

Spring 1994

Center Voice

the newsletter of the Center for Sacred Sciences

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Special Focus: Devotion

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◆ Enlightenment Day Celebration ◆

Each year we honor the mystics of all traditions on the anniversary of Joel's awakening in August, 1983. The Center will be hosting this year's party on August 7, following our regular Sunday program. Join us at 11 a.m. or from 1-4 p.m. for a potluck.

This issue of *Center Voice* is about the mystical practice of spiritual devotion. Devotion is often contrasted with the practice of inquiry—where one examines the nature of consciousness and the self as the means toward spiritual insight. In the practice of devotion the spiritual seeker experiences the liberation found in the power of love and surrender of self.

In Joel's article, "The Function of Devotion," he speaks of the transformation of the heart which is the key to a spiritual path. A shift in one's conceptual awareness that does not open the heart cannot be adequate ground for this transformation. Through an object of spiritual devotion one can gain some direct experience of the Absolute as divine grace and love.

Mike has written in his article, "Reconciliation," about his experiences on retreat. He writes of his struggle with the concept of a God that exists in form and of his direct experiences of that grace.

Two articles in the newsletter illustrate devotion from the Eastern and the Western perspective. John Richardson has written about the practice of devotion as exemplified in the Hindu path of Bhakti Yoga. And "In the Footsteps of Christ: the Life of Saint Francis of Assisi" we see an example of a life of devotion from the Christian tradition.

From the Cloud Mountain retreat last Fall, we have contributions of poetry. The Library Page has the latest on new books in the CSS library as well as information on the traditional literature on devotion. I hope you enjoy this issue.

—the editor

Center for Sacred Sciences

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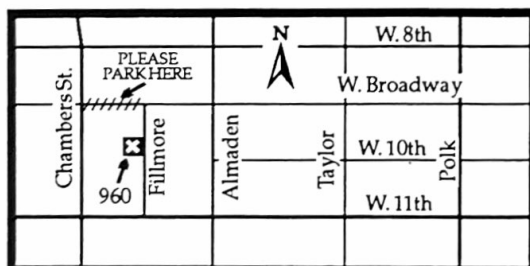
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The Center for Sacred Sciences is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization dedicated to the creation and dissemination of a new Worldview, based on the wisdom of humanity's great spiritual teachers, but presented in forms appropriate to our present scientific culture. Our programs draw on the teachings of the mystics of all traditions, as well as the evidence of modern physics. Among the Center's current offerings are Sunday Programs with meditation and talk by Joel Morwood, meditation classes and retreats, and workshops and study groups. Joel also leads a weekly Practitioners' Group for committed spiritual seekers, as well as being available for private consultation. The Center also maintains an extensive lending library of books and tapes covering a broad spectrum of spiritual, psychological, and scientific subjects. Other than a small stipend for our bookkeeper, the Center has no paid staff. We rely entirely on volunteer labor to conduct our programs, and on donations and membership dues to meet operating expenses.



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Center News:

Last December Joel and Jennifer visited Alpha Farm in Deadwood, Oregon where Joel gave a talk on "Self and Suffering" to a dozen or so residents and friends of the community. It was followed by a lively discussion in which many people shared their personal experiences. If you would like Joel to talk to your group, call the Center at (503) 345-0102, or write to our mailing address on the back of this newsletter. In keeping with his policy of not charging for teachings, Joel asks no fee, only donations to cover travel expenses.



Participants at Cloud Mountain Retreat, Fall 1993.

For six weeks, from January 9 to February 15, 1994, Ann, Gene, and Paul went to India. They visited various temples and ashrams along the way including those of Ramana Maharshi, Anandamayi Ma, and Poonjaji. They stayed together at first, then split up and went separate ways before reuniting for the journey home. They report that the people they encountered in India were very helpful and friendly, and they are considering another trip back!

Two of Franklin Merrell-Wolff's books have been republished in one volume. Merrell-Wolff was one of Joel's teachers. The original books, *Pathways Through To Space* and *Consciousness Without An Object*, are now available in *Experience and Philosophy*. This volume gives greater accessibility to Merrell-Wolff's writings and also provides an index not available in the earlier publications. *Experience and Philosophy* is available from SUNY Press, \$19.95.

THE FUNCTION OF DEVOTION

by Joel

Conversion of the Heart

Some spiritual seekers today consider themselves too sophisticated to engage in practices of devotion. To them such practices seem to be predicated on a dualistic error, common to exoteric religion, which conceives of the Absolute in terms of a distinction between 'I' and 'other', 'self' and 'God'. If, they ask, the Absolute is (as the mystics of all traditions teach) that Reality or Consciousness which *transcends all forms of distinction*, how can it possibly appear in any form that might serve as a suitable object for devotion? But seekers who hold this view have, themselves, fallen into the far more serious dualistic error of ignoring the teaching's indispensable complement—namely that the Absolute is also and simultaneously *immanent in all forms of distinction*. Consequently, any form—whether it be a gross object (like the stone Lingas worshipped by the devotees of Shiva) or a highly subtle one (such as the Idea of the Good, so ardently pursued by the Greek Platonists)—is potentially a window through which the Divine can manifest to seekers during certain stages of their paths.¹

When such theophanies do occur, they automatically call forth a devotional response in the heart of the seeker—a response which, in fact, is essential to the successful completion of any spiritual quest. This is because, unlike purely philosophical pursuits, a spiritual path ultimately entails something far more profound than a mere modification of a person's ideas. What is required is a metamorphosis of the whole psyche, a revolution in the deepest recesses of the soul, capable of bringing about an emotional as well as an intellectual reorientation of one's entire life. In short, the spiritual seeker must undergo a conversion not only of the mind, but also of the heart. And it is this "conversion of the heart" which devotion alone can accomplish, because devotion pre-eminently embodies and expresses that most fundamental of all spiritual principles, *self-surrender*. Thus, whether or not a particular seeker engages in formal devotional prac-

tices, if the cultivation of heart-felt devotion to the Absolute is neglected, no true transformation can occur and the way to liberation will be blocked.

