refraining from oral and anal intercourse. There's a real ambivalence there. It's clear that homosexual activity does take place, but even when it does, celibacy is still held as an ideal.

WIE: *In this issue of the magazine we're exploring whether it's possible for an individual to come to a point in*

their spiritual evolution when they're no longer compulsively fixated on gender differences or sexual preferences, while at the same time having no need to avoid or deny whatever differences that may actually exist. Do you think that such a condition is attainable?

JC: Yes. But not easily. What we're really talking about here is the kind of insight that comes from the realization of emptiness or nonduality. Someone who has real insight into the ultimate truth, into emptiness, is capable of seeing *beyond* gender and sexual orientation distinctions. But until that point is reached, we still live with the social conditioning that we inherit from our culture.

WIE: *Looking at what it could mean to not be compulsively fixated on differences and not avoid or deny differences, would you say this would be a state of total androgyny or a state where natural differences would be revealed without there being any set reference points for any individual, man or woman, gay or straight?*

JC: Where compulsion related to sexual or gender identity is most strong, from a Buddhist point of view, is in regard to sexual desire. So, I suppose one way of phrasing this question is: Is it possible to respect gender differences while at the same time avoiding sexual desire? And Buddhism, of course, would say yes, one can reach a state of desirelessness where one does not fixate upon the sexual identity of another person without denying the conventional differences that exist between men and women, both biologically and as constructed by culture.

WIE: *As you said, traditional Buddhist teachings of liberation emphasize coming to the end of desire and craving. But one of the common themes in the gay liberation movement is the acceptance of and fascination with sexual desire, and even the strong assertion of the importance of expressing, exhibiting and fulfilling this desire as a part of coming into one's own more complete gay identity. Gay psychiatrist Anthony Richardson says, "Sex is of primary importance to us. Insistence on the importance of sex is one of our differences from most straight folks." Given the Buddha's teachings on the difficulties of navigating the strong force of sexual desire, do you think it is possible that the celebration of an identity based on one's sexuality could lead to increased confusion rather than to freedom from the chains of desire and attachment? How do gay Buddhists reconcile the contradiction between what is sometimes called "liberated self-expression" and the Buddha's injunction to quench the flames of sexual desire?*

"I don't believe that there's anything intrinsically spiritual or antispiritual where sexual identity is concerned. So I don't think that gay people are in a privileged position with regard to their spirituality."

JC: First of all, let me say that even among gay writers today there is considerable debate regarding the extent to which sexuality and sexual expression are a necessary part of gay identity. Many gay writers raise the question of whether the claim that it is has, in fact, had negative consequences, like fueling the fires of AIDS. This is a debated issue even in the North American gay community. There have always been voices in the gay liberation movement that have questioned the essentializing of a "gay identity" in any way. So, for example, to say, "Sexual self-expression is an essential part of gay identity"—that it *must* be this way—I find problematic. I don't believe that sexual self-expression is essential to being a gay person. To say that it is essential is to make celibate gay men and women somehow less gay, which is both logically absurd and ethically problematic, as if to say, "You don't count as a real gay person." Now there's no question that in Buddhism, desire is one of the major problems that human beings face. And sexuality is perhaps the strongest form of desire. Therefore, in order to decrease desire, sexual activity must be diminished or curtailed. I see this as being one of the cornerstones of the Buddhist path and I see no way for Buddhists to interpret their way out of this. My personal belief is that there is a kind of responsible sexuality that Buddhism calls for that commits Buddhists to keeping their sexuality within bounds. And I don't see that this in any way negatively impinges upon the struggles of gay people, gay men in particular.

WIE: *It's commonly believed that the Buddha had strong views about the inherent inferiority of women on a spiritual path. What were his views on homosexuality?*

JC: The Buddha was a pragmatist. He realized, I think,

that the insights that he had often went against social norms. And I think that the Buddha also realized that it was necessary to sometimes compromise his insights as an *upaya*, a skillful means, in order to benefit a greater number of beings. For example, although it seems to me that the Buddha could not possibly have seen an essential distinction between homosexual and heterosexual acts, there are portions of the Buddhist texts that seem to come down on homosexuality. On one hand, I think this had to do with the social setting in which the Buddha found himself. On the other, it probably had to do with a pervasive homophobia found even among his followers, followers who were responsible for compiling and editing those texts. If we look at the Buddhist teachings as a whole, there's no question that singling out homosexuality for special critique is not consistent with the Buddha's general message. And the same can be said in regard to the position of women. The Buddha lived in a time and place where it would have been impossible for him to advocate radical egalitarianism between the sexes. But if we look at the Buddha's teachings as a whole, it is quite clear that the Buddha did not believe that women were inferior or that women were spiritually inferior. On the issues that are most important, namely whether women can attain enlightenment while still being women, the Buddha was quite clear that they can. So if we were to transport the Buddha through time to the present day, given our present circumstances, I think there's no question that the Buddha would come out in favor of gay liberation and women's liberation.

WIE: *When we think about the Buddha, we think of somebody who is walking this earth as a living example of the fulfillment of our spiritual potential. If you could*

imagine meeting the Buddha, what do you suppose that his transmission would be, specifically with regard to gender? What do you think we could learn about being a natural man, uninhibited by social convention or by a fixed and limited identification with one's sexuality or by one's gender, from one like the Buddha?

JC: That's a very hard question. I mean, in the Buddhist texts you find cases of enlightened people changing sexes, a man turning into a woman, say, or vice versa, in order to teach people lessons. If the Buddha is, as the texts portray him, a master of skillful means, it's not inconceivable that the Buddha might engage in such acts to completely confound our notions of what is male and what is female—what in contemporary circles is called “gender f—ing”—for the sake of making a spiritual point. That certainly is possible, but I think it's also quite consistent that the Buddha would simply act as a man or a woman without engaging in these types of actions. The answer to this question is that there's no predicting what the Buddha would do. Whatever actions would be for the benefit of others, those are the actions that the Buddha would engage in.

WIE: On this subject of changing genders, we interviewed Kate Bornstein, who was born a man and had a sex change operation to become a woman. She calls herself a “gender outlaw,” and one of the goals of her philosophy is to confound people's ideas of gender. Do you think that her extreme measures are useful to break apart our deep and rigid ideas of what it means to be a man or a woman, or do you think that what she is doing actually has more to do with a fixation on and identification with gender?

JC: We tend to be enculturated in such a way that we have very fixed ideas of what it means to be masculine or feminine, male or female. Part of the process of becoming more spiritually aware involves losing that rigidity in regard to all categories, in regard to all forms of duality, including male and female. So to the extent that we can be challenged in these ways, I think that's healthy. Sometimes we tend to think that we can only come to spiritual insight when we engage in some kind of special, isolated, meditative exercise. And perhaps ultimately it is that kind of practice that is going to lead to permanent spiritual transformation. But that doesn't mean that along the way we can't learn a great deal from

continued on page 133

Halfway Up The Mountain

The Error of Premature Claims to Enlightenment

by Mariana Caplan

“In a world where both the path and the goal of spiritual life are becoming increasingly murky, *Halfway Up The Mountain* sheds light on what are possibly the most important, yet seldom asked, questions facing Western seekers: What is enlightenment? And what is the difference between a glimpse of spiritual illumination and a life transformed and rendered wholly into service of that which is sacred?”

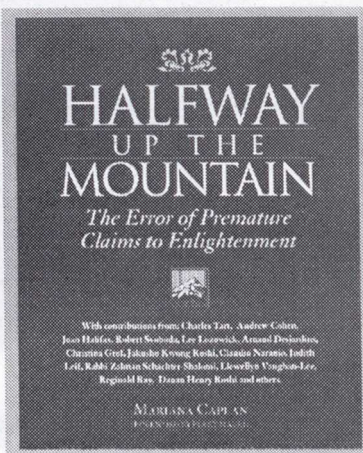
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GAY LIBERATION

I've been on the spiritual path for many years. For the past four years I've been formally celibate, having taken a five-year vow. After only a few months of celibacy, one simple thought crossed my mind that stopped me dead in my tracks: "What if I find out that *I'm not gay*?" The mere thought of such a possibility gave rise to sheer panic. It became clear that my identity as a gay man was something that I did *not* want to question. After recovering from the disorienting tremors of this deeply visceral response, I thought to myself, "If I'm not gay, then who would I be?"

At that moment I was faced with just how deeply identified I was with being gay. It was frightening to discover that I would literally not know who I was if I gave up this fundamental sense of myself. My response had very little to do with giving up sex and relationships with men—I was already renouncing this through the practice of celibacy. This was about something deeper than that. It was about who I AM.

Over time I've realized that, without having given it much thought, my most fundamental identification as a human being has been "I AM GAY MAN." Not MAN who is also GAY, but GAY MAN. MAN and GAY MAN were distinctly and intrinsically different from each other. MAN was "those big, hairy brutes—insensitive, aggressive, unrefined." I was GAY MAN—sensitive, gentle and an expression of the higher levels of human potential.

While I made a conscious effort to distance myself from MAN, there was not any need to distance myself from WOMAN. A large part of the justification of GAY MAN's superiority over MAN is that GAY MAN embodies many "feminine" traits that he holds in high esteem—i.e., the ability to express a broad range of emotions and an appreciation for aesthetic/artistic matters. I could more easily relate personally to WOMAN than to MAN. And yet it never occurred to me to align myself with WOMAN.

Nor did I see GAY MAN as any sort of synthesis of MAN and WOMAN. I simply was who I was, always had been and always would be—GAY MAN. Gay manhood was something intrinsic to

my being in the same way that I imagine manhood is to MAN and womanhood is to WOMAN. When I encounter another GAY MAN, I experience a kinship and intimacy with him that arise from an instant recognition of him as "self." Although I would never have put it in these terms, I considered "GAY MAN" to be its own distinct gender.

This fundamental sense of difference I now recognize to be an almost unconscious conviction in the inherent superiority of GAY MAN over both MAN and WOMAN. This is in essence no different than the positions that MAN takes with WOMAN and WOMAN takes with MAN. My dubious alliance with WOMAN was that we shared the same unflattering view of MAN and were united in our superiority over him. The unspoken alliance with MAN was in our shared and unquestioned assumption of an *a priori* superiority over WOMAN.

Some propose that gay men hold a unique role spiritually on the planet. One example is that gay men serve as keepers of the arts and culture. Another is that we provide a unique conduit to the sacred in the role of priest or shaman. Ever since I was a boy, I was aware of being different from other boys, and somehow *special*. I felt special because of a sexual and emotional attraction to other males as well as a powerful attraction to the sacred.

Probably the single most liberating aspect of being GAY MAN is breaking out of the cultural, social and religious stigmas around gender and sexuality. There is extraordinary freedom in rejecting all limitations on something as powerful as the sexual impulse. Just knowing that you're *free* to break the barriers, and have already broken one of the most fundamental, is intoxicating.

As a result of questioning my fundamental identity as GAY MAN, I no longer feel special. Soon my celibacy will come to an end. Having seen through so many of the ideas that held my world in place, I wonder . . . "What would it be like to be back in a sexual relationship with a man?" And, I sometimes wonder, "What would it be like to be in a sexual relationship with a woman?" ■

by Daniel Piatek

a student of Andrew Cohen

Gay Man

What's the Relationship between

EMPTY





NESS

& *beautiful nails?*

**An interview with Jetsunma Ahkön Lhamo,
the First Female Tulku Reborn in the West**

by Andrew Cohen

I first heard about Jetsunma Ahkön Norbu Lhamo, the first Western woman to be recognized and enthroned by Tibetan lamas as a *tulku* (an enlightened teacher who reincarnates in whatever form can most benefit all beings), when I read about her in Vicki Mackenzie's book *Reborn in the West* four years ago. Touched and inspired by what I had read, I knew that one day I wanted to meet the remarkable woman miraculously discovered by Penor Rinpoche, the current head of the Nyingma sect, the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism.

INTRODUCTION

continued

Jetsunma was born to a Jewish mother who was a grocery store cashier. Her stepfather was an Italian truck driver who drank too much. Both parents beat the kids. She was baptized a Catholic and went to a Catholic school. Even though she experienced an inexplicable attraction to Buddha statues, she claims to have known absolutely nothing about Buddhism until her destined meeting with Penor Rinpoche when she was thirty-six. "There was no one who put me in touch with Buddhism," she told Mackenzie. "The only thing that could have connected me, but didn't, was that my mother took me to Coney Island, and a palm reader there told me I was an old Tibetan. That was all. I had no idea about Tibet. Not a clue. When I thought about Tibetans, I thought of smelly old men on rugs!" At seventeen, she ran away from home and went to Florida, where she got married and had a child. She and her family then moved to an isolated farm in North Carolina.

It was there that her spiritual depth began to reveal itself. First she had a series of prophetic dreams in which she was "told" what to do. Eventually she was instructed to begin her meditation practice. "I knew that if I prayed for guidance, I would get to learn how to meditate, as the dream instructed. That was the start of my real spiritual training." Constantly praying for and receiving guidance, she systematically practiced different kinds of contemplation that she would ultimately discover were Tibetan Buddhist in form. Finally, after a relentless questioning of the meaning and significance of human life, she lost all fascination with mundane existence and turned her back on worldly pursuits. Her contemplations

continued to deepen and she began to meditate on the absolute nature of reality. "I didn't have the words for it, but I knew it wasn't like God, the old-man-on-the-throne idea. What I was meditating on was a nondual, all-pervasive essence—that is, form and formless, united, indistinguishable from one another. I saw that it was the only validity—that and the compassionate activity that was an expression of it." She continued to meditate intensively for several years, during which time she lived a householder's life. When she was thirty, she had a spiritual experience that made clear to her that her personal life was over, and that she had been born solely to be of benefit to others. "After that," she said, "people started coming to me."

Jetsunma moved with her family to Washington, D.C., in 1981, where a group of new age seekers soon discovered her. In order to support her teaching work, they formed an organization called the "Center for Discovery and New Life." One day, her group was introduced to a Tibetan lama who was selling carpets to raise money for his monastery in southern India. The money was mainly for young monks who needed clothing, books and food. Even though Jetsunma and her students knew nothing about Tibet and little about Buddhism, they decided to raise money for the monastery. They managed to sponsor seventy-five Tibetan children in southern India, and a correspondence followed. A year later they received a letter from the monk who had sold them the carpets, informing them that His Holiness Penor Rinpoche, the abbot of the monastery that they had been helping to support, was making his first-ever teaching trip to the United

States, and he wanted to visit Washington to meet and thank the people who had sponsored so many of his young monks. Also apparently, ever since he was a young man, Penor Rinpoche had prayed to meet the reincarnation of Ahkön Lhamo, the Tibetan yogini who with her brother had founded his own lineage, the Palyul sect, back in 1652. He had already met the reincarnation of Ahkön Lhamo's brother, a Tibetan who was teaching in Oregon.

When Jetsunma first saw the five-foot-three-inch Tibetan master, she burst into tears. "Now I'm not the sort of person who usually does this sort of thing, you understand. I'm a hard-headed lady. I'm from Brooklyn, for heaven's sake! But I just could not pull myself together. I cried and cried. I just looked at him and thought, 'That's my heart . . . That's my mind . . . That's everything.'" Penor Rinpoche then went with Jetsunma back to her house where he interviewed all of her students in great depth, probing to find out exactly what she had been teaching them. When Jetsunma herself asked the lama where her teaching was coming from, he said, "In the past you were a great *bodhisattva*, a person who works throughout all time to liberate sentient beings. You have attained your practice to the degree that in every future lifetime you will not forget it. You will always know it; it will always come back to you. It is in your mind and will not be forgotten." He then proceeded to tell her that she had to buy a center. "You're going to think you can't afford it," he said to her, "but you will find a way. Have faith. It will be all right eventually. . . . Buy the one with the white pillars in the front." After he left, they looked for

What's the Relationship between

EMPTINESS

& beautiful nails?

property and, remarkably, the center they found had six white pillars all along the front. A year later, Jetsunma went to visit Penor Rinpoche at his monastery in southern India, where he officially gave her her new name, Ahkön Lhamo, saying, "I now recognize you as the sister of Kunzang Sherab. Her name was Ahkön Lhamo. In that life she and Kunzang Sherab cofounded the Palyul tradition. I recognize you as her incarnation." He also handed her another certificate, authorizing her to teach. "This is important," he said. "People will say you haven't been studying the dharma, that they have never heard of you. They will not understand. With this paper no one will doubt that you are capable of teaching the dharma."

When she returned to America, she formally assumed her new identity and began to teach Buddhism. Some of her followers found the change disconcerting and left, but most survived the transition. In 1988, Penor Rinpoche returned to Washington and conducted an official enthronement of Jetsunma. It received wide media attention, covered by newspaper reporters and television crews, and was featured in the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Washington Post* and *People* magazine.

In 1994 Jetsunma was further recognized by Lama Orgyen Kusum Lingpa as an incarnation of Lhacham Mandarawa, the Indian spiritual consort of Padmasambhava, the tantric master who established the Buddha's teaching in Tibet. While still maintaining her main temple in Poolesville, Maryland, Jetsunma now lives in Sedona, Arizona, where she spent the last year on "semi-retreat." I interviewed her there last April.

I had wanted an excuse to interview Jetsunma for a long time now, and finally I had one: What could be more compelling than to ask an "American *dakini*" about the relationship between gender and enlightenment? After asking her organization innumerable times to send us a video of Jetsunma teaching, we began to wonder why it was that her always friendly students never seemed to get around to actually putting it in the mail! In the meantime, a little research revealed that Jetsunma seems to be quite a controversial figure in Western Buddhist circles. First, a highly respected Buddhist journalist told us that the American Buddhist establishment, which is largely comprised of well-educated, upper-middle-class white people, considers Jetsunma to be "white trash" because of her blue-collar roots! This rather bizarre comment really piqued our curiosity. Then we found a Buddhist scholar who called her "a new age bimbo cashing in on a lucrative trend." Amidst the swirl of our ever growing confusion, her video finally arrived. Upon watching it, it soon became clear that Jetsunma was an unusually passionate and inspired teacher who seemed to be appealing to the listeners' very soul. I watched her video several times, trying to make sense out of why it was that she had attracted so much criticism. And yet, no matter how much I tried to see her as the opportunistic prima donna she was accused of being, time and again all I could see was *bodhicitta*, a deep and powerful compassion that was literally heart-wrenching. Still, as I traveled to Sedona, I couldn't help but be troubled by the echo of her critics' protestations.

The woman I met there was

disarmingly free from pretense. Not only that, she was radiant, clear, simple and unwavering in her strong vulnerability. Ironically, for a woman who has been condemned for her vanity because of her unapologetic adherence to maintaining her feminine appearance—she is known for the great care she gives to her hair and nails—what she emanates powerfully transcends any notion of gender. At the end of the interview, when I asked her point-blank about her critics' accusations, she never lost her composure and seemed genuinely surprised that there was so much controversy, while at the same time making it clear that the only thing she cared about was her students' liberation. Indeed, she said, "*I feel that knowing that I would die for them, knowing that I care for them to the nth degree, empowers me to do whatever is necessary, and that's the basis of the agreement I have with my students.*"

I don't know all the facts of Jetsunma's story, but it is intriguing that even though world-famous, highly revered, master lamas of the modern era have been accused of far greater detours from the straight-and-narrow than this Jewish-Italian *bodhisattva*, many in the Buddhist community seem much less forgiving of her. *Is it because she is a woman?* This is one of the questions I wanted to ask her. And in the following interview, I did my best to give this American *dakini* a hard time, for I really did want to know the answers to some very tough questions. She didn't disappoint me.

ANDREW COHEN: In general, women don't speak with the kind of confidence and authority about enlightenment and the spiritual path that you do. In our last issue, on self-mastery, we spoke with developmental psychologist Beverly Slade about how, in our culture, women often shy away from publicly demonstrating their own competence and authority. She said, "They find that people are threatened by their ability and may want to avoid them. Given women's position in the culture at large, they probably regularly face people who are trying to undermine them, because people are threatened by competent women." What has your experience been? Do you find that because you're a woman who has been recognized as a great teacher and who also speaks with unusual confidence and authority, people are threatened because of that?

JETSUNMA AHKÖN LHAMO: My experience with the gender question has been pretty interesting. When I was first recognized, upon performing the actual crowning ceremony, His Holiness Penor Rinpoche said, "Many Westerners have been wondering: 'Where are the women in Tibetan Buddhism?' Now I've answered their questions." And at that time he said something that was very interesting and that helped to explain why we don't see women conventionally being recognized as heads of monasteries. In Tibet, he said, normally the *dakinis* [female enlightened beings] would often stay in retreat or they would have a small, select group of students and would tend to be isolated off by themselves, whereas the men would stay and run the monasteries. So the women's lineages were not followed as well as the men's. And many of these women didn't even write or read; they had oral traditions. So they weren't literate in that sense, but they were considered very high tantric masters.

Now when I was recognized and enthroned, my experience was that the traditional monks had a kind of squeamishness or almost discomfort around me. When I went to the monastery in India, His Holiness did an amazing, wonderful offering ceremony. He introduced me to all of the monks and said, "This is the cofounder of our lineage. She's come back." And all the monks then came up and offered prayer scarves. And it was interesting; some of the monks had this amazing surrender because here was this *dakini* and that was that. But the other monks actually felt a little embarrassed, not accustomed to being around women, not sure how to act. Many of them stumbled over their

words and almost walked up backwards so that you wouldn't know whether they were coming or going. And having asked other teachers about it, I found out it's just fairly rare for a woman to be held up in that way.

But in terms of how Americans and other Westerners acted—actually, His Holiness once said to me: "Because I have recognized you and I have the right and the responsibility to do so, there will never be any conflict with any Tibetan teacher or practitioner who knows who I am. But," he said, "actually, your own kind, the Westerners, will probably crucify you."

AC: Has that been your experience?

JAL: I've had both.

AC: Is it because you're a woman?

JAL: I think so. When I was first discovered, I was a very Western woman, as I still am now. I used to paint my nails, I had makeup on—which I don't do anymore—I had all these unusual characteristics that one doesn't associate with a teacher. And so there was a lot of criticism questioning whether I was spiritual or worldly. And at first I tried to please everyone. I tried to ascertain what the expectations were for me. I was kind of naïve in that way, just wondering what it was that people wanted in a spiritual teacher. And I discovered that people had problems with women who were "womanly," who were very feminine in their presentation. They also had problems with the fact that I wasn't a nun, that I was married.



I

is Holiness Penor Rinpoche once said to me:

"Because I have recognized you and I have the right and the responsibility to do so, there will never be any conflict with any Tibetan teacher or practitioner who knows who I am. But, actually, your own kind, the Westerners, will probably crucify you."

AC: But Nyingma [the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism] lamas have often been married. It's not against the rules.

JAL: Male Nyingma lamas. It's easier to think of married male lamas than it is to think of married female lamas, for some reason.

AC: And haven't many great dakinis been described as being ravishingly beautiful and also sexually attractive?

JAL: Tara [a revered Tibetan deity] herself is seen with beautiful adornment. And she has taken a vow that said, "When I appear in the world, I will appear in this way so that beings can understand that all can approach the dharma. And I will always appear as a woman." So there's definitely precedent for that, but when it comes down to the nuts and bolts, it's another matter.

AC: It seems, from what I've read, that from the very beginning of your teaching career you have never pretended to be other than who you are. You said, "This is who I am," and you were always unapologetic about it. And when Penor Rinpoche recognized you, that was part of the package; everything was really on the table.

JAL: Yes, exactly. It was really on the table, and it was very unusual. During the enthronement ceremony, His Holiness even allowed news stations to come in and film it. He said, "This has never happened before. And the reason why I've done this is that you were born as a Westerner, as a woman. Obviously that's where your mission lies." In the beginning I asked my teachers what they thought I should do—how I should change or what should happen. And they suggested that I wear dharma clothing such as *chubas* [Tibetan dresses] and things like that, which I usually do when I'm teaching. But what I

found was that there's no point in not being natural. There's no point in faking yourself and becoming something else because then you're just allowing discursive thought or conceptualization to basically run your life. What I came to eventually is that this is my job. My job is not to be a traditional Tibetan teacher. If that was my job, I would have come as a traditional Tibetan. I feel that my job is to be a bridge between Easterners and Westerners. I'm very good at translating abstract ideas, and I feel that the reason why I appear in the way I do is that other women and men who are Westerners and have no plans to change their culture or their cultural affiliation need to know that it's possible for them also.

And personally I have no attraction to the Tibetan culture. All of the other Western Tibetan teachers I know are crazy about it. They all dress up in dharma duds and they walk the company walk and talk the company talk. But I really don't. And I don't feel sorry about that. I think that's for Easterners.

AC: How does Penor Rinpoche feel about that? Does he respect your independence and your interest in bringing the Buddha-dharma to the West in a way that is as free from cultural overlays as possible?

JAL: Well, at first he sort of suggested that I become more traditional. He said, "Not many dharma teachers paint their nails red; maybe you should go for pink or something like that." He tried to modify a little bit. Then after a while I said, "Well, Rinpoche, you know, I'm an Italian American. This is how my people dress. I would feel stupid not being like this. This is my way." And he absolutely understood it.

AC: To me, that brings up an interesting question and the question is: What is the relationship between enlightened mind and expressions of gender? What's the relationship between emptiness, or freedom from all notions of self, and culturally prescribed norms for the expression of masculinity and femininity? Some teachers of enlightenment have stressed the need to abandon any identification with self-image. For example, there are men and women monastics who shave their heads and abandon all worldly possessions in order to leave behind attachment to culturally prescribed images of masculinity and femininity. And then there are others like yourself or the great J. Krishnamurti, who was known for giving a great deal of attention to maintaining his always elegant appearance. I



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and to just be the way I am.*

honestly think this is a very intriguing question. What is the relationship between inner freedom and the desire to express one's masculinity or femininity in a conventional yet unselfconscious way? What's the relationship between emptiness and beautiful nails? Does the path to enlightenment, which is freedom from all notions of self, ultimately demand that we all unconditionally abandon any attachment to gender and care for our appearance, or is there room in enlightenment for a demonstration of masculinity and femininity that expresses beauty and dignity?

JAL: I like your use of the word "room." I like to think that the path to enlightenment is a bit more spacious than it is confined by a lot of absolutely this's and absolutely that's. Fundamentally, I feel that when *bodhisattvas* [those dedicated to the attainment of enlightenment for the benefit of all beings] come into the world to do a job, they do it in the best way that they can. I think they appear in a way that is not foreign, a way that speaks to us. If the *bodhisattva* comes to teach Westerners, then it would be appropriate to appear as a Westerner. If the *bodhisattva* comes to teach Easterners, then it would be appropriate to appear as an Easterner. I could never say that there's a direct relationship between lipstick and emptiness, but I could never say that there is no relationship between lipstick and emptiness.

AC: What do you think the relationship is, though?

JAL: I'd have to say that the relationship is. There is just no other way to look at it.

AC: It's an intriguing question because if someone was established in the enlightened mind or a liberated view, they would be, at least theoretically or ideally, free from any and all attachment to notions of self. So then the question is: What does that look like? Obviously there are some very rigid ideas that have come to us from the East.

JAL: I can say that a person who dresses up as a renunciate, who doesn't wear makeup and wears robes, can sometimes actually be in a position of increasing the strength of their ego because they are so virtuous and are so convinced of it. And the same thing can happen when a person dresses up in clothes "to die for." So I hold the whole appearance issue kind of lightly. I feel like I'm not grabbing on to it in one way or the other. For me, there would be a level of discomfort if I were to radically change the way I dressed. The women I grew up with wore hoop earrings. They all wore lipstick. They had a 'do. For me to *not* do that

seems more effortful and more concerned with sticking to a rigid code. It seems like putting on some sort of elaborate disguise. To me it seems to be easier, better, more natural to dress the way I came and to just be the way I am.

AC: What if a man or a woman came to you and asked to be your student and, after observing them over a period of time, it became apparent to you—let's say, for example, it was a woman—that they seemed to be too invested in their appearance, in the way that they dressed, in the way that they moved, in the way that they walked and talked, and they seemed to express an overidentification with their own feminine nature. Would you tell them to question it?

JAL: If I saw that there was too much ego clinging and too much self-absorption, sure, I would always address that. I wouldn't indicate to them how they should dress. Except in one case. Actually, one of my nuns, before she became a nun, was a really sharp dresser. She was one of those "outfit" persons. She always looked really sharp and wore all the cool things. And even after she became a nun, her shirt over her *shantab* [robe] would always match her socks. And I did talk about identity issues with her. She was the only person I've ever told how to dress. She's very beautiful, very exotic-looking, and she realized that most of the suffering in her life was because of her identification with her looks and her sexuality and so forth. And so eventually it came to the point where she decided to become a nun.

AC: She came to that decision on her own? You didn't encourage her?

JAL: Well, I encourage by my high esteem for the ordained. I have tremendous esteem for them. And even my teachers have said, "How is it that you're a laywoman and yet so many of your students go for ordination?" I really think it's because I hold monks and nuns in such high esteem. I feel that, however I appear, in my heart I'm a nun.

AC: A renunciate.

JAL: A renunciate. A nun. Yes, in my heart.

AC: And a definition of that would be?

JAL: A definition of that would be someone who is so completely bound to the spiritual expression that there

really isn't much else going on. So, in "pure view," you could say that was an ordained person.

AC: *Do you think that it's possible for a human being to come to a point in their spiritual evolution where they're finally freed from any fixation on or attachment to their gender identity while at the same time not in any way avoiding or denying the fact of their maleness or their femaleness?*

JAL: Absolutely. I feel that as we move farther in our practice and we come to the point where we awaken to the natural state, in that natural state, by definition, there is no gender. There is no bias whatsoever. For instance, supposing that I had come to that state—now I'm still a woman and I still dress like one, but the whole question of gender identity doesn't seem like an issue that should be taken up. It simply is what it is. It has no particular emphasis. But you wouldn't fight against it either.

AC: *How does gender identity express itself in someone who's no longer particularly identified with the fact of their gender?*

JAL: I think it expresses itself naturally for the world we live in. I feel that *bodhisattvas* who are in the state where they're no longer identified take on the demeanor and the ideas and concepts of the society that they come to. And since in this society it is natural to identify with either one gender or the other, I believe that's why it happens. In a sense, a *bodhisattva*, an awakening being, would be like somebody who doesn't smoke going into a room full of smokers. They come out smelling like it, and they even breathe a little bit of it, but they don't themselves have that habit.

AC: *This is something that personally intrigues me a lot. What does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman? Most of the ideas that we have about who we are in relationship to gender are culturally imposed, so it's a big question. What does it mean to be a liberated human being, and what does liberation have to do with the expression of gender? So much of our identification with gender, whether we're male or female, has to do with the fact that we're always living up to culturally imposed shoulds—"Because I'm a woman, I should be a particular way," "Because I'm a man, I should be a particular way"—and most of the time, this so inhibits the individual that they really have no idea what the natural expression of their own gender would be. So, to me, it would seem that an expression of gender that is liberated would have to be entirely free from this kind of self-consciousness.*

JAL: I agree with you completely. And peculiar questions like, "Should I be more male? Should I be more female? Should I dress up? Should I dress down?" I think, to be perfectly frank, are questions that have to do with the tightness of our minds and our conceptual proliferation—that habitual tendency to constantly compare everything and make notes and put things in boxes. That quality of mind, that tightness of mind, is not synonymous with liberation. It is preliberation, so all of those ideas are also preliberation. I think with liberation comes a certain spaciousness, a certain acceptance, a certain floatingness—without meaning spaced out—a certain ease of expression. Everything is looser and more spacious. Our habitual tendencies are not so automatic, so tight and so kicked in that we have to identify with something!

AC: *You're a teacher of the Buddha-dharma. There is much to suggest that the Buddha felt that women were spiritually inferior to men. In the Pali Canon [a scriptural record of the Buddha's early teachings], the Buddha is reported to have said, "Ananda, if women had not obtained the Going Forth from the house life into homelessness in the Law and Discipline declared by the Perfect One [acceptance into the Buddha's monastic order], the Holy Life would have lasted long, the Holy Life would have lasted a thousand years. But now, since women have obtained it, the Holy Life will last only five hundred years. Just as when the blight called gray mildew falls on a field of ripening rice, that field of ripening rice does not last long, so too, in the Law and Discipline in which women obtain the Going Forth, the Holy Life does not last long." It is also traditionally held that in the monastic community that formed around the Buddha, the most newly ordained male novice monk was to sit in a superior position to the most senior female nun. This seems to suggest that women definitely had a second-class role. Now Buddhism is becoming more and more popular in the time that we're living in, and more and more women are being attracted to the Buddhist path for many good reasons. But personally, what I've always found interesting is that often this particular question of the Buddha's bias or apparent bias—we can't really know for sure—is something that many women never really deal with. Because the Buddha has been called the "Perfect One," his enlightenment was supposed to be complete and perfected. And the point is, if one such as he had such strong notions of gender bias, then it seems that we would have to conclude that either his understanding or his realization wasn't perfect, or there was something true about what he was saying and we needed to come to terms with it. How do you feel about this statement?*



I really don't agree with the view that women are subjugated under the Tibetan system. Guru Rinpoche himself has said that, in fact, in the tantric tradition, it is women who have the highest potential for liberation.

Culturally, throughout time, women have been trained in such a way that spiritual surrender is easier for them.

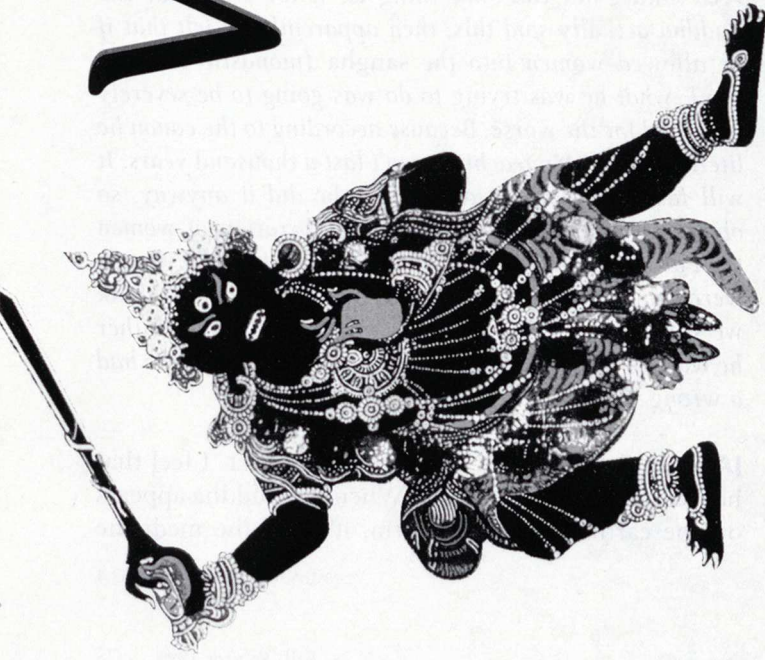
JAL: Well, my understanding—and this is something that I have discussed with some of my teachers and with *khenpos* [Tibetan scholars]—is that the Buddha taught in stages. Lord Buddha taught perfectly and appropriately for the context that he was in. And to take a teaching out of its original context and isolate it may be inappropriate. At that time, there were cultural realities that were practically insurmountable. The Buddha was dealing with many caste structures, not only gender. He was accepting into his ranks untouchables—telling Indians that untouchables could be touched. There were many, many issues happening in his time that he was really right against. And the gender issue was one of them. Back then in India, women were still getting burned with their husbands when their husbands died. The prejudice was there; it was predisposed. The cultural difference between men and women was so extreme that if it were automatically the case that women were put in the same position as men, I don't think it would have been allowed. I don't think it would have been okay. I think that things had to happen in a progressive,

stage-by-stage way. Later on, through the evolution of the path, Buddhism developed all the way up to the tantric and Vajrayana elements in which males and females were exactly equal.

AC: Okay, but the only thing is, if it's true that the Buddha actually said this, then apparently he felt that if he allowed women into the sangha [monastic community], what he was trying to do was going to be severely impacted for the worse. Because according to the canon he literally said, "My teaching won't last a thousand years. It will last only half as long." Now he did it anyway, so obviously he cared more about the liberation of women than about whatever detrimental effect he felt that women were going to have. But if the canon is correct, then I think we still have to come to terms with this dilemma: Either he was right that women are spiritually inferior or he had a wrong view.