Encounter with the Divine

Formal devotional practices can be distinguished from the other types of spiritual practices (at least, in their initial stages) by the kinds of experiences they are designed to produce. Whereas practices like inquiry, meditation, and morality are aimed primarily at yielding insights into the fundamental causes of suffering (such as the impermanence of phenomena, the insatiability of desire, and the futility of attachments), practices of devotion function to provide the seeker with an immediate (albeit partial) apprehension of the Divine. This is not to say, of course, that such glimpses can only be gained in practices of devotion. Any practice, if pursued with sufficient ardor, will eventually generate the same result. But the other practices of the path usually take a much longer time to bear this fruit. In the meantime, the seeker must exercise a relentless self-discipline, often accompanied by strong internal resistance, which can turn the whole quest into a discouraging and joyless ordeal.

The great advantage of devotional practices, then, is that they tend to make possible a direct encounter with the Divine during the earliest stages of the path. Once having gotten a foretaste of that indescribable happiness to which the whole quest leads, the seeker will have a strong incentive for enduring future hardships. Instead of being driven to seek transcendence solely out of a negative desire to escape the suffering endemic to all deluded life, the seeker will now be positively drawn towards the Divine by a powerful longing for another experience of that bliss which he or she has already savored firsthand.

In shamanic cultures those who sought an encounter with the Divine went alone into the forest, or to the desert, or climbed a mountain, and "cried for a vision." Although perhaps the most ancient of spiritual disci-

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plines, this "vision quest" has continued to form the basis for devotional practices in all the Great Mystical Traditions down to the present day. Here, for example, is how a nineteenth-century Russian mystic, Theophan the Recluse, describes it for Christians: "To raise up the mind towards the Lord, and to say with contrition: 'Lord, have mercy! Lord grant thy blessing! Lord, help!'--this is to cry out in prayer to God."²² The only external condition necessary for such a direct approach to the Divine is solitude. Nor is it mandatory to climb a mountain, or go to the desert, or find a forest. As the great Hasidic Master, Nahman of Bratslav, writes, all that is really necessary is for the seeker to "set aside at least an hour or more during which he is alone in a room or in a field so that he can converse with the Maker in secret, entreating and pleading in many ways of grace and supplication, begging God to bring him near to his service in truth."²³

To modern ears, this kind of simple appeal to God may sound hopelessly naive. Surely establishing contact with that Consciousness which informs the entire cosmos cannot be so easy! Yet, anyone who actually tries this practice will find that truly opening oneself to the Divine is far more difficult than might at first be imagined. Most seekers will discover that a host of obstacles arises—embarrassment, doubt, humiliation, fear. These feelings constitute what in many traditions is called a "hardened heart"—i.e., that sense of an isolated 'I' which is what perpetually stands between ourselves and the Divine. In order to overcome this painful self-consciousness, many renowned devotees of the past initially prayed for a "piercing" or "wounding of the heart." Simply to be able to let go of one's defenses long enough to confess one's own suffering, fear, sorrow, grief, and impotence is already to have taken a major step towards freedom. It means that at least some small crack has been opened in the prison-house of self through which the Light of Consciousness can now start to shine, if only intermittently.

Passion for the Divine

The next step in the practice of devotion is to widen this crack into a permanent portal by cultivating a constant remembrance of the Absolute, for as Theophan explains: "The essence of the whole thing is to be established in the remembrance of God, and to walk in His presence."²⁴ The Hindu sage, Shankara, goes even farther: "Do not waste a moment in concern for worldly affairs or attraction to sense objects. Remember Brahman even while you are asleep. Meditate

upon the Atman within your own heart."²⁵ But is such a thing really possible? Can a person literally maintain a constant remembrance of God in the midst of all the activities of daily life, and even while sleeping?

The answer testified to by the mystics of all traditions is an emphatic *yes*. What's more, there are specific disciplines for cultivating this constant "remembrance of God," the most universal of which is *unceasing prayer*. The Christian version of this discipline is described by Theophan as follows: "In order to make their thought hold to one thing, the Fathers used to accustom themselves to the continual repetition of a short prayer, and from this habit of constant repetition this small prayer clung to the tongue in such a way that it repeated itself of its own accord. In this manner their thought clung to the prayer and, through the prayer, to the constant remembrance of God."²⁶

In India the technique is known as *japa* and usually involves the continual reiteration of one of God's numerous names. "While attending to your work with your hands," says the twentieth century Hindu saint, Anandamayi Ma, "keep yourself bound to Him [God] by sustaining *japa*, the constant remembrance of Him in your heart and mind."²⁷ Practicing the remembrance of God is also a fundamental discipline in Sufism. Called *dhikr* (literally "remembrance"), its most common form is the repetition of the phrase, "La ilaha illa 'llah" ("there is nothing but God") over and over until (as the Sufis put it) "the heart steals the *dhikr* from the tongue"—meaning that the phrase starts to resound effortlessly within the seeker all by itself.