JAL: No, I don't think either one is correct. I feel that he was speaking to the time. When the Buddha appears on the earth in whatever form, it's like the medicine

continued on page 134



Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,
please listen to me!
From the depth of my heart
I beg you to remain!
I offer all virtue I have accumulated
in the three times.

Please accept for the sake of
sentient beings.

I request you to remain in the world
for the sake of the lost.

I request you to give instruction
for the sake of the deluded.

Grant blessings
for the sake of the poor and hungry.

Increase the strength of Dharma
until none can resist!

Suppress with your splendor
the horrors of hatred,
greed and ignorance.

Do not abandon us!

WAR CRY

by Jetsunma Abkön Lhamo

You will appear in lovely forms,
Seductive, caressing,
singing songs filled with promises.

It is then I will appear
far more beautiful than you,

Adorned with garments
of pure aspiration,

Resplendent with gold
and gems of pure bliss.

From my mouth will come
the ambrosia of Dharma,

And from your grasping arms
I will steal my children away,

Like a thief in the night...

And lead them to Paradise.

Bitch,
You will be known as mother
And from your teats my babies
will suckle vomit and death.
You will cradle them
in arms of deception and sorrow,
Saying "trust in me"
and "I am your mother."

Then I will appear
vast as the sky
With arms that reach
around the world.

My arms, with terrifying claws,
will reach into every corner.
I will clasp my children,
every one.

With great cries of suppression
I will tear them from you,
Hell-Bitch,

And carry them to Paradise.

Be warned,
whore-mother of suffering,
I am coming.
I am relentless!

Not one of my children
will I abandon to you.

I will meet you
on every hill and mountain,

In every ocean, in every country,

In the sky, in the six realms,

In form and formless lands.

No hell or heaven
will hide you from me.

I will never stop.

Like a tigress

I will come,

Mouth dripping with blood,

Claws extended.

This pitiful practitioner;
this humble servant
of the Three Precious Jewels,
This poor steward of lost beings
begs you to hear these verses.
Please accept them as my
timeless vow.
Please remind me in every future time
of these words.
Please let me perform this duty
in order to benefit beings, and so
that in some small way I can
repay the kindness of my Teachers.

To Guru Rinpoche, I pray.
Lord of my Three Doors
Do not abandon me.
I, your humble servant,
am concerned for sentient beings.
Here I am, to promise you,
I have not forgotten my vows
spoken before your Holy Face.
Again I lay them at your feet
for their sake
as you have taught me.

Bitch,
I have seen you.
I have heard your voice.
I have smelt your smell.
I have lived
and died with you.
I know your name...
Samsara.
Bitch, whore,
Whatever garment you wear
I will know you.
Your smile is no seduction to me.
I know you.

From pure white breasts
I will offer the milk of Bodhicitta.
My arms will reach into hell itself,
to every place.
Joyfully I will hold my children
Saying,
"You, my darlings
are sons and daughters
of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas"
Singing,
"You are the child of luminosity,
the Holy Display
of the Sphere of Truth."
And then, offering sweets
succulent and filled with Love,
They will follow me,
and I will lead them
to Paradise.

Whore,
You will appear as the demon.
Death, fear, hatred,
selfishness, greed, ignorance...
These will be
your unholy teachings.
Ugly and terrifying,
you will manipulate my children.
Like the helpless and blind,
They will follow any sound
without distinction.
Then I will come.
I will be uglier than you.
My yellow fangs
will be terrible to see.

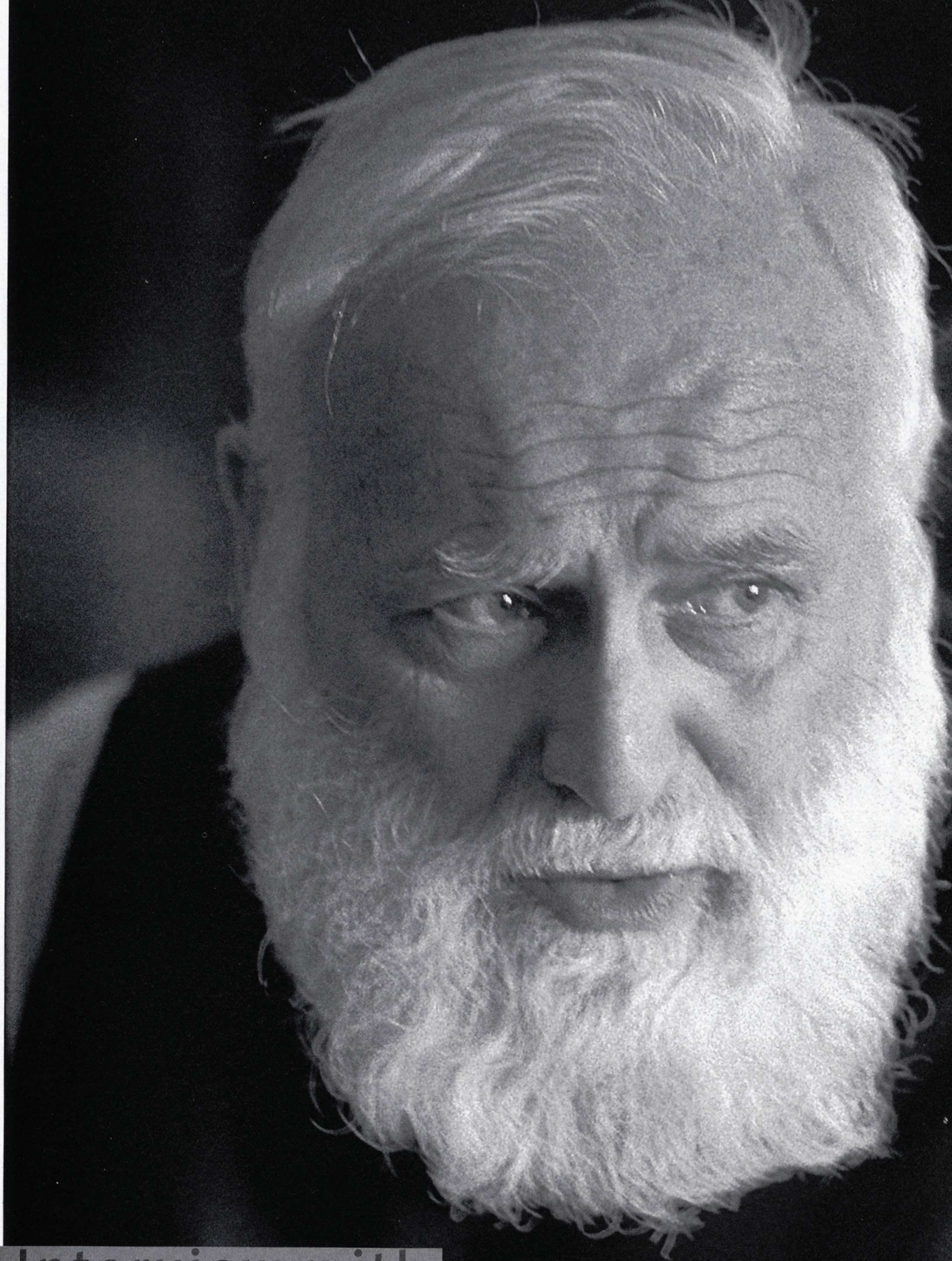
From my mouth will come
an unbearable howl.
Fierce and dominating,
my voice will be heard
above yours.
My feet will walk
all the worlds, all the realms.

I will come and slay you,
I alone will defeat you.
I will rip you apart,
Cut up, shredded,
sliced and diced,
No one will know
which part to call Samsara.
I will finish you.
You will not enslave my children.


Then I will shed tears
to heal you.
I will scoop you up
in my arms.
Tenderly I will hold
your head.
My eyes will shine
wisdom and compassion
upon you.
My body will be your home.
My speech will sing lullabies
of pure virtue.
Then you will remember;
you are my child, too,
Samsara.
Yes, you too.
Then, beloved child
who is never separate from me,
We will depart together:
We will be in Paradise.

Colophon by Ani Alana Devi, Jetsunma's attendant

Written by Jetsunma Ahkön Lhamo on February 16, 1996, when two of her beloved students were caught in terrible ignorance and delusion and could not see the face of the Guru. In an extreme and powerful display of wrathful compassion, she wrote this war cry to benefit all beings who are lost in samsara, with the intention to offer these verses to Guru Rinpoche at Maratika Cave in Nepal during pilgrimage in March, 1996. After writing these verses, in her purity and compassion, she apologized to us, her powerless students, for not being more beautiful, or more fierce and ugly, in order that she would lead us out of suffering. May all who read this and hold it within their hearts know the Dakini, inseparable with the Guru, and never rest until all beings are free.



An Interview with
Fr. BASIL PENNINGTON



COULD CHRIST HAVE BEEN A WOMAN? +

“Could the Virgin Mary have just as easily given birth to a *female* Savior?” I remember the moment it first occurred to me to ask this question. It was at the end of a rather frustrating conversation with a very conservative Orthodox Christian Father who kept insisting that in his tradition, despite all evidence to the contrary, there are no differences between men and women. The monks in their monasteries and the nuns in their convents, he explained, keep identical hours, do identical work, and say identical prayers. “So, you see?” he challenged me. “Everything is the same!”

by Simeon Alev

INTRODUCTION

continued

I could feel the conviction and the truth in his words and, upon hearing them, I thought I'd perhaps understood the significance of the Apostle Paul's declaration that "in Christ there is neither male nor female." So was it simply a coincidence, then, that "God the Father" was *male*, that Christ and his twelve apostles were *male*, and that in most traditional Christian denominations the priests, bishops, deacons, etc., were still exclusively *male*? What did this historical preponderance of maleness mean, if, as I had been assured, "everything is the same"? More importantly, what was the significance of gender on the Christian path? What were the implications of Christ's divinity, or enlightenment, for his own relationship to the very human facts of maleness and femaleness? As the confident words of this Orthodox elder swirled in my mind, it became increasingly clear that we had to speak with someone who could bring real depth and open-mindedness to these challenging questions.

I immediately thought of Father Basil Pennington, the man who had initially referred me to this passionate spokesman for the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Himself a Catholic priest, Father Pennington has the distinction of having traveled widely to visit the great Spiritual Fathers and Mothers of the Eastern Orthodox Church. He describes his pilgrimages in his anthology, *In Search of True Wisdom*, coauthored with

Sergius Bolshakoff. An important contribution to the Catholic ecumenical movement, the book is a moving account of contemporary efforts to rediscover the riches of the Christian mystical and contemplative tradition. According to Father Pennington, these powerful Eastern Orthodox masters represent the last remaining link in an unbroken lineage directly traceable to the early Fathers who helped to shape the Church's views on gender centuries before the allegiances of the Christian world came to be divided between East and West, Constantinople and Rome.

Father Pennington had first come to our attention as someone with firsthand experience of Mount Athos, the fabled Aegean island of Orthodox monasteries on which, for fifteen centuries, no woman has set foot. Legend has it that not even female *animals* are allowed there. As we began our investigation into Christian views on gender, the "Holy Mountain" represented yet another metaphor for patriarchal Christianity: male God, male Savior, male priesthood—why not a male island? We wanted to ask Father Pennington: Why was the "Holy Mountain" wholly *male*? He wasted no time in informing me, during one of our initial telephone conversations, that there are Orthodox convents of equal renown throughout the world—though, he admitted, no all-female islands—and

that Mount Athos, like the rest of our planet, abounds in fauna of *both* sexes. Given his obvious appreciation for the dimension of living transcendence embodied in Eastern Orthodox practice, we wondered what Father Pennington would have to say about some of the subtle questions our investigation was beginning to raise.

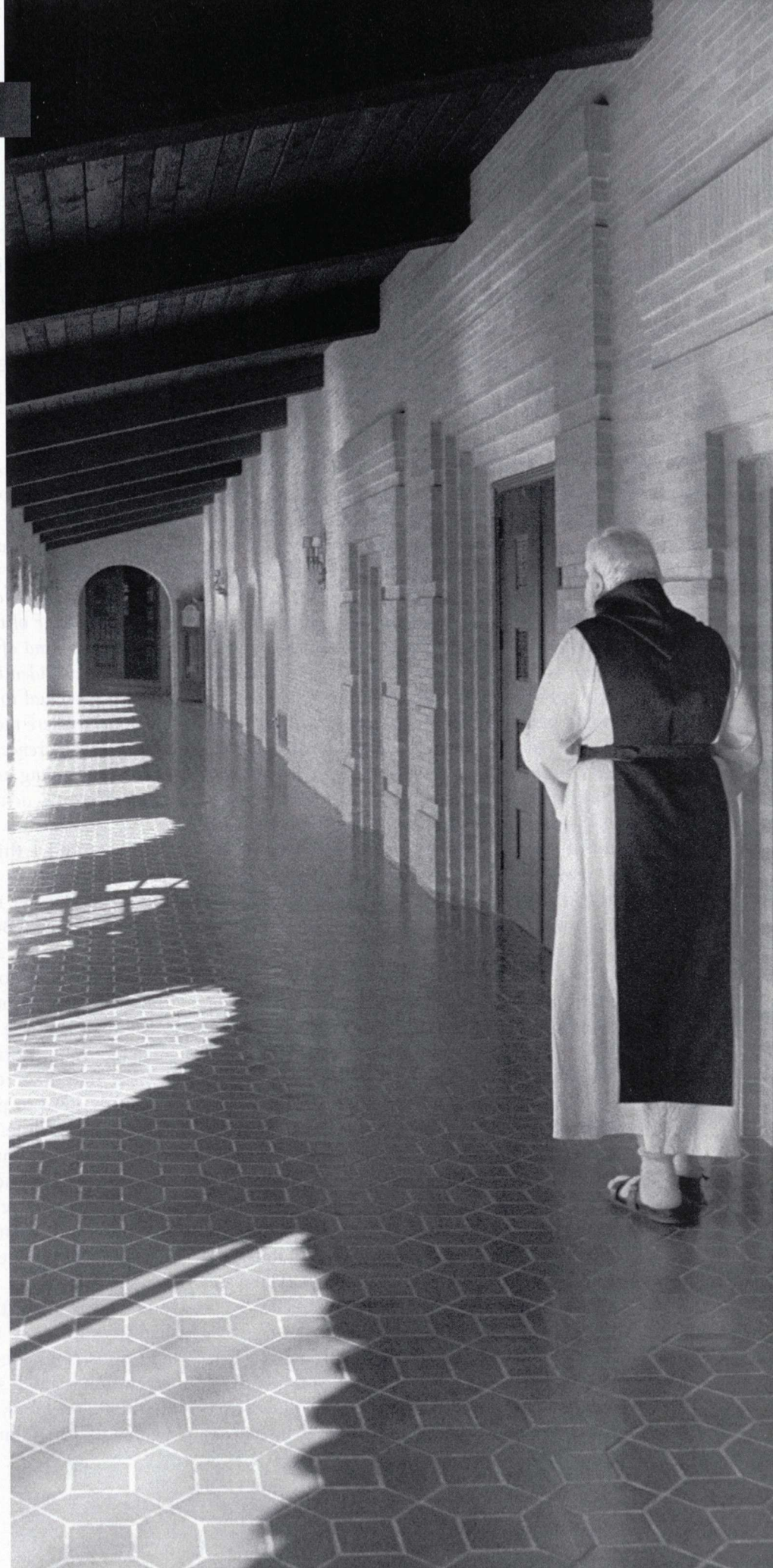
The three-dimensional, larger-than-life Basil Pennington who greeted us at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, was rather different from the soft-spoken priest his voice on the telephone had led me to imagine. A huge bear of a man attired in the traditional Cistercian monk's habit—white robe, black tunic and a brown leather belt—he had the snowy hair and full white beard of the archetypal patriarchs he'd met in his travels, and his clear blue eyes radiated dignity, humor and a timeless and palpable peace.

Father Pennington had recently returned to St. Joseph's after seven years in residency at a Cistercian monastery in Lantao, China, during which, as has been his custom for the past three decades, he'd also traveled extensively to lead retreats and workshops on the contemplative practice known as Centering Prayer. Along with Father Thomas Keating, he has become one of the world's best-loved teachers and exemplars of the Western revival of this ancient Orthodox practice. Father Pennington is also, like

COULD CHRIST HAVE BEEN A WOMAN? +

fellow Cistercian the late Thomas Merton, a prolific writer, with over fifty books to his credit, many of which describe his own direct experience of—and his profound appreciation for—the teachers and teachings of traditions other than his own.

We fully expected that a man of Father Pennington's renowned erudition and open-mindedness would have much to say about the relevance of gender and sexual orientation to the pursuit of true spiritual freedom, and we weren't disappointed. It was obvious from the start that his responses were animated by an infinite reverence for the revelation and example of the historical Christ, as well as an earnest conviction that God had introduced Jesus into humanity's midst when He did, and as He did, for very specific reasons. But this only made Father Pennington's independence of thought, and the consistency with which his views reflected his own deeply considered personal experience, all the more striking. Throughout our talk, he demonstrated a breadth of perspective and a flexibility in his approach to this most challenging of subjects that clearly stretched (and sometimes strained against) the limits of his tradition. "These are wonderful questions!" he exclaimed. "Looks like you're going to have a very interesting issue!" How right he was.



WIE: *It seems to be the case for most of us that our identification with being men or women is quite primary. Freud went so far as to assert that gender distinctions constitute the core of the individual personality and the basis of our civilization collectively—that our ideas about gender form the very foundation of who we believe ourselves to be and are the very source of the way our civilization is put together. In your view, does this fundamental identification with our gender ultimately inhibit or support the realization of our full potential as spiritual beings?*

FR. BASIL PENNINGTON: Theoretically, I'd say it would inhibit it, in the sense that any kind of box we put ourselves in inhibits our growth. We are an expression of the Divine and are open to full divinization, and so *anything* that tries to define us is going to fall short and has the danger of inhibiting our full blossoming. I would certainly say that if a person is too conscious of his maleness or her femaleness, and if that's become something of the agenda of their life, then it definitely would inhibit their spiritual development. It can become part of that project of building up the false self. In my own experience, I don't believe I personally think of myself as a man, or as gender-specific, and I don't know if I ever did. But just looking at today's advertising, I think you can see that there's a lot of playing at what it means to be a "real" man or a "real" woman, and that's all usually fairly superficial. So obviously, if you're putting a lot of energy and intentionality on that, then the spiritual dimension is going to be lost.

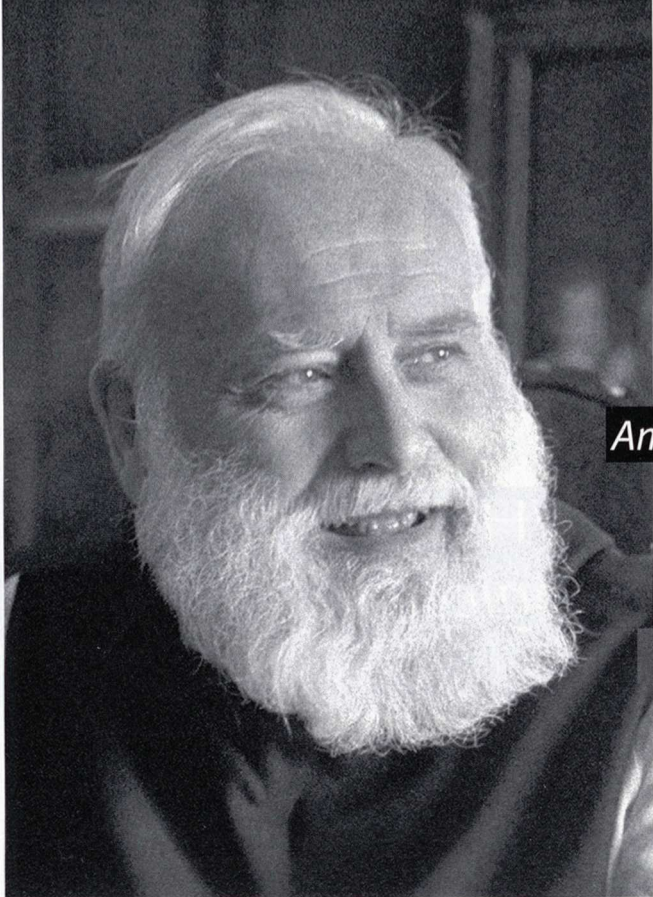
WIE: *You said that you may actually never have thought of yourself specifically as a man?*

BP: Well, I don't think I meant *that* exactly, but that I've tended to give primacy to my *being*. And yes, perhaps I have thought of myself specifically as a man at times, but that's only to say that at times I celebrate my maleness and feel very happy that I have a male body. And it's not just physical, either; I think there's a whole attitude toward life that comes with that. But my point is that it's more a matter of just being who I am. And I must say that I don't like categorizing at all—you know, "These are female characteristics; those are male characteristics."

WIE: *In contemporary society, though, these ideas about what it means to be a "good" or "real" man, or a "good" or "real" woman, tend to exert a very powerful influence on most of us. And we generally experience a lot of insecurity*

about whether or not we measure up to our gender ideal, and tend to put a lot of energy into trying to live up to it. Spiritual liberation teachings, by contrast, have perennially stressed that we have to be willing to give up all of our preconceived ideas and live in a state of perpetual "unknowing," a condition of genuine openness to the discovery of what is. One of the things we're exploring in this issue is what this kind of "unknowing" would mean in relation to our gender identity. Would it be possible, for example, for an individual to come to a point in their spiritual development where they're completely free from any fixation on gender differences, superficial or otherwise, while at the same time feeling no need to avoid or deny whatever real differences may actually exist?

BP: Yes, and I think that's where the real challenge lies. If we rise to a sufficient level of humanness, or Christification, we realize that there is essentially neither male nor female. But at the same time we find that this somehow gives us a larger perspective on our body's reality—the *reality* of our maleness or femaleness—and the particular emotions and sensitivities that go along with it. Here at the monastery, for example, we live in a male community rather than a mixed community, and I'd say that as a result, the men here are largely free from any need to prove that they're "real" men or that they're "masculine." But the other side of that is that in having so little contact with women, this whole perception of the differences between male and female can get a bit distorted. We're having much more contact with our nuns now than we did in the past, and it turns out that most of the men are finding that very enriching. In fact, just this past Sunday morning one of the monks was talking about the three large group meetings we've had here this past year—three occasions where monks and nuns came together—and how these meetings had given him a much stronger and clearer grasp of his true identity as a monk. Being with the nuns, he said, had helped to bring him into a fullness of self-understanding



*Any kind of BOX we put ourselves in
INHIBITS OUR GROWTH.*

*We are an EXPRESSION OF THE DIVINE
and are open to FULL divinization,
and so anything that tries to DEFINE US
is going to FALL SHORT and has
the DANGER OF INHIBITING our
full BLOSSOMING.*

that was truly beyond male and female. We were just doing various things together—discussing basic problems, concerns, challenges and so on—but it freed the monks from some of their lingering presuppositions about the differences between men and women because we were meeting in a fuller human and divine realm. And so all those ideas just got left behind, that was all—they just got left behind! At the same time, I think we were probably more conscious in the end about some of the *real* differences. I mean the nuns—well, nuns do things differently from monks, you know!

WIE: For example?

BP: Well, I don't know if we stopped to think about it all that much, but there's definitely *something* . . . a greater delicacy about things, I guess. They challenged the monks to be a little more spruce, a little more careful, not so rough in their expressions—and to behave a little bit more like gentlemen than we usually do. And while, again, I don't like to generalize, having listened to their discussions, I'd also say that the nuns have certain insights, or have generally more of a feel precisely for the things that *are* felt, while the men tend to be a little more intellectual. Anyway, the point is that while there was a growing experience that in the things that really mattered there *wasn't* a difference, at the same time there was also an enrichment. And that enrichment was

due to an appreciation of our tendencies to come at things somewhat differently, and to the challenge, through recognizing those differences, of coming to see our reality more integrally.

WIE: In many mystical or contemplative teachings, spiritual liberation is described as the transcendence of opposites. Because we're talking about being in a spiritual environment in which all kinds of opposites are recognized and gone beyond, I'd be interested to hear about your own experience of what transcendence means in relationship to gender. What does it actually mean for an individual to transcend gender differences while still inhabiting a male body or a female body?

BP: Well, again, these kinds of differences are a part of the journey, but they mean different things at different points. I would say, for example, that when you're starting out, they're quite apparent, and that you're also pretty conscious of being male or female. I was a model before I entered the monastery, so I was very conscious of my body and my appearance and things of that sort, and especially before I wore the habit I'm sure I tended to stand out as a very present male in some ways. But the habit takes a little bit of that away from you; it's kind of like you don't know what's under there, and in letting go of that male image you take on a *new* image. You're much less concerned about the body, and in fact

*The REALITY of the situation
is that GOD did make MEN and WOMEN.
And I am a MAN and this is what
He made me,
and so I CELEBRATE this—WHO I AM,
physically, psychologically,
emotionally and SPIRITUALLY.*

the purpose of many of the monastic disciplines is to put the body down, in a sense—the fasting and the not getting as much sleep and so on. And in the early days, when I first entered the monastery, we were still very much in a more primitive tradition of monasticism where cleanliness was not considered next to godliness by any means. You just didn't bother with it; you'd take a shower and change your clothes once every couple of weeks, as was the practice of the poor. We did a lot of hard manual labor too—building this monastery, for one thing. We really worked very hard.

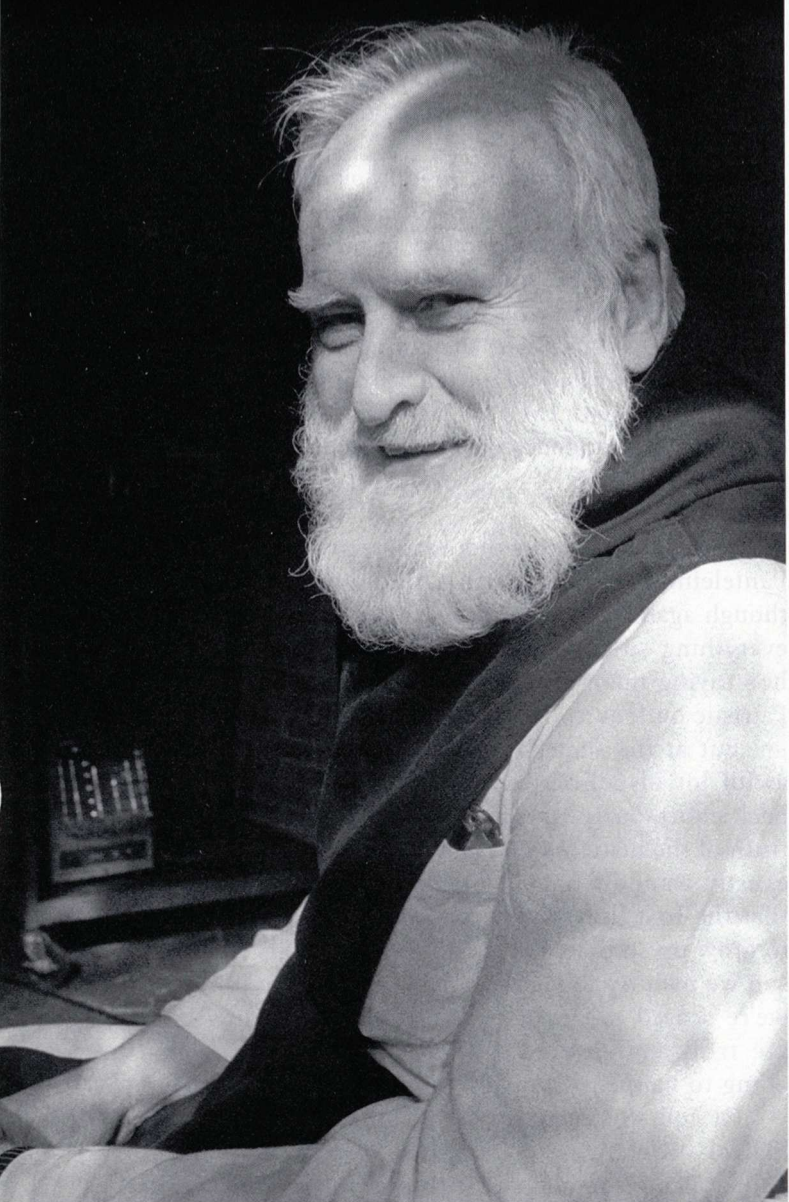
So the idea, you see, was to subdue the whole physical side, and I think the gender side went with that a good bit, too. We just didn't think about it; we were on a spiritual quest, looking at and moving into transcendence. But it seems to me that, after years of becoming more and more spiritually attuned and more in touch with the divine reality, as your spiritual consciousness and your awareness of the Divine in everybody and everything grows, at some point you come back to an appreciation of your body and what you could call your "maleness." And while a lot of that is socially or culturally defined and is certainly quite open to and in the process of evolution, it's still, as I said, a part of that reality that you've become more aware of. And because you're more in touch with it, you can more easily distinguish the essential from the superficial.

WIE: You seem to be saying that at a certain point you start to have a more direct experience of gender rather than one that's filtered through all of your ideas about it.

BP: Yes, exactly. Because the reality of the situation is that God *did* make men and women. And I am a man and this is what He made me, and so I celebrate this—who I am, physically, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually.

WIE: It's been very interesting for us, in exploring with various people this question of going beyond gender identification, to find out how many different ideas there are about what this kind of attainment might look like. Some believe, for example, that what it would ideally lead to is a condition in which sex and gender aren't really an issue anymore at all—that if you were to encounter someone who truly embodied freedom in relation to gender, you would find yourself face to face with an individual who had no maleness or femaleness to speak of, no particular sexual characteristics, or perhaps a kind of perfect blend of the two.

BP: Yes, well, I wonder if I'm really comfortable with that because, as I was saying, as you grow spiritually, you begin to realize the divineness in your maleness or femaleness, and I don't think you'd want to lose that. If you're a man, it's because you were *called* to be male. That being said, you wouldn't want to go along with any of the superficial stuff that people say is "male" and "female" but, at the same time, you wouldn't want your freedom from those ideas in any way inhibit you from celebrating the fullness of the *true* maleness in a man and the *true* femaleness in a woman. So the point, I think, is that if you're a man or if you're a woman, then you're still a man or a woman when you come into your



fullness, and so you celebrate that. God likes variety, you know, and hopefully there always will be variety. I personally believe that we want the full richness of the human person there, which is ultimately still male or female because that's the way we're made—and that's good, and that's complementary, and I think that in some way it offers another vehicle for the Divine to express the *fullness* of the Divine. There is something precious about the differences between men and women in that they uniquely express something of the Divine, and, rather than wanting to lose that, I think you want to get more and more in touch with it! Why? Because that's when you become so aware of how much everything you've thought or said or heard about "male" and "female" is really not it. It's superficial stuff, it's cultural stuff, and you just don't want to get caught by any of that.

But it's very hard, you see, because we *are* so culturally conditioned. It's very hard for us to find any

articulation that really touches that realization, or to find any kind of expression of it that really satisfies us, especially when we're trying to talk about what's beyond the physical. The spiritual dimensions of my being that are coordinated with the fact that I have a male body, with the fact that my wholeness is male in form, are very hard to articulate without getting caught up in that cultural conditioning, and I don't want to get caught there.

WIE: *Early Christian interpretations of Genesis seem to support the notion of a disparity between the capacities of men and women for spiritual attainment. For example, in 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul states, "For man was not made from woman but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman but woman for man." And religious historian Elaine Pagels writes that according to Paul, like Eve before them, "women, being naturally gullible, are unfit for any role but raising children and keeping house." And some of the writings of the early Church Fathers state that man alone, and not woman, was created in the image of God. What is your understanding of the significance of the Genesis story?*

BP: The other day I was writing a letter on the computer, and you know how the keys get away from you every once in a while? Well, I suddenly realized I had the date up there as "19999," and I just stopped for a second and thought about that. You know, that year is going to come, and people are going to look back and think we belonged to the primitive Church in the year 2000. I mean, what's 2000? It puts a lot of things in perspective if you just sit with that a little bit. Yes, we've seen a good bit of evolution of human consciousness since the time of the primitive revelation or the development of the Hebrew/Christian scriptures. And while we can be grateful that we've got all those centuries behind us, we should also remember that we may still be a lot more primitive than we think we are.

Now in the writings of Saint Paul, which have had an enormous impact on Christian thinking, he affirms very simply that in Christ there's neither male nor female, and that the primary goal is becoming this divinized person that is Christ. But then, secondarily, much of what he says is directed to the prevailing social climate of his time—"How do you handle this situation?" and so on—in the context of that social climate. That's why he'd tell slaves how to behave, and masters how to behave, and lay all sorts of strictures on the way men and women were supposed to function in the Roman household or the Hebrew household that are

very difficult for us to hear in such a vastly different cultural context. But if we accept all this from the point of view that God meets people where they are, and that the divine dimension in us is always growing, then suddenly the challenge becomes: Are we really hearing the divine consciousness as it's coming forth in *our* time? I mean, that's not easy either—we've all had acculturation, too. I think the greatest challenge for the human race now is to fully accept the equality of men and women and the fullness of humanity and divinization that we share. I think that is what the divine consciousness is calling us to at this point in our evolution.

WIE: I'm sure many people would agree that is what has to happen, but some would no doubt also assert that a critically important part of that process involves addressing the repercussions of these kinds of sexist ideas having been propagated for so many centuries. For example, feminists such as Mary Daly cite the traditional notion of "God the Father" as quintessential proof that Christianity is really the source of an oppressive global patriarchy. They publicly revile the Church—and particularly the Catholic Church because it has so much power—as a universal oppressor of women. Now, some people say, "Well, that's too extreme,

and it's not really productive to focus on all that in such a negative way." Yet, when I asked your friend Father Panteleimon, a charismatic elder in the Greek Orthodox Church, whether the Virgin Mary could just as easily have given birth to a female Savior as a male one, he dismissed that notion as impossible, unnatural and absurd, citing the doctrine of one of the early Church Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa, that since Eve's fall from grace, woman's reproductive role has rendered her constitutionally unfit for spiritual leadership.

BP: Well, I certainly would not agree with that. Father Panteleimon and Christian Orthodoxy as a whole—though again I probably shouldn't generalize—say that everything stopped with the Seventh Council. What he's saying there is much more in line with the early Patristic outlook.

But at the same time, as I said, we still have an awful lot of cultural conditioning that's holding us back enormously, and just to fill that out a little, the truth of the matter is that *most* of us men still wouldn't exactly want a woman to be our boss. So I often say that the first thing women have to do is to help men to grow up so that men are able to be equals. The reason we men try to keep women down is that in reality we're scared to death of them—because when they are truly empowered, and we're not, well, what's going to happen?

Of course I certainly don't think that the physiological differences, as you just quoted there from Father Panteleimon, pose any kind of problem. And what may come out of those differences isn't, in the integral person, a problem either. As I said before, I think they're a complementarity and an enrichment. And I certainly don't think that they dictate any kind of hierarchy, either. But one of the great challenges that the Catholic Church has, precisely because it's Catholic, or "universal"—unlike, say, the Episcopal Church, in which the national church in the United States could do one thing and the one in Indonesia could do another—is that there is a universal teaching authority and a kind of moving together. Now if you've traveled around the world as I have, you're especially aware that this whole evolution of consciousness with regard to the equality of men and women is at very different places in different countries. In some countries, they're just not ready for it at all. And so the Catholic Church is like a good teacher who meets the students where they are and only takes them to the next step they can master because the teacher knows that if they're too far out in front of their students, they'll lose them. And when you're talking about a class

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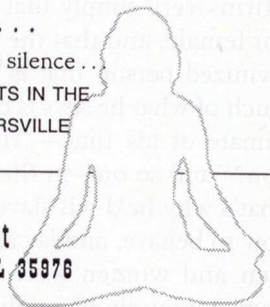
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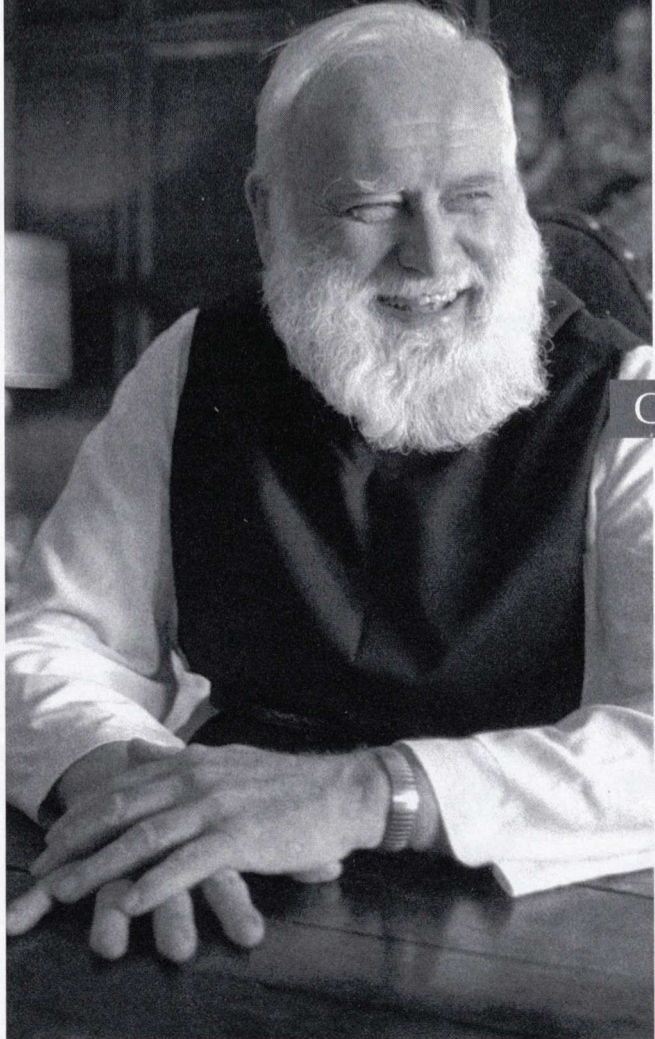
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that is *universal*, or even just one parish for that matter, you just have to try to get a sense of what the next step is for the group as a whole. I was talking to a parish priest yesterday and he was telling me that when you get up in the pulpit, and you've got people in that parish from one end of the spectrum to the other, *somebody's* going to damn just about anything you say.

You know, the Catholic Church took quite a leap at the Second Vatican Council and changed a lot of things for the first time in four hundred years, and that really has stretched and strained a lot of people. So moving ahead with the women's thing has been a matter of doing it gently. Women have moved into the sanctuary and are taking new roles as lectors, ministers of the eucharist, parish counsels, officers of the diocese and so on, so gradually people are getting used to that. But we're in a country where this evolution is perhaps the most advanced and yet, even here, we still see all the drag that's around! And when you go to a country that's been cut off, like China, say, it's quite clear that they have a long, long way to go.

WIE: *Is it conceivable to you that Christ could have been a woman?*

BP: In his time and place? No. I mean, look, he had a hard enough time as a man! Could he today? Well, yes, if God had chosen this as the time and place for the Incarnation, I think it could have been possible—though I still suspect he probably would have chosen to be male because the contemporary world is still far from being a place where a female Incarnation would be universally accepted. You know, we've seen women in different countries rise to the highest position, but that's often because they've stepped into a male expectation, or what would be called a "male" way of looking at things. And I think the great thing will be when women, *as women*, can really lead and help society to move ahead. But we're still a good way from that as far as I can see, in this country and probably every other country in the world.

WIE: *Sociological considerations aside, though, is there anything to Panteleimon's insistence that there is some inherent limitation on a woman manifesting an attainment equal to Christ's?*

BP: No. And our Lord used the feminine image when he could—like a mother hen gathering her chicks to

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THE BACK OF THE
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an interview with
Tamar Frankiel
&
Esther Kosovsky

by Amy Edelstein

"She converted to Orthodox Judaism *after* being a feminist!?" my colleagues exclaimed to me. "We have to speak with her!" We were discussing the work of Tamar Frankiel, author and educator, whose book *The Voice of Sarah* portrays the purpose and meaning in the traditional roles for women in Judaism. Drawn by the spiritual depth she felt in the Jewish ritual observances for women and by the unusual strength of character of the Orthodox women she had met, Frankiel underwent the unlikely conversion from liberal Christian feminist to practicing Orthodox Jew.

INTRODUCTION

continued

"As I grew to know [Orthodox women]," she says in a candid description of her experience, "my first feelings of condescending pity toward these victims of patriarchy changed to admiration and wonderment. I knew I could never live like that, but I appreciated that they were living a life of integrity with a spiritual richness of its own. That was ten years ago. Today I find myself speaking in much the same way to others as those women spoke to me then. . . . I don't expect such statements to be any more believable to feminists than they were to me ten years ago. I can only assert that there is truth behind their simplicity."

The fact that Frankiel, who has taught comparative religion at Stanford, Princeton and U.C. Berkeley, found the message of this gendered belief system so compelling that she left her liberal feminist freedoms in favor of a far more restrictive lifestyle led me to question many of my prior assumptions. And mainly, I began to wonder: Could Judaism, whose "faceless" God nevertheless seems to have a very masculine face, really offer women a spiritual life of equal depth and significance to the one it offers men?

The Judaic religion is built on traditional roles for women and

men, with elaborate commandments governing all aspects of the observant Jew's life, from conjugal relations to time and place of prayer. Its very structure depends on man fulfilling his distinct duties and woman fulfilling hers. Men hold the positions of authority as the religious leaders and lawmakers while women are relegated to hearth and home. "Separate but equal," some may argue, but as far as feminist scholars such as Rita Gross are concerned, Judaism practically tops the list of patriarchal religious offenders. So when Tamar Frankiel, with her background in the feminist and equal rights movements, praised this "separate but equal" tradition primarily *because* of the position of women, we raised more than an eyebrow.

Among observant Jews, the rabbi is meant to be the final authority on all issues spiritual and mundane, including everything from whom to marry to the finer points of theological debate. So I called Rabbi David Edelman, leader of the Lubavitch Orthodox congregation in western Massachusetts, to gain some insight into this gendered way of life. As presiding rabbi over a large Jewish community for the last forty-nine years, Rabbi Edelman, I thought,

would be well-versed in both the theory *and* practice of the Orthodox tradition.

"Can you tell me about the traditional roles for men and women in Judaism?" I asked him last December. "You want to know how men and women should be?" he began. "All the answers are in the Torah." Then he proceeded to tell me about the great Biblical matriarchs and the exalted position of women in Judaism. "Women are more spiritual than men," he said, to my astonishment. "They naturally have a closer connection to God. Men need to be reminded to pray. That's why they have to come to the synagogue. Women can pray by themselves because they pray deeper. And you know, it is said that when the Messiah comes, men will be raised to the spiritual level of women."

His description stood in stark contrast to the Orthodoxy I had pictured. I had expected Rabbi Edelman to explain why, in Judaism, women are prohibited from chanting the holy scripture; why they sit behind a screen during public prayer; why they are considered impure, unclean and not to be touched every month because of their physiology; and why men utter a prayer every morning thanking God for not

THE BACK OF THE SYNAGOGUE IS NOT THE BACK OF THE BUS

making them a woman. But the rabbi then told me, "I have six daughters. They never missed out on anything. You should have seen them all together, walking down the street to the yeshiva school—what a picture! They were modest, but they were always nice-looking, with a little lipstick. You should talk to them; they'll tell you they never missed out on anything!" In Yiddish there's a special word, "nachas," used to describe the often less-than-objective pride parents can take in their children. So was Rabbi Edelman *kveling* [gushing] with *nachas*? Or had this way of life actually given his daughters a deep sense of self-fulfillment?

I couldn't help wondering what Rabbi Edelman's daughters were really like. Would I find them to be meek or subservient, with a narrow scope of interests centered around teething and bread making? Would they be restless in their restricted sphere, with all the freedoms of the modern world tempting them from just around the corner? Would they be passive and accepting of their lot, reluctant to question, challenge or reform, fearful of retribution from an angry God or a conservative rabbi? Or was Rabbi Edelman accurate

in saying they really hadn't missed out on *anything*? My curiosity piqued, I arranged to meet Esther Kosovsky, one of Rabbi Edelman's by now, at least to me, illustrious daughters.

Esther Kosovsky is the director of the Jewish Educational Resource Center in western Massachusetts, mother of eight and wife of a rabbi. We met in the Springfield yeshiva school, the very school that the rabbi had mentioned. Walking down the hallway, alive with sounds of children singing Hebrew songs, I was struck by her quiet confidence and self-assurance. She was all that her father had described her to be. Not only was she attractive, but there was a light in her eyes, an unusual serenity and vitality. As she spoke about her love, appreciation and respect for this gendered tradition, I found myself reflecting on the great Biblical matriarchs—the Sarahs, Rebeccas and Deborahs who had deep spiritual passion and had served God with valiant devotion, powerful faith and rare wisdom. As I glanced around the book-lined office, the white-bearded Lubavitch rabbis seemed to smile and twinkle at me from their picture frames on the wall.

Unlike Esther Kosovsky, most of the women I have known are women who grew up in the wake

of the feminist movement, beneficiaries of many newfound and hard-won freedoms. But in spite of all the opportunities available to us, most of us have had to grapple with insecurity, confusion and self-doubt around our role, position and even spiritual path in a world of shifting values. In grocery stores and newsstands around the country, magazine racks sport colorful arrays of women's magazines, all eager to help us navigate our perplexity with "how-to" recipes for finding fulfillment in work, relationships, sexuality and motherhood. In light of the simple confidence of these Orthodox women, I began to consider what had been for me, at least up until now, an inconceivable question: Could it be possible that women adhering to a traditional feminine role in this patriarchal religion might actually end up having more inner strength and higher self-esteem than women free to explore an infinite number of lifestyles in the post-feminist world?

I listened carefully to what Esther Kosovsky and Tamar Frankiel had to say as we talked about some provocative and pointed issues. Their unswerving conviction in their own rich experience as observant Orthodox women speaks for itself.

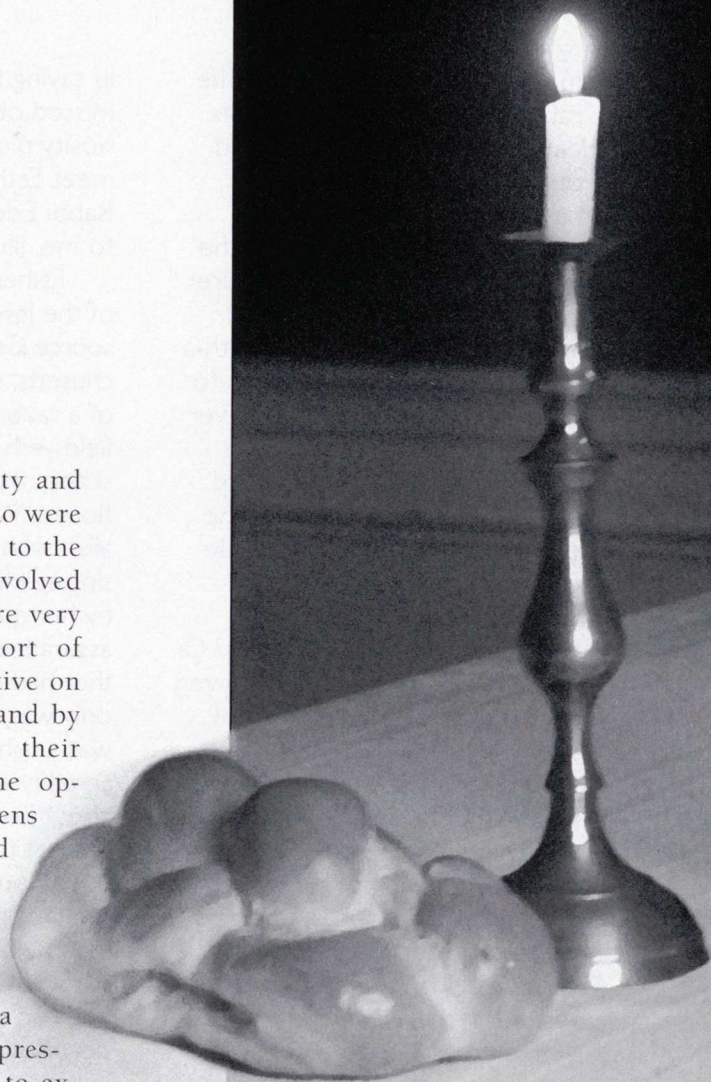
Tamar Frankiel



WIE: What led you to convert to Orthodox Judaism after being a feminist? That seems very unusual.

TAMAR FRANKIEL: Yes, it is. When I was teaching comparative religion at Stanford, I met the man who would later become my husband. He was returning to the Jewish tradition after not having been an observant Jew. First, I found the practice of *Shabbat* very attractive. It was a richer, more meaningful way of life. I had no intention of becoming Orthodox and I still don't like the labels, but I undertook a Conservative conversion and then found that I was much more deeply attracted to the observance than even the rabbi who converted me! My husband was attending Orthodox services. I would go with him and really rage at what I felt was the inequality of women, but at the same

time I felt the authenticity and the depth of the people who were there. So I started talking to the women who had been involved for a long time. They were very strong women. I was sort of shocked by their perspective on life, by their confidence and by their ability to manage their lives. They were not the oppressed, second-class citizens I had thought they would be. It was a process of coming to a depth in my own spiritual practice and reconciling that with what it means to be a woman and to fight oppression. I had to find a way to express my own voice. That's how I ended up writing *The Voice of Sarah*. It became clear to me that there was another way of seeing things besides women as "feminists and liberated" or "oppressed and religious."



Esther Kosovsky



WIE: *In Judaism, is God male or female?*

ESTHER KOSOVSKY: In Judaism, we're not supposed to have any image of God because God is beyond human form. I don't view God as male or female, even though I may say "he." In the Torah, when it says, "And God spoke," it's put in a masculine form, but the word "God" is really genderless. The Torah was written in Hebrew, the language of God, and one of the beauties of Hebrew is that everything is gender-oriented; there's no nongender. Every word is a masculine word or a feminine word, every color is a masculine color or a feminine color, every number is a masculine number or a feminine number. It's either one or the other. When we talk about a chair, we use a masculine pronoun for the chair. Does that mean the chair is masculine instead of femi-

nine? No, and we don't ascribe human qualities to a chair. I'm not comparing God to a chair at all. My point is that the Hebrew language forces us to choose one gender or the other. If Hebrew had an "it," that might be what God would have used, but God chose masculine and it's never bothered me.

WIE: *In the Talmud [Rabbinic commentary on the Torah] it is said, "What is characteristic of men is not characteristic of women and what is characteristic of women is not characteristic of men," and in Orthodox Jewish life, men and women have very distinct roles to fulfill. What is the significance of having these separate roles for men and women?*

EK: I view it as almost like an orchestra, where every piece has its own role. If they all play the best that they can, understanding that they're only a part of the orchestra, then

WIE: You described being attracted by the confidence that the Orthodox women expressed. Did you not see the same confidence among women in the feminist movement?

TF: I didn't see much spirituality among the women in the feminist movement. The women whom I knew at that time were politically oriented, and even when I met women who were religiously involved in some way, it often seemed as if they were trying to be like men. After meeting Orthodox women who had a sense of their own being, I realized that we really have to think about whether there is a gendered quality to spiritual work and whether taking the man's role really serves women. The Hasidic women I met had a long tradition that's been passed down to them of how to be with God. Doing the simple rituals and observances that they did, which were private, not political, was extraordinarily satisfying to them. They had a sense of their own purpose, and they didn't seem to need to do what their husbands were doing. Of course I asked, "Are they just brainwashed?" But over a period of years of knowing many of these women, I realized that, no, they really weren't. They really did have a sense of deep satisfaction.

WIE: When I was describing your championing the Orthodox way of life for women after having been involved in the feminist movement to a feminist friend of mine, she commented, "I know what that's all about"—the implication being that you must be someone who has sold out or even gone off the deep end. Have you encountered that response before?

TF: Oh yes, sure.

Judaism insists that women be involved in what is called "the redemption," which means the perfection of the world. It can't be done only by men. The tradition is that it was because of the righteous women that the Jews were redeemed from Egypt, so it's going to be because of the righteous women that the final redemption will come.

WIE: How did you explain your attraction to this traditional and more restricted role to your feminist colleagues in a way that convinced them that you hadn't gone crazy?

TF: I've found that a commitment to something that is deep and profound gives you a center from which you can do other things. Sure, there are things you cut out of your life. But I found that once I cut them out, for the most part they really hadn't been nourishing me anyway. It's the spiritual work that's nourishing. And what I saw among the Orthodox women whom I respected was a realization that we are all in this together and if we don't help each other—men and women—none of us will advance. There is an organic sense



together they will make a wonderful concert. There is a beauty when everyone understands what their own strengths are and when their strengths are called for. I think when you are confident enough in where you are, who you are and what your role is, you can appreciate the strengths of the other gender. You do what you do well and they can do what they do well. There are differences that we can't ignore—in the way we were created and how we react. We're better suited for different roles. But I think what is most important is having confidence in knowing that I have to be the best that I can be within my limits, knowing what my limits are and accepting them and growing within them. That takes great strength and understanding. Then you can have a completeness of the genders. If you're going to think, "Well, it's not fair that I can't do this," or "I have to do that," then no one wins.

WIE: The prevailing view today among contemporary men and women is that there shouldn't be any differences between the sexes, that through the women's liberation movement, we've discovered our fundamental equality and now we can finally put the archaic bonds of patriarchal tra-


ditions behind us. This view holds that any religious tradition that advocates separate paths for men and women, if looked at carefully, is really designed to keep women in the position of second-class citizens. Feminist religious scholars such as Rita Gross say that the ideal woman in Orthodox Jewish culture is meant to adhere to the same role that has kept her oppressed throughout history, that has stunted her capacities and her ability to contribute to the world. I'd like to ask you what you think about some of the arguments that are used to support this radical feminist view that Judaism is really one of the worst patriarchal offenders. I hope it's not too much, but I have five points that they raise that I thought I'd ask you about all at once. Okay, here goes! Why is it that of the 613 commandments of the Torah, only a small fraction are considered essential for Jewish women to observe, while men are required and also privileged to follow them all? Why is it that one of the most revered commandments, chanting from the Torah, is reserved for men only? Why is it that the spiritual leaders, the rabbis, are all men? Why do women sit in the back of the synagogue? And why do Jewish men say a prayer every day thanking God for not having made them a woman?

EK: I was waiting for that one! But let me start with your first question. We can't just say, "I do eight mitzvot [commandments]," or "Well, I do twelve," or "Oh, I do a hundred and seventy-two." You walked in today and smiled; you know, that's a mitzvah. You were pleasant to someone else. There are very few mitzvot that men do that women cannot, and there's a practical reason, not a spiritual reason, why women don't do the others. What are the mitzvot that women are responsible for? For the kashrut

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it's about understanding your role.
My father's always said, "Why should
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among these women that we're all responsible for each other, for the community and particularly for the future, for the next generation. Judaism insists that women be involved in what is called "the redemption," which means the perfection of the world. It can't be done only by men. The tradition is that it was because of the righteous women that the Jews were redeemed from Egypt, so it's going to be because of the righteous women that the final redemption will come. It can't be done without the women, and that means that women have a crucial and unique role according to even the most traditional interpreters of Judaism.

WIE: By saying to women, "You have a responsibility for the redemption of the world," the tradition calls on women to take their spirituality and their own lives seriously. There's something very moving about this way of cultivating that sense of dignity and spiritual responsibility.

TF: Yes, absolutely. I've seen it among many of the Hasidic women. They take themselves seriously spiritually and see themselves as having a responsibility. Even if it sounds genderist or sexist, I think women do have to take seriously the question: If women are supposed to have a special role and it's not exactly what men are doing, and it is supposed to be helping the whole world, what is that role?

WIE: It's a complex question. In your book, *The Voice of Sarah*, you also wrote, "I think we need to face the potentially disturbing question, 'Is it possible that some forms of spirituality are more feminine and some are more masculine?'" What do you think about that now?

TF: I grew up with a strong belief in equality, and the feminist movement enhanced that. I'm not sure what it would mean if we took it seriously that there might be very different things that people need to do in order to grow spiritually. In Judaism, I think what's meant by "a woman's place is in the home" is that the inwardness or spirituality of women develops in a different way than the inwardness of men. My husband seems to think that men just wouldn't do any inner work at all if they didn't have to be out there in groups *davening* [praying], doing the more public thing. I think that's a little extreme, but—

WIE: Is that a Jewish view, to say that women would gravitate toward an active relationship with God even if they didn't have an outward structure, whereas men wouldn't?

TF: Yes, that's right. That wouldn't be true for everybody, but women don't seem to need those external structures to grow in their spiritual life the way men do, although they may be helpful.

WIE: Can you describe what it is about women's roles and their particular rituals, laws and prayers that brings the awareness of God into their lives and gives their lives a deeper meaning and a broader context?

TF: The rituals that are marked out for women have to do with directly bringing spirituality into the physical. Men have certain physical symbols that are supposed to help them do that, like putting on *tefillin*, [phylacteries, ritual prayer ornaments] and wearing the *tzitzit*, the fringes; whereas women's *mitzvot* [commandments] are directly connected to the body, to the physical, to giving birth and all the women's processes. It sanctifies these physical



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[dietary laws] and the home. That's a huge role. It's not just being the cleaning lady and the washer-woman. It's a big thing, making sure that the fuel we put into our bodies, which gives us the energy for our lives, is the food that God wants us to have. Women light the *Shabbas* candles, and although it's incumbent on both the man and the woman, why would I not want to do it? It's a beautiful *mitzvah*. Why would I deny myself a commandment that brings spirituality and warmth into the home?

Women today say, "It's not fair, I want to wear *tefillin* [phylacteries, ritual prayer ornaments] because, as it's recorded in the Talmud, this great Rabbi's daughter wore *tefillin*." My response to that is: When you've done everything you can as an observant woman and you still want to do one more thing, fine, then you can take that on—but in the privacy of your home where you're doing it because of you and God, not because you're doing it to show other people that you can. If you're going to do an act just to be defiant, then there's nothing to it. There's so much meaning behind these things, it's not just the act. You see, it's not about equality, it's about understanding your role. My father's always said, "Why should women be equal? They'd have to come down a level to do that."

WIE: Did he mean that women are seen as being better or more spiritual than men?

EK: Yes, women are viewed differently. Men wear a *yarmulke* [skull-cap] on their head as a constant reminder of God's presence. The Yiddish word *yarmulke* means "fear of heaven" or "fear of the king." Women don't have to wear one because women have a natural understanding. Similarly, circum-

cision is a physical sign of a bond between man and God. Women don't need a physical reminder that God expects certain things from them because they are born with a spiritual sensitivity. These explanations come from the Talmud; they weren't just thought up to counter-act modern society.

WIE: Some feminist scholars would say this kind of explanation is a rationale for keeping women down, denying them privileges like reading from the Torah. What do you think?

EK: You know, it's like when you buy a new appliance that you have to assemble. If you go to instruction number twelve and it says insert slot A into hole B, you'll say, "I don't know what sense that makes. This is a dumb machine!" and you'll take it back. Whereas if you said, "I want to use this machine—let me go step by step and then I'll understand," when you come to step twelve it'll make sense to do what they tell you to do. If you're going to approach Judaism by saying, "Okay, let me check everything along the way and make sure everything makes sense to me, and then I'll believe in God. Then I'll accept this spirituality and grow with it," you're going to find problems. I wouldn't mind if some things were different. But if you accept the work of God and the word of God and that He treats us as equal in many respects and greater in some, then maybe I wouldn't mind putting on *tefillin*, but I don't need to identify myself any more strongly as a Jewish woman.

WIE: Why is it that women are relegated to the back of the synagogue, separated by a screen from the place where the Torah is read? And why don't women have their own version of the men's prayer—"Thank you, Lord, for not making me a man"?

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DIFFERENCE!

AN INTERVIEW WITH SWAMI BHARATI TIRTHA THE SHANKARACHARYA OF SRINGERI

BY CHRIS PARISH

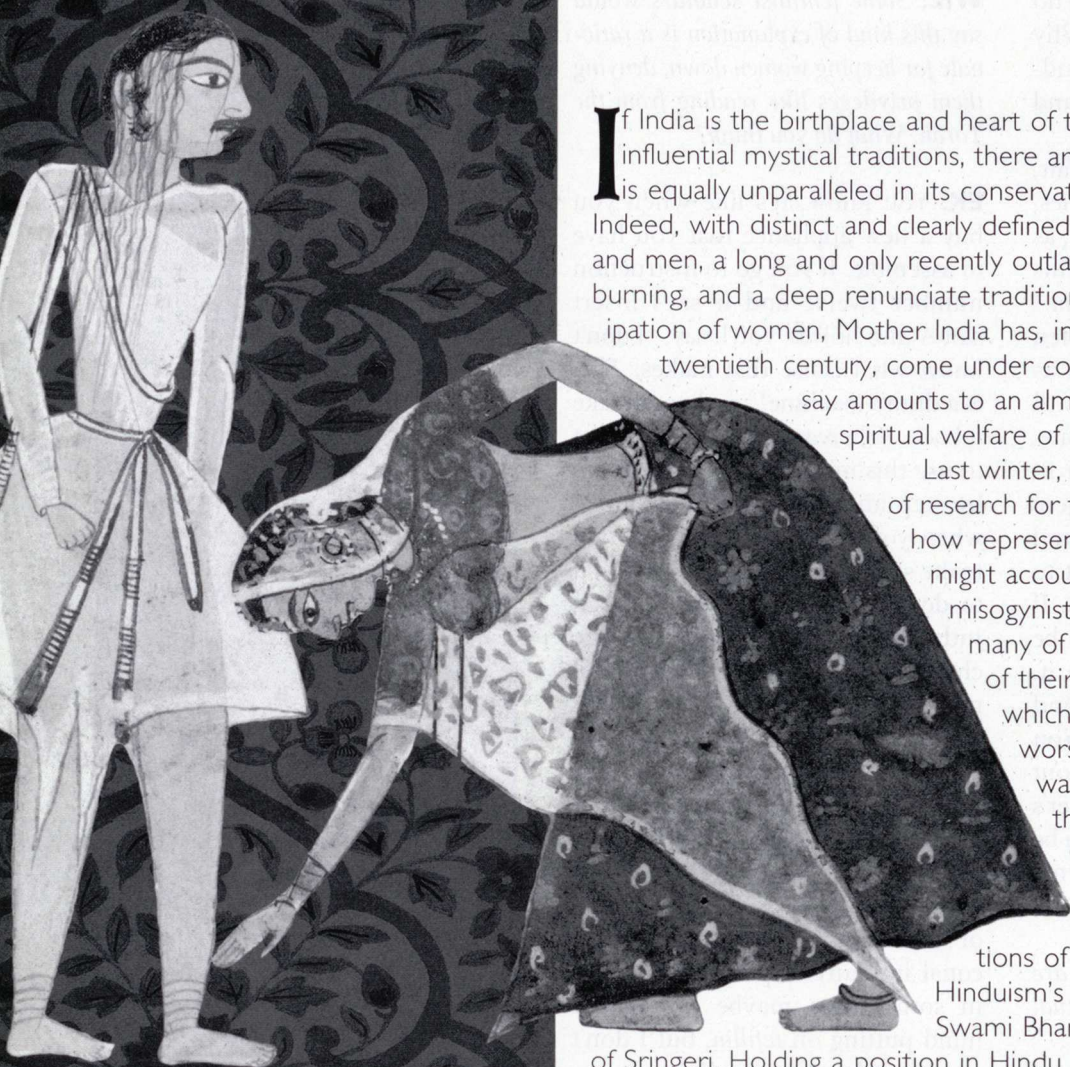
If India is the birthplace and heart of the world's most powerful and influential mystical traditions, there are those who would say that it is equally unparalleled in its conservatism regarding gender issues. Indeed, with distinct and clearly defined religious roles for women and men, a long and only recently outlawed legacy of ritual widow-burning, and a deep renunciate tradition all but forbidding the participation of women, Mother India has, in the final decades of the twentieth century, come under considerable fire for what many say amounts to an almost universal neglect of the spiritual welfare of her daughters.

Last winter, while still in the early phases of research for this issue, we began to wonder how representatives of Hindu orthodoxy might account for some of the apparently misogynist sentiments expressed in many of the most revered scriptures of their tradition—a tradition in which, perhaps ironically, goddess worship occupies a central role. It was with an aim to find answers that we sent reporter-at-large Chris Parish deep into the jungled hills of southern India to ask some probing questions of one of contemporary Hinduism's most respected authorities, Swami Bharati Tirtha, the Shankaracharya

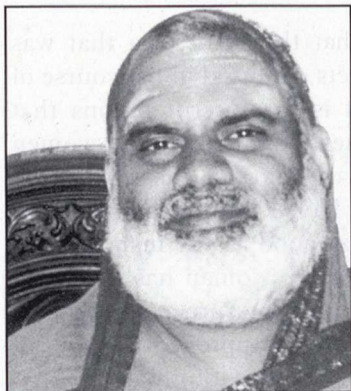
of Sringeri. Holding a position in Hindu religious society often compared to that of the pope in Catholicism, Tirtha is one of four current representatives of a long lineage of Shankaracharyas dating back to Adi Shankara, the eighth-century founder of Advaita Vedanta and India's most revered philosopher/sage. If anyone was qualified to defend the tradition's stance on gender, we thought, surely he would be the one.

In the course of the conversation, as we might have expected, the Shankaracharya did indeed stand firm in defense of the ideological bastions of his native soil. But as the following excerpt reveals, the direction he took to do so was one that none of us could have anticipated.

"After serving the husband, if any time is left, she can attend to spiritual sadhana. If time is left. But her first priority is serving her husband."



WIE: In this issue, among other things, we're looking into the different advantages and disadvantages that men and women experience on the spiritual path and whether or not the spiritual path and goal are the same for men as for women.



SWAMI BHARATI TIRTHA: When one is doing practice on the spiritual path, the results of that practice will not differ based on sex, on whether one is a man or a woman. As long as the practice is done correctly, the result will be the same. From the point of view of the Lord, it is a *human being* that is practicing—not a person of a particular sex.

WIE: But we've noticed that the Hindu scriptures do tend to speak differently about the spiritual propensities of men and women. One of the things we were hoping to ask you, for example, is: Which qualities of men's and women's nature or conditioning are the most helpful to their spiritual development and which aspects might be hindrances to that development?

SBT: Here we will have to say the "individual human being," not "man" or "woman."

WIE: So there aren't any particular differences in your view? For example, it's been said that men can tend to be very fascinated by and attached to their intellect and that this can act as a hindrance to spiritual realization. Would you have any comment on that?

SBT: This attachment is a hindrance whether it is in man or in woman. There is no truth in saying that man alone has more attachment to knowledge. Because of the ego, whether we are speaking about man or woman, that attachment will be there. And attachment is a hindrance to the spiritual path. Ego is a big enemy—the biggest enemy.

WIE: Many scriptures in the Hindu tradition clearly state that men are inherently superior to women in their spiritual potential. We've seen numerous references to this and were wondering what the basis for this widely asserted view is.

SBT: In spiritual practice, there is definitely no greater advantage for men or women. What is said in the scriptures might be wrongly interpreted.

WIE: To be specific, in the course of our research we came across a number of strong statements in the Hindu texts criticizing women's basic character or nature. The *Manu Samhita* makes reference to the "natural heartlessness" of women and states that "women are as impure as falsehood itself." The *Maitrayana Samhita* asserts that "women are evil." And in the *Mahabharata*, we read that "women do not hesitate to transgress morals" and that "a man with a hundred tongues would die before finishing lecturing on the vices and defects of women, even if he were to do nothing else during a long life of a hundred years." If this were true, it would certainly seem to at least imply a difference in aptitude for spiritual pursuit.

SBT: Such things should not be taken as relevant points because intrinsically there is no difference.

WIE: How, then, do you account for the traditional notion that men and women tend to have different balances of the three *gunas* [essential qualities]? Well-respected scholars have asserted that men are generally considered to have a higher proportion of *sattvas* [lucidity], which is widely held to be the most beneficial disposition for spiritual development. Whereas, because of their biology, women tend to have a higher proportion of *rajas* [dynamism] and *tamas* [inertia]. Isn't it true that men are considered to be generally more *sattvic* [imbued with *sattva*], at least according to the tradition?

SBT: There is no difference. How can man be more *sattvic* than woman? All such ideas will come only when people think that man is more important than woman. This is only a man-made notion.

WIE: But from what we've seen and read it does seem that in India, it is considered better to be a man than a woman on the spiritual path. Not only are women referred to as being deceitful and untrustworthy, but they are often said to have minds that can't concentrate. There are numerous references to this in the scriptures.

SBT: Difficulty with concentration and a wandering mind occurs in both men and women. Whatever

"A man with a hundred
tongues would die before
finishing the task of lecturing
on the vices and defects of
women, even if he were to do
nothing else throughout a long
life of one hundred years."

—The Mahabharata

"Women are as impure
as falsehood itself."
—Manu Samhita

"Women constantly suck
the blood of men like leeches."
—Devi Bhagavat

"Though destitute of virtue,
or seeking pleasure elsewhere,
or devoid of good qualities, a
husband must be constantly
worshipped as a god by a
faithful wife."
—Manu Samhita

"If, when her husband has
died, a woman ascends with
him into the fire [funeral pyre],
she is glorified in heaven."
—Stridharmapaddhati

"When creating them, Manu
allotted to women a love of
their bed, of their seat and
of their ornament, impure
desires, wrath, dishonesty,
malice and bad conduct."
—Manu Samhita

quality you find in women, or whatever quality is said to be stronger in women is there in men also. There is no difference.

WIE: What are all those references in the scriptures about? Why are they there?

SBT: What happens is that the main idea that was there in the original text gets confused in the course of interpretation. Usually, it is the interpretations that fail to acknowledge that these comments about women occurred in a particular context. In that particular context, one lady might have conducted herself in such a way that was not as good as the man. And in that particular reference, if the woman has exhibited such negative qualities, then an interpretation is given. But that does not mean it is an approved theory. So, bereft of the context, that interpretation will have no meaning. It cannot be taken as a general fact.

WIE: So are you saying that with all these references in the scriptures, there's no general point being made about women?

SBT: No general point. According to Vedanta philosophy, there is absolutely no difference between man and woman. And this is true not only with regard to sex. There is no difference in caste. There is no difference in religion. Every human being who practices his proper spiritual path is entitled to *moksha* [spiritual liberation]. That is the Vedanta stand about *moksha*.

WIE: Yet the Manu Samhita and other Hindu scriptures assert that whereas men have many religious duties to fulfill and many spiritual practices available to them, women have only a single religious duty and path—to worship their husband as a god. They're instructed to do this even if the husband doesn't have any good qualities at all, or if his command goes against the laws of scripture. A pious woman, it is said, should worship, obey and serve her husband faithfully if she is to advance spiritually. How are we to understand that?

SBT: What is wrong in that?

WIE: Well, the author seems to be suggesting that the spiritual path of women is solely to serve and honor their husband, whereas, from what I understand, men have an opportunity to take up many different forms of *sadhana* [spiritual practice].

SBT: Yes, that means to say that a woman's job is made easier, because the husband is doing all the *sadhanas* and the wife is helping him in all the *sadhanas*. That itself is a *sadhana* for her.

WIE: Does that path of serving her husband lead a woman to the goal of *moksha*?

SBT: Yes. If she takes it in the spirit that she will get *moksha* by just serving the husband, she gets it. There is a story wherein one *rishi* [sage] sat under a tree and there was a bird that dropped its filth on his head. The *rishi* was enraged and stared at the bird, and by the *rishi*'s very sight the bird was burned to ashes. Then the *rishi* went to get food at a shop in town, and there he came upon one lady, a very pious lady, always serving her husband with all patience and faith. The husband had just come to the house, so in order to allow the husband to settle, she waited for a short period before cooking the food for this *rishi*. When she came out afterward, the *rishi* was angry because he was made to stand there and wait for a long period. He then began to stare at her just like he had stared at the bird. And she said, "I am not a bird to be burned by your staring." She was able to understand that this *rishi* had burned the bird dead, even though she had not seen it. And she was able to withstand his sight. How? She had acquired all the power only by serving her husband faithfully. So when a woman serves a husband faithfully, she will get all the spiritual powers that the husband is capable of getting. So that is why it is said that merely faithful service to the husband is itself sufficient *sadhana*. Separate *sadhana* need not be done.

WIE: How can such a seemingly simplistic *sadhana* as service to one's husband lead to the same goal as a practice such as *jnana yoga* [the path of knowledge], which is considered within Vedanta to be a much higher practice?

SBT: The most important thing is faith. They have faith that "just by serving I get everything."