The important point in all these different variations of unceasing prayer is not the actual words, but that the constant remembrance of God (which the prayer inspires) should awaken in the devotee an unbroken awareness of the Divine Presence. As a result of basking in this Presence, feelings of spiritual longing and love will begin to stir. At times, this love may be felt only as a smoldering ache in the heart. At others times, however, it will blaze forth into a kind of spiritual bonfire so beautifully described by the Christian mystic, Catherine of Genoa: "As the soul feels itself being drawn upwards, the soul feels itself melting in the fire of that love of its sweet God."²⁸

What makes devotional practices unique is just this power to ignite the kind of ecstatic passion which, when fully enkindled, can (as Catherine goes on to say) "extinguish all other loves in me and will annihilate me and busy me so much with you that I will have no time

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or place for anything else.”⁹ In other words, once the seeker’s normally scattered attention and desires have been freed from all rival attractions, they will coalesce into a single yearning, become riveted on a solitary hope, which is for a complete and indissoluble Union with the Absolute conceived as a “Divine Lover”.

In order to convey something of the intensity of this feeling, many mystics have compared it to the experience of “falling in love” that happens between human beings. This analogy, however, is not to be confused with our modern “democratic” notions of love as a sort of emotional contract entered into by “equals,” trying to work out a balance between their own self-interests and desires and the desires and interests of their partners. Instead, what the mystics have in mind is Unconditional Love, or *Amor* (as the Medieval troubadours called it), exemplified by the love affairs of the heroes and heroines of such classics as the *Tales of King Arthur* or the *Arabian Nights*. In this type of all-consuming love there is no room for negotiation based on self-interest or personal desire. On the contrary, what is required is a total submission to the interest and desires of the Beloved—a submission, moreover, which must be proven by deeds and tested by sacrifices.

Surrender of the Self

For the lovers of God, of course, the “deeds” and “sacrifices” which must be performed are precisely those required by the other disciplines of the spiritual path—for the practice of devotion in no way obviates the necessity for engaging in inquiry, meditation, and moral conduct. However, if devotion has been successfully cultivated, the seeker’s attitude towards these practices will itself have been dramatically transformed. Self-inquiry, for example, will take on new urgency as the seeker realizes that the more quickly attachments can be exposed and abandoned, the nearer he or she will come to God. Likewise, meditation, which can so easily bog down into a seemingly interminable war against endless distractions, will become for the practitioner of devotion a series of lovers’ trysts in which the most intimate communions with the Divine take place. As for the virtues and precepts, instead of viewing them as exercises in austerity, true devotees will start to welcome them as precious opportunities for proving their love through acts of self-surrender, offered at the Beloved’s feet.

Yet despite the fact that practitioners of devotion usually exhibit an enthusiasm for spiritual exercises

that other seekers lack, this does not mean that the practice itself is free from sorrows and woe. As with human love, the love of God can result in periods of intense anguish as well as joy. Listen, for example, to Mira Bai, who, after surrendering herself to Krishna, laments: “Why do You torment me? For Your sake I abandoned the world, and my family. Why do you now forget me? You lit the fire of the pain of absence, but You have not returned to put it out.”¹⁰

The reason such lacunas occur in the seeker’s relationship with the Beloved is that, in reality, all forms of experience—even spiritual ones—are by nature transitory. And just because spiritual communion brings such supernal happiness, when it is interrupted, the heart-broken devotee becomes immersed in the deepest despair. It is, however, this very despair that in the end proves to be devotion’s greatest blessing. For, as in the case of human lovers, it is this unbearable pain of separation that makes the spiritual lover increasingly willing to submit to any ordeal—even that of death itself—if by so doing permanent union with the Beloved can at last be attained. The onslaught of this psycho-spiritual crisis represents a crucial turning-point for the seeker precisely because death is just what is called for if the quest is ever to be concluded—not the physical death of the body, to be sure, but a *spiritual death of the self*. This is why the Sufi poets sing: “Do not escape being slain, if thou art a true lover. He who is not slaughtered is just dead meat.”¹¹

The reason the “death of self” constitutes the inescapable denouement of the spiritual path is, of course, that it is this very delusion of a ‘self’ separate from some ‘God’ which has all along prevented a full *Gnosis* or Realization of the Absolute’s Ultimate Mode of Being which does, indeed, *transcend all forms of distinction*—including and especially the distinction between the devotee and the Divine. Consequently, as long as there exists the slightest shadow of an ‘I’, capable of desiring union with some ‘other’, then even though that other be the Transcendent Reality Itself, this desire will form an impenetrable boundary between them. But then, what is the poor seeker to do? For even if he or she desires *not* to desire in the hope of attaining this final Realization, there will still be present a ‘self’ who desires not-to-desire.

Now as anyone who has ever endured the torment of unrequited love knows, the hardest thing for any lover to accept is that there is nothing more to be done—that no additional effort no matter how strenuous, no further gesture no matter how grand, will ever succeed in

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winning the Beloved. Yet this is precisely what must be accepted by the spiritual lover. For, in the final analysis, Unconditional Love does not mean surrendering to the hope that union with the Beloved will one day be achieved, but rather to the certainty that it will not. Thus, when the seeker is deprived of every last trace of hope and desire—and if all other hopes and desires have been truly surrendered during the course of the path—then the self simply dries up like an old autumn leaf and vanishes into the world forever.

This is the real end of the path, not because anything has been attained, but simply because the delusion of separation has ceased. Here no “union” is possible for here there are no ‘lovers’ nor any ‘Beloved’ to be united. Here there is only that Boundless and Unconditioned Consciousness, and the Divine Play of all Its infinite forms, which is Love Itself. ❖

March, 1994

Notes

¹ The exoteric error here consists not in taking a particular form to be a manifestation of the Divine, but in seizing on that form as the Divine’s *only* mode of manifestation.

² Igumen Chariton of Valamo, *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*, trans. E. Kadloubovsky and E. M. Palmer, ed. Timothy Ware (1985; reprint, London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 80.

³ Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Thought*, (New York: Behrman House, Inc., 1976), 63-64.

⁴ Chariton of Valamo, *The Art of Prayer*, 98—his italics.