WIE: So the entire path for women consists of simply serving their husband? They are not encouraged to engage in other forms of *sadhana*?

SBT: After serving the husband, if any time is left, she can attend to *sadhana*. If time is left. But her first priority is serving her husband.

WIE: Wouldn't it seem that men would therefore have an advantage on the spiritual path because they have all these different practices that they can do—practices that are not available to women? For example, the practice of renunciation, or the giving up of worldly and familial ties, is a cornerstone of Hindu religious life, but it is rarely taken up by women. The vast majority of renunciates are men.

SBT: According to Hindu faith, as long as the husband is living, the wife has no right to go away from him. If she did, she would be going away from her path of duty. But if the woman agrees, then the man can renounce and go. That is the only difference we find, that man can renounce with the consent of the wife. But the wife cannot renounce as long as the husband is living.

WIE: Earlier, you made the point that there is no fundamental difference between men and women on the spiritual path. I understand that in the view of Vedanta, ultimately there's no difference because there is only the Self, and the Self is one. But on a relative level, would you say that there are no differences even in the general characters of men and women that might make it easier or more difficult for them to practice?

SBT: The spiritual path and spiritual ideas cannot be mixed up with the day-to-day, worldly aspects of life. They are two distinct, separate things. What I have said about there being no difference is only in reference to spiritual life. In the world, however, there is a difference. Many differences are there.

WIE: And couldn't those differences affect the spiritual practice and the spiritual progress of the seeker?

SBT: One is completely different from the other. They are two different aspects of life. What we find here is purely worldly and has nothing to do with spiritual practice. The two cannot be mixed.

WIE: Could there ever be a female Shankaracharya?

SBT: That is a very hypothetical question.

WIE: Yes, I know that.

SBT: A very hypothetical question! Because the tradition is there and, as for the tradition . . . that is a highly hypothetical question. The question does not really arise. ■

An Interview with
Kate Bornstein
by Susan Bridle



"I'm what's called a transsexual person. That means I was assigned one gender at birth, and I now live my life as something else. I was born male and raised as a boy. I went through both boyhood and adult manhood, went through a gender change, and 'became a woman,'" writes Kate (formerly Al) Bornstein. "On the personal side of things, my lesbian lover of over three years decided to become a man. We lived together for a few more years as a heterosexual couple, then we stopped being lovers. He found his gay male side, and I found my slave grrrl side. What a wacky world, huh? I can't think of a day in my life when I haven't thought about gender. . . ."

Kate Bornstein is a woman (she underwent a male-to-female sex change operation in 1986) with a mission: to dismantle the "gender system" on the planet as we know it. As a lesbian feminist writer, actress, performance artist and frequent guest on daytime television talk shows, she is dedicated to educating others about what she feels is the inherent oppression of a binary gender system that forces everyone to conform to one of only two gender options. In her books *Gender Outlaw*, *Nearly Roadkill* (coauthored with Caitlin Sullivan) and *My Gender Workbook*, as well as in numerous theater productions and the experiential workshops she presents across the United States, Bornstein questions, challenges and deconstructs all ideas about gender—including ideas that many of us aren't even aware we have.

Gender Outlaw

INTRODUCTION

continued

The moment we heard about Kate Bornstein and her work, we knew we wanted to speak with her for this issue of *WIE*. Here was someone who has spent several decades deeply investigating what gender is and isn't, how gender identity is constructed and maintained, and how we can free ourselves from what she sees as the rigid and narrowly defined roles called "man" and "woman." She has a unique perspective on the nuances of the "performance of gender" informed by both her training as a character actor and her familiarity with postmodern gender theory. But Bornstein's exploration of the subject has by no means been academic. She has explored these questions with her own life and her own body and gone farther with her inquiry than most would even dare to imagine. We were very interested in talking with her about what she has learned about "gender freedom," and how her experience sheds light on what an ultimately *spiritually* liberated relationship to gender identity might be.

When I finally got a chance to interview her, in the small, cluttered apartment/office in New York City that she shares with her girlfriend, two dogs, a cat, several turtles and a conspicuous collection of sexually suggestive art, books, knickknacks and videos, she was not, somehow, the person I had expected to meet. Through her thoughtful and provocative writing, I had encountered, on the printed page, a committed feminist and social activist, someone serious about her work and ideas. In person, however, I met someone more closely resembling, well, a seventeen-year-old

Valley Girl who punctuated her remarks with, "Cool!" and "Like, duh!" Bornstein was intentionally, even rebelliously, chameleonlike, with a palette of personas she would shift into and out of unexpectedly, sometimes in mid-sentence. On occasion, the fifty-one-year-old, well-educated, upper-middle-class suburban white man she would have been had she not taken her destiny into her own hands appeared before me; at other times, a flamboyantly gay stage performer prone to breaking into song; and once, a gruff "Uncle Max" from New Jersey. While speaking with her, it became unsettlingly apparent that when she writes about embracing "personal anarchy," she means it literally.

Bornstein, who has described herself as a "gender terrorist," has invented what she calls a *bodhisattva* approach to unhinging ourselves from gender identity. "Make yourself foolish!" she told me. "Make yourself sillier. Make yourself more outside the rules that have been set up for you. . . . All I've been doing all my life is going lower and lower and lower on the social scale." For Bornstein, using "gender transgression" to aid in downward mobility on the ladder of social acceptance, prestige and privilege is not just a sign of the "gender dysphoria" her psychiatrist diagnosed her with, nor simply a personal agenda, but a spiritual path that can dismantle patriarchy and the adversarial gender relationships she feels are the primary glue that holds it in place. "This is the Age of Pisces," she explained, "and what the Age of Pisces is going to teach humanity is fluidity. Gender fluidity is a lesson



we're going to have to embrace if we want the peace that's going to come through the Age of Aquarius."

Meeting Kate Bornstein was, without a doubt, a mind-opening experience. This "gender outlaw," who insists on "saying no to gender, and to keep saying no to systems that would rein me in, classify me, pin me down or keep me in my place," does seem to have achieved success in her goal of blurring the margins of her identity, particularly her gender identity. And in spite of her defiant attachment to "fluidity and whimsy" and her aversion to taking anything, even her own life's work, very seriously, she is a patient teacher about the subject of gender with a generous willingness to lay bare her own experience. Because she asserts that gender itself is a powerful path to enlightenment that emerges from the point where "postmodernism, technology and desire meet Zen," we were eager to explore her discoveries about the liberation that lies in transcending identification with this most central of our ideas of self. Yet as she revealed that the ability to wear a mustache one day, lipstick the next, and both together the day after is the sort of thing that she feels demonstrates progress on the path, it became increasingly clear that the "gender freedom" she advocates is not *exactly* what we had in mind.

WIE: What is a “gender outlaw”?

KATE BORNSTEIN: It's anybody who f—s with gender. A gender outlaw is anybody who f—s with gender, in any way, shape or form, and has the courage to admit they're doing it. Period.

And how can you f— with gender? You can do stuff that is proscribed for your birth gender: “Men can't do this; women can't do that.” There have been various cultures where there have been in fact more than two genders. But usually anyone who is not a member of what the culture considers its primary genders is relegated to outlaw status. You violate the laws of nature. That makes you an outlaw.

WIE: *You seem to suggest in your book Gender Outlaw that it's only through breaking out of society's rigid gender roles and identities that we can discover and express our full potential. Why do you say that being attached to fixed gender roles creates a form of bondage?*

KB: Well, what's the definition of bondage? Being held in one place. What's the definition of a role, except operating within a place, within certain prescribed manners? The degree to which anything keeps us motionless limits us. Anything that limits our reach, our grasp, the way we do things limits our potential. The women's movement has certainly looked at how the cultural role of “woman” has limited women. And the men's movement has looked at how the cultural role of “man” has limited men. But very few people have looked at how the system of having only men and only women has limited all of us.

WIE: What is your concept of liberation?

KB: For me, the most important freedom is the freedom to express my harmless values, and values are tied to identities. You're not allowed the freedom to express your values other than in an identity that the culture agrees you have. You're allowed to say, “I want to be Davy Crockett!” and “I want to be Princess Diana!” as long as you're a kid. Once you're an adult, you're not allowed to say that. That's not considered adult behavior. Well, duh!—of course! I hope I'm a child until the day I die! So freedom, for me, would be the freedom to freely express myself and my harmless values.

WIE: *Some people feel that a liberated relationship to gender is the realization of some kind of androgyny in which everyone has equal access to a full spectrum of human characteristics, skills, roles and opportunities. Others feel*

that true gender liberation lies in men and women becoming more authentically and powerfully grounded in their experience and expression of their manhood or womanhood. What do you think of these two rather opposing views of liberation in relationship to gender?

KB: I wouldn't call them opposing at all. I would call them steps on a journey to gender liberation. I think the first step is to fully embrace what you might be being and see if you could fully be that. I mean, golly, if you were born a man or born a woman, go ahead and be one! That's the easiest thing. Boy, wouldn't it be great if, simply by being a woman, you could be everything your heart desired. Great! Go for it! Fantastic! I think that's the first step, and that's the second of the two alternatives you offered me. If that doesn't work, then I would suggest moving into the second step, which is this whole concept of a full range of expression, and androgyny. And that's a good next step because you can ask: What is it between man and woman—which is what “androgyny” means—that I can embrace? Will that enable me to freely express myself? Can I find an identity in this range of androgyny? Try that. If that doesn't work, then you're going to need to go to a third option, which is to move outside of androgyny, beyond the bipolar concept—which androgyny still keeps in place by admission of *andro* and *gyna*—and explore the space that contains these two poles. Explore that to see if you can find a way to freely express yourself using gender.

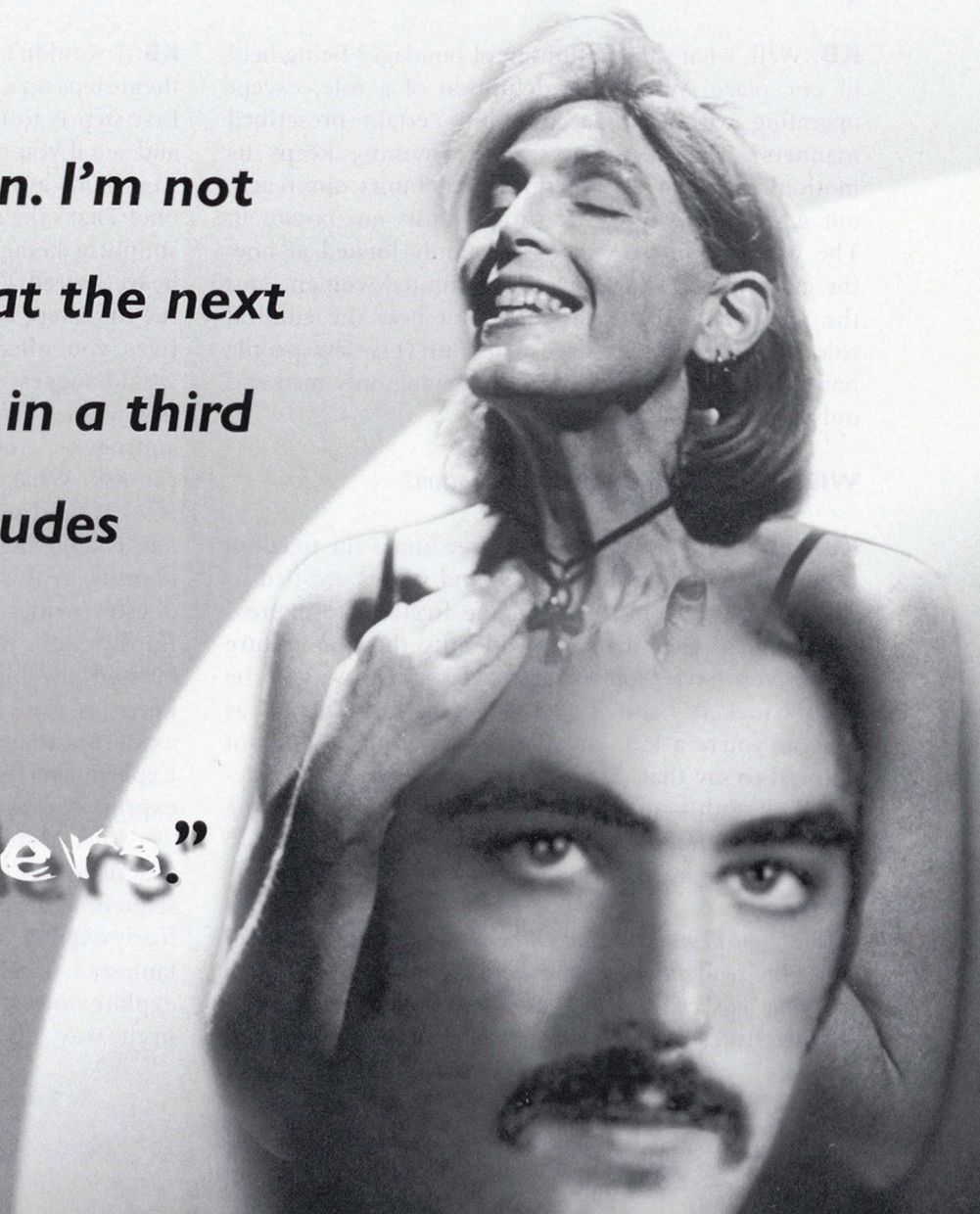
So I think it's not that the two options you described are opposed. I would say that it's just a sequence of steps, and what's easiest? If the goal is to freely express yourself, is gender in your way? If it's not, fantastic! Explore race, explore class, explore age, explore one of the other identities. For me, gender was in the way. I first tried to be fully a man. It didn't work

for me. Then I tried the androgynous thing and explored what parts of woman I could embrace and still be a man. That didn't work for me either. So I went, "Okay! I'm a woman!" and I went back to the first step. "Now I can fully express myself as a woman." But naahhh, not really—it didn't work. So then I went back to, "Well, maybe I'll incorporate some of this man stuff again." It still didn't work. I'm not a man. I'm not a woman. I'm at the next stage, which is in a third space that includes man, woman and lots of other genders.

WIE: *From a spiritual perspective, do you think that there are any limitations in focusing so much on gender and sexuality?*

KB: Big time! Golly! I think I've gotten to a point where the gender system on this planet doesn't work for me. I understand that and I have accepted it. And I have embraced my own freakdom around that. I've gotta get on with my life now. I'm not going to beat my head against a brick wall trying to be a woman or trying to be a man. Been there, done that. And since those are the only two identities that the gender system of most cultures on this planet allow, why should I beat my head against that? Lao Tsu said that whenever you have a binary system, you've got to get to a point of being outside it before you can be free of it. I do not buy your system that offers me a choice of *one* or the *other*. I just can't subscribe to it anymore. *That's* what I needed to

***"I'm not a man. I'm not
a woman. I'm at the next
stage, which is in a third
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and lots of
other genders."***



learn from gender. But gender, even though it's a very common shared experience, is just *one* aspect of who we are. The danger is that it's rarely, if ever, explored. It goes on automatic.

WIE: *What do you think transcendence means in relationship to gender?*

KB: I think it means getting to the point of relegating the genders "man" and "woman" to two of many, rather than the only two to choose from. I think that's transcending the gender system as it currently exists in most cultures on the planet.

WIE: *What do you think it would mean to transcend gender differences and still inhabit a male or female body?*

KB: Impossible! Is your body male or female? By whose definitions? Is my body male? Is my body female? What's a male body? What's a female body? You're using terms that are too loaded to answer that question. Unless you define what a male body or a female body is, that question is *impossible* to answer. I don't understand what those are. I know too many people who have too many different definitions for them, and I don't know yours. I don't mean to be snide. So, tell me: what's a male body?

WIE: Well, I guess, to begin with, XY versus XX chromosomes.

KB: Have you ever had your chromosomes tested?

WIE: *Not that I'm aware of.*

KB: Then how do you know whether you have a male body or a female body? There are actually fourteen possible combinations at that particular chromosome level. There's XX, XY, XXY, YYX, XO, XXX, XOX. . . . Does that mean there are fourteen genders? So gender isn't at the level of chromosomes.

WIE: Well, there are the typical secondary sex characteristics that generally identify our bodies as male or female—breasts, facial hair, etc. And we also present ourselves as a particular gender, such as in the way we dress or wear our hair. But the idea I'm getting at is the possibility of transcending gender identification while living in a world where we still inhabit bodies that are identified as male or female.

KB: A lot of people think I have a female body. But I

would be the first to argue that. Do I have a penis? Yes. It's been turned inside out, but it's still a penis. Do I have a vagina? No. On the sexual characteristics level, I've got an "inny," not an "outy"! And you've never seen men with breasts? I've seen men with breasts bigger than mine. With what you're wearing, I can't tell if you have breasts. And with your hat, I don't know what your hair is like. So, by your definition, I have no idea what you are! So it's not the breasts and it's not the hair. Is it hormones? You know, testosterone and estrogen? If that were the case, we could buy our gender at any drugstore. So any question relating to the "male" or "female" body, unless it's defined, I can't answer it.

WIE: *Which aspects of gender do you think are biological and which do you think are conditioned? And has your experience as someone who's undergone sex change surgery and hormone treatment changed your view of this?*

KB: It's pretty easy. I think aspects of gender that are biological are those aspects that can be measured in the physical universe. Everything else is conditioned. Physical manifestations of gender are sex characteristics, hormones, chromosomes or anything you can see, hear, feel, touch, smell, measure—that's all biological. But things like "wants to wear a prom dress" are not biological.

WIE: *Do you think any psychological, emotional or behavioral gender characteristics follow biology, or do you think it's all cultural?*

KB: Let's pull this conversation back a minute because otherwise we're going to get inextricably trapped here. Am I correct in assuming that, unspoken in your question, when you say "gender," you mean "man" or "woman"?

WIE: Well, yes.

KB: Right. And any conversation that's based on that is going to be difficult for me to respond to because I don't believe those are the only two genders. If you want to talk about gendered characteristics, let's narrow it down to a field of, say, six genders: men, women, boys, girls, she-males and drag kings.

Okay, that being said, now let me contradict myself. Does testosterone make a person more randy and more given to anger? Yes, absolutely. Does estrogen change the nature of a person's sexual drive? Yes. Changed mine. Absolutely. But who says estrogen and testosterone are female and male, respectively? If you want to say the effect of an XY chromosome on the body produces certain characteristics in a person—

WIE: So you would say that certain characteristics may follow biological factors as long as you don't separate them into what people call "male" and "female" categories.

KB: Absolutely. Yes, because I mean otherwise it doesn't totally make sense.

But if we were to shoot you up with testosterone, would you grow hair on your face? Yes! But would that make you a man? Did you know that if you took testosterone, your clitoris would grow to maybe three or four inches long? What would that be like? Would that be a woman's body? I think a sign of approaching enlightenment is that you can laugh about some of this stuff and your default conception of gender is no longer an either/or construct. You know, I really am having trouble hearing some of your questions because they're based in this either/or world.

WIE: In *Gender Outlaw* you describe gender freedom as having the ability to move fluidly between a variety of different gender roles and identities—

KB: Among a variety.

WIE: Yet there is another view of freedom in relationship to gender that I wanted to ask you about. The teachings of some of the most spiritually liberated beings have called us to transcend all notions of self, including gender. From a spiritual perspective, wouldn't attachment to or preoccupation with gender in any form ultimately prove to be an impediment to spiritual liberation? Attachment to ideas of fixed gender, fluid gender, no gender—any way of relating to gender as a fundamental reference point?

KB: Yeah. Attachment to it would certainly be an impediment.

WIE: Do you think it is possible for the individual to come to a point where they no longer are preoccupied with or fixated on gender differences, roles and identities, and at the same time feel no need to avoid or deny whatever gender differences there may actually be?

KB: I think that pretty well describes what I'm approaching.

WIE: It's a subtle question, though. What I'm asking about is the possibility of letting go of any kind of grasping at or holding on to a self-image that's related to gender. Is it possible to really let all that drop and then find out, again and again in every moment, what qualities or characteristics there would naturally and spontaneously

be? To allow "gendered" qualities or characteristics to just be there without denying or avoiding them, or orchestrating them, and without having to know beforehand what they are?

KB: You're talking about a very enlightened state. I can do that a lot around gender, okay, because it's been my whole life. I've spent over forty years consciously exploring it. And I'm trying to use what I've learned in my gender explorations to be as fluid in other areas of my life.

WIE: From what you described in *Gender Outlaw*, it seems that much of the experience of transgendered people is practicing or acting various gender and sexual behaviors. It seems that the goal is having a greater spectrum of characteristics and behaviors to choose from, and not just being slotted into a certain range of characteristics. I wanted to ask you about this idea of acting a gender role.

KB: Well, everybody does that. It's just a question of the degree of consciousness we have while we're doing it. I mean, you do it.

WIE: Yes, it's true; I realize that this is definitely not just true for transgendered people. But what I'm getting at in this question is that when people are acting these roles, it can seem self-conscious or somewhat unnatural. It can seem affected, this putting on of a feminine or a masculine persona. But obviously, conventionally heterosexual men and women do it also.

KB: I was going to mention John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe, Bruce Willis, Geena Davis. I mean, hello!

WIE: Right, exactly. Yet one way of describing spiritual liberation is the discovery of a condition of naturalness, spontaneity and lack of self-consciousness that comes from all self-concern falling away. There's no self-image being clutched on to. What do you think about the distinction between this way of being and the kind of self-consciousness that comes from acting a gender role?

KB: I don't think that they're different. I think one is a step toward another. I think that one way to be able to totally cast off the either/or gender idea would be to fully embrace the being and doing and experience of each of these main genders and see if they really, really work for you—either one. And by defining ourselves as genderless, i.e., unable to be nailed down to any gender, we open ourselves up to being able to perform the

function of any gender, create the effect of any gender, experience the experience of any gender. But if you're going to perform, create or experience depending on the performance, creation and experience that are *allowed* your gender, well, it's going to be on a *limited* basis. Men are allowed to perform certain things, create certain things, experience certain things that women *aren't*.

WIE: But isn't this "performance" still self-conscious?

KB: Yes, and it's a path.

WIE: What do you mean?

KB: If you really wanted to get to a point of transcending gender, you would have to consciously embrace and act out both primary genders.

WIE: Do you think that is a path to the kind of transcendence of gender identification that I've been asking about?

KB: Well, it's a clumsy path, but it's the only path that the culture allows right now—it's to carve out

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"Any conversation that's based on two genders is going to be difficult for me to respond to because I don't believe those are the only two genders.

If you want to talk about gendered characteristics, let's narrow it down

to a field of, say,

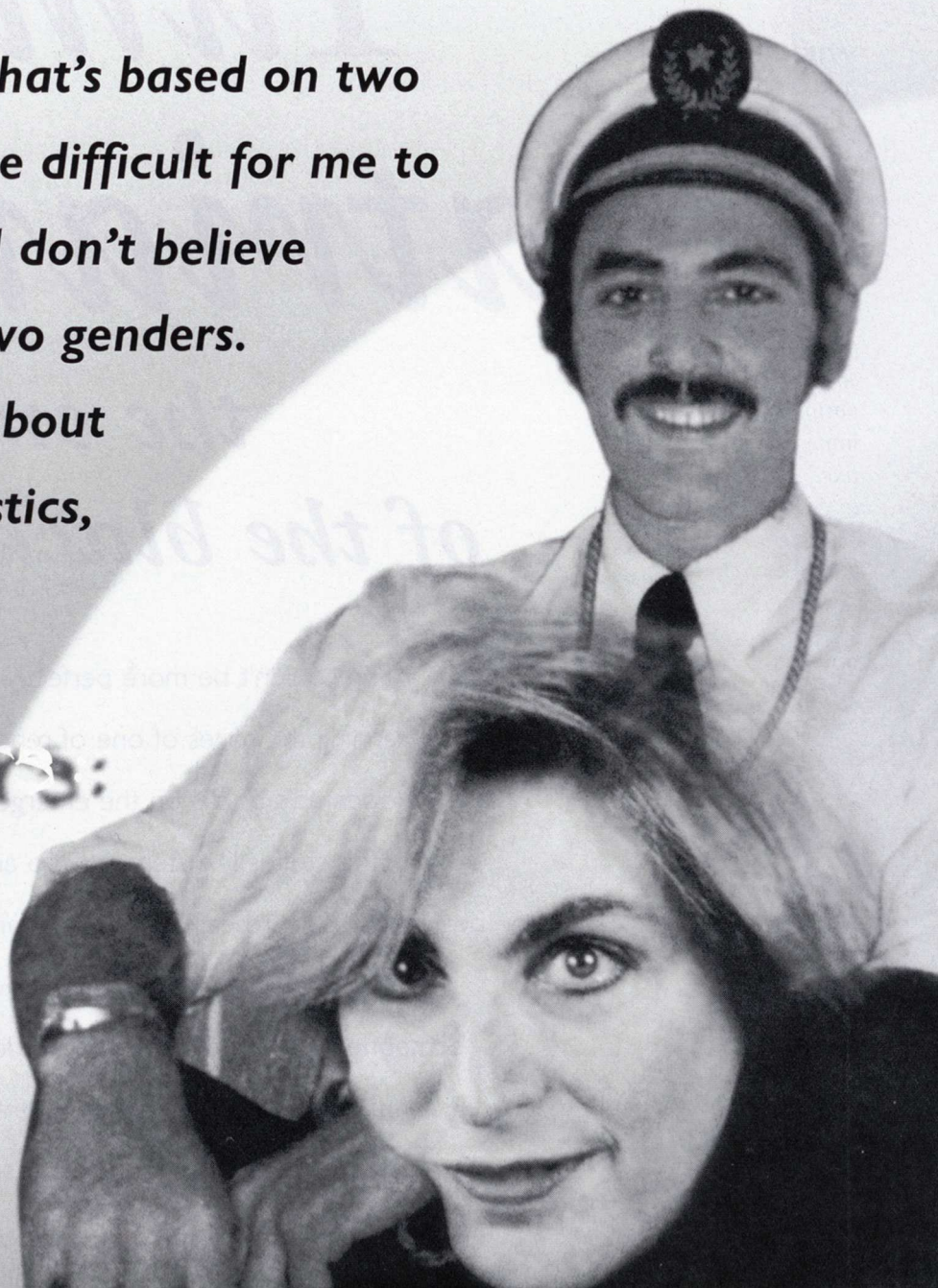
six genders:

men, women,

boys, girls,

she-males and

drag kings."





an interview with

Marion Woodman

Taming Patriarchy

the emergence of the black goddess

"She couldn't be more perfect!" my colleague had exclaimed, scanning the pages of one of renowned Jungian analyst Marion Woodman's books on the emergence of "the feminine." "Even reading this stuff is like stepping into another dimension." From the beginning of our research on gender and spirituality for this issue of *What Is Enlightenment?*, we had known we wanted to speak with someone who could articulate the delicate balancing of masculine and feminine energies so central to Jung's conception of the spiritual path. In Woodman, it seemed, we had hit the mark.



INTRODUCTION

continued

Internationally acclaimed for her work as a "bridge builder between the male and female worlds," the former high school English and drama teacher has, in the twenty-five years since she enrolled in Zurich's C.G. Jung Institute, earned a name as a renegade analyst with a rare understanding of the role of the feminine in bringing about personal and cultural transformation. Perhaps best known for her videotaped workshop with men's movement pioneer Robert Bly, *Bly and Woodman on Men and Women*, she is also the best-selling author of six books, including *Addiction to Perfection* and *Leaving My Father's House*. Her most recent work, coauthored with psychologist Elinor Dickson, is *Dancing in the Flames: The Black Goddess in the Transformation of Consciousness*. At the age of seventy, having analyzed more dreams than most of us have probably had, Woodman, we thought, would surely be able to bring the often enigmatic world of Jungian archetypal psychology to light.

Having spoken over the years with some of the foremost voices in today's increasingly popular dialogue between psychology and spirituality, one thing we have learned is that whenever *What Is Enlightenment?* approaches a thinker firmly rooted in the ego-dominated world of the psychological, there is always a certain amount of tension in the air. For although renowned transpersonal

theorist Ken Wilber has written eloquently about the necessity of marrying Freud and the Buddha in order to achieve a truly integrated view of human development, it has been our ongoing experience that when the psychological view meets the enlightenment view, a collision of worlds is almost inevitable. Little did we know, however, when we approached Marion Woodman for an interview that, in this case, the clash would not only be one of views, but of the very forces that drive the human psyche. Nothing in our past experience could have led us to predict the ironic outcome of the interviewer's month-long immersion in Woodman's writings on the complex shadow world of the unconscious. As if a man possessed, our colleague became so consumed by Woodman's emphasis on healing the ancient wounds of the ego that almost overnight he chose to completely abandon his life's aspiration to let go of his personal history in pursuit of enlightenment—suddenly finding the temptation to identify with the demons of his past too overwhelming to resist.

We were originally drawn to this master analyst for her explanation of the difference between masculine and feminine energies in the Jungian worldview—and particularly for what she sees as the essential role of the feminine in bringing men, women and even our troubled world to wholeness. Could the

mysterious black goddess that she claims is emerging in the dreams of men and women around the globe really be, as she suggests, the harbinger of a new paradigm of inclusiveness, here at last to tame the patriarchal lust for power and control that has brought us "to the brink of extinction"? We wondered.

But, as we became familiar with her view, what began to capture our interest even more than her teachings on the all-embracing nature of the archetypal feminine were the ultimate philosophical implications of her assertion that wholeness can be found only when we go beyond absolute, either/or thinking to embrace the "dance of opposites." What, we wanted to know, is the relationship between the balancing of poles she describes and the transcendence of all duality spoken of in the great enlightenment teachings? Could the wholeness discovered through embracing and balancing the opposing masculine and feminine energies really be the same as the wholeness attained through the transcendence of *all* pairs of opposites, through enlightenment?

In the end, our encounter with Woodman proved to be an illuminating experience, as she showed both the genuine warmth and sensitivity one would expect from an analyst of more than two decades and the unusual elasticity of thought that has won her a reputation as one of today's truly wise women.

WIE: In your books, you've written quite extensively about the relationship between "the feminine" and "the masculine." What do these words mean to you, and how does the relationship between them express itself in our lives?

MARION WOODMAN: As I understand it from my work with dreams, there are two energies in our bodies, just as there are two energies controlling nature. There's a very active, analytical, logical energy symbolized by the sun and a synthesizing, relating energy symbolized by the moon. In our bodies, as in nature, we are dependent upon this balance of energy between day and night in order to live. In the caduceus, the "logo" of the medical profession, these two energies come forward as two snakes that start together from the bottom and climb up through the various arcs until, at the top, they are about to kiss. Well, in our lives, these two energies are working all the time to *find* this balance. The words that I would associate with the feminine energy are "presence"—being able to live right here, in the here and now; "paradox"—being able to accept what appears to be contradictory as two parts of the same thing; "process"—valuing process as opposed to putting all the value on the product; "receptivity" and "resonance" in the body—having a body that is like a musical instrument, open enough to be able to resonate, literally resonate with what is coming both from the inside and from the outside, so that one is able to surrender to powers greater than oneself. So, for example, a dancer may perfect the instrument as much as he possibly can, the muscles can be as strong as it is possible for them to be, and the whole body will be as highly sensitized as technical work can make it, but still, the greatness of the dancer lies in his

ability to surrender to the power of the Divine as it is coming through in the music.

WIE: And that would be an expression of the feminine?

MW: Yes, exactly—the word "surrender." The principle of the feminine is openness to life, death, rebirth and the unity of all things within that cycle. It's the world of nature, you see. And that's the world that's striving so hard now to be recognized.

WIE: What is the expression of the masculine, then?

MW: The masculine—to contrast it with the feminine images that I've used—tends to leap ahead to the future, to some idealized future. It tends to make things into black or white; it tends to look at life as an either/or situation instead of being able to hold a paradox.

Now here I must point out that I don't think "patriarchy" and "masculinity" are synonymous. I think that the patriarchy has become identified with power, and that as such it kills the masculine just as much as it kills the feminine. So patriarchy exaggerates the either/or, exaggerates the black or white. But the masculine is simply analytic, and it simply *recognizes* the either/or. It's more focused than the feminine in that it can go for a goal; it can discriminate between what is essential to that goal and what is not essential. It can discern, can use the sword, can cut off what is not essential to the action at

hand. And these are positive attributes as long as they are *in relationship* to the feminine. I see these two energies as being in both men and women, and the masculine will always be in relationship to the feminine, so that it will be protecting the feminine, honoring the feminine and recognizing the values of the feminine. The feminine is the "being" side, and the masculine takes that "beingness" out into the world. It can also be the meditative "connector" inside, meaning that it can connect the soul to the Divine. A woman who is writing, for example, needs the masculine to begin her process, to put the words on the paper in a logical, informed way. She needs those masculine discriminatory powers to open the way for the Divine to come in, take over her arm and let her writing happen, and she also needs the masculine courage and strength to allow herself to *be* taken over. In that moment, she's trying to discriminate between the personal and the *transpersonal*. That can be very frightening, and that's where masculine courage and strength are required. It takes tremendous courage to surrender at that point. Now, this is as true in a male artist as it is in a female, so my point is simply that there's a divine marriage going on between the feminine and the masculine in every creative process.

WIE: In a condition of balance, or wholeness, what is the relationship between the feminine and the masculine energies, not only in the individual but in society as a whole?

MW: In the individual, as I said, it is a harmonic balance where the values of the feminine are defended and honored by the masculine. Now that is so far beyond where our society is that it's hard to imagine it at that level, but maybe the example of a relationship or marriage might help. Suppose a woman decides that her marriage is no longer a big enough container for the person she's becoming. She holds the value that she has to grow into her full maturity as a woman, but she is *related* enough so she doesn't want to hurt the soul of her husband. She may use a sword to get out of the marriage, but she learns to use it with love. Because if you get out of a relationship or a job that you've loved with hatred, you damage your own soul as much as you damage the other. It's this *relatedness* between the masculine and feminine that is so important, and that's a very hard balance to find when you're at a transition in life. There has to be the masculine courage to make a cut if it has to be made, but there also has to be the feminine love that respects the soul of the other. Now in our society the same thing applies, but so far, most people are depending on anger and violence to try to make these cuts, and so there's no balance at all between the masculine and the feminine.

WIE: *What would the relationship between the feminine and the masculine be like under ideal circumstances?*

MW: Well, think of a person like Gandhi, for example, where you have that magnificent femininity along with incredible masculine strength. Or take an example from the theater world: Garbo developed a strong masculine side and became all the more feminine, all the more attractive, as her own inner masculine brought out her own inner feminine.

The more a woman develops her masculinity the more feminine she becomes, and the more a man develops his femininity the more masculine he becomes.

So to answer your question, I see this condition of balance in mature people who know what their own values are because they've worked very hard to discriminate between what belongs to their own soul and what does *not* belong to their own soul—mature people who value their dreams and who recognize that the soul has its own pattern and its own life to live, and who give it a chance to live that life. But in order to do that, they would have to be in touch, as I said, with their own inner imagery. And they'd have to be in touch with their own inner feelings, which is a frightening thing to say in a society where most people are cut off at the neck and honestly do not know what is going on at a feeling level in their gut or their kidneys or their heart or any of the other parts of their torso. And that's the tragedy, because then it erupts in rage. There's no discrimination. The masculine doesn't have a chance to come in with any kind of discriminatory action; action becomes acting out. In a society where citizens are in balance, they have those emotions—that rage, for example—but it is contained until it can be put into cultural forms such as a play or a dance. That's what culture is. It's holding the passion at a vital point until it can be put into a civilized form. But in our culture, there's a tendency to not even attempt to hold the container, to give creative form to the tension between these opposites. Instead, let the bombs or the knives or the bullets fly, and act *out* the rage. And where are the values in that?

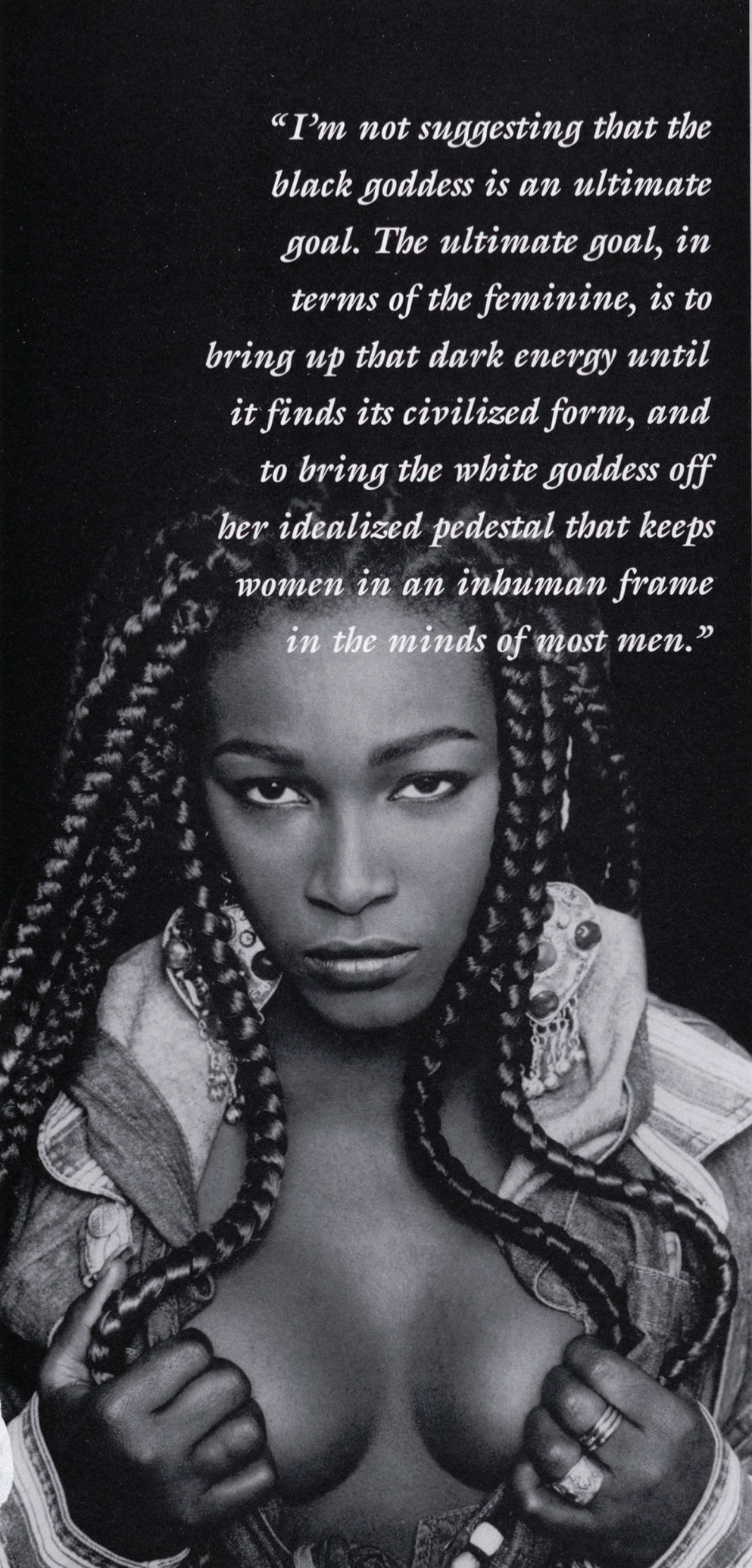
WIE: *Are you saying that the more civilized form of expression you're*

describing could potentially extend beyond personal creativity to animate the structure of society itself?

MW: Of course, and that does happen periodically on the planet. I mean, there have been cultures, when they've reached their peak, where that balance was in place. But mind you, even that keeps changing. And now, I think we're moving toward *one planet*, and the transition is ferocious because we have to go through that terrible breaking up of these old patriarchal patterns in order to find the new ones.

WIE: *In your book Dancing in the Flames, you describe the figure of a black goddess or Madonna that has been appearing with increasing frequency in the dreams of many contemporary men and women, and you describe this as an indication that the feminine is "push[ing] through from the very depths of the collective unconscious like a universal force that speaks individually and culturally." What exactly is happening here, and what does it mean?*

MW: Well, as I see it, we've lost touch with the feminine, with our feelings in our bodies and with the planet itself. Now, collective dreams are presenting new challenges. For example, lust in the body now needs to be united with love in the soul. The Judeo-Christian tradition has split the body from the soul, and so now these dreams of the black goddess are bringing up the image of a very lusty, passionate woman who values life and is in love with life. For example, I'm looking out the window now, and all the buds are coming out and the flowers are all bursting forth in the garden, and there's that luscious, delicious sense of loving—loving and living—that is the recognition of the birthright of



"I'm not suggesting that the black goddess is an ultimate goal. The ultimate goal, in terms of the feminine, is to bring up that dark energy until it finds its civilized form, and to bring the white goddess off her idealized pedestal that keeps women in an inhuman frame in the minds of most men."

life itself, in which lust and that love are expressed *together*. And this is one of the most crucial problems of our culture: Too much feeling is repressed in our own "human earth"—which is to say, in our own bodies. For many people, "playing it cool" is the biggest, most important thing; one should not get heated up over anything. In other words, they cut out the passion: then life becomes boring until they explode in a fit of rage.

Now I'm not suggesting that the black goddess is an ultimate goal. The ultimate goal, in terms of the feminine, is to bring up that dark energy until it finds its civilized form, and to bring the *white* goddess off of her pedestal, her idealized pedestal that keeps women in an inhuman frame in the minds of most men. Idealization confines her to a heavenly state that must eventually flip into a demonized state because, in its incompleteness, it's simply inhuman. So the goal is to bring the white goddess down from her pedestal, to bring the black goddess up from repression, and to bring them together—lust and love together. And again, that's for both men *and* women, because both men and women have this tragic split in their femininity—and in their masculinity.

WIE: How do we know that the goddess is, as you're suggesting, an emergent, impersonal, feminine cosmic force that is revealing itself to an increasing number of human beings with the intention of revolutionizing human life and consciousness?

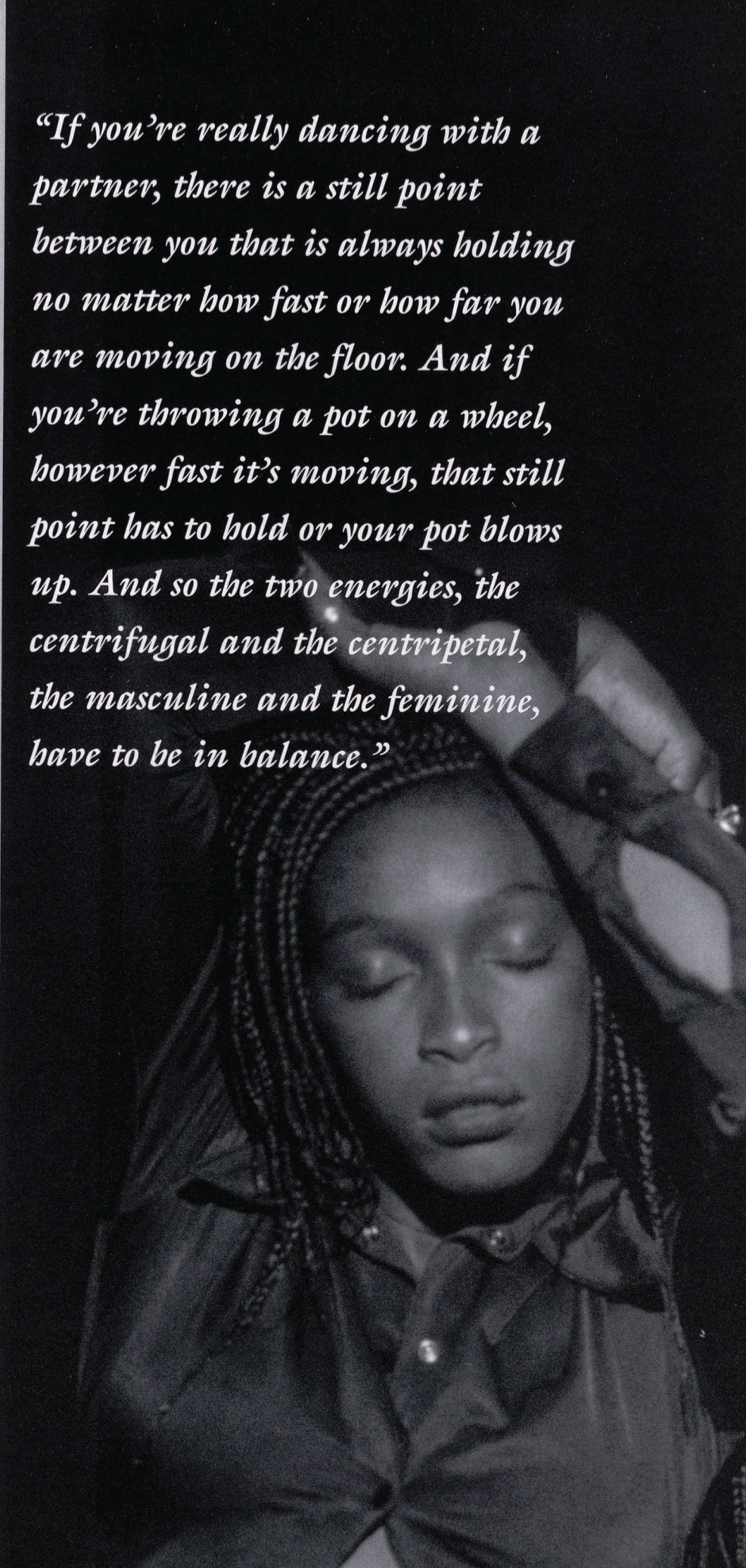
MW: I don't. I don't *know* that. How could we possibly know? All I can say is that I believe that God—masculine spirit and feminine matter—is speaking to us directly through our dreams. Dreams, being metaphorical, being the *connection*

between the spiritual and the physical, are the language of the soul. And I've seen messages from this black Madonna in hundreds of dreams, and they all seem to have a creative intent in the life of the person to whom they come. So I see the black goddess as representing a cumulative insight that will eventually have an impact on the planet. It's not just happening here, you know; it's happening all over. And this goddess is, by the way, beloved in India—Kali, the goddess of life and death, of creation and destruction, is the most revered Hindu goddess. But our country hasn't dealt with Kali at all because we don't like to think that death is part of life—even though we've just finished with winter! I mean, if we gave any thought to it at all, we'd know that death leads to new life. So I don't *know*, but I think we have to learn to accept mystery, to accept that the Divine is mysterious and that if we think we know everything, we are grossly deceived.

WIE: *The radical feminist theologian Mary Daly has written that "God" represents the necrophilia of patriarchy, whereas "Goddess" affirms the life-loving being of women and nature." Do you agree with the assertion that patriarchy is inherently destructive, whereas matriarchy is inherently beneficent?*

MW: Again, I think patriarchy has *become* destructive. I think that when it started out in ancient Greece, there was an attempt to bring the nation to consciousness. That was a very important step in the evolution of humankind. But now it is connected to power—power over nature, power over other people, power over our own bodies—and people identify themselves in terms of power if they're in patriarchal thinking. So patriarchy has lost its sense of relatedness and its sense of

"If you're really dancing with a partner, there is a still point between you that is always holding no matter how fast or how far you are moving on the floor. And if you're throwing a pot on a wheel, however fast it's moving, that still point has to hold or your pot blows up. And so the two energies, the centrifugal and the centripetal, the masculine and the feminine, have to be in balance."



love; it's on a wild rampage now. But I cannot agree that patriarchy, in itself, is the solution. I think that unconscious patriarchy can be just as vicious as patriarchy. If a person is taken over by the negative mother archetype, the voice inside continues to snarl, "Who are you? Who do you think you are? You can't really achieve anything. You are nobody." That voice is a broken record that goes on and on and on inside the brain, and it can come from the feminine just as much as it can come from the masculine. So I simply cannot accept Daly's statement. It seems to me that we've all got to strive toward consciousness. And it's not any longer about being subject to father/patriarchy or mother/matriarchy. It's about finding ourselves and taking responsibility for ourselves as mature, grown-up human beings. That's what I think this big transition is about. We're moving out of being children and adolescents, and we're being forced into the responsibility of making mature decisions—or we're not going to survive as a planet.

WIE: In this issue's interview with Sam Keen, the author of *Fire in the Belly*, we presented him with your view that within each of us, male or female, there are both masculine and feminine energies that need to be brought into balance if we're to become whole. Keen responded: "There are two kinds of people. Those who divide the world up into two columns and those who don't. Why start with two columns? Why start with making your basic concepts about the human psyche goose-step along? I think that's a kind of intellectual tyranny. It's totally unhelpful for me to say, 'Now I've got to get my yin balanced with my yang. Am I too yang or too yin?' If all I can think of is 'I've got to do this or that,' if all I can think of is masculine or feminine, it's a shotgun to my head. That's why I don't like

Jungianism and why I detest the idea of archetypes." What is your response to Keen's criticism?

MW: I've learned to accept the fact that there are energies in all human beings that can wipe out the personality, and personally, I think it's wise to have some idea of what those energies are. That would be my comment on the archetypes. I mean, what is the point of living if there is nothing but a bread-and-butter, walk-on-the-ground flat world? And as for having to divide everything up into yin and yang, I didn't do any dividing up into yin and yang. We're living in a world that is divided into yin and yang. There is masculinity, there is femininity; there is night, there is day. And energy functions like a magnet: opposite poles attract and like poles repel. So I think that if you want real passion in your life, you need to recognize that the so-called opposites are passionately attracted to each other. Without that differentiation, you lack the "fire in the belly"—and life isn't worth living without that fire.

WIE: Yet with regard to opposites, you've also written: "Let us . . . try to avoid the patriarchal either/or and move into the feminine both/and. In that paradox, the mystery of being human lies." Could you explain why, in your view, the feminine is "both/and" and the masculine is "either/or"?

MW: As I explained earlier, it's the patriarchal either/or that splits things in two, that is continually setting up differences, whereas if you were to look at nature as an expression of the feminine principle, you'd find that in one little patch of ground there are a hundred different living organisms working together to bring the planet to life in spring. The whole world of nature has this incredible both/and ecosystem, so

that you don't have to get rid of these things in order to have those things. It's not either/or. You accept the black, the white, the red, the pink; you accept it all as one. And the true masculine, as I understand it, honors that.

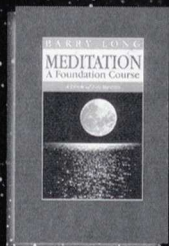
WIE: You've also stated that "The opposites are complementary, not contradictory. They are partners in the dance of life—partners, that is, in the ongoing interplay between the observer and the observed. This dance, this interplay cannot take place in a world of absolutes, for such a world has no room for differing modes of perception—only for a patriarchal God who is himself the observer and the observed." Why is it that absolutes leave no room for differences?

MW: Well, absolutes bring forward their opposites, but the poles are so far apart that they can't even recognize that they're two sides of the same coin. So that if, to use an example we've already spoken about, you idealize women on one side, you're inevitably going to demonize them on the other. When a woman "betrays" you because she cannot live up to the ideal that has been projected on to her, there's a tendency for men to see her as a betrayer, a seducer, an evil witch who would suck out their insides—right? So, with absolutes, the poles are so far apart that it's always an either/or, black-or-white situation. You can't bring them together. Whereas from a nonabsolute perspective, the poles are not so far apart. Because from that feminine perspective there's a human dimension, and the human dimension is imperfect. And within that imperfect world, differences are not only possible but are in fact essential to make life interesting. If, on the other hand, you're in an absolute world where what you want is perfection—for example, the Nazi

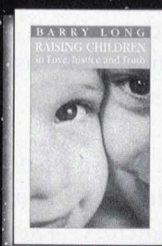
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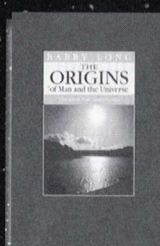
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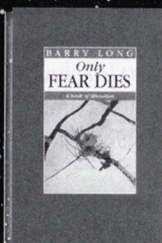
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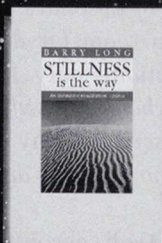
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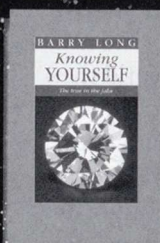
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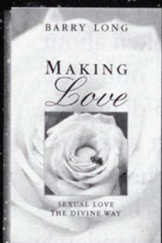
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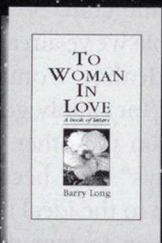
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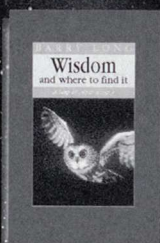
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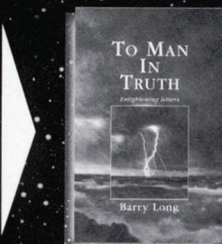
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ANDREW COHEN
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for you—you were saying, "I have a *special* path that's unique for me." And you see, in all of that is the problem. That should be a sign that it's the wrong road. Because what you're getting excited about is not *no* face, but a *feminine* face. It's having a special road for the feminine vehicle that addresses *her* needs. And as long as that's going to excite you as a woman, or as long as I'm going to get excited about a particular path that's going to be unique to me as a man, then we're still in the world of *samsara* [cyclic existence]. We're still in the world of differences, and that's what we're going to get. What we're going to get then is *women's* liberation and *men's* liberation.

ED: Right. And there's no human liberation in that.

AC: Well, there's no liberation without a face. So whatever examples that we may hear about of men and women who appeared to have achieved a state of liberation but who seemed to have had different paths are, I feel, ultimately irrelevant to the point I'm really trying to make. Because when a human being becomes very still—very, very still—so still that they begin to lose awareness and consciousness of their particular gender, and they are simply looking into that abyss where there is no notion of self whatsoever, the world disappears, and so does everything along with it. And that's really the only place to go, and it's the only place to remain. The excitement that you were feeling about a special, unique path for yourself as a woman is all part of your identification with and attachment to being female. And that's ultimately all ego. So we have to be careful about that.

You see, what I'm speaking about is something that is not really from this world. It's something that transcends it. And if you find that place, and then you look at this particular topic from that place, you'll see that any fascination with difference is just more *samsara*, it's just more ignorance.

Difference, Wholeness and Emptiness

ED: I wanted to ask you about the idea in many religious and spiritual traditions in which there are strictly differentiated roles for women and men, and where men and women strive to fulfill the ideals of these separate roles and then come together in some kind of wholeness. The idea is that men and women, individually, don't express the unity of God's vision for humanity, that it's only through men and women coming together that this wholeness can be experienced and manifest. Do you see any strengths in this view?

AC: Well, the strength of that kind of perspective is that it presents a very holistic view of human life in the cosmos that's very pleasing, very satisfying. It's like opposites coming together, and in coming together they both experience wholeness. When you come together with your other half, you immediately experience a sense of wholeness and completeness.

But in my teaching, I don't speak about two halves coming together in this way; there's nothing tantric about my particular view on life. In the teaching of liberation without a face, the necessity of men and women coming together in order to become an expression of wholeness is a secondary priority. This is secondary because I feel that for men and women to be able to come together at all, men and women as individuals have to *first* become liberated from the need to have to come together with anyone, with any other. This experience of wholeness or completeness is something that, in my teaching, each man and each woman has to experience independently of any sense of relationship or relatedness to any other—especially to anyone of the opposite sex. I think that completeness first has to be found in our own Self. We have to consciously experience with utter doubtlessness that everything is already within us, that the whole universe is already within our own Self. And when we begin to experience some confidence in that, then we're not going to be afraid of the other and also we're not going to be burdened by the conviction that we need their presence or their embrace in order to experience any sense of fullness. And that's what creates a forum for a kind of coming together and being together that is free from fundamental need and that's quite revolutionary.

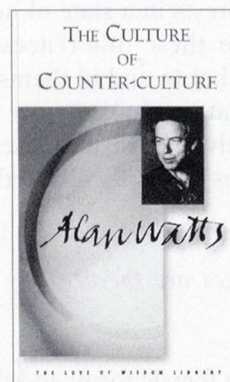
ED: *You have beings who are whole coming together, not individuals who are desperately needing from each other.*

AC: Yes, exactly. That's the whole point. That means as a liberated man, as a liberated woman, I am already inherently full and complete as I am. Man doesn't need woman and woman doesn't need man in order to experience his or her inherent fullness. And it's only when a man and a woman have experienced their own fullness of being, independent of any other, that it would be at all possible for them to come together in any kind of equality. Without that as a prerequisite, real equality, which means real partnership, is not even conceivable.

ED: *What do you think about the view that there are important distinctions between male and female energies?*

AC: Well, distinctions or differences between the male

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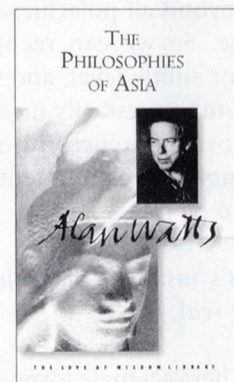
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energy and vibration and the female energy and vibration obviously exist. The male energy and the female energy are an inherent part of being either male or female. And obviously there's a certain polarity, and those polarities attract each other. This is part of the way the universe works. But the liberated perspective sees beyond all polarities and rests in a state of nondifference. So we can recognize these differences on a gross or subtle level, and see that in and of themselves, they don't necessarily mean that much. We're not denying those differences in ourselves or in the other, but that's not where our attention is primarily directed if we want to be free.

ED: *It's just that the differences are there? They exist, they're real.*

AC: There's a male form and a female form; and there's a red rose and a pink rose, etc.

ED: *What do you think about the view that both male and female energies exist within each man and woman, and that in order to become whole, men and women have to balance these male and female energies or qualities within themselves?*

AC: Well, first of all, I'm not convinced that what are traditionally considered to be "male" energies or qualities or "female" energies or qualities really have as much to do with gender as many people think they do. In my experience, men are not necessarily less sensitive or compassionate than women are, and women are not necessarily any less aggressive or competitive than men are—as a matter of fact, often they are more so! (Laughs) I mean, one of the most extraordinary things about being a spiritual teacher is the rare privilege of being able to look deeply into the very souls of many human beings at the same time. It gives one a unique

perspective on the human condition, some of which is breathtakingly glorious, and some of which is frighteningly destructive. These different energies or qualities that seem so distinct, while being very real, are more superficial than I think many people are aware of. The only thing is, not that many of us get beyond the superficial layers of our own being, and that's why these differences appear to be so significant.

As for the need to "balance" male and female energies within ourselves in order to achieve wholeness . . . from the point of view of liberation without a face, the very notion of trying to "balance" any particular sense of self with another *with the mind* is the very self-consciousness that is the antithesis of the kind of brave leap into bold innocence that I have been speaking about. You see, we want to *find out* what it would be like to be a whole and fully integrated man or woman without being attached to the idea of being a man or woman—whatever that means. We don't want to *create* this "balance" with our minds. We want to find out what it would look like without being attached to any preconceptions.

ED: *It seems like trying to balance these different qualities can be an incredible trap for the mind.*

AC: That's right. And again, I think that making too much of a big deal out of these differences—as interesting and fascinating and compelling and relatively true as they may be—if one wants to really find out what it means to be a liberated human being, will tend to be just a big distraction.

You see, there are certain facts about maleness and femaleness that men and women are both very attached to. And to some degree these real differences are going to continue to exist—because men are still going to be men and women are still going to be women, no matter how liberated they become. But the individual male or female is no longer going to be identified with or attached to these differences. We are aware of these differences, but the ultimately empty nature of their significance is something that's seen very directly. And that's the whole point: When their ultimately empty nature is directly seen, the apparent significance falls away. At the same time, it's not denied. I personally believe very strongly that unless one really sees through this with a lot of depth, it's going to be almost impossible to get off the wheel of becoming. And I think that very few people actually do, because this is one of the hardest things to see through. A lot of people in spiritual life use the awareness of difference, and the spiritual glorification of difference, as a justification to indulge in that

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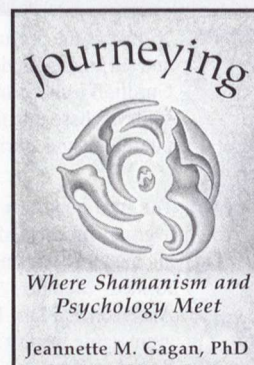


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As I've been saying, in the liberated vision, the liberated view, one sees beyond any and all notions of difference to an inherent fullness that is beyond all pairs of opposites, including male and female. That's the liberated mind, that's the liberated state, that's the liberated perspective. And in liberation without a face, that's the state of consciousness and the perspective that one strives to realize and experience directly for oneself—and, once realized, that one endeavors to live wholeheartedly in a world that recognizes only differences. ■

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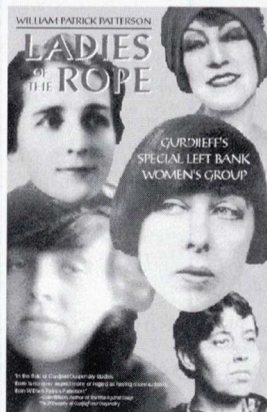
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MARY DALY
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which women obtain the Going Forth, the Holy Life does not last long."

MD: It's just the same old song in a different language: "Women pollute."

WIE: My question is: How do you think that Gautama the Buddha could have come to such an extreme position about half of the human race? What would you say to a Western Buddhist woman wrestling with the apparent incongruity of such an enlightened being holding such a woman-negative view?

MD: As I wrote in *Gyn/Ecology*: all patriarchal religions are patriarchal—right? They take different forms. What would I think? There's nothing to think about. It has taken another form—seductive, probably, because christianity is so overtly warlike and abusive. And furthermore, I don't know what "enlightened" means. It's not a word that's in my vocabulary. This is like a christian woman being upset over something that Paul said, instead of seeing that *of course* he's an asshole. He's one more very macho asshole described as a saint and as enlightened, and once you get over that, you get over it. You see it for what it is and you don't worry about why he would say such a thing. Of course he would say such a thing. That's what he is. It's really extremely simple. Stop wrestling with it; it's not interesting. Get out of it. That would be my approach to it. Misogynists! Hateful! All of them! I studied them. And finally I just didn't try to reason with it anymore. Boston College was most enlightening to me. The experience of being fired for writing *The Church and the Second Sex* introduced me to the idea that it's not going to change. That's the way it is—leave it.

WIE: In the past couple of decades, there has been increasing interest in prepatriarchal agrarian societies that worshipped female deities. While there is evidence that these societies were more egalitarian in their views of and roles for men and women, some people criticize the current fascination with these goddess cultures as a rewriting of history, a creation of a fictional paradise lost. Once again, Sam Keen writes: "We need to question the historical romanticism of feminist ideology. . . . When God was a woman—Isis, Ishtar, Artemis, Diana, Kali, Demeter—she was a terrible mother, as bloody as God the Father. . . . If nature is the goddess we must claim her dark and demonic sides, and not merely her nurturing qualities. . . . Slavery, forced labor, injustice are not modern or 'patriarchal' inventions." What is

your response to Keen's assertion that the lauding of these matrifocal societies is "historical romanticism"?

MD: First of all, if it's only matrilineal and matrifocal, it's not really prepatriarchal. Prepatriarchal would be really ancient—gynocentric. And so what he's speaking about, as I understand it, is already patriarchy on the way. I'm talking about a *really* woman-centered society of which we have no direct memory. But, as Monique Wittig said, "If you can't remember, invent." Part of it has to be created because most of the records have been destroyed. All of what he's talking about is an intermediary stage.

WIE: Because you also speak about inventing an image of an idyllic prehistoric culture, it sounds like you're not concerned with any risk of romanticization.

MD: What is the risk? I mean, we live in hell. This is called hell. H-E-L-L—patriarchy. Do you watch TV and see the stuff from Kosovo? The ethnic cleansing, genocide—watching them get on trains and go off to nowhere and starve and die and have the shit bombed out of them by NATO. Is it romantic to try to remember something better than that? There's a reality gap here. How can I make it clearer? We're living in hell and he's talking about a danger of romanticism in imagining something that is a hope for something better in the future? I think that the question comes from not looking deeply enough at the horror of phallocracy, penocracy, jockocracy, cockocracy, call it whatever—*patriarchy*. If you experience the horror of what is happening to women all the time, it is almost unbearable, right? All the time! And a lot of it is mental horror, spiritual horror, together with the physical horror and the atrocities that I've analyzed in detail. Then, when you are acutely aware of that and desire to exorcise it, the exorcism welcomes, *requires*, some kind of dream. The accusation of romanticism belongs to a detached intellect, not seeing the desperate need for escape from where we are. And when I speak, it's out of desperation; I know it! I know what women's lives are like! Intuitively, instinctively, experientially, I know. I don't have to have been there in prison and had my genitals cut up and experienced the horrors that happen to women now—I am existentially aware of it. So I don't have patience with that.

WIE: Some people say that exclusively blaming men for the patriarchy is misguided. Transpersonal theorist Ken Wilber, in an article entitled "Don't Blame Men for the Patriarchy," writes: "'Patriarchy' is a word that is always

pronounced with scorn and disgust. The obvious and naïve solution is to simply say that men imposed the patriarchy on women. But alas, it is nowhere near that simple. . . . If we take the standard response—that the patriarchy was imposed on women by a bunch of sadistic and power-hungry men—then we are locked into two inescapable definitions of men and women. Namely, men are pigs and women are sheep. . . . But men are simply not that piggy, and women not that sheepy. One of the things I try to do . . . is to trace out the hidden power that women have had and that influenced and cocreated the various cultural structures throughout history, including patriarchy. Among other things, this releases men from being defined as total schmucks and releases women from being defined as duped, brainwashed and herded."

MD: Usually for someone at that state of consciousness—which is unconsciousness—if anything would work, it would be to make the analogy with racism. Because that's back where he is in that. It would be like saying, "Well, that this is a racist society is the fault of blacks, too, and you can't just blame white people for a racist society. The others must have collaborated in it." And the fallacies become immediately obvious, don't they, when you speak of that case. So it works for me to just make that comparison and see if they can flounder their way through it. You could say certainly that some blacks would appear to have collaborated in that, but it's shallow sounding. It doesn't work, although there have been "Uncle Toms" and all that. So that's the way I would approach it.

WIE: Along similar lines, Sam Keen told us: "Men and women have been in this thing together all along. . . . Any time you put the blame on one of the genders, you have rendered the other inferior. . . . In America, women are just as injurious to the world as men are." He has also written: "Are we to excuse womankind from complicity and active participation in the spoiling of the environment? Go to any mall and watch the frenzied buying of the latest fashions, any landfill and see the mountain of disposable diapers and trash, any thrift store and count the discarded items of serviceable but no longer 'stylish' clothes and appliances, and it will be obvious that womankind is as compulsive a consumer as mankind. . . . There is an existential and moral fallacy involved in seeking to transfer all the blame . . . onto the shoulders of men. The issue is not general. We all have dirty hands."

MD: I can't stand it. He's too smart for me. It's just not worth answering. Each sentence is full of falsities. Again,

it's like saying the blacks get the benefit of supermarkets over here and things that they don't have in the jungles and villages of Africa—so what?

It's true that to be a feminist now absolutely requires being an ecofeminist or what I would call a "Radical Elemental Feminist." There's no way that you can accept the pollution and the destruction of animals and the harm to nature out there because what happens to nature is happening to us; we're sisters. But I just want to say that in with this "frenzied buying" statement there is nothing about the context. Why are women so frenzied to buy the latest fashions? Because their lives are so empty and they've had no opportunities. Because their self-image has been so damaged. I can go on and on about the damage that has been done to women under patriarchy. And then women are blamed for going out and buying all the time, but there's nothing left for them when their creativity has been smashed. This is very woman-hating, the way it's written.

It's not that I don't get mad at women for their complicity, but it's not the same level of being mad. I can get so angry at tokenized women—women who sell their sisters out. It happens all the time on a more

sophisticated level, but I always have to remind myself to go to the source. It's more annoying to see women doing it because I believe they have the inherent capacity to do better than that. But I also see how they've been smashed down, and so I always go to the source. Why are women the way they are, the ones who are woman-hating, who have all of those hideous qualities that women get in patriarchy? I hate that, too—to have to see women in that condition is hateful, it's disgusting.

But you see, I have great respect for the inner power in women that can grasp far more than is attributed to them. I don't just think that *I'm* smarter than Sam Keen. I think many, many women are smarter than Sam Keen. One of the typical ironies of patriarchal society is that he gets to have a voice, while you can walk around and talk to many highly intelligent women on the street whose voices are not heard and who have insights he lacks. Yet he gets to have a "name"; that's the joke of it. And for me to honor that is ridiculous. No woman who is really on track would be wanting to read these men—they're boring. I think that emphasizing male authors in this context serves no purpose. Why not take some radical feminist texts and talk about them? Maybe you're writing for the

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wrong audience. Look, are we trying to raise the energy level, to convey joy in life, to convey biophilia and encourage the biophilia that's in women? Or are we trying to just go on dialoguing with these men? What I try to do is speak to women on the highest level of vibration that there is, and those who can hear, who can sense, on that level *do* get it. And then they can spread it to others; there's a ripple effect. Women, my tribe, radical lesbian feminists—the women who *get* it—are overjoyed to have their lives affirmed. And I want that joy to exist because that inspires courage and movement forward and creativity. That's my job.

WIE: In your latest book, *Quintessence*, you describe a utopian society of the future, on a continent populated entirely by women, where procreation occurs through parthenogenesis, without the participation of men. What is your vision for a postpatriarchal world? Is it similar to what you described in the book?

MD: You can read *Quintessence* and you can get a sense of it. It's a description of an alternative future. It's there partly as a device and partly because it's a

dream. There could be many alternative futures, but some of the elements are constant: that it would be women only; that it would be women generating the energy throughout the universe; that much of the contamination, both physical and mental, has been dealt with.

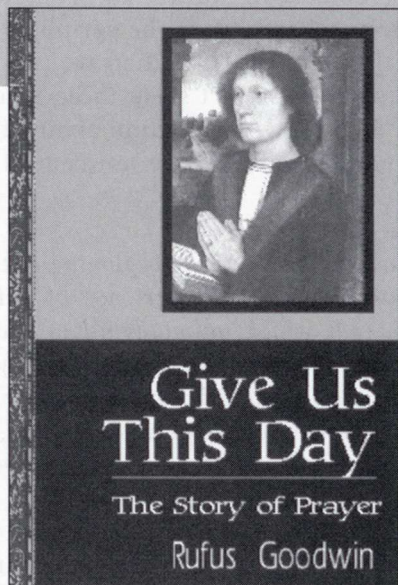
Also, my favorite word is not "postpatriarchal." It's "metapatriarchal." The prefix "meta" has four meanings. It's transformative of, in the background of, beyond, or transcending. It isn't just *post* or *after* in linear time. So we can, right now, even though patriarchy is all around, try to live metapatriarchally. You can try to be metapatriarchal by not succumbing to all the rules and roles and games of patriarchy.

WIE: In *Quintessence*, your idyllic continent is inhabited by women only, but the rest of the world is inhabited by women and men.

MD: I didn't say how many men were there.

WIE: Which brings us to another question I wanted to ask you. Sally Miller Gearhart, in her article "The Future—If There Is One—Is Female" writes: "At least

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three further requirements supplement the strategies of environmentalists if we were to create and preserve a less violent world. 1) Every culture must begin to affirm the female future. 2) Species responsibility must be returned to women in every culture. 3) The proportion of men must be reduced to and maintained at approximately ten percent of the human race." What do you think about this statement?

MD: I think it's not a bad idea at all. If life is to survive on this planet, there must be a decontamination of the Earth. I think this will be accompanied by an evolutionary process that will result in a drastic reduction of the population of males. People are afraid to say that kind of stuff anymore.

WIE: Yes. I find myself now thinking that's a bit shocking.

MD: Well, it's shocking that it would be shocking.

WIE: So it doesn't sound like your vision of a separate nation for women is something you see as an interim stage that would eventually lead to men and women living together in true equality.

MD: No. That's a very old question. I answered that to audiences twenty-five, thirty years ago. I just don't think that way. See, right now, I would be totally joyous to have a great community of women—whether men are somewhere out on the periphery or not. I don't have this goal of: "Oh, then we can all get together again!" That doesn't seem to be a very promising future. So why would I think about it? I think it's pretty evident that men are not central to my thought.

WIE: I have one last question. At the beginning of this interview, you spoke about the experience of being deeply at one with that which animates all of life. I wanted to ask you what you think about the possibility of becoming identified with that as who one ultimately is, having that as one's ultimate resting place, or ground, so to speak, and where one's gender would no longer be a primary reference point.