⁵ *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, 3rd ed. (Hollywood, California: Vedanta Press, 1978), 80.

⁶ Chariton of Valamo, *The Art of Prayer*, 86.

⁷ Anandamayi Ma, *Matri Vani: Vol II*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Shree Shree Anandamayee Charitable Society, 1982), 64.

⁸ *Catherine of Genoa: Purgation and Purgatory*, trans. Serge Hughes (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 79.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁰ *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai*, trans. A. J. Alston (Jawahar Nagar, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980), 76-77.

¹¹ Dr. Mir Valiuddin, *Contemplative Disciplines in Sufism*, ed. Dr. Gulshan Khakee (London: East-West Publications, 1980), xxiv.

XIV

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.
I, like a usurpt towne, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but Oh, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved faine,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce mee, untie, or breake that knot againe,
Take me to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.

John Donne (1572-1631)
from the *Holy Sonnets* (1610-1611?)

RECONCILIATION

by Mike

The Fall '93 Retreat was, for me, a time of heart openings, humbling insights, profound experiences, and, surprisingly, deep despair. The theme of Devotion was something I have had an uneasy relationship to. I have tended toward Jnana, or inquiry, as the primary emphasis for most of my path so far. The insights gained from these practices left me with a hard time relating to the concept of a "God" in the realm of form, however subtle. I found my experiences on retreat to be deeply troubling, in that they were very powerful, but in some ways they seemed to contradict or be incompatible with what I thought I "knew" from my practices of inquiry. My despair grew from the realization that, as important as insight was, insight alone was not going to end my delusion once and for all. I felt like I had used all the fuel in my spiritual vehicle and ended up in a cul-de-sac.

For a long time I had been more comfortable with the Buddhist avoidance of giving any form to Brahman, or Consciousness Itself. I had "seen" for myself, in meditative absorption into the formless, what the Eastern Traditions call samadhi, that *ultimately* there was no "thing" that could be called God. Even though I had often felt a power in the practices of the Christians, Hindus, and Sufis, practices of contemplation and chanting and zikr, I always held "God" at arm's length. I was skeptical. I couldn't really accept the existence of a Supreme Being, in any form, that my intellect couldn't comprehend, and indeed, some of my own spiritual experiences seemed to deny.

But there *is* a power beyond any individual self. I have experienced it many times in the past. And during the retreat, doing devotional practices, there clearly *was* "help from beyond" in the form of visions and clear instructions received from within. These experiences during the retreat were, to me, undeniably real. But I was experiencing cognitive dissonance. The thinking part of me wanted to relegate these experiences to that twilight zone of the mind reserved for interesting experiences that don't fit the filing systems of reality, there to be remembered occasionally as curiosities. But

my Spiritual Path is much too important to me to allow me to turn away from such divine guidance.

I had to grapple with the paradox of a "God" that I didn't believe was ultimately real, very clearly making contact with me. On the last day of our retreat I wrote in my journal:

How can I sum up what I am feeling? Confusion. Uncertainty. Getting visions from a God I am not sure I believe in, yearning for union with a God I have seen behind, so to speak. Joel says God is real so long as we believe in a separate self. But I believe very tentatively in a separate self, at this point. Is my only refuge and comfort a tentative God?! What is to be my salvation? At times I sink into despair and confusion.

After the retreat, I continued to struggle with this issue of the relative reality of God. When I reflected on a God that was as real as my separate self, I was forced to admit a few things to myself. One humbling but obvious fact was that no matter how tentative I thought my belief in a separate self, in fact I was still acting out of this delusion in my daily life. This delusion is very pervasive, with roots far deeper in the psyche than intellectual analysis can ever hope to reach.

I also had to admit that the powers of concentration and mindfulness I had developed over years of training through meditation, and all of the spiritual experiences over the years, gained through Grace alone, that had allowed me to see deeply into Truth, indeed even experience (temporarily) my identity with Consciousness Itself, none of these had ended my delusion. The momentum of karmic inertia, the very motive principle of this lawful universe, would present this delusion of self to consciousness again, as surely as the tide comes in. It would seem to come as a kind of a "package deal" with the world of form itself. Even though this world had become more transparent, this delusion itself would be fooled yet again into believing in itself, albeit with less certainty than before.

All my effort, and all my will, had helped to remove many obstacles to final Realization. But as my vision had cleared, and the veils had been removed, one of the

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things I saw so clearly was the depth of my own imperfection. From my retreat journal:

... I feel more lost than ever, less close to (and certainly not worthy of) Gnosis than ever, even though the depths of insight have pierced through delusion more profoundly than ever. Even though my vision of God's hands seemed to promise all. ... I have seen in more minute detail all the little selfish thoughts and actions that blind me to the Truth—they are so myriad! How can there be any hope of them ceasing when there is still a self?!

I knew, from my own experience, that help from beyond the self is needed if the delusion of self is to end. I also knew, from experience, that such help, such Grace, exists. Should I deny this just because I didn't understand it? Of course not. Who am *I* to quibble about the reality of the helper? I have come to terms with my confusion in this way. God, in form, is as real as anything else in this world of form. I have seen that this world of form is nothing *but* God, consisting as it does of distinctions arising in Consciousness Itself. Seeing this, the conceit of my delusion has lost much of its power. I have ceased to have a problem asking for help from One more vast than the Universe, older than time itself, more powerful than a billion suns. If this God, in form, is no more real than the earth beneath my feet, or the air I breathe, or this body and mind itself, so be it. Truly, who am I to question the reality of God?