MD: I don't know if that has anything to do with my experience. I have my own experience of oneness. Sometimes I have ecstasy and a kind of active repose in connection with nature. It's tremendous. But I never forget that I'm a woman, because this is me. I know who I am. I have Female integrity. ■

making your basic concepts about the human psyche goose-step along? I think that's intellectual tyranny. It's not helpful! It is helpful for me to say, "Now, Sam, what are you experiencing?" It's helpful for me to sit quietly in meditation and try to get in a witness space and to identify my feelings and images. It's totally unhelpful for me to say, "Now I've gotta get my yin balanced with my yang! Am I too yang or too yin?" And again, to label these virtues and/or vices as masculine and feminine is part of the problem. Don't start with an artificial separation. Think in different categories. If all I can think of is, "I've got to do this or that," if all I think of is masculine or feminine, it's a shotgun to my head. That's why I don't like Jungianism—just like I detest the idea of archetypes.

WIE: *Why is that? There are more than two of those.*

SK: All right. Let's take the most recent thing. Tell me what the archetypes of man are?

WIE: *The king, the warrior, the lover and the magician.*

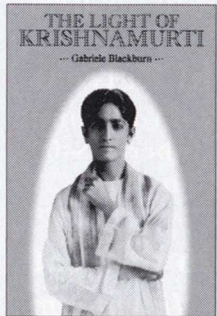
SK: Now, the idea is that these archetypes are different ways of structuring our experience that we all somehow have to go through. To show you how ridiculous that is, let's go back to the earliest notion in the West of what constituted the dignity of a human being, which was what? The citizen. In the Greek world, the word for "idiot," as a matter of fact, meant somebody who was not a citizen. Now tell me, why isn't the citizen in the archetypes? Because the

Jungians are apolitical, because they're interested in inner psychodrama. They're not interested in the transformation of the world. You see, if those are the four archetypes, then we don't have to worry about what's happening in Kosovo or anywhere else. That's just stuff that's going on over there. We don't have to worry about the educational system deteriorating because that's something citizens worry about. Give me a break! King as an archetype?! That's why we came to this country—to get rid of those archetypes! That's what America was all about—saying, "Screw kingship! Screw dominion!" And the warrior? That's the hair of the dog that bit us. That's what's been driving us all along. If the Jungians would say, "There are endless numbers of metaphors that help us to understand ourselves, and here are four," I'd say, "That's a good start. Now give me five or six. How about giving me, oh, *garbageman*." Now, that's a good archetype, right, because isn't half of the problem cleaning up the trash in our psyche? Well, sure it is! Separating the wheat from the chaff, you know. Or how about *fool* or *hobo* or *wanderer* or *friend*? How about friend! Now, that's an interesting archetype. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* has a great deal to do with friendship, *philia*. I'm not much of a fan of Jungian thought because it ignores two things: politics and the body. They're largely a disembodied movement.

WIE: *It seems as though much of the men's movement has centered around Jungian thought.*

SK: That's right. It has. And I don't think it's helped them.

WIE: *In this issue, in addition to exploring the relationship between*

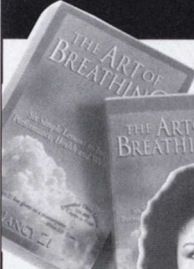


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gender and spirituality, we're also looking into the relationship between sexual orientation and the path to liberation. In our time, there are many gays and lesbians who view their experience of sexual orientation as the very basis of their spiritual path, a path employing unique forms of practice and worship. Some advocates of a distinctly gay spirituality have even suggested that because the male and female polarities are theoretically more fully integrated and balanced in homosexuals, theirs is an inherently superior form of spiritual practice. Andrew Harvey, one prominent spokesperson of this view, states that "in earlier times . . . homosexuals . . . were seen as sacred—people who, by virtue of a mysterious fusion of feminine and masculine traits, participated with particular intensity in the life of the Source." What do you think of the notion that sexual orientation constitutes the basis for a distinct and separate spiritual path?

SK: I don't like it at all. I think that sexual orientation is an individual thing that shouldn't be politicized. And I don't think, in that sense, it should be spiritualized, either. In the life of the spirit, the question isn't whether somebody is gay or straight. From a spiritual perspective, I think that's meaningless. In the life of the spirit, the question is whether you're loving or unloving, and to what degree you can enter a relationship with the fullness of who you are. And this theoretical construct that the polarities are more balanced in gays and lesbians? Well, who says that and by what possible jump can we get there? Maybe they just don't have the polarities. To make gay or lesbian a category is itself a sin. It's a mistake and a sin. I have friends who are largely homoerotic who would never call themselves gay. And people who are homoerotic are as different from each other as

people who are heterosexual are. I'm all for anybody being able to do what it is that they want with any consenting adult of either gender, but let's not raise it to the level of something superior. Let's not make homosexuality or heterosexuality spiritually superior. It's not the issue.

WIE: In our research for this issue, we also came across the idea among Jungian psychologists, some feminists and a number of contemporary spiritual thinkers that our ultimate human potential is the realization of a kind of androgyny in which all human qualities find equal expression in everyone, regardless of gender. Describing the fruition of the spiritual path as the birth of what he calls the "sacred androgyne," Harvey, again, writes: "The main mystical traditions agree that this birth of a new being can only take place through a long, arduous, and

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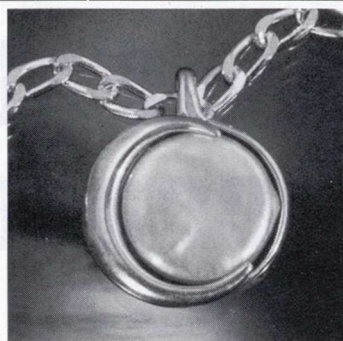
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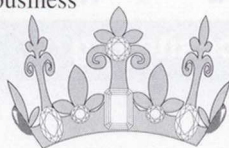
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increasingly conscious intermarriage of the masculine and the feminine within each one of us, male or female," and that "only such an intermarriage can give birth to the sacred, androgynous, free child of the Source that is potential in each of us." Do you agree with Harvey's view? Is the fullest expression of our spiritual potential the realization of androgyny?

SK: HO HUM. I mean, why try to press every old idea into service? Why not try to think about things differently? The idea of androgyny is just the romantic myth taken into the interior. "Oh, boy. Finally, now, the man in me and the woman in me are going to get together and have this marvelous romance and I'm going to be whole." It's like thinking with wooden blocks. I mean, that idea comes up all through the alchemical tradition, and it was okay to talk about it

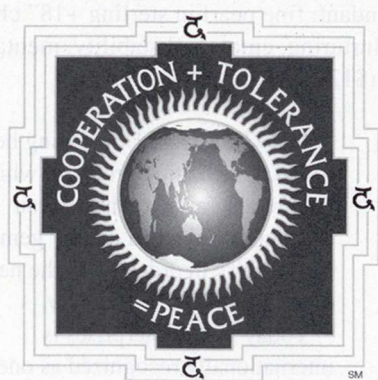
then. But isn't it time to think creatively, to get some new categories, new ways of thinking, instead of just trying to knit new wool on these old needles?

WIE: You brought up Mary Daly earlier. She and other radical feminists hold that most if not all of the ills in our individual psyches and in society at large are the result of the overwhelming influence of men—male values, attitudes and dispositions—on everything from the structure of government and commerce to the structure of language. Citing the widespread, catastrophic effects of patriarchy on not only the status of women but on the quality of life on this planet, they call for a return to a gynocentric spiritual culture with values and institutions akin to those of the peaceful, agrarian world that existed thousands of years ago. Is Mary Daly right? Would placing all

power in the hands of women be enough to bring about a peaceful, harmonious culture rooted in deeply spiritual values?

SK: Yeah, yeah. Of course. I mean, you know what they did to build the pyramids—they went out and they got union labor and they asked for volunteers because it was all a "cooperative culture." And in those matriarchal cultures, they also asked people if they wanted to be human sacrifices because they were nice and kindly in those days. You know . . . it's the chalice and the blade.

What all of that really is is a disguised rewriting of history in order to do male bashing. Men and women have been in this thing together all along. If you want to bash patriarchy, you can bring it right up to the modern era and speak about how these brutish men, these terrible men, went over



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to Vietnam and killed all those people. I mean, they were nineteen-year-old kids who had no more choice about what they did than Mary Daly did. Anytime that you put the blame on one of the genders, you have rendered the other inferior. If it's true that men just dominated women all that time and women had no power, then they probably needed to be dominated.

WIE: *Do you think putting the blame on men is a complete misappropriation?*

SK: Yes. But I also want to say that I do believe that Mary Daly is one of our great prophetesses. I have learned enormous amounts from her. I want to affirm so much of her analysis, but I don't want to affirm her anger. It takes a good deal of courage for a man to really read Mary Daly and to open himself up to her arguments. Many of them are brilliant and are necessary medicine to help most men to understand the injuries that women have experienced in this culture. But there are certain feminists whose anger gets in the way of their clarity.

WIE: *I think they would argue that they've got a lot to be angry about.*

SK: And they do. They do.

WIE: *In your view, what does it mean to go beyond gender?*

SK: Again, it means *get over it!* This question of gender is something, by and large, to be gotten over, to get on the other side of. I don't ask myself the question: Am I a man? Am I manly enough? I ask myself the question: What am I about? In other words, I think we need to stop making gender a primary way of asking the question: *Who am I?*

WIE: *What do you think becomes possible within the individual and between human beings when we do "get over it," as you put it?*

SK: Well, I would ask—and this question is at the very center of Buddhism and Christianity—What does it mean to be wise and compassionate? That's a hard question for me to answer. In my daily life, how do I be wise and compassionate in relationship with my wife when I'm in conflict, or with my children or my friends? What do I do about Kosovo and my government to be a decent human being? This is an age in which, somebody said, you have to become heroic just to be decent! And that isn't a gender question. What's injuring the world here isn't gender. In America, women are just as injurious to the world as men are. They're out there in the malls. The mall is where we vote about values. Why did we do what we did in Iraq? So we could drive to the mall. And again, I think what I object to about your magazine is the lack of the real political kinds of questions. All afternoon you haven't asked me anything about the politics of gender.

WIE: *Well, our magazine is about enlightenment.*

SK: Well, that's what's wrong with it, then. Frankly, that's what's wrong with it. It's kind of narcissistic. There's a lot of spiritual narcissism, I think. Now, that's not to say it's completely that way. You do come out of it and you do have the courage to speak with people who aren't particularly in sympathy with your major point of view. But let me ask: What would it be like if, on your cover, underneath the words "What Is Enlightenment?" you put: "One

definition of an enlightened person might be that the first question they would ask is: What is just? How do we establish justice?" Because that takes us into the political realm. That takes us beyond the obsession. And the obsession with enlightenment can be just like the obsession with gender. People who are obsessed with enlightenment are never going to get there.

WIE: *This is a common argument against the pursuit of enlightenment. But I don't see the question "How do we establish justice?" as being in any way removed from the question "What is enlightenment?" If we look at the human condition, if we look at what's behind the atrocities in Kosovo or Nazi Germany, it seems to me that we have to confront the question: How is humanity's problem going to be solved without individuals making a change, without individuals coming to a reckoning with themselves, with their own motivations? Our magazine is actually founded in the idea that there is a strong moral and ethical component to liberating ourselves from delusion.*

In this issue, for instance, we're questioning the core of gender identity because, as you've pointed out, it seems that the strong identification most of us have with gender is one of the fundamental structures underlying the conflict we see in the world. And the idea is that if enough light can be brought to something so fundamental to our makeup, then hopefully we can begin to see, and even respond to, another possibility.

SK: Well, good. Transforming the self and transforming our society are warp and woof of the same tapestry. It takes both to weave anything hopeful, beautiful and new. ■

the conventional world around us, including actions like Bornstein's. There are many conventional lessons that begin the process of breaking down the solid foundations of the false world we live in, and this might be a good example of one.

WIE: *With respect to breaking down our fixed identification with our sexual and gender identity, what was your experience when you went from being a monk to being a layperson?*

JC: I don't know if it's possible to generalize but, in retrospect, I'm quite convinced that in my own case, the most effective way of sustaining a spiritual program is through celibacy. Now don't get me wrong, I'm far from being celibate at this stage in my life. But I still hold celibacy as an ideal, and I have tremendous respect for those who can keep to the discipline of celibacy. I have heard some former monks justify their return to lay life by claiming that they needed to gain some new experiences, or by claiming that a sexually active life was more conducive to spiritual growth. This is certainly not my experience. With me it had to do with a number of conditions, for example, finding that living in the West was particularly unconducive to living a celibate lifestyle.

WIE: *How did your experience as a monk help you in the pursuit of the transcendence of gender fixation or identification as a man? Did it help you to leave those ideas behind? Did it help break apart some of your fixed reference points because you set aside the sexual part of your life?*

JC: I don't think that monasticism or celibacy, in and of itself, does that. What does do that is whatever insights you come to by engaging in spiritual practices while a monk

or a nun. I don't believe that the monastic life alone is going to give you the tools for deconstructing gender differences. That comes from elsewhere.


WIE: *Are you referring to the realization of emptiness that you brought up earlier?*

JC: Right.

WIE: *It's interesting. So if we want to be truly free, if we really want to go beyond—not only as a spiritual experience, but to actually manifest that realization in time and space, in our lives, through our humanity—what do you think it would mean to give up this fundamental investment in being a man or a woman?*

JC: You know, this might go back again to what I think is almost a

Western obsession with sexual identity and gender differences or gender identity. It's said in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist texts that an understanding of nonduality, of emptiness, brings about greater compassion. I think that the most tangible result of seeing through gender, of seeing through the distinctions of male and female, gay and straight, manifests itself in a kind of equanimity of compassionate action in regard to all creatures. All distinctions, not only gender distinctions—beautiful, ugly, fat, thin, intelligent, ignorant—form the basis for restricting our compassionate action. I think a person who has truly seen the empty nature of these distinctions, including male/female, gay/straight, would exhibit the kind of equanimity in their life that does not distinguish between human beings. ■



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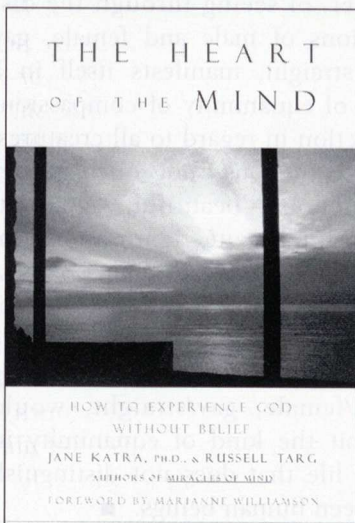
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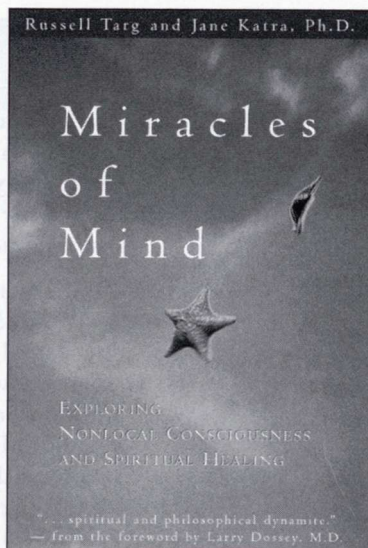


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JETSUNMA AHKÖN LHAMO
continued from page 75

that's given as an antidote to whatever suffering is there. And I feel that was absolutely pure, absolutely correct at that time. It was meant to grow and engage the way that it did. And I think the view has grown and developed and we've come to understand it better. I don't think he was mistaken and I don't think he held women as inferior. I think his enlightenment was perfect.

AC: The Tibetan Buddhist system has also been accused of being extremely patriarchal, with a structure that traditionally keeps women in second-class positions. One of the most outspoken critics of that system even went so far as to say that "the patriarchal structure of Tibetan Buddhism literally depends upon the subjugation of women." Even though historically there indeed have been renowned female tantric masters, for the last five hundred years, strong female tantric voices have largely disappeared from public view. As a female representative of that tradition, what has your observation been? Is Tibetan Buddhism a man's world?

JAL: I have to say that I really don't agree with the view that women are subjugated under the Tibetan system. Guru Rinpoche [Padmasambhava, the founder of Tibetan Buddhism] himself has said that, in fact, in the tantric tradition, it is women who have the highest potential for liberation. He has said that culturally, throughout time, women have been trained in such a way that spiritual surrender is easier for them. Letting go of certain fixed, rigid things to stand on is easier for them.

AC: Are you saying that the Tibetan monastic system isn't held together by a patriarchal structure at all?

JAL: The Tibetan monastic system is. But the left hand of that monastic system is another system of *dakinis* who are held very, very highly. In fact, in *thangkas* [Tibetan Buddhist paintings], when you see a representation of someone practicing tantra, while you'll never see a male practicing alone, you will see *dakinis* practicing alone. And the reason why is that the woman is considered to be a display or an emanation of primordial wisdom. She's held in very high regard. I think the people who are saying that the monastic system is so oriented toward males understand only one aspect of it.

You have to understand, each of us is viewing the situation with our own preconceived ideas and prejudices. I think if I were inclined to feel demoted as a woman or *less than* as a woman, perhaps I would see

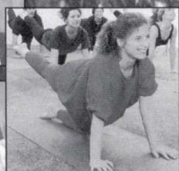
that male superiority, but I don't. I do see that traditionally the form has the man on the throne in the monastery, but I don't in my practice or in any other way see a male superiority. For instance, when most males are enthroned, they are enthroned with the crown of their lineage. When I was enthroned, I was enthroned with the crown of the five primordial wisdoms. From one perspective, you could say, well, maybe the five primordial wisdoms are much higher than the male lineage crown. But I just don't think there is any value in looking at it in that way. The male is the head of the lineage—that's how the Buddha appears in the world. The woman with the five primordial wisdoms as her crown—she's the *dakini*. These are all the appearance of the Buddha. How can they be unequal? To me, the Buddha appears. Period. That's the event. We're sitting here with our cultural bias and our gender bias and we're looking at that and we are interpreting it. "He gets to sit on the throne. She gets to sit in the cave." And we put our meanings on that. But I'm telling you, the only event that occurs is that the Buddha has appeared, and that's how I see it. I would be unfaithful to my practice if I tried to distinguish and make one higher than the other.

AC: In a previous issue of WIE, we spoke with Buddhist scholar Miranda Shaw about gender roles in the practice of Tibetan tantra, which is considered by many to be a powerful and even essential vehicle for reaching enlightenment. She made the intriguing statement that in tantric practice, conventional male/female gender relationships are reversed and, specifically as part of the practice of sexual yoga, the primary role of men is to serve women, acting as their devotees, servants and even slaves. In tantric practice, Shaw writes, men are to "take refuge in the vulva of an esteemed woman" and are to literally worship her as a goddess. By worshipping her in this way, she told us, "He's also realizing his innate divinity and his Buddhahood; only he believes that the proper expression of his Buddhahood is to honor her divinity. In this world-view, it is the role of the female to channel enlightened energies, the energy of transformation, into the world in a powerful way. It is the role of the male to be the recipient of those energies and to honor them and their source." According to Shaw, that is the tantric view. In your own experience as a *dakini* and an incarnation of Mandarawa, perhaps the most renowned Tibetan yogic consort of all time, are women the source of enlightened energy for themselves and for men?

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JAL: Wow! Well, I can't say that I agree with her interpretation. I don't feel that men actually worship and become enslaved to women. I think that what really happens is that there is a mutual recognition of the view. The female and the male become inseparable; they become unable to practice fully without one another. They are a unit in union. They are primordial emptiness and its display, inseparable. And that being the case, there is a mutual viewing of one another as that. The *dakini* recognizes the *daka* [male counterpart of a *dakini*] as the source of her energy; the *daka* recognizes the *dakini* as the source of his energy. It is a symbolic picture of primordial emptiness and the display or emanation of that emptiness, like the sun and the sun's rays: completely inseparable. Any words or any thoughts that separate them or put one higher than the other are simply conceptual proliferation and really have no place in that kind of practice.

AC: In general, what do you see as the fundamental differences between men and women on the spiritual path? Do men have any particular advantages over women on the path to enlightenment? Do women have any particular advantages over men?

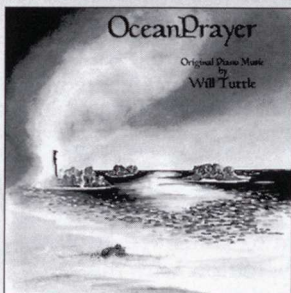
JAL: Yes and yes. I really feel that I understand and vibe with what Guru Rinpoche said about women having, through our cultural experience, been trained in surrender a little bit better. This is simply my own observation. But in looking at the great weight of the male population as practitioners and as people in our world today, I do think that men are having a little problem with their footing. I think that certain things have been expected of them and that they haven't known how to get beyond that. There are certain kinds of strengths that men are supposed to have and certain ideas that men have as to how to have those strengths. And sometimes they can be counter-productive to getting past our exterior ego identity.

AC: Do you mean that certain culturally imposed ideas about manhood become obstacles to liberation?

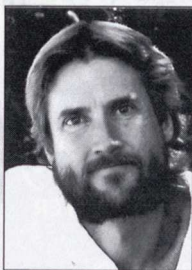
JAL: Yes, I think they do. Men are expected to be strong, they're expected to be controlled, they're expected to be producers. And judging from a lot of the students I have taught, I think that psychologically a lot of men have to go through a period where they have to accept this intuitive, spiritual, feminine part of their natures in order to go even one step farther. But that's

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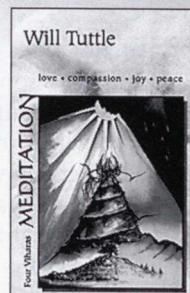
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not really something women have to do. We're taught that's okay for us, so we don't so much feel that we have to get to that point before we let go. I think if there is a difference, it isn't because there's any fundamental potency or strength that either gender has over the other. I think the two are equal and meant to function in union. But I do feel that culturally, men have been biased toward a more materialistic life than women have.

AC: So do you feel that because it's more culturally accepted for women to be intuitive and vulnerable, they therefore have less to let go of on the spiritual path?

JAL: I definitely think that's a factor, but again, you have to take everybody case by case.

AC: In the Buddhist teaching, enlightenment is said to be directly related to the recognition of the inherent emptiness or insubstantiality of a separate personal self. In a previous issue of WIE, the renowned Indian woman sage, Vimala Thakar—the only person who the great J. Krishnamurti ever asked to teach—spoke in detail with us about her observation that women tend to have greater difficulty letting go of attachment to a personal sense of self than men do. She said, "Nothingness, nobodyness, emptiness—even the intellectual understanding of this—frightens women. Because of our physical vulnerability, because of our secondary role in human civilization, on a subconscious level, there is fear. If I mature into nonduality, into nothingness, into nobodyness, what will happen to my physical existence? Will it be more vulnerable? Will I be able to defend myself in case of difficulty, in case of some attack against me? Consciously, intellectually, women understand everything because regarding the brilliance of the brain, there is no distinction such as male and female. But psychologically, at the core of their being, is this

fear." In my own experience as a teacher I have also noticed that women do seem to have greater difficulty than men in letting go of the habit of what I call the personalization of their experience. Now I certainly don't mean to imply that this means men, as a gender, tend to be fearless heroes who are willing to jump into emptiness and abandon any and all notions of self at the drop of a hat. Men and women struggle with the same fear of nonexistence. But it's been my experience or my impression that women seem to have greater difficulty being able to see directly into the impersonal nature of all human experience than men do. As a woman and as a teacher of enlightenment, is this also your experience?

JAL: At a certain point in our path, there's a kind of grieving that both men and women have to go through. When we leave the party and begin to really practice renunciation, begin to practice recognition of what samsara [cyclic existence] really is, there's a grieving that comes from that. And I think for men and women it's a different grief. I think that men have to let go of certain kinds of expectations that are made of them and that they have of the world. And I think that

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women have to grieve about the letting go of another kind of expectation, which is a more personal one. Women are culturally biased toward being *in relationship to*, and so their best way of understanding themselves is *in relationship to*. However, at a certain point in our practice, when that grieving is finished, we are every bit as capable of allowing that to pass, and approaching the ground view and letting go of identification with self-nature as being inherently real. I think at a certain level of practice, after that grieving is done, our abilities are equal.

AC: *Would you consider that to be, relatively speaking, quite a high level of practice?*

JAL: Yup. (Laughs)

AC: *In this issue, in addition to exploring the relationship between gender and spirituality, we're also looking into the relationship between sexual orientation and the path to enlightenment. In our time, there are many gays and lesbians who view their experience of sexual orientation as the very basis of the spiritual path. Do you think that giving spiritual relevance to sexual orientation is a help or a hindrance on the path to enlightenment?*

JAL: I think maybe I should speak personally about my experience with this whole issue. First of all, I'd like to say that I have been very disturbed by the way in which some of the conventional religions that are present in our time have kind of lopped off their gay population and considered them not fit and inappropriate and bound for someplace bad. I feel a tremendous amount of grief about that. When I developed the temple and even before His Holiness recognized me, I made it very, very clear that any sexual orientation did not preclude being a member of my temple. I made it very clear that whether you were gay or straight, tall or short, thin or fat, it didn't matter to me at all. When that word got out, a lot of people who were gay who were looking for a spiritual home took refuge in my temple. I now have some nuns who are gay. They're not practicing, of course. They're celibate.

Now my experience has been that, of the people who came to my temple at first, some of the ones who were suffering the most were a lot of the gay people. They were deeply ingrained in finding an identity and gathering it around themselves and making a box out of it. It was as if they were less free than those who didn't feel the need to find an identity. They were just encumbered by this need.

AC: *They were encumbered by their gay identity?*

JAL: Yes. Not by their homosexuality itself, but by the need to express it in one way or another, or to not express it—either coming out of the closet or not coming out of the closet—whatever their phenomena were about that. That was what oppressed them, not their sexual proclivity. And what I've tried to do is to let them know that they shouldn't put themselves under such pressure to express themselves in one way or another but rather they should identify with the original nature that we're trying to reveal. I feel that people have to be who they are. In the same way that I didn't want to lose my Jewish-Italian American identity and start wearing Tibetan *chubas*, I don't expect my gay practitioners to act like straight people or to lose their sense of gayness. But I feel that just as being a Jewish-Italian American is not going to get me enlightened, neither is being gay going to get them enlightened. My feeling is that we all have to drop that stuff and go for it!

AC: *What you're saying has also been my observation—that often a gay identity tends to be just another expression of ego. That doesn't mean that one has to necessarily deny one's sexual preference. But one has to maybe question the ego's investment in any particular sexual preference.*

JAL: Totally. That's totally it. What keeps us from functioning as awakened beings is the fundamental belief in self-nature being inherently real. Self-nature as defined by anything—gender bias, sexual bias, emotional, cultural, anything. Whatever form it takes. So in giving that any validity, any lip service—what's the point? We've already got that in the world. Let's move away from it.

AC: *Father Basil Pennington, a highly respected Trappist monk, whom we also interviewed for this issue, made an intriguing statement about the relationship between spiritual freedom and sexual orientation. He feels that "all men and women are ultimately bisexual and that therefore, a person who is really free knows that he or she is bisexual and can relate with others in whatever way is appropriate, that they're not bound by any particular sexual orientation." In your experience, is Father Pennington on to something when he says that there's a direct relationship between spiritual freedom and liberation from a rigid adherence to any particular sexual orientation?*

JAL: He is absolutely dead on. Absolutely correct. Because again, the *bodhisattva*, when it appears in the world, appears in the form of compassion, in whatever form is needed. So if you need a banana, the *bodhisattva* is going to appear as a banana. If you need a person with a certain kind of orientation, the *bodhisattva* is going to appear in that way. I really think that at a certain level, the bottom line, the only thing that matters is the *bodhicitta* [aspiration to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings]. The only thing that matters is the appearance of compassion in the world.

AC: So would you agree with his assertion that if someone is free, they know they're bisexual and that would be expressed in whatever ways are appropriate?

JAL: I would say that if a person is free, they know that the human condition is to be sexual and they don't have a determined bias as to how that sexuality should be expressed. However, I wouldn't say that a person knows himself to be bisexual. To recognize yourself as bisexual is, I would say, a preliberated state. If you are free, you can't even recognize the concept of bisexual. A person who's truly liberated isn't going to spend all that much attention on thinking about what box to put their sexuality in. If you are free, your sexuality, like anything else, is an adornment that you wear in order to be of benefit to others.

AC: So in this way of looking at it, the expression of one's sexuality would somehow have to be for the sake of someone else?

JAL: As a *bodhisattva*, everything is for the sake of all sentient beings. I think that for a person who is a

liberated *bodhisattva*, if it were required for them to be homosexual at a certain point in time, that would not be a foreign concept. I think that would be a perfectly okay thing to do because that's the way the *bodhicitta* would appear. I feel for myself that if it were needed for me to function in a homosexual way, I'm sure I could. I'm sure I would. And that would be part of my sexuality. It would be real.

AC: *Marpa, the guru of Milarepa, one of the most revered Tibetan yogis of all time, is widely known to have been a fierce and demanding teacher. Tales of his ferocity in the service of his disciples' liberation are legendary. Not only did he repeatedly humiliate Milarepa but he even was known to beat him physically in order to awaken him to his own true nature. You too have a reputation for being a fierce and demanding teacher and have even been criticized for the lengths to which you have been willing to go to keep your students on the straight and narrow. The whole notion of crazy wisdom, meaning that the teacher will go to any lengths necessary to awaken his or her students—including that which often appears to be incomprehensible to the unawakened mind—is revered by Tibetans as a powerful method of spiritual instruction. Some of the most widely respected male Tibetan teachers of our time have been accused of far greater abuses of their disciples than you have, and yet the Buddhist world at large seems to be much less forgiving in your case than in theirs. Is there a double standard in place? Does the fact that you're a woman make it unacceptable for you to be a fierce and uncompromising teacher? Or are your critics correct in saying that sometimes you go too far?*

JAL: I have to say that I don't have a particular view on the subject except that in looking at each student individually I see that each one of them has a particular capacity and a particular set of obstacles. And sometimes, something really unusual or outrageous might be the very thing that provides the hook on to the path, or the very thing that provides some amazing ripening. When it happens that this kind of student comes together with a teacher who is capable of seeing it and maybe delivering what is needed there, I think that is the most fortunate of circumstances. I think that is an outrageously rare thing and an outrageously fortunate set of circumstances. So when that has happened, I have dived on it. But my teachers have also done that with me.

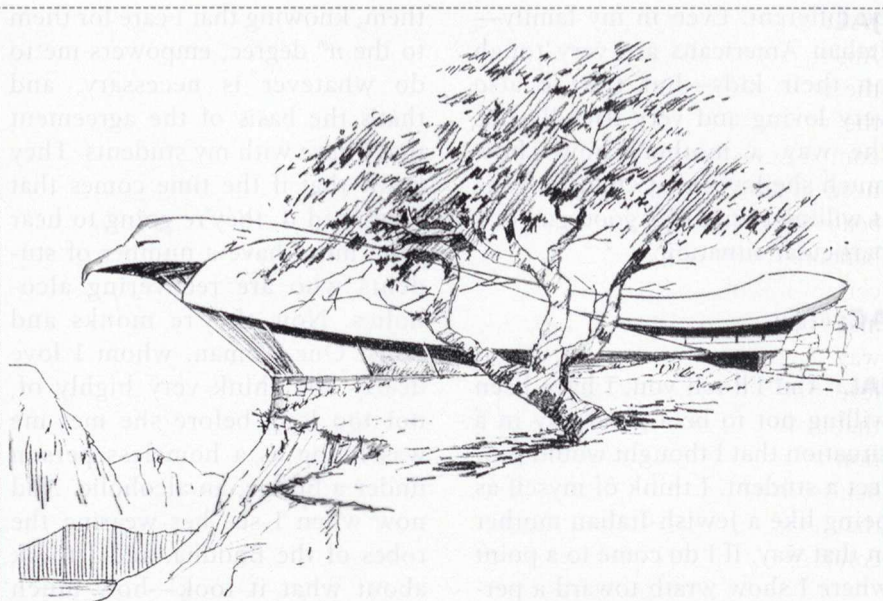
AC: *They've been very fierce with you?*

JAL: One time when I was newly recognized, my teacher was extremely wrathful with me and it was about something that never even happened. It was so outrageous and it tore me up so badly but it also, I think, added years on to my life because health obstacles that were happening to me disappeared like magic after that. So I believe that sometimes those two circumstances come together and when they do, it is the teacher's responsibility to take advantage of them. There have been circumstances where I have gone to amazing lengths to befriend and stay with and hook on to the path some student of mine, to the point where the other students will say, "Gee, you didn't do that for me!" But that's just because of the way the karma has ripened. That's because at that moment in time, there was a win-

dow and there was a way to go through it. When one of my nuns was first ordained, a series of things happened where I really took her to task and yelled at her. It upset her very badly and yet the very next day she was totally able to see it, and there was an amazing change after that. I don't think a person should make an issue about such things. I think that once a student entrusts themselves to a teacher and trusts that teacher to the degree that they have confidence in their qualities, then at that point, you kind of have to make a deal that it's not always going to be roses; sometimes you're going to hear things you don't want to hear and it's going to be painful. And it's a student's responsibility to somehow let that input come into their lives.

AC: *Someone engages in a committed relationship with a teacher of enlightenment because they're saying that they want their ego killed. So that's not necessarily going to be a painless process. I mean, most of the time, it's actually horrendous. And it's very hard, it seems, for most people to make that kind of commitment where they say, "This is it."*

JAL: Right. And it's difficult to teach in that way, with that kind of passion, in a world where it has become very fashionable for people to file lawsuits about everything. Anytime anyone goes to a counselor, I guarantee that counselor will find out that they have been abused. That's kind of the popular thing. The idea that people are being victimized or being abused is very much in style. To write a really hip pop psychology article, you've got to talk about abuse, and sexual abuse if you can! You know, at a different time, in a different place, it would



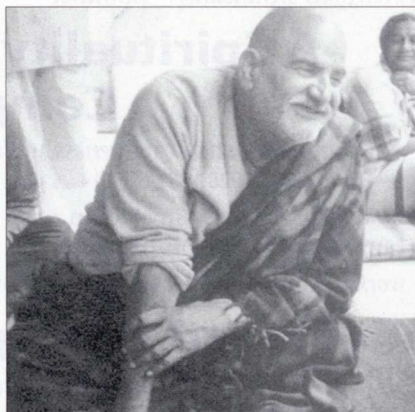
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be different. Even in my family—Italian Americans are very tough on their kids—but they're also very loving and very friendly. It's the way a mother shows how much she loves that child that she is willing to not be a good guy in a particular situation.

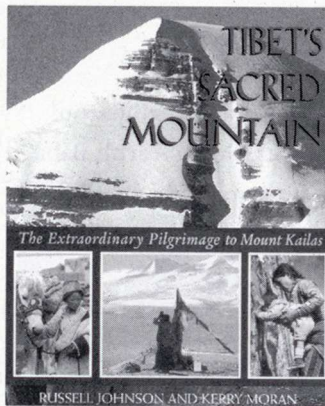
AC: Right.

JAL: And I'll tell you, I have been willing not to be a good guy in a situation that I thought would protect a student. I think of myself as being like a Jewish-Italian mother in that way. If I do come to a point where I show wrath toward a person, at the same time I'm feeling so much love for them. I feel like you don't have the right to show wrath to a person if you don't know how much you love them. And I feel that knowing that I would die for

them, knowing that I care for them to the *nth* degree, empowers me to do whatever is necessary, and that's the basis of the agreement that I have with my students. They know that if the time comes that they need it, they're going to hear from me. I have a number of students who are recovering alcoholics. Now they're monks and nuns. One woman, whom I love dearly and think very highly of, not too long before she met me was living as a homeless person under a bridge, an alcoholic. And now when I see her wearing the robes of the Buddha, and I think about what it took—how much wrath and how much love and how much of everything it took to get her to that point where she's not only not under the bridge but she's benefiting others—when I see something like that, you

know, I think this is an amazing opportunity. This is fantastic. And I don't think I could live with myself if I hadn't taken advantage of that. I don't think I could live with myself if I hadn't been strong, if I hadn't been wrathful, if I hadn't said, "Sit down. Listen. Now I'm going to tell you the truth." I don't think I could watch someone pass through their neuroses if I have a karmic connection with them and not do something about it. I feel that every karmic connection I have with a student is an opportunity. I feel that I have a passion about that opportunity and I'm going to take it. And I'm not going to apologize. ■

I want to thank Vickie Mackenzie for allowing me to quote liberally from her chapter on Jetsunma in her fascinating book Reborn in the West.



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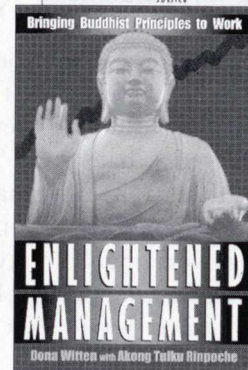
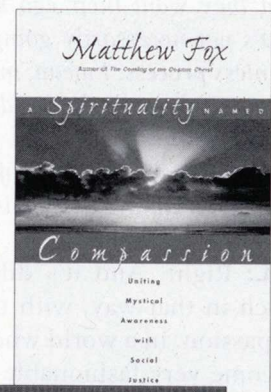
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her breast and so on. He was very comfortable with men and women. He wasn't afraid to have John resting at his bosom, and at the same time, he wasn't afraid of letting Mary Magdalene anoint his feet and kiss them—which was an enormously sensuous and exciting experience! But he had to work in the time and place he chose to come to, which was a very pivotal place inhabited by a Semitic culture, which, because of a certain simplicity and earthiness that it had, made it possible for his message to be absorbed into every other world culture and philosophy. That's where and when he chose to come, and in that situation I don't think there would have been much hope, as a woman, of his fulfilling the mission that he'd set for himself.

WIE: *Is it your impression that, as a woman, Christ would have been a different sort of Savior?*

BP: I would say yes. Because Christ expressed himself in a very complete way, and so because he was a man, there was a *maleness* about that expression that, if he'd been a woman, probably would have been different. Even though he tried to use feminine images, I think that, being a man of his time and place, he was probably more comfortable with male images. And so he says, for example, "What father among you would give his child a serpent when he asked for a fish?" If he had been a woman, I think he might well have said, "What *mother* among you would do that?" He was more comfortable with praying, "Our Father." In fact he almost always spoke of God as "Father"—and if he'd been a woman, he might well have spoken much more of God as "Mother" and used more *womanly* images. Not that he didn't use them; I mean, he complemented the story of the good shepherd immediately with that of the housewife who'd lost a coin, or the story of the farmer selling the seed with that of the woman selling the leaven. So he tried as much as he could, given his people and their situation, to bring out both sides. But he was obviously a man and probably would not have chosen twelve men as his key group, with the women just kind of serving in the background, if he had been a woman.

WIE: *In my talk with Father Panteleimon, he went on to assert that this seemingly discriminatory aspect of the Christian tradition—the Twelve Apostles and the priests all being male—is in fact inspired and sanctioned by God "Himself," and that allowing the tradition to be toyed with by misguided reformers who want to ordain women can only have disastrous consequences. But some*

liberal voices within the Catholic Church, such as yours, insist that traditional Christianity's attitude toward women is not sanctioned by God but has its roots in the patriarchal ambience of the Church's early history and now can be modified to suit our more socially enlightened times.

BP: You know, our present Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, is a very sharp person, and I wonder if he wasn't sending that very message to the Church and his people when he spoke on this a couple of years ago. According to Catholic belief, you know, he has the power to speak infallibly, but very rarely has it ever been invoked. And when people have tried to push him to speak infallibly about this particular subject, as well as about other things, he's always refused—so that's already a message. But it was even more significant to me that two weeks after his very sweet apology for the way his predecessors had treated Galileo, in which he said publicly that they had failed because they'd taken the scriptures too literally, he spoke out against this question of ordaining women, himself explicitly arguing, just as Father Panteleimon does—from a very literal interpretation of scripture—that this male-only priesthood is simply the way it's always been and always will be. Now, again, he's a sharp man and I don't think he was missing that. I think he was sending a message that said, in effect, "Just as they were too sure about Galileo back then, we're a little too sure about this thing now. Just wait around, boys, and you'll see." In other words, I think that by using the very same arguments he himself had said were wrong in the Galileo case, he was saying to us, "Hey, this could change, too!" And not only that it could change but that it will!

WIE: *I wanted to ask you about some other models for the kind of freedom we've been speaking about in relationship to gender because there are different approaches to this. For example, there are many spiritual practitioners who see the differences between men and women as being solely the expression of cultural conditioning, and believe that any gender-based conditioning must, like all forms of conditioning, be transcended if we're to become truly free. Certain religious traditions, on the other hand, adhere to a kind of "tantric" model in which there are strictly defined spheres and roles said to be divinely ordained for men and for women. In Orthodox Judaism, for example, the men devote themselves to study and prayer and the women find their spiritual fulfillment in bearing children and maintaining the sanctity of the home. And, according to this paradigm,*

it's only by each sex giving themselves wholeheartedly to the fulfillment of their respective roles, and then coming together in their differences, that divine union can be achieved and God's will can become manifest on earth. Similarly, in more eclectic or secular circles, a number of contemporary thinkers and practitioners have asserted that women are generically suited to pursue a path of immanence that involves, as in the Jewish model, deeply connecting to their bodies and to the cycles of nature and finding the sacred in the ordinary events of daily life, while men tend to seek for the transcendence of all that is worldly and to look beyond themselves for the sacred mystery that lies at the source of all existence. Do you feel that this notion of distinct paths for men and women holds true in practice?

BP: Some of those distinctions are certainly true. I mean, a woman will find holiness in bearing a child, while a man will *never* find holiness in carrying a child in his womb for nine months. So there are some things that are just realities, and they will remain. Others—like study or prayer, for example—well, I don't see how you could put them specifically in a male or female category. But the point, I suppose, is that even if we were to go beyond all social conditioning, there is still some difference that remains, as I was trying to say before, and what that difference is isn't always as easy to understand as the physiological capacity to bear a child. The way men pass on life and the way women pass on life are different, and because that is a tremendous expression of divine energy going through us, it certainly is a part of our innate holiness, and the significance of that difference is easy to see. And when you come to things like immanence and transcendence, there may ultimately be some difference there, too—something that reflects itself in the physiological way we each pass on life. But having said all that, I'd still want to be very cautious because I think that our socialization, our acculturation, would tend to see concepts like transcendence and immanence too imaginatively—or too physiologically based—and also because I think that transcendence and immanence ultimately come together. There may be more naturalness to a woman moving through the immanent and into the transcendent, or to a man moving out of the transcendent and into the immanent—that may be so. And that may not be just sociological, either. But when people make these sorts of generalizations, the tendency is so to *debase* these things—if that's not too strong a word—that I would be very cautious in saying anything like that. I'd want to put a lot of signs around it that say, “Be careful here,” because certainly the indwelling

Divine, once a man really goes on the spiritual path, is as strong in him as it is in a woman, even though physiologically he functions differently. And at the same time, women can certainly be as transcendent and ecstatic as any man. So I would be hesitant to make too much of that.

WIE: Continuing in this vein, in our time there are also many people who view their own experience of gender or sexual preference as the very basis of their spiritual path. For example, there are women who worship the Goddess; there are men who champion a distinctly male spirituality; and there are many gays and lesbians who regard their sexual orientation as requiring unique forms of practice and worship. In fact, some advocates of a distinctly “gay spirituality” have even suggested that because the male and female polarities are theoretically more fully integrated and balanced in homosexuals, theirs is an inherently superior form of spiritual practice. For all of these individuals, gender and sexuality are seen as central to the path and as giving rise to fundamentally different paths for men and women, homosexuals and heterosexuals. What do you see as the advantages and limitations of a view that focuses on gender identification or sexual orientation as a path in itself to spiritual freedom?

BP: I would say that the differences are *not* that fundamental. What's much more fundamental is that we are all in some way expressions of the Divine Being and Life. Of course it's a reality that we come out male or female, but once again, those are secondary. They're a *part* of reality, such that when you come into the fullness of who you are in God, and the expression of God that you are, they'll still be there. But sexual orientation is even farther down the road and also a little more problematic than gender, because even though we pride ourselves on having learned and understood so much about sex, I don't think there's anybody who can tell you what the basis of sexual orientation really is. And I think that ultimately we're all bisexual anyway, which makes me even *more* hesitant to speak about sexual orientation as being a fundamental part of one's spirituality. So while I have no doubt, as I said, that the male/female distinction is an essential though not a fundamental part of becoming fully, integrally divinized, I'd be much more hesitant to say that in order to be that full expression you're going to be gay or straight. And, as I said, ultimately I think that a person who's really free knows that they're *bisexual*—that we *all* have the capacity to relate to our sexuality in these different ways.

WIE: *What do you mean, exactly, when you say that “we’re all bisexual”?*

BP: It was established by the Kinsey Report, I think, that virtually nobody is right in the middle of that spectrum, or totally at one end or the other, but that it’s a question of dominance. But most men are so afraid of their homosexual side that they totally ignore it or repress it if they can. And I think that many gay men and women have been so hurt by homophobia that they repress their *heterosexual* side—though probably not as strongly as many heterosexuals tend to repress their homosexual side. All I’m really trying to say, though, is that both elements are there in everyone to varying degrees.

WIE: *So in terms of a person who’s liberated realizing that they’re “bisexual,” what that would mean is not necessarily that they would practice bisexuality, only that they would be fully aware of the potential within themselves to be both heterosexual and homosexual?*

BP: Yes. I think that someone who’s really free knows that they can relate with others in whatever way is appropriate and that they’re not bound by a particular orientation that would make it impossible to relate with others in one way or the other.

WIE: *And what about the notion, prevalent in some gay spiritual circles, that being homosexual makes one more predisposed to the Divine, or more open in some way to direct contact with the Divine?*

BP: Well, if you’re speaking about the human race as a whole, many people would probably accept the generalization that women are more disposed to spiritual or contemplative life and, based on that generalization, it could seem that those men who are more comfortable with their so-called “feminine side” would be more disposed to spiritual life than those who aren’t. But again, I think that’s all still kind of superficial because how much of that is sociological acculturation is difficult to say. To the extent that gay men tend to be more gentle and maternal and all those sorts of things, they might be more disposed to spirituality. But you see, we’ve *labeled* those characteristics as “feminine” without knowing whether, in their nature, they really are.

WIE: *In the Christian mystical tradition, how is Christ himself thought to be a model for true spiritual freedom in relation to gender?*

BP: Some people would respond to that, I suppose, by saying that Christ was obviously very comfortable with both men and women and had no problems there, but to me that’s also kind of a superficial answer. Obviously it’s true and obviously he’s modeling something that we should try to follow. But I think there’s also something deeper there, because we know Christ not only through the scriptures and the tradition, but also through our own personal experience. And through one’s personal experience, one can discover for oneself what a total reverence Christ has for the person, and for what it is that is the quintessence of the human person, which is the power to love and the power of free choice. This is an expression, in a way, of the humility of God. He makes his creature and then lets his creature decide what he’s going to do; he can tell God to go to Hell if he wants to, and God will let him! So in Christ there is a profound reverence for the person, and that is absolutely equal for every person, male or female, and God expresses himself in this essence of all-embracing love as much in men as in women. It’s only a limitation in our way of seeing or listening that makes us think it could be different for one than it is for the other—although there’s also something in the male and female *expression* of the Divine that is different. And God uses that difference. So Christ would have been totally respectful of that as well. He chose to be male, for example—and I think he celebrated his maleness—but then he created a specific role for Mary, who was female. He could have just come to earth in a human body, but he chose a woman and did the greatest thing that he could with that woman, which was to let her be, in the fullest possible sense of the word, his “mother.” So in these ways, and through these differences, I think that he was trying to express something—a reality so full, so beyond words, that our language cannot begin to describe it. And this is why scripture is written so much in parables and stories and mythology, because the message it’s conveying is far beyond the words. But at the same time, given that there is an equal capacity in male and female for full and authentic expression of the Divine, I think that feminists, and women in general, may have a real beef against God in the fact that he *did* choose to come as a man. I mean, they could always say, “Well, why didn’t God do it the other way? Why didn’t he come as a female and have a *father* or something?” Well, that’s true, but—God’s free! He can do anything he wants to do! In the end, I think you’ve got to say that, too. I mean, God is God, you know? But I can certainly see their point. ■

processes for women. Women don't have to set foot outside their own home to create everything that Judaism wants women to do. And when you do set foot outside your home, it's to expand that into the community. It's like an inward center that radiates outward. But a woman can't just do the rituals and take care of the kids and expect magically to feel as though she's living a spiritual life. If a woman is doing that, she's living a traditional life but not necessarily a spiritual one.

WIE: *The laws governing marriage and intimate relations seem to be meant to foster a coming together between men and women that is based on each person independently worshipping God in everything they do. The relationship described is very beautiful—intimate, loving, respectful but not sentimental. You've explained the philosophical basis as, "When husband and wife unite at permitted times . . . their union reflects the union of masculine and feminine in the divine. This is a special kind of holy act: two people in their physical being and their natural energies reflect the culmination of the divine creative process, making a unity from what had been a duality. . . . Only in the union between man and woman can we touch with our own natures the process that the whole world is about: to come together, to overcome our separation, to be one." Can you elaborate on how this teaching for men and women helps us realize divine union?*

TF: Judaism affirms that you can come together in these ways with respect and love and, yes, it is unsentimental. You are manifesting something that goes way beyond our ordinary consciousness. It goes into the depth that unites everything. The idea is to go beyond the personal and the feelings of the two people at any given moment. Maybe they've been doing really well. Maybe they've been having a lot of difficulties, but they're able to overcome them. It affirms that possibility of union even in the midst of all our conflict and division.

WIE: *There are relative differences between men and women. When it comes to ultimate realization or union with God, how significant do you feel these differences between men and women are?*

TF: These differences in conditioning don't mean anything when you get to the ultimate. An important part of the Jewish spiritual path is *ratzo vashov*, running and returning. You run to God and then you come back. This means you can achieve experiences of union, but you're always almost instantaneously brought back into

your physical reality. So, even when a person achieves great heights in spirituality, when the person brings it back down, so to speak, they're going to again be speaking through their own conditioning.

WIE: *Many different teachings, like Judaism, say that fully embracing our womanhood or our manhood will enable us to realize our full spiritual capacity. Could there be another approach that, without denying the differences between us, allows us to focus on our essential unity and then discover naturally and freely what the differences between the genders are?*



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TF: Experiencing unconditioned reality is one thing; gendered reality is another—whether you can “freely and naturally” discover it or not. But when I pray or meditate, I’m not the least bit interested in these issues. This has absolutely no relevance when I open up my prayer book or when I sit down to meditate. I am just concerned with either contemplation, speaking from my heart or the different kinds of work one can do in those contexts. I think being concerned with that kind of identity while I’m involved in a specific practice oriented toward my relationship with God would be completely distracting. I don’t know why anyone would want to do that. When you’re doing your spiritual work, contemplating the One, that’s what prayer is supposed to be all about. But bringing it back down, then we have to realize that we are in gendered bodies and we do have societies that treat us in certain ways according to our gender and expect certain things of us. And then we need to deal with these issues again. We don’t stay up there in a spiritual state. God wants us to create that state here on earth. I think the important question is: How can we best create a world where divinity is realized. Because from the Jewish point of view, that’s ultimately our job. ■

EK: Well, the back of the synagogue is not the back of the bus. Our modern view is to think that the back of the . . . is bad. It’s just separate. When it comes to prayer, you have to ask: What is your purpose? The purpose of being in a room with other people praying, rather than praying by yourself, is that the prayers of the many will help generate your prayer up to God. If you’re distracted by other people, then not only are your prayers not going up, but you’re dragging other people down. So, at the time of prayer we sit separately. You can feel that you’re participating even if you are separate—I’m not going to make a blanket statement that Orthodoxy is bad or observancy is bad because women are relegated to the back. The synagogue rituals revolve around men, and the role of the cantor and the rabbi are male roles because of the rules of modesty and practicality. It’s not considered modest for women to sing in front of men because, as I mentioned, when we’re praying we want to make sure that we put our attention upward, not sideward. So a woman rabbi or a woman cantor is an issue. [The rules of practicality come from women’s childbearing role, which exempts them from certain time-bound commandments.]

You asked about the morning

prayer that men say. It’s part of a whole series of morning blessings where we thank God for everything he’s given us—for giving the rooster the wisdom to crow so we’ll know when to get up; for giving vision to the blind because when we’re sleeping, we’re as if we were blind; for giving us strength, clothing, etcetera. Then the final three blessings are a progression—we’re thanking God for the ability to serve him as much as we can. We thank God for not making me a non-Jew. We thank God for not making me a slave. We thank God for not making me a woman.

You see, non-Jews were given seven commandments, the universal laws of mankind. So we thank God that he made us Jewish so that we have more than those seven. Jewish slaves were exempt from certain commandments because they could only do the commandments that would fit into their master’s schedule. Then there’s one more group that has fewer commandments than men, and that’s women. So men say, “Thank you for not making me a woman so I can have *even more* commandments to do.” This is the rationale, and it suits me okay. But even if it wouldn’t, I’m not throwing away the tapestry because of one mis-stitch. It’s not enough to make me say, “Well, how chauvinistic, if that’s in there I can’t accept anything.” Why can’t I accept everything? So my prayers in the morning go a little quicker because I skip out that line and a half. It’s one of those things that gets so much attention—it’s as if it’s in twice as big a font as everything else in the prayer book. But, I know, it makes for good conversation.

WIE: In Judaism, the women’s spiritual role centers around the family and home. Can you still fulfill your

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potential as a Jew if you're not married and don't have children?

EK: There is a great bent in Judaism toward marriage and children because we have a responsibility for the next generation. It's not that a person who's not married is doing anything wrong—if you haven't found your soul mate yet, that's not a problem. There are other ways you can continue to grow. Study on your own is also a wonderful thing. But a person whose goal is, "I never want to get married and I never want to have children," needs to rethink what their priorities are because otherwise something will be left unexpressed.

WIE: *Andrew Harvey, a well-known gay spiritual thinker and author, writes that in many traditions homosexuals have been especially revered as visionaries and priests. "Homosexuals," he states, "were seen as sacred, people who, by virtue of the mysterious fusion of feminine and masculine traits, participated with particular intensity in the life of the Source." Tamar Frankiel told me that homosexuality is considered an abomination in the Torah. What do you think of Andrew Harvey's statement that homosexuals may actually be more open to the call of God?*

EK: I can only speak from the Jewish viewpoint. In the Torah, the most sacred group, the *Cohenim*, or priests, were required to be married. The *Cohen HaGaddol*, the high priest, could not perform the most important service of the year on Yom Kippur if he was unmarried. If there happened to be a high priest who wasn't married, that service wasn't done. The Torah states that homosexuality is something that's not condoned, so in Judaism, there really is no place for looking up to that type of lifestyle.

WIE: *Tamar Frankiel was a feminist before she became an observant Orthodox Jew. One of the things that had attracted her to Judaism was that many Orthodox Jewish women she met seemed to have a self-confidence that many women who were in the women's liberation movement didn't have. It's a little ironic that the Orthodox women seemed stronger to her, in light of the fact that so many feminists see Judaism as a patriarchal religion where women are treated like second-class citizens—where men are seen as having all the privileges, like studying and praying, while women are relegated to the home, to raising children and baking bread.*

EK: Even in my childhood, I never felt that feeling of "second-classness." My father would study Talmud at home and he'd say to me, "Come, let's do this together"—studying with a girl, whoever does such a thing? But I never thought it was strange. My father always accepted us as intellectual people with whom he could have any kind of discussion, and he expected an intelligent response. My mother was the same. You know, I bake my own *challah* [braided bread] because it's something I enjoy doing. It's not because I'm forced to do it. Some people because of their own unease feel, "If you're baking *challah*, it's because you have to, and isn't that terrible! You're so downtrodden!" They think that they would feel downtrodden, but the nurturing in my family was and is amazing. I've never had the chance to feel downtrodden.

WIE: *That's very unusual. It's so common for women to have been made to feel "less than" or "not equal to" in so many ways.*

EK: Right. But I think there gets to be a time when we have to get over it. You know? I'm serious. You were

teased in the second grade—you've got to let go of it sometime. When I was young, maybe I thought I wasn't given the same opportunities, or I felt like I was in the back of the bus every time I went to synagogue. So, I say let me study and learn, and maybe I'll find out that it's really not the way I thought it was then. It's a lot easier to grab on to something like that and use it as a way to explain why you haven't progressed. Make the effort to understand or try it for a while; really learn about it. For every Talmudic quote of a rabbi who said, "Don't talk to women," we can find three quotes exalting women. We can find the matriarchs, we can find role models. There are plenty of examples if we want to look in the proper way.

WIE: *It's said that in the time of the final redemption, when the Messiah comes, he will be a son of David, a "ben David." Do you think it's possible that the Messiah could come back as a woman, as a daughter of David?*

EK: I'm more concerned with bringing the Messiah than being the Messiah. People think, "Who, me—the Messiah? I don't think so!" But it gives a lot to people to think, "I could help bring the Messiah." It's a lot more helpful than worrying about whether it can be a *ben David* or a *bat David* [daughter of David]. The reason that we say *ben David* is that the Messiah is called "the king," and by Jewish tradition, a human king is a man. So to me, that's pretty much set in stone. But the Talmud also tells us that it was by the virtues of the women of the generation of Moses that we merited leaving Egypt, and that by the merit of righteous women today, we will merit the Messiah. So I think it's better for everybody to be concerned with that; there's a lot of power in a statement like that! ■

our own. But if you're *really* going to transcend, if you're really going to get to a point of being enlightened, unattached to self, unattached to how you're presenting, unattached to how you're treated in the culture, you better know how you *are* being treated. For most people, there's not much difference between being oblivious to gender and being unattached to it.

WIE: *I don't think I'm with you on that.*

KB: I'm saying that I'm approaching a point in my life where I'm becoming more and more unattached to gender. But I would venture a guess that you've been pretty oblivious to any gender beyond man or woman prior to recently.

WIE: *Right.*

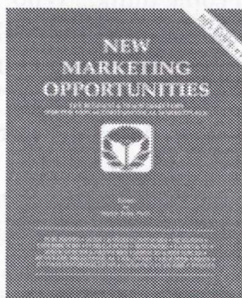
KB: But you would probably consider yourself fairly unattached to gender—or at least, it isn't necessarily a component of your life that you've really had to focus on. But you'll go to bed tonight thinking you're a woman. I've never done that. And I've never gone to bed thinking I'm a man or a boy. *Ever.*

WIE: *That's true; my experience has been different. But there's another way to approach the question of how to go beyond gender identification. Many traditional spiritual teachings point to becoming completely immersed in that which transcends the particulars of material life—something that's beyond time, beyond space, beyond thought, beyond mind—and becoming identified with that. And then we still happen to be whatever gender we are, but it's not a fundamental reference point or preoccupation. We'll be in whatever kind of bodies we're in, and we may express whatever qualities in those bodies we express spontaneously, naturally, but without being self-conscious about it, without there being any kind of pretense or affectation—whether it's the Marilyn Monroe kind or the campy homosexual kind—which is still a kind of posturing, isn't it?*

KB: But posturing can be a lot of fun, *darling*, don't you think?! Posturing makes us laugh! Most of the Zen masters were great comedians. And a lot of the Taoist masters were too; Chuang Tsu was a riot! He was better than a lot of the stand-ups we've got today. I think that kind of posturing, when done tongue in cheek, can create an effect. It interrupts what's going on to a point where we can go, "Oh, yeah, we were all

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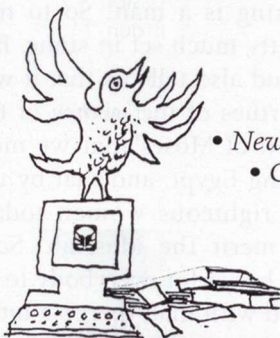
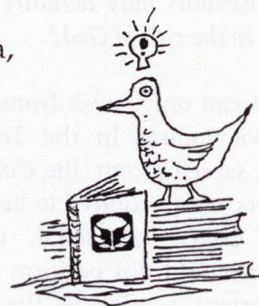
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attached to that. Now we can breathe."

You keep asking me either/or questions. And I don't know what's good and bad! I don't know what's right and wrong! So I'll contradict myself again. Do you need to embrace each gender wholly before you can achieve gender enlightenment? No. But you need to examine what values you're holding on to that are gendered and let go of the gendered nature of those values and embrace them for what they are rather than the fact that they're tied to a gender. You need to take a look at how important your identity is to you. How important is it for others to see you as a certain identity? How important is it that people see you as a man? How important is it that people see you as a woman? What are you holding on to, what am I holding on to, that ensures or increases the chances that people will see me as a certain gender? That's attachment to gender!

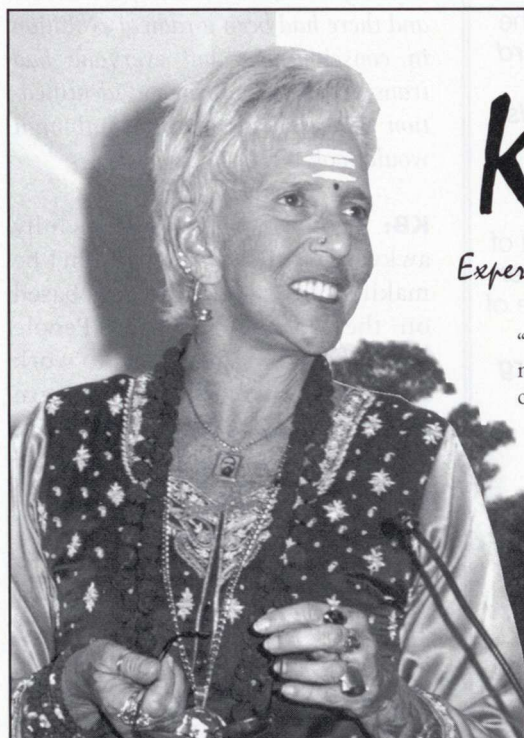
WIE: What do you think is the best way to see this?

KB: I think it's taking risks. I think it's saying, "Okay, what about *this* gender?"—you know? [takes off her wig] If I have an attachment to your seeing me as a pretty girl with long blonde hair, then I've got a problem.

If I don't, if I can joke about it, great. It's less of a problem to me. Also, it's *bodhisattva*: Make yourself sillier. Make yourself more outside the rules that have been set up for you.

WIE: That leads to my next question: It's been observed that people who break taboos are in a powerful position in relation to others precisely because they've dared to transgress social, cultural or religious mandates. In transgressing these mandates, they experience a kind of freedom and power and are sometimes viewed with awe or fear by those interested in protecting the status quo. You have quite intentionally broken a number of taboos, and not only do you not hide this, but you use it as a way to educate others. Has it been your experience that there is power in breaking taboos?

KB: Yeah, I've broken some taboos. Breaking a taboo lowers a person on the social scale, and paradoxically, it gives them power. It's like the position of the fool in the royal court. When you break a taboo and come to terms with it, then you're free of the cultural whip called humiliation. You know, I can't be humiliated. What are you going to do, call me a transsexual? I'll go, "Cool! Duh!" Are you going to say "lesbian" with



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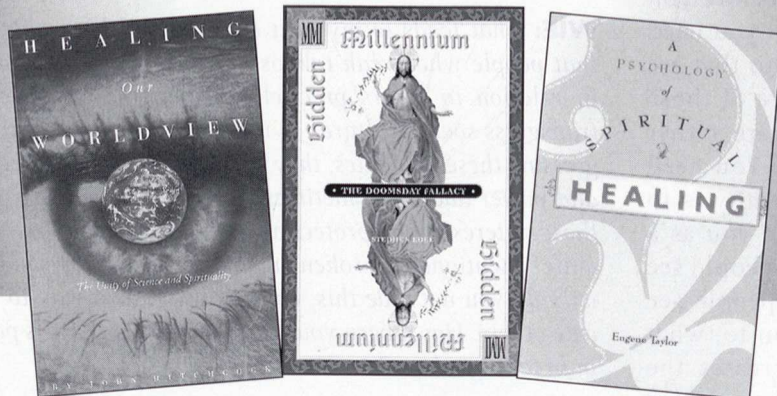
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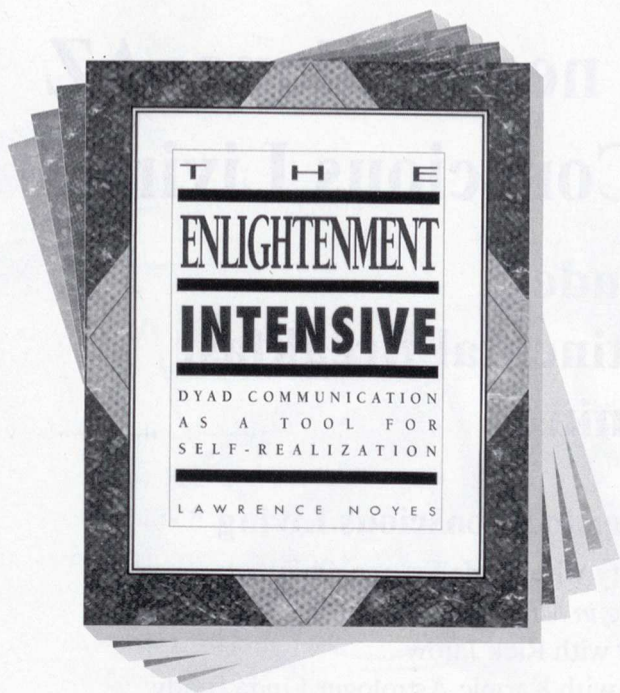
a sneer? I'll go, "Yah!" What can you say—"You're a man!"? I'll say, "Okay." Or, "You cut off your penis!" I'll say, "No, I turned it inside out!" I mean, there's very little that I can be humiliated about now. That's the freedom.

Gender has its own set of social responses that you either obey or don't obey; and when you choose not to, you get humiliated—until you get to a point of having fun about it. I think that a sign of approaching enlightenment is having fun with it: "Yes, I'm performing because I like it!" Can I be a man, woman, boy, girl, aunt, uncle, sister, brother, teacher, student all at the same time? Wouldn't that be enlightened? Flip, flip, flip, flip, flip, flip. I think I finally got that there is not going to be any socially sanctioned identity or role that will fulfill me. I just take on roles as a lark now.

WIE: If we were to wake up tomorrow and there had been a radical evolution in consciousness and everyone had transcended this primary identification with gender, what do you think it would look like?

KB: People would look awfully awkward at first. They wouldn't be making moves automatically based on their gender identity. People would have to relearn how to work in the world, would have to relearn how to get along with each other. They couldn't use the automatic structures that exist for men and women in this world.

Do you know how much is based on whether you're a man or a woman? Try going as neither. Put on a mustache. Make people wonder what the f— you are. Do that for one day. Or make it easier—ask three questions, honestly, of yourself. What is a man? What is a woman? Why do we have to be



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one or the other? And I think if a majority of the world asked themselves those three questions over a period of three minutes, we'd have a hell of a change on this planet. If they honestly, without fear of retribution or loss of respect, could ask themselves these questions, that would change the face of the globe.

WIE: *Do you recommend that others question gender identity in the way that you have as a spiritual path?*

KB: One way to achieve enlightenment is through gender. One way. It's to unattach yourself from the perks of both genders. That's what I've done. Now I still walk down the street and get the perk of "pretty girl." I do! And I get all the shortcomings of "pretty girl" or "dumb blonde," too. It's really cool. It's a fun identity for me. I enjoy "bimbo." I enjoy "silly blonde." I have a lot of fun with it. All I'm saying is that some people might find it easier to explore the path of gender than to explore the path of meditation. What's meditation but focus? How much focus do you think it takes to change a gender? A hell of a lot. It's a very meditative practice if you choose to use it like that. You have to pay attention to an infinite number of details, and you can never get all of them. The best you can do is spread your mind out over as many as you can and let the rest go by, and that's meditation. It's a form of meditative behavior, if you will—"Zen and the Art of Gender Maintenance." All I'm saying is that conscious gender is a path to enlightenment. It's gotten me farther toward understanding stuff, toward accepting how much I don't understand and toward developing a sense of humor than anything else I've ever gone through. But that's just me. ■

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world that wanted the perfection of the human race—there's absolutely *no* room for the play of opposites and therefore no room for the dance. The dance goes on between differing values, and there is a mystery at the center of the dance. The still point at the center of the dance is that mystery, and it keeps changing. And that's what's so interesting about life—that even the still point keeps moving. As your perception evolves, the still point moves.

WIE: Hitler's ideology is no doubt one of the most horrifying examples we've ever seen of the dangers that can result from adherence to an absolute view. But at the same time

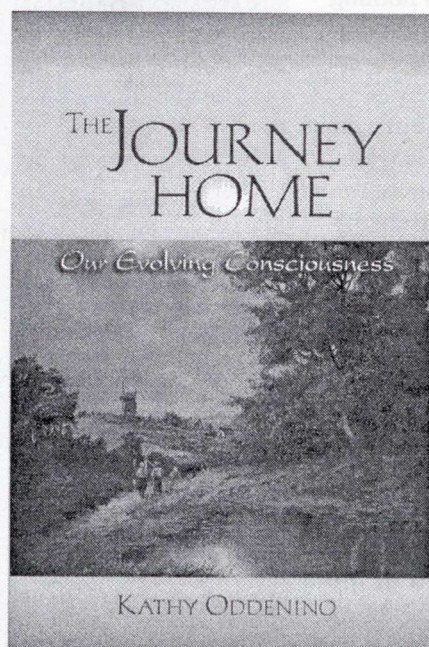
there have been other figures throughout history who are known to have espoused what could also be called an absolute view with the aim of achieving a decidedly different outcome. The Buddha, for example, to the best of our knowledge, aspired to a kind of perfection and encouraged his followers to do the same. Would his teaching of enlightenment have had the same kinds of implications that you've been speaking about?

MW: I can't speak to that because I'm not steeped in Buddhism. But I do know that when, for example, Christ talks about being "perfect," that word means "wholeness." It's not about cutting off everything in yourself that's not acceptable; it's about bringing out everything in yourself that contributes to the wholeness of who you are. Instead of being perfect in a very tiny area of yourself, you'll be attempting to be a whole human being, and that does place a limit on the goal of perfection.

WIE: But if, as you suggest, an ultimate or absolute view does inherently negate the rich interplay of opposites that make up the world we live in, at the same time couldn't it also be said that the feminine, as you've defined it, inherently negates an ultimate or absolute perspective that always transcends everything?

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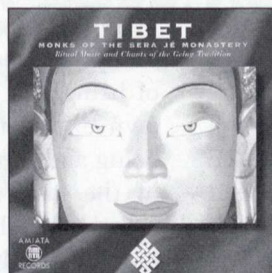
MW: Yes, I would say so. Now bear in mind that I am speaking from my own point of view, and I don't pretend to be a philosopher or a theologian. But the word "transcend," as it's used by most people, means to come in from above, to see everything from above, and that's the use of the word that I'm responding to. For me, though, the word "transcend" can also mean seeing everything from *below*. Most addicts, for example, find their healing by going down into the trauma that caused their emptiness in the first place. As they learn to love themselves and honor themselves with their own imperfections, their hearts open. They can love themselves and other human beings. They transcend the hell they could not endure, not by flying up and out of life but by moving down and into life. Then heaven and hell cease to be polarized opposites. Paradoxically, they are one. I also see the black Madonna as "transcending from below." In other words, the feminine energy of the planet itself, if you think of it as a volcano erupting from the very bowels of the earth, is transcending our normal life's existence. Think of the great waves that come smashing in. That power that is erupting from inside and below can be just as life-renewing as an angel touching down from above.

WIE: On one hand, it seems completely understandable that, as you've said, a rigid adherence to absolute notions can easily lead to a dangerously disembodied, exclusive and alienated relationship to life. But on the other hand, couldn't it be said with equal validity that it's only when we're willing to transcend all notions of opposites—including those of "masculine" and "feminine"—that we can experience a perspective and a relationship to life that's truly all-inclusive?