God in form is but one aspect of the One. This same God also transcends form and concept, and this extraordinary quality of the immanent God is of great value to the spiritual seeker. God is one of the few forms arising in consciousness that can not only focus our attention, but lead us toward the only Reality and open our hearts to Grace. By doing the practice of Prayer in the heart, we can notice the attachments and distractions that bind us to this world of delusion, much like in any object meditation. But the prayer of quiet in the heart, or contemplation, consisting of "a naked intent toward God" is much more subtle, being, in effect, a concentration on no object. This can lead to a deep peace and stillness, removing all barriers to the workings of Grace.

A few weeks after our retreat, I had a particularly deep experience of this prayer of quiet in the heart.

I believe that this practice of Devotion has great power indeed to prepare the heart for the Grace of God. In the direction of our yearning, Grace will indeed reach out to us from beyond the self.

After settling deeply into the practice, I noticed that all of my being was concentrated, laser like, on this "naked intent," this longing for union with God, this yearning in the heart. In addition to the exceptional freedom and clarity that arose in this state, I observed very clearly and steadily, in the form of my yearning, the presence of will itself—one of the subtlest manifestations of the delusion of self. In this state, with my attention anchored firmly in the longing for God, mindfulness naturally came into play, observing this will, this subtlest manifestation of self, completely free of its grasp for the moment. At this point, inquiry and devotion were naturally reconciled. I don't know if an individual can do anything more in this moment to reach out to God, to clear away the obstacles to Gnosis. The only thing to do in this moment is to surrender, and trust in the Grace of God, in its own

time. Indeed, surrender is the very nature of this state, and it was clearly obvious that any willed action would entail re-identifying with this will that can so clearly be seen as "not I." And in that direction lies effort and suffering and delusion. The deep inertia of delusion, in fact, reasserted itself after this deepest of prayers. But I have "committed myself irrevocably to Grace," as suggested by Theophan the Recluse, and the will that would try to hold on to these ecstatic states grows ever weaker as I increasingly open myself to the Grace of God, in whatever form it might take.

I believe that this practice of Devotion has great power indeed to prepare the heart for the Grace of God. In the direction of our yearning, Grace will indeed reach out to us from beyond the self. Our yearning serves to keep us oriented and our hearts ready and open to that Grace. In a certain sense, Grace has answered my questions by transcending them. The reconciliation of my paths occurs eternally before the questions arise. Ultimately, God is a mystery impenetrable to the human mind. Gnosis consists not in figuring God out, but in the full and unshakable Realization that there is nothing *but* God, One without a second. The Truth to be Realized is our true identity with this One. This is, as Jesus said, "the truth that will set you free." May all of my friends on this path open their hearts to this practice of prayer, and receive blessings of abundant Grace. ❖

March, 1994



Library Page

CSS Library Hours:

Sunday afternoons
2:00 - 4:00 p.m.



Tuesday evenings
5:30 - 8:30 p.m.

Library News:

After hearing about the books coming out of the Parliament of the World's Religions (held in August and September of 1993), we postponed the subject of Science as a book-drive theme, and purchased several books from and about the Parliament and interfaith dialogue.

A Sourcebook for the Community of Religions was published by the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions (CPWR). It includes critical issues discussed at the Parliament, "portraits" of the religions of the world, overviews of global and local interfaith groups and what they are doing, as well as suggestions and resources for beginning or continuing interfaith dialogue and projects. I especially recommend this book to those interested in teaching a multi-cultural religious class.

Pilgrimage of Hope: One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue by Marcus Braybrooke and *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* by Diana L. Eck are two very readable and lucid books on interfaith dialogue. *Pilgrimage* is a history that starts with the organizers of the first Parliament held in Chicago in 1893, and then traces the development of four major interfaith organizations. *Encountering God* is a more personal look at interfaith work. As a practicing Christian and a professor of Comparative Religion, Eck blends a comparative look at religions with long personal experience in interfaith dialogue and how that dialogue has deepened her own faith.

Some other books in this new section include: *Global Responsibility* by Hans Kung, *Our Religions: The Seven World Religions Introduced* edited by Arvind Sharma, and we should soon have

Global 2000 Revisited: What Shall We Do? by Gerald O. Barney.

The other theme of this year's book-drive is Art. We've purchased some great books for this section. I'll give you a report on them in the next issue, as well as on some of the books in our new section titled Religion & Modern Culture. JK

Book Reviews:

It is often interesting to read different translations of the same work. A comparison can either confirm our understanding of a sacred text, or when meanings diverge, force us to turn to ourselves and our own experience to wrestle the wisdom from the pages.

The library has two translations of a 12th century classic of Hindu devotional literature: *The Narada Bhakti Sutras* (Swami Tyagisananda, trans.) and *The Philosophy of Love* (Shri Hanumanprasad Poddar, trans.).

I found the two translations of Sutra #81 to be interesting examples of differing styles which raise questions about the original meaning. Swami Tyagisananda's version reads: "Only love of the absolute, eternal Truth is the greatest; this love, indeed is the greatest." Poddar's translation is: "Out of the three truths (physical, oral, mental), (or in all the three times - past, present and future, it is indeed true that) devotion to the Lord alone is the best, devotion alone is the best."

This is just a small example of the discrepancies that can arise in translating, but these differences can lead to helpful insights if we take the time to wonder why they exist. I thought it odd that the Swami's translation put "love of the absolute truth" as the highest. This seemed to be more of an intellectual than a devotional approach. I turned back to Poddar's version where "devotion to the Lord" is used in the same place. This seemed more consistent at first but then I saw there was really no difference between them. For a Bhakti, devotion to the Lord is love of the absolute eternal truth.

The library has books from many different traditions with multiple translations available. Among them are *The Bhagavad Gita*, *The Koran*, *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Talmud*, *The Tao Te Ching* and *The Dhammapada*, which you may want to check out. JR

Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff. . . . And preach as you go, saying, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.'

Matthew 10:9 & 10:7

In the Footsteps of Christ: the life of Saint Francis of Assisi

by Melody Carr

In the Christian tradition the path to God is disclosed through fidelity to the life and words of Jesus. One man expressed this ideal so perfectly that he has been called a second Christ. But he called himself God's fool.

This man, who was to become Saint Francis of Assisi, was born Giovanni di Bernadone in 1181 or 1182. Assisi is a town in the central Italian district of Umbria. His family was very wealthy, though not of the nobility. His father was a cloth merchant, and his eldest son, nicknamed Francis, was raised to take over the family business. Francis took advantage of his family's money and position and became a leader of the town's young men, noted for his charismatic and passionate nature—and his sensual and profligate lifestyle. As a youth, Francis dreamed of the worldly glory and adventure embodied in the chivalric ideals of knighthood. But when Assisi warred against the neighboring city of Perugia and Francis enlisted, this dream came to grief. In the battle of Collestrada, the forces of Assisi lost. Many of Francis's friends were killed and many others, Francis among them, were imprisoned in Perugia's dungeons. It was a year before they were released.

When he returned home, Francis was twenty-two and very ill from tuberculosis. Slowly, as he recovered, the visions which had once inspired him to worldly grandeur were transformed to spiritual awareness. In his first moment of visionary revelation, Francis heard Christ speak to him from the cross in an ancient ruined church, saying, "Francis, repair my house." Taking this command literally, he began rebuilding many of the churches around Assisi. This work began the practice

that Francis followed through his whole life: surrendering his spirit wholly to God's will.

In 1208, in a small church in the woods near Assisi, Santa Maria della Angeli, called the Portiuncula, Francis listened to a priest read Matthew 10. In this chapter Jesus speaks to his disciples telling them to go out into the world and proclaim the kingdom of heaven is at hand. When he heard these words, Francis felt Christ speaking directly to him.

With that single-minded intensity and simplicity of spirit which always characterized him, Francis took Christ's words literally. He gave away everything he had and set forth to preach. Every footstep Francis took was in exact and unswerving devotion to the ideals of obedience, poverty, and selflessness set forth in the Gospel. Yet this obedience and poverty of spirit was not grim and ascetic, for what comes down to us through the eight hundred years since is the power of Saint Francis's joyful response.

"God's Fool" took Christ's injunctions at their face value. He understood what Christ meant when he said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." And Francis understood that one's acceptance of Christ as model must be whole-hearted, for Christ also said:

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:24)

What do these words mean? Why deny ourselves? What is this paradox of life lost and gained?

Perhaps it is that we think of our lives as something we possess. We think of our personalities, our talents,

our skills, our faults, ourselves . . . the accumulation of a lifetime, as our deepest, most intimate possessions. Without these things, what are we? Francis answers with Christ: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Those who have given up even their desire for spiritual possession—for possession of self and will—these are the poor in spirit, embracing that most inconceivable poverty—selflessness. Saint Francis wrote, "Nothing, then, must keep us back, nothing separate us from [God], nothing come between us and him."¹

Saint Bonaventure, in his *Life of Saint Francis*, describes how Francis practiced non-separation from God:

Francis strove to keep his spirit in the presence of God, by praying without ceasing . . . whether walking or sitting, inside or outside, working or resting, he was so intent on prayer that he seemed to have dedicated to it not only his heart and body but also all his effort and time.²

Such was the strength of Francis's faith and the purity and clarity of his preaching that people listened to him as though they had never heard the gospel before. ". . . his must have been an almost magical presence. It was this that drew followers from various regions and from many different walks of life."³ Because Francis was small and frail, people called him "the Poverello," "the Little Pauper." Soon Francis had converted such a large number of people that the brotherhood of Friars Minor was recognized by the Pope in 1209 or 1210. One of Francis's more remarkable conversions was a young woman of Assisi, Clare, who was to become a saint herself and the head of the Franciscan sisterhood of "Poor Clares." Her devotion to the Franciscan ideals of poverty and selflessness was unequalled. She was perhaps the living embodiment of "Lady Poverty," which is what Francis called that virtue dearest to his heart.

The poor in spirit, possessing nothing, cherish all creation equally. Saint Francis's famous poem, *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, addresses the elements of creation as his kindred, "Brother Sun," "Brother Wind," "Sister Moon," "Sister Earth," "Sister Death," for they, too, are the creation of God, as is he. This respect and love for the natural world, which Francis celebrates in the *Canticle*: "Praised be you, my Lord, with all your creatures," is perhaps the best remembered quality of the Saint (he was made the patron saint of ecology by Pope John Paul II in 1980).

It seems astonishing to us that Francis could embark on a life of such poverty that he would actually own not

even shoes, nor a change of clothing, nor did he live in a cloistered environment where such things were provided for him, but instead he took to the road and traveled around Umbria, depending solely on God's grace and human generosity to sustain him.

Christ also said:

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? . . . And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to the span of life? (Matthew 6:25)

And Jesus holds as a model for humans the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, who trust wholly in God to be sustained. Francis's faith in God's care and a sense of kinship with all things of this world gave him freedom from suffering and an abiding joy.

Poverty of spirit to Francis also meant confronting the abuses and suffering in this world fearlessly, accepting no separation or difference from all the poor and outcast beings in the world. Through the humblest task he praised God, honoring his creation, and so the monks and nuns in his brotherhood and sisterhood dedicated their lives to service.

Francis's passionate devotion to living the spirit of Christ enkindled Christendom. By 1220, the converts to the Franciscan orders had so enlarged their ranks they encompassed thousands of people throughout Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The original brotherhood and sisterhood had changed, for now there were settled monasteries. Francis traveled still, though, modeling his life on that of the Gospel. He created a third order, one for lay people, and always attempted to both change and strengthen the Church, remembering his first spiritual directive.