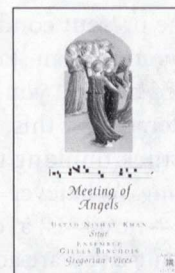
MW: Yes, that is right. But even so, I think I'd still stay with the metaphor of the dance. Energy moves because it is attracted to something. We are magnetized by otherness. Eventually, we realize opposites are not in opposition. They are in love. They attract, they unite, they create new life. The key is to hold the still point in constant movement. If you're really dancing with a partner, there is a still point between you that is always holding no matter how fast or how far you are moving on the floor. And if you're throwing a pot on a wheel, however fast it's moving, that still point has to hold or your pot blows up. And so the two energies, the centrifugal and the centripetal, the masculine and the feminine, have to be in balance. Balance is all. ■

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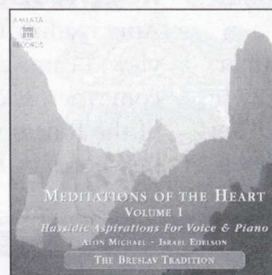
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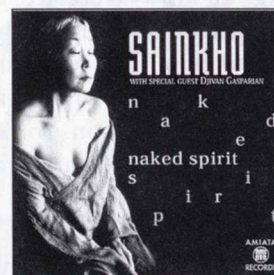


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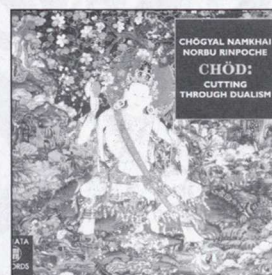
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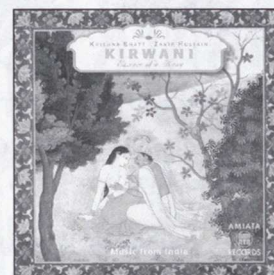
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And then, like my grandfather, she'd leave you with this newly sharpened perception. You could act with less chance of hurting yourself.

You could make what you wanted. They both assumed you knew what you wanted. They would have enjoyed this issue. I think they would have agreed with the women who resisted using the word "mastery" and found Michael Murphy's "both/and" point of view very familiar. I think they would have found Vernon Kitabu Turner's description of being and doing most like their own experience. They lived from being and through doing regardless of the task. They wouldn't have called it enlightenment because they didn't think in this language. They just did it.

David Altemose
Rahway, New Jersey

ROLE MODEL?

After reading the Susan Powter interview, I came away disappointed. She comes across as the Sandra Bernhard of the fitness world! While I respect her honesty on some issues, I am

disturbed by her often venomous answers. Her analysis and responses were often very callous. Overall, she seems to be a very angry woman. She has no problem blasting Anthony Robbins, yet she seems to lack insight about her own anger and bitterness. While her points about patriarchal, organized religion and society have merit, she lacks clear insight about a very real, ever present God that made both MEN and WOMEN.

She talks about Deepak Chopra—proclaiming that he is rude. Yet she clearly is pretty rude herself. She says, "screw India" and "[India's] a filthy damn place!" I'm not even Indian, yet I find her words offensive! Then in the next breath, she proclaims that "her message" is very loving and very positive! And then she has the audacity to proclaim that with all her influence she is no role model!? Can anyone take this statement seriously when thousands of women come to hear her lecture? Is she really that clueless? To brand her as a woman of many contradictions is putting it mildly. Is she an example of a progressive woman of the nineties?! Susan Powter is right. She is not the best example of a role model. You would have done better interviewing Rosa Parks.

L. M. Dawson
via email

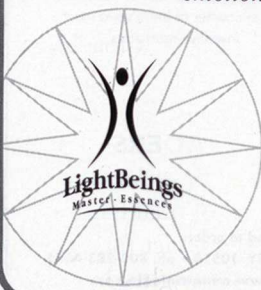
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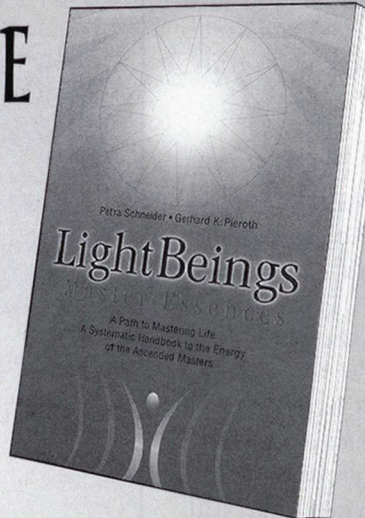
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THE YOGA OF THE EAST

I just picked up my first issue—number 15—and ended up reading the interview with Anthony Robbins. Though I found the article engaging and Robbins very forthcoming and sincere, I was amazed by what I perceived to be the lack of simple coherence in the conversation, and Robbins's lack of mastery in engaging the differences between Western techniques for accomplishment and Eastern ones.

Simply put, the Eastern methods of internal accomplishment through

dedicated meditation or the Western methods of outer accomplishment, i.e., self-mastery, are flip sides of the same coin. Those who have quenched their desires through outer accomplishment arrive at the same place as those who have engaged and quenched the same essential desires through active nonaction, or meditation.

Mr. Robbins degrades the Eastern methods based upon an unexamined assumption that active nonaction equates with inaction, or the lack of activity or withdrawal from life. Not having engaged in a genuine Eastern meditative path, he naturally does not understand the Zen concept of dynamic nonaction or the Zen theory of nonaction in action, or correct meditation or correct action.

With all due respect and deference to Mr. Robbins, I personally think that though he does not theoretically understand the above-defined subtle concept as it applies to Eastern yoga, he nevertheless probably personifies it in his life. So, I believe that he probably owns the reality behind the concept, though he could not and did not articulate it in the interview.

Having said all this, I confess that I do admire the man.

Arthur Ardashes Minassian
via email

A QUESTIONABLE AGENDA

I enjoy your magazine very much and love the topics you investigate. But I often feel that some of the interviewers are leading those they interview. It's as if the interviewer's opinion or agenda matters most, and the response of the person being interviewed had better fit in or they'll just ask the question again until the interviewee gives the "right" answer.

I especially felt this while reading the interview with Jean Houston

in the "Self Masters" issue, where the interviewer continually used the term "self-mastery" when Jean Houston said that she would never use the word "mastery." It just felt like the interviewer wasn't listening to the responses but was only waiting to ask another question. And what finally pushed me to write to you was what I believe was a total misunderstanding of a response Susan Powter gave in her interview. As if to prove a point about women not wanting to be role models, Amy Edelstein, in her interview with Beverly Slade, uses Susan Powter's statement, "I'm not a role model, I'm just a housewife who figured it out," out of the context in which Susan was speaking. Ms. Powter, I believe, was making a profound point about living and speaking honestly and just being real and open with one another. And I just don't think you were being fair to her to comment on what you think she means.

Susan Powter's blunt and simple remarks were a refreshing addition to the interviews that I think sometimes try too hard to prove a point.

Christine Van Heerden
Rochester, New York

GOOD WORDS

I recently came across your wonderful journal. It is one of the few works of art I've seen that bridges the gap between spirituality and the practical side of living a spiritual life. Your interviews are well thought out and quite insightful. I'm looking forward to more wisdom from WIE.

Tom Katovsky
Chagrin Falls, Ohio

I just "happened" upon your magazine while on vacation and looking for something to read—what a nice surprise! I almost didn't buy it because of the glitzy cover (your

Spring/Summer '99 issue). But, okay, I took a chance.

Wow, it was worth every penny—and thank you! Jean Houston's interview, whose work I am familiar with, justified the purchase. However, I read each interview and *all* were great!

Elizabeth Heininger
Aurora, Oregon

I picked up the latest edition of WIE and was both relieved and enthralled to see a magazine devoted to an unbiased exploration of spirituality and enlightenment. The magazine is great, as well as the writing in it.

Todd Mermell
Boulder, Colorado

It's not often something out there reaches right into my daily practice and registers a quantum shift. Your words on "Impersonal Enlightenment" [Summer '95] did that for me and I thank you. I love browsing old issues of WIE.

Daniel Wilkinson
via email

The interview with Michael Murphy is absolutely magnificent in all ways! Thanks so much. My legally blind husband and I enjoyed every moment of my reading it to him.

Fanchette Stewart
Coldwater, Michigan

TWO WORDS

What is enlightenment in two words or less? "Only God."

Thank you for your magazine; I enjoy it.

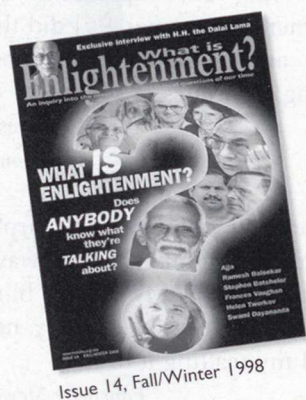
Glenn Bradley
via email

MY FELLOW READERS

Don't ask me why this irks me, but it does—your habit of qualifying some letter writers by the fact that they've submitted their thoughts by email.

Who cares? This letter comes to you by email—so what? What matters is that I live in Chilliwack, B.C., Canada, which begins to define me by placing me in the world. Those who've been to the Fraser Valley can visualize the place—its fundamentalist Christians, its marijuana growers, its mountainous terrain that's home to more than its fair share of prisons. Out of that landscape come these thoughts. The old geographer finds that interesting. So, fellow letter writers, do you live in Dusseldorf or Zimbabwe or Springfield, Illinois? As a reader—and a very grateful reader of *WIE's* spiritual investigations—I feel I'm owed that much info about you.

P. J. Reece
Chilliwack, B.C., Canada
via email



WHERE ARE THE MASTERS?

I have just finished reading the Fall/Winter '98 issue of *WIE*. I was very interested in the Advaita articles; however—putting aside the Dalai Lama—what on Earth was the rationale for the choice of the Buddhist spokespeople? I feel that among the Advaita practitioners were authentic sages, whereas the Buddhist practitioners interviewed were of a different category altogether—not even a single practicing monk! Certainly no sages/masters, someone who could

throw some light on the subject matter. Instead we find a perhaps disillusioned layperson (Helen Tworckov), an academic Buddhist-cum-retired monk (Stephen Batchelor), and Peter Masfield, an out-and-out academic. Is it hard to find an authentic lineage holder? While Buddhism does indeed have at its core the teachings of Gautama, there are many masters—Tibetan, Indian, Chinese and Japanese—who are well known, all of whom can throw light on this topic. Even the comments in your introduction comparing fullness to emptiness without a qualifying remark that the term “emptiness” was, in the original translation, meant to mean “emptiness of self”—these things are all so elementary to the topic, yet seem to have been omitted from the conversation. Also, the distinction between nirvana and perfect enlightenment is not touched upon in your discourse. In the Lotus Sutra, a defining text of Mahayana Buddhism, as I am sure you know, the Buddha clearly states that nirvana is simply a toy to save humans from desire. It is not perfect enlightenment. Emptiness in and of itself is not enlightenment. This is very clear in the teachings of Zen, yet this point is also not brought up in your articles.

All in all, I found the Buddhist viewpoints to be sadly covered. To any unfortunate individual who is searching for answers, I feel that this edition of your magazine could be misleading. Personally, I would feel very uneasy to have published such a set of articles that were so under-researched, especially in the light of the fact that inquiring beings' impressions are shaped by such articles.

In Mahayana traditions, the assistance of a master is central to training and vital in the attainment of perfect enlightenment; the final truth is transmitted from master to student. It is a truth that cannot be taught with words, since of course

Truth transcends language. Even putting aside the very grave doubt that an unenlightened mind can grasp enlightenment by reading your magazine—how can you get at this truth without interviewing a master?

Nick Blake
via email

BELIEVE IT OR NOT

In his dialogue with Andrew Cohen [“Absolutely Not!”, Fall/Winter 1998], Stephen Batchelor is zealous in his denial of metaphysical, superstitious or dogmatic beliefs, admitting at the same time that ALL belief is not dispensable—that one must believe that one's spiritual practice has value. What this concession obscures is that Batchelor allegedly believes in nothing BEYOND his allegedly spiritual activity, a point Cohen gets at later by asking what might be “absolute.” Batchelor concedes that the Buddhist Third Truth, freedom from craving, might be “final” or definitive, but this again refers only to the seeker's inner striving.

I don't believe Batchelor really *wants* to be this “free of belief.” If there is nothing (to believe in) toward which striving reaches, what makes it spiritual as opposed to merely psychological? Freedom from craving, or the stilling of mental noise, could be striven for for reasons of mental health only—but would anybody, including Batchelor, make that effort without believing in a SOMEWHERE that it led to?

It is understandable that Batchelor would want to avoid definiteness about what is believed in. As Jacques Derrida argued, that is the road to orthodoxy and religious persecution. Perhaps THAT one believes is more important than WHAT one believes, but the role of belief in spiritual seeking is not to be scorned. I have been a disbeliever most of my life, and it seems

to me that spiritual struggle is hard enough for believers, let alone for those of us who aren't sure why we are going where.

Batchelor refers to "Mystery." If he believes, even in something no more defined than the "hidden face" of Mystery, I believe he should still declare it. Talking only of ways in which he DOESN'T believe seems misleading.

Coyd Walker
Scottsbluff, Nebraska

A NON-ISSUE

I sometimes find WIE's letters to the editor more enlightening than the articles themselves.

For example, I found Peter J. Lima's letter, "No Difference," about the duality of words, ALL words, and their relationship to Advaita, especially provocative. And I think he is right. Words must always, by necessity, be the instruments of duality, so it is totally ironic that there is a magazine exploring, through the imperfect lens of seemingly endless verbiage, the "issue" (non-issue, really) of "enlightenment."

But until we transcend words and their meanings, please keep up the good work.

Gary Falk
via email

THE ACHILLES' HEEL OF ADVAITA

Certainly it is meaningful to ask what illusion is if we are to understand what enlightenment is. Vijai Shankar tells us in your interview with him that when "the Atman reflects the entire world through the mirror of knowledge," this reflection is illusion. Your interviewer found this explanation to be "very clear." I beg to differ, as would many were they to press on this Achilles' heel of Advaita with a smidgen of reason.

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Can scientific inquiry lead us to the discovery of the same transcendent knowledge that the world's spiritual traditions speak of? Interviews with Huston Smith, Rupert Sheldrake, F. David Peat and Amit Goswami as well as articles by E.F. Schumacher and Fritjof Capra.



Women, Enlightenment and the Divine Mother

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there is no other, and reality is all-pervading. It has no form, qualities, attributes, etc. First of all, there is nothing for it to reflect upon to begin with and, secondly, that which is formless, like the sky, has no potential to reflect anything, much less something that remotely resembles the world of our experience.

Fortunately, there are more reasonable explanations of illusion available in other schools of Vedanta. This suggests that there are more meaningful conceptualizations and experiences of what enlightenment is than that which Advaita tries to tell us it is while simultaneously subscribing to the idea that enlightenment is an unspeakable nonexperience. Unfortunately, you gave these other schools no room to speak in your journal, and have chosen instead to ask us to hear from those who have, by their own philosophy, nothing to say about what enlightenment is.

Christopher Brown
 Eugene, Oregon

DON'T DISMISS THE SCRIPTURE

When you asked "What is Enlightenment?" in your Fall/Winter '98 issue, Swami Dayananda shed considerable light on how to answer this question as per Vedanta when he insisted on the importance of the scriptural legacy. Without this, no standard of knowledge exists by which one's words and actions can be evaluated.

Emphasizing, as many do, that truth lies beyond any book is a weak argument for dismissing the scriptural standard. No doubt realization of the truth does lie beyond the scripture, but it is scripture more than anything else in this world that points us in the direction of the truth. At least this is the theory of what the Upanishads are—revealed knowledge for the sake of showing the way.

The most universally accepted enlightened Vedantin himself stresses the importance of referring to the sacred texts when speaking about enlightenment. Here I am speaking about Krishna, who is accepted by all Vedantins as their leader. Throughout the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna underscores the importance of the scriptural legacy for those seeking enlightened life. Your question as to the nature of enlightenment is directly asked of Krishna by Arjuna early on in the Gita. In the second chapter Arjuna asks: "What, O Krishna, are the characteristics of one who is enlightened?" (BG 2.54). Krishna's answer is too lengthy to cite herein, and I leave it to interested readers to refer to the verses themselves. Suffice it to say, these verses offer tangible information that enables one to get a theoretical handle on what enlightenment is all about. The clearer we

are on the goal, the better we are equipped to traverse the path. To counter this with "Ah, my son, but there is no goal to attain, and only when you know this will you stop being a knower, having become the known, etc., ad nauseam" is a disservice to humanity. This sophism is for the most part what you have offered in the name of Vedanta.

Thus I appreciate Swami Dayananda's chastening us to the scriptural legacy. However, at the same time I question his own understanding of it when he tells us ignorance is the problem and knowledge alone the solution. Let me defer to the absolutely unambiguous words of Krishna when he says in his concluding remarks of the Gita: "By devotion to me one realizes me in truth" (BG 18.55). Throughout the sacred texts, and in the Gita in particular, devotion takes precedence over knowledge, for love knows no reason, and loving includes within it a kind of spontaneous knowing that can never be taught. When one loves God in truth, one knows what to do.

That there are diverse understandings of what the scripture says is no reason to abandon the canon of Vedanta when discussing its goal. Indeed, the theory is that God has spoken to us therein and it is our human prerogative, if not God's mandate, to discuss what has been said. In this regard, the earnest pursuit of your question would have been better served had you included discussion from the theistic branches of Vedanta that make up its majority, especially when the only other tradition you showcased was Buddhism, which like Advaita Vedanta is a nontheistic discipline with a scriptural canon of its own.


John Peters
via email

A NEW ALCHEMY

I eagerly read your Fall '98 issue on Hinduism and Buddhism from cover to cover. I would like to add a comment that mostly relates to the Helen Tworikov interview. It is not a position against hers, for I read her as being very open.

If we assume Buddha was enlightened, fine, but does this mean that "he knows better," and that we are to follow the past, and that any deviation is inherently inferior? To me, the dharma is not in the past, but evolves in the sense that it always readapts itself, ever arising anew, always Now.

We live in times of great transformation and experimentation. Of course, when the transcendent is adapted more deeply into the "ways of the world," there will be more challenges than when it is maintained within the context of the monastery.



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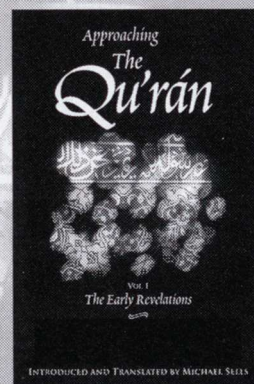
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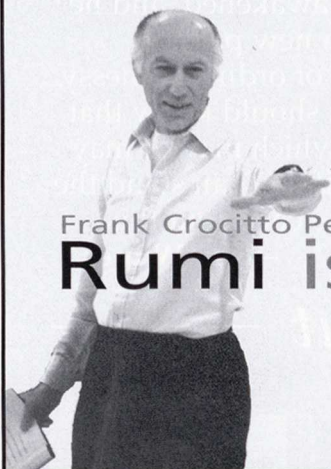
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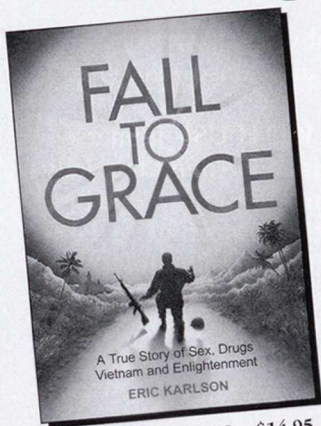
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Nevertheless, this is part of the challenge of our times, and it does not (it seems to me) help the situation by bemoaning it. It seems to me that the *bodhisattva* orientation is one of service, not one of criticism or trying to stem the tide. Rather, it is a "skillful means," an alchemy by which everything works to serve the higher unfolding of the dharma (and by this I do not even mean to limit this to Buddhism, since "the dharma is One").

As long as we consider the "Westernization" of Buddhism simply as a secularization, then the only way it can go is downhill. It is like saying that God is perfect, and any phenomenal manifestation can only be in the direction of imperfection. But this itself supports a dualistic position of contrasts. However, in this process, we need both the transcendent and the immanent, the ascending and the descending, for the "whole truth." In the current emphasis on the descending and the everyday applications, certainly I concur that we need the balance of the reawakening shock of the transcendent, the enlightenment orientation. But that is not a fixed position; rather, since it is inherently radiant, it naturally moves out into the world. It is like the ascending and descending movements of the yin/yang symbol, each moving into the other within the ever present Tao.

I agree that the rejection of enlightenment as a romantic or mythic idea can lead to dissipation, but we can also affirm a higher orientation: the radical sense of transcending the "goal" of enlightenment as something "out there" to be achieved.

Ed Hirsch

Albany, California

PLANET ADVAITA: THE DEBATE CONTINUES . . .

I just wanted to thank you for the interview with Ramesh Balsekar. Ever since reading that interview, I've felt ecstatic! I can finally do what I please without weighing the consequences. It's God's will, right? That's strange. I wonder why God didn't want me to finish my intensive physics lab report last night. It was due today. Oh, well . . .

I felt like I could no longer take Ramesh Balsekar seriously when in the interview he said that we are all just machines with no hearts and there's nothing we can change. My laughter ceased as I realized that there are probably many, many people out there who would agree with him.

Khanti Munro

Cambridge, Massachusetts

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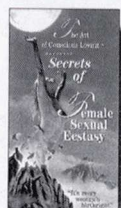
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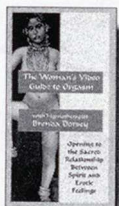
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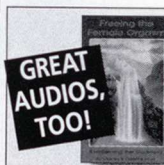
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The tirades against Ramesh Balsekar all miss one very important statement that he made in his interview with Chris Parish: that all that he says is his "concept." The self-righteous indignation expressed in some of the letters (especially Lisa Novak's) is really the anger of linear thinking unable to come to terms with that which cannot be expressed, but which can certainly be lived and "seen." Balsekar is being absolutely to the point when he says it's just a concept. That it doesn't mesh with the one I'm holding is not his problem, because he is pointing, finally, to that which is beyond the conceptual. To apperceive the nonconceptual is what it's all about; not giving soothing explanations for the mind is, as we say in South Africa, "hard luck." Balsekar refuses to give soothing explanations, hence the anger.

I, too, was deeply troubled by Balsekar's language. My mind saw greater value in saying that life, rather than being predetermined, is like a drama improvisation, with just the skeleton of a script being given. This sounds more appealing, doesn't it? We can hold on to our precious ideas of how things work, of still being an individual with "our will," etc. This was my firm conviction, until I experienced the reversal of "me" living life: Life was actually living "me"! Literally mind-blowing. (I am still unable to make "sense" of it, because it is beyond description.) Only then did I see the truth of Balsekar's "silly semantics." (No doubt you are asking, who is the "I" that is seeing the truth? Well, I believe that you, too, would have this "experience" if you can answer that question for yourself, nonconceptually.)

Chris Parish, by saying that "Planet Advaita is a nice place to visit, but I definitely wouldn't want to live there," is saying one of two things: The philosophy is interesting conceptually, or, I can go to the place

that Advaita points to (the nonconceptual) whenever I want. If it is the former, then it's really mind-stuff—an entertainment—but nothing to do with the nonconceptual. If he is implying the latter . . . well, you figure it out. And that would be more than "silly semantics."

Kriben Pillay, D.Phil

Editor, Noumenon

Durban, South Africa

I was disturbed by the tone in the interview with Ramesh Balsekar contained in your latest issue. Your magazine espouses open inquiry and clarity in delicate spiritual questioning, as does Andrew Cohen. However, the dialogue between Ramesh Balsekar and Chris Parish contradicted not only your stated aims but Andrew's teachings as well. The "Planet Advaita" prologue and epilogue were simply disrespectful toward not only a spiritual teacher and the tradition of Vedanta, but to the readers as well. When looking at important spiritual issues, one's intent must be directed toward discerning the impersonal truth, rather than being immersed in one's own purely personal emotional and philosophical reactions. The question I want to ask is: What purpose did this piece serve? Did it help to clarify and inspire one's own open inquiry into these difficult questions or did it serve to bias the reader with the interviewer's own personal opinions? When investigating such delicate issues, this kind of yellow journalism serves only to excite and confuse the reader, not enlighten them.

C. Gentile and J. Yang

via email

RAMESH BALSEKAR: SELF MASTER?

The enclosed postcard illustrates very well Michael Murphy's idea to put the head of Ramana Maharshi on the body of Frank Zane. Ramesh

Balsekar, whether you accept him or not, was in the position of a Frank Zane while staying in London as a young man. Isn't it interesting and very apt for your last edition of *WIE*?

Alf Lüchow

German publisher of Ramesh Balsekar
Freiburg, Germany



Ramesh S. Balsekar, 1939

GRADING THE ADVAITINS

The interviews published by *WIE* on Advaita reflect that the editorial board has chosen fame of the teachers as its criterion for whom to interview.

Ramesh Balsekar first: What he says is a standard Advaita ambush during debates. In fact, there are manuals specifically written by Advaitins on how to defeat others in debate, etc. But what he says contradicts Advaita, as expounded in the major treatise on the subject, the *Yoga Vashishtha*. If anyone reads the YV, they will find that this issue is dealt with in great detail there. And YV suggests that each jiva ("body/mind," as Balsekar says) has free will, and each mind by its desires and exercise of free will shapes the events in the universe. Since YV was supposedly told to Lord

Ram by his guru, Vashishtha, its word has much more value than what Mr. Balsekar says.

Anyone who practices witnessing meditation (the root of most meditations in Hinduism), will realize very quickly that the mind is to a great degree mechanical, and maybe in that sense predestined. But as the individual becomes aware of the mechanics of the mind, he does have more free will. According to various sources, I have come to understand that the "fully enlightened" have no free will, i.e., the universe acts through their "body/mind."

However, I am not even remotely close to partial enlightenment, let alone full enlightenment. But given that every person who has this habit of promulgating anti-commonsense theories about reality claims to be fully enlightened, one does get suspicious. On the other hand, people acknowledged as enlightened by most except the most orthodox (like Ramana Maharshi, Ramkrishna, etc.) never engage in this kind of intellectual and verbal jugglery. Their level of sincerity and honesty was far higher. And it shows.

Dr. Vijai: His opinions are more reasonable, but the way he always seems to suggest that he is enlightened and the interviewer is not, makes one suspicious of the state of his ego.

A strange paradox one notices with these people is that they have no problems at all with the suffering of other people. As they are Indians, I'm sure they have seen enough people suffer. And if in the Advaita sense they are really "fully" enlightened, they would also understand and FEEL that it was they themselves who were suffering inside the other "body/mind." If that were true, one would see it in their actions. Since compassion not practiced cannot be called compassion but only a frustrated, dishonest attitude, these "fully enlightened," in my opinion,

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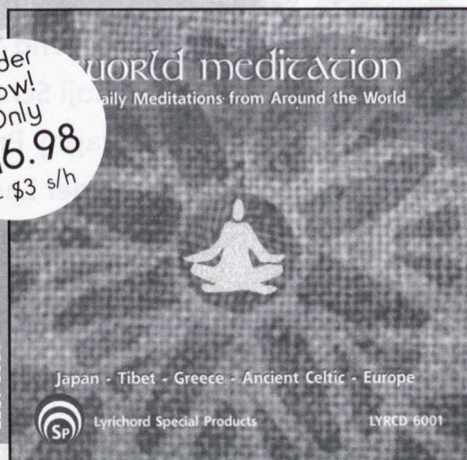
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lack compassion, and therefore their enlightenment is suspect. Of course, saying that may turn hell loose.

As for the interview with Swami Dayananda, he is an extremely orthodox person, and like orthodox people anywhere else, they have their set ideas, and nothing can help them. But at least they are keeping Hindu traditions alive. So I thank them to that extent.

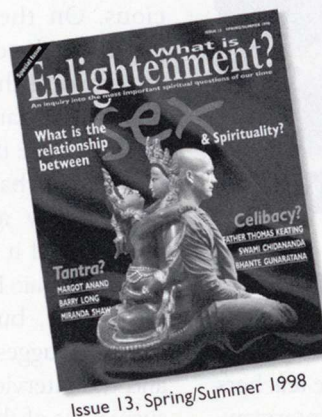
Ajja's report was a masterpiece.

Hemant Sharma
via email

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I am finding it very entertaining to read your "Does Anybody Know What They're Talking About?" issue with all its strange, rare and peculiar theories about enlightenment peppered with the advertising in your magazine. The advertisements give me the general feeling that enlightenment can be mine if I just order something—anything—from one of these ads. Only in America! I love your magazine; it always changes my life.

Julie Simmons
via email



IN LIEU OF A RESUME

I very much enjoyed Susan Bridle's interview with Margo Anand and felt she asked all the right questions and provided an excellent overview of Anand's work. I felt, however, that her epilogue was unfair and dismissive.

In her epilogue, Ms. Bridle states that she experienced some "cognitive dissonance" when attempting to "reconcile [Anand's] statements about 'claiming one's birthright of unlimited pleasure' on the one hand with 'surrendering to the ultimate source of Being' on the other." She then concludes by reminding herself, "I'm just in California." Firstly, following up the interview with this epilogue/editorial shows that WIE doesn't respect its readers enough to allow them to draw their own conclusions from what Anand says. It goes without saying how disrespectful this

was to Anand. And Bridle wasn't even willing to account for what *she* was bringing to the table that might have contributed to her experience of "dissonance," lazily pointing instead to the fact that she was in California.

So I hereby volunteer my services as an interviewer for your magazine and promise to acknowledge any personal bias that I bring to the table.

Hugh Smith
via email

STRAIGHT AND NARROW

I've just had an opportunity to examine your issue on sex and spirituality, and after combing the magazine page by page, I could find no direct reference to homosexuality of any sort, anywhere. Now, I didn't go through it thoroughly enough to say that there is no mention of the subject. (That would be almost unbelievable.) However, as a gay person who has found it essential to directly engage my sexuality as part of my spiritual path/practice, I find the lack of obvious consideration of my kind rather off-putting. I expect that the reason for this may be that you have taken for granted that the necessary attitudes toward sex for a person seeking "enlightenment" are the same, regardless of one's orientation. I don't know if this is really the explanation, but whatever the case, I find it inadequate.

While religious institutions have exploited their believers' vulnerability around the powerful force of sex in their lives for centuries, homosexuals (along with women and children) have by far gotten the worst of the deal. With the current, growing evidence that homosexuality is not a "choice" but a biological trait like left-handedness or eye color, the inability of many societies and religious authorities to come to terms with this fact of nature (in some way other than trying to eradicate it entirely) is desperately in need of change. This is an area in which many, even most, traditional spiritual teachers continue to fall short in demonstrating true "illumination," as I see it (from my admittedly "queer" perspective).

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azine devoted to the topic of sex that doesn't directly address the experience of gays is insufficient in scope if its aim is to promote "total" enlightenment. You have left a good ten percent of the human population out of the enlightenment equation!

Brian Mackenzie
Sydney, Australia

A LITTLE UPDATING

I want to thank you for your commitment in providing the marvelous array of views in *WIE*. I'd like to comment on the interview with Barry Long in your Spring/Summer 1998 issue. Barry asserts that women are to be "adored" (*Webster's New World Dictionary*: "to be worshipped as divine") by men. He proceeds to define what he believes should be worshipped and elevates this to an abstraction he calls "woman." He then positions (and limits) men based on this abstraction: "Because only when woman is truly loved can man be truly himself and regain his lost authority. Only then can peace return to earth." This is projection, not metaphysics.

Within society, Barry's approach envisions a world where fifty percent of the people do not teach or speak in public, while the other fifty percent "regain a lost authority." What Barry is asserting, when applied, is that it is metaphysically necessary for men to dominate women within society, and he starts that domination by claiming authority to tell women what their true nature is. I've seen this epistemological approach in nineteenth-century treatises justifying slavery, which start by asserting the God-given nature of the races. There is no inherent connection between Barry's interesting idea of God in/out of existence and his definition of "woman," or his assertion that "man" has lost his authority—which, of course, makes men dependent on someone or something to have authority over.

Within the relationship itself, Barry's approach envisions a world in which men and women sideline two of their aspects—mental and emotional—while making love. Denying the two aspects that personal projection could operate through is not a solution. In real life, partners commit not only to God but also to each other. You can't discount two of the other person's four aspects (spiritual, mental, emotional, physical) and fulfill that commitment. Barry asserts that his method has "no mass solutions," and that "everyone has to do it for himself or herself," but his method is too limiting to be useful outside of a master/disciple or educational context. Barry's disciple Jade (whom he will not allow to be interviewed) writes, "It is the God that I love in the man—not his person or personality." Perhaps, having allowed herself to be depersonalized by Barry's training (she is now personifying his abstraction, "woman," and disengaging half her aspects), she does not understand

herself to be capable of loving both God in the man and the individual man. But this is a great joy of life, and perhaps the greatest human dharma—to be able to experience another human being as a unique spark of the divine! Until one comes to the place of doing this, it's so much easier just to love an abstraction. That we could do without bodies.

Miranda Shaw's explanation of tantric sex is very interesting, but it, too, includes the idea that men should "adore" women. This is an invitation to projection, as illustrated by Barry Long's use of the concept. A little updating may serve both men and women well. How about mutual respect, which includes the peaceful reception of whatever the other person is?

Louise Vogel
Upton, Massachusetts

NOT A WOMAN'S ISSUE

We have just seen Vimala Thakar's quotation on your web site concerning Swami Prabhavananda, women, *sannyasa* and female liberation. Let me assure you that as 1) a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, 2) a woman, and 3) a *sannyasin*, that Ms. Thakar's quotation is completely erroneous. Swami Prabhavananda GAVE *sannyasa* to a number of qualified women and he strongly favored the foundation of the women's monastic order in India, the Sri

Sarada Math—the women's division of the Ramakrishna Order. If Ms. Thakar was not given permission to speak in the Hollywood Vedanta Society (Ramakrishna Mission), I can assure you that the reason was not due to her gender! Swami Prabhavananda was quite careful about whom he allowed to speak in the temple; gender, however, was never an issue. He was a staunch believer in women's spiritual capabilities; indeed, he was far ahead of his time.

Pravrajika Vrajaprana
Sarada Convent, Vedanta Society
Santa Barbara, California

EVER NEW

I thought that it is about time that I thanked you for your magazine and for offering up so much of it online. As I sit here, my very loud dot-matrix printer is spitting out a Ken Wilber article from your Fall/Winter 1997 issue, "The Modern Spiritual Predicament," that I think is a very important one—contrasting religious experience that comforts with that which transforms. It is one of many articles I come back to in WIE. I have read it many times, linked to it from my website and led a chat room discussion based on it.

Tom Armstrong
Editor, Zen Unbound
via email

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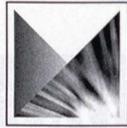
With a full schedule of teachings, dialogues and meditations, this two-week residential retreat has become renowned as an ecstatic event, alive with the joy of self-discovery and the wonder of genuine spiritual inquiry. For many who attend, the opportunity to deeply explore Andrew's teachings, and the chance to interact with him over a sustained period of time, is a profoundly life-changing event. In this unique environment in the midst of the magic and mystery of India, participants quickly find themselves swept up in the possibility of a total and unimaginable transformation.



Rishikesh, India
February 5-20, 2000

For more information, please contact:

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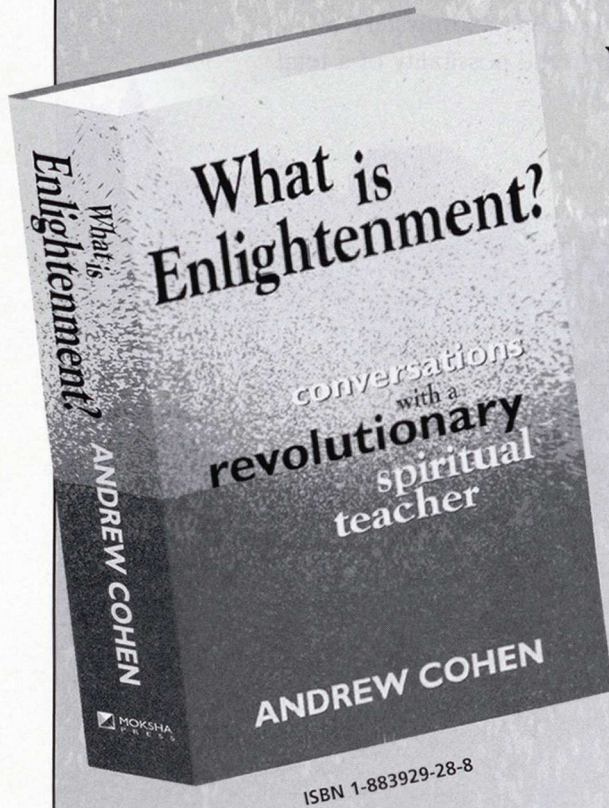
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