Toward the end of Francis's life occurred a remarkable event. Francis had gone to Monte Alvernia in September, 1224 to spend forty days in retreat and prayer, as Christ had done in the wilderness. There on the mountain Francis had a vision. He saw the crucified Christ with wings of fire like the angel in Isaiah 6, who purifies Isaiah to speak for God. His heart was filled with a "marvelous ardor," as his biographer Bonaventure describes it:

. . . and imprinted on his body [were] markings that were no less marvelous. Immediately the marks of nails began to appear in his hands and feet . . . also his right side, as if pierced with a lance, was marked with a red wound from which his sacred blood often flowed.⁴

Francis's devotion to Christ had marked him with the "stigmata," the marks of crucifixion. The body of

cont'd on page 15

Writings from Cloud Mountain

Fall Retreat 1993

Lost At Sea

Lost in this sea of identification,
 in a drunken stupor
 with fear and longing,
 struggling to hear the North Star
 through failing synapses.
 There it is! for a moment,
 and the tiller responds,
 though it too is often
 no more than a dancing shadow.

Onward, willingness pulsating
 through soft waves
 of bliss and sorrow,
 and the breath of the tides
 silently whispers its truths.
 Letting go into stillness of heart,
 the myriad identities and grasping pulsations
 merge into a passionate embrace of silent knowing.

“I think I’m getting it”
 breaks through the silence
 and a new storm is arisen;
 the tiller jams and grasping—joy
 and all, is plunged back
 through sorrowful and trembling waters.
 Lost in ignorance, suffering cries out.
 Presence of mind drops the anchor
 until stormy tides blow through.
 And again, the tiller is worked pliable;
 the North Star, Willingness, Wind, and Sail
 are merged in Silence.

Anonymous

Devotion

I’d never understood the bliss of devotion,
 Always thought it strange and absurd.
 But having tasted a drop
 From this ocean of love,
 I can understand from whence it does come,
 And can accept it more freely.

Fred Chambers

Stones and Grass

I look
 beneath the appearance
 of stones and grass,
 down into the bare earth deep;
 but I cannot find You there.
 I look up
 into vast blue prairies
 of wind and sky,
 reaching out with all my heart;
 but I do not see You there.
 I even search within
 the swirlings of my Self
 amongst the myriad patterns
 and layers of I want thises and thats.
 Still,
 elusive You remain.

I sigh and turn away
 from my self-appointed noble task,
 holding my head in my hands,
 not knowing where to look;
 not feeling how to approach
 Your divine Majesty.

A cold emptiness looms
 around the edges of my Being
 and then,
 You look at me.
 A mere glance
 and stones to grass to earth to sky
 to I,
 all undone
 and the Mystery laid bare.

But then,
 the “I am thankful for that Grace”
 pushes It away,
 back into the Silence
 from which It came
 and the dance begins anew:
 looking beneath the stones and grass.

John Richardson

Writings from Cloud Mountain, cont'd

Hanging Around In the Heart

I'm just hangin' round in the heart, Lord,
in the place where You're adored,
there is nothing that can muster me away.
I am sweeping out the chambers
—and I'm even scrubbing floors—
so that when You come, You'll be inclined to stay.

I have finished with my travels
—tho I've really learned a lot
from the people and the places that I've seen—
but I must confess it's mostly been
about what You are *not*,
(and especially that trip to New Orleans . . .)
But I *did* have fun in Tucson, Lord,
and over in San Juan,
and playing flutes with Ronnie by the Bay
—Oh, but Lord, I beg your pardon
and I'll move it right along,
for the heart is where I'm hanging out today.

So I get my sacred passkey
(for the seven millionth time)
and I hold my breath til it unlocks the door.
What's it made of, anyhow,
to take this terrible abuse?
Will this constant wear erode it?
There is really no excuse!
Or perhaps its only enemy is *rust*,
from long disuse,
tho I really couldn't tell You on that score—

but, again, I beg Your pardon, Lord,
I'll move it right along,
and the heart is where I'll dwell forevermore.

So I'm back and settled in,
the fire is burning in the grate.
It's so sweet—and yet—I find I'm missing You.
I've been waiting here, so could You kindly

try not to be late,
since I've really got a lot of things to do.
There's the laundry, and the dishes
and the videos—*oh, no*—
I've really got to get them back by five.
Did You see the one about the guy
who tried to buy a dress
for his mistress, but his wife found out
and leaked it to the press,
then they all went out for pizza—
oh, but Lord, I *do* digress—
It's the *heart* where I'd intended to abide . . .

And, oh Lord, I really *have* to beg Your pardon
once again,
You are more than gracious, what else can I say?
To be constantly forgiving me
and beckoning me in,

And the heart is where I'm staying now,
I'm sick to death of straying now,
the heart is where I'm hanging out
today.

Mora Dewey

Touching Clear Sky

Glorious God rains down
upon the creation.
Do you still have your umbrella up?!

Mere rain from clouds
knows no such delight
as I,
laying this old umbrella down,
reach out
and touch clear sky!

John Richardson

BHAKTI: YOGA OF DEVOTION

by
John Richardson

Drums beating, voices chanting, colorful robes twirling. This is the impression most of us have of Eastern devotional practices. Seldom do we look beyond this into the philosophical foundations and meditation practices of Bhakti yoga.

The word "Bhakti" is equivalent to the Christian word Agape (Love) and when we add to it "yoga," meaning union, we have a path for achieving union with the Love of God.

According to the twelfth century *Narada Bhakti Sutras*, one of the few Hindu devotional texts translated into English (see the book review on the library page), there are four stages to this path.

First comes the stage of renunciation. This is not necessarily a renunciation of worldly life for the cave but a renunciation of the self. This brings up the question: what is this self that's to be let go of? Before we can let this self go we must first see what it is. The practitioner is given precepts for cultivating a moral outlook on life and various devotional practices, chanting, for instance, as well as preliminary meditation exercises to still the mind and enhance concentration. As the practice deepens, the student begins to see the workings of his own willfulness and ego as counter to his desire for union with God, and a desire to be free of this self grows. Trying to identify just what this self is and how it binds the seeker to the ways of the world rather than the ways of God occupies most of this first stage. Through the meditation practices the identifications of the self with the world are gradually revealed to be illusory. The seeker finds out through his own experience that he is not his thoughts, perceptions, sensations, or conceptions. So then what, who, is he?

Since this is a devotional path, feelings are very important and towards the end of this first stage the seeker meditates on feelings. The instruction is to sit in meditation and observe feelings arising. Much to the

dismay of many, what they find out is that nothing happens! Without the world, which the ego has created to react to, there are no feelings to justify the self's attachments. The seeker sits there in perplexity expecting warm fuzzy feelings of bliss and devotion only to experience an empty void where he thought those feelings should be. What does arise, however, is the mind. Instead of the nice feelings, there is a silence which is quickly penetrated by thought. Now the teacher prescribes various devotional practices, such as chanting or singing, so that the seeker will be able to generate some feelings to work with.

At this point many leave the Bhakti path thinking that since only thoughts have arisen, feelings must be unreal and they would be better off elsewhere. But those who continue and learn to treat thought itself as a distraction from feeling find that the thoughts subside and the devotional practices begin to pay off. Feelings of grace and bliss break through and a real sense of connection to the Divine begins to take place.

The Bhaktis say it is not the fault of the sun (God) that we don't see the light if we have shut ourselves up in a dark room (the self). The next stage is breaking out of this dark room and coming out into the light of the world by performing loving service. This is the time for a real weeding out of the ego by doing selfless acts with no desire for the fruits of your labors. You must abandon all support and confirmation of who you are according to the ways of the world. By so doing, true selflessness becomes your practice. The seeker is encouraged to embrace a path of good works and charitable deeds, performing them with no expectation of reward in a spirit of love and service while at the same time examining any feelings of egotism and attachment that arise. Now the devotional practices of chanting and singing hymns take on a supportive role

cont'd

Bhakti: Yoga of Devotion, cont'd

(loving service is the activity, Bhakti is the emotional accompaniment) and meditation practices are prescribed for further cleansing of more subtle self-centered tendencies.

The next step is the stage of remembrance. The student is to say his mantra or do his visualization at all times in all circumstances whether good or bad. He strives for constant remembrance of God in the midst of whatever activities, worldly or otherwise, he engages in. This is also a time of study and enquiry. Just as the Jnana yogi cannot expect success wholly on the mental plane, the Bhakti must balance his emotional efforts with some serious contemplation about what he is doing and why. He also begins a narrowing of the path from some "universal" idea of spirituality to the particular devotional practices he has chosen. Care must be taken here not to fall into old habits of judgment which may arise towards those who are on a different path. This is seen as a "spiritualized" attempt of the ego to reassert itself. Indeed, one of the offenses against God mentioned for this stage is to discriminate between the different names of God as if one were superior to another.

As the limitations imposed by the ego dissolve away under this onslaught of practice it becomes clear that will and effort themselves are part of the ego and a great dilemma sets in. How can the ego let go of itself? Narada says, "When we know from actual experience that our independent efforts do not produce even the worldly effects desired by us unaided by outside help, how can we safely expect that spiritual Realization can be had by our personal endeavor alone?" Try as one might, the individual self cannot let itself go and the final step remains God's grace.

Thus, the seeker proceeds with life and the practice, not out of self-interest but out of love and devotion. The practice itself is a reminder of that ever-present reality of God and faith in God's grace for deliverance into Bhakti. And what distinguishes this Bhakti from just another form of love? Narada says, "It is entirely independent (of the self), exclusive and unalloyed love. It needs no other proof than itself. In its own intrinsic nature, Divine Love is nothing less than the immortal bliss of freedom itself, which comes unsolicited by the grace of God." ❖

March, 1994

St Francis, cont'd from page 11

the Saint bore the marks of his union with the spirit of Christ. He may have been the first person ever to receive these markings, but many other people since have borne the stigmata, including some who have been studied and well-documented by physicians and other researchers.

Francis died in 1226. Within two years of his death he was canonized as a saint.

One of the legacies which Francis has left for us, passed down through the years, is this simple prayer:

Most high,
glorious God,
enlighten the darkness of my heart
and give me, Lord,
a correct faith,
a certain hope,
a perfect charity,
sense and knowledge,
so that I may carry out Your holy and true command.⁵

April, 1994

Notes

¹ John C. Maraldo, "The Hermeneutics of Practice in Dogen and Francis of Assisi: An exercise in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue." *Eastern Buddhist* 14.2 (1981): 36.

² *Ibid.*, 39.

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, "Christ—and the Second Christ." *The Yale Review* 74 (1985): 335.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁵ Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. C.A.P. and Ignatius C. Brady, O.F.M., trans., *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, The Classics of Western Spirituality. (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 103.

The quote from Matthew in the epigraph is from: Green, Julian. *God's Fool: The Life and Time of Francis of Assisi*. Trans. Peter Heinegg. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985.

All other quotes from the Bible are from: *The New Oxford Annotated Bible With The Apocrypha*, Expanded Edition, Revised Standard Version. Ed. Herbert C. May and Bruce M. Metzger. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

The little space within the heart is as great as this vast universe. The heavens and the earth are there, and the sun, and the moon, and the stars; fire and lightening and winds are there; and all that now is and all that is not . . .

The Upanishads

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