

Center Voice

Fall 1995

the newsletter of the Center for Sacred Sciences

In this issue . . .

Special Focus: Renunciation

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** Plus: Calendar & Catalog Inserts **

We are blessed with material abundance unimagined by people living in third world cultures or past ages. Even so, the marketing sciences and media of our culture exhort us to desire ever more. Yet, no matter how much we have, we may feel empty and unfulfilled. In contrast to our cultural messages, spiritual teachings from all traditions suggest that true happiness lies in the other direction, in renunciation.

This issue of the Center Voice takes a closer look at this radical sounding idea. In "Renunciation," Joel examines the nature of true renunciation, and writes about how its spiritual aspects can be applied in our everyday lives.

To find out what it might be like to actually live as a renunciate, Katie Geiser interviewed Mother Elizabeth, prioress of the Carmel of Regina Monastery in Eugene. Turn to page 10 for a first person account of a renunciate living a monastic life in our contemporary society.

New with this issue, we introduce "Postcards From The Path," a regular feature where Mike Taylor, our new minister, will share observations and experiences from his own spiritual journey. This time, Mike writes about his exploration of "seeking," an issue closely related to renunciation.

Also be sure to check out "Center News" for all the latest happenings here at the Center, including the wedding of Joel and Jennifer, and Mike's ordination. Turn to "Library News" on page 9 for the latest book reviews and updates from our library, which has grown to over 2,700 books, 100 videos, and 500 audio tapes!

**Please note:
As of November 1995
our new telephone
area code is 541**

Center For Sacred Sciences

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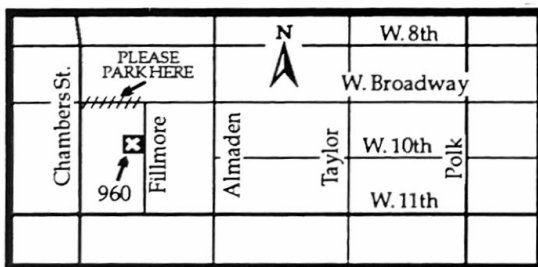
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The Center for Sacred Sciences is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization dedicated to the creation and dissemination of a new Worldview based on the wisdom of humanity's great spiritual teachers, but presented in forms appropriate to our present scientific 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, meditation classes, retreats, workshops and study groups. Joel also leads a weekly Practitioners' Group for committed spiritual seekers, as well as being available for individual spiritual consultation. The Center 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:

Spring Retreat: The theme of our Spring retreat was "Cancelling Errors of Perception." During the five day silent retreat, held at Cloud Mountain Retreat Center in Washington, we focused on how our senses misperceive reality and how we are fooled by illusion. Joel's discourses were delightfully illustrated by Todd, our resident magician, who amazed and delighted the retreatants with levitating cups, scarves turning into canes, appearing and disappearing balls, and many other wonders of the conjurer's craft. We examined the arising of likes and dislikes, and how they create a climate of self-validating perception and belief that prevents us from seeing what is true. We all left the retreat convinced that things are not always what they appear!



Retreatants: (top row, from left) Mickey Obezo, Grace Schneiders, Anita Runyan, Bev Forster, Therese Engelmann, Barbara Dewey, (middle row) David Cunningham, Lori Cunningham, Tom McFarlane, Fred Chambers, Todd Corbett, (bottom row) Mike Taylor, Gene Gibbs, Joel, John Richardson, Katie Geiser.

* * * * *

Palo Alto Talk: On June 2-4, Joel traveled again to Palo Alto, California, to give a talk and weekend retreat at the Quaker Center. The theme of the retreat was "How to use Meditation as a Tool for Inquiry." If you are interested in attending one of Joel's seminars he will be back in Palo Alto May 31-June 3. For further information you may contact George Heaton at (415) 857-9228.

* * * * *

Enlightenment Day: On August 9, our annual Enlightenment Day celebration, honoring the anniversary of Joel's enlightenment, was held at the home of Grace Schneiders. Her candle lit gardens were a truly enchanted setting for the large turnout of members and families. Good company, Joel's barbecue mastery and a superb potluck from everybody else made for a party to remember!

* * * * *

(continued, page 14)

THE NECESSITY FOR RENUNCIATION

by Joel

In our society today *renunciation* has become almost a dirty word. This is largely because renunciation embodies a spiritual attitude that stands in direct opposition to the egocentric values of the materialist worldview which has dominated our western culture for the last two hundred years. From the beginning, apologists for materialism have been tireless in denouncing spiritual renunciation as "world-denying," "life-negating," and even "pathological." What's more, these condemnations have recently been picked up and parroted by many prophets of the so-called "New Age." While rightly preaching the necessity for a spiritual renewal, these pundits nevertheless warn against reverting to any of the renunciate traditions of the past. Instead, they urge us to "integrate" mystical insights with worldly concerns.

Bombarded by such a barrage of anti-renunciate propaganda, it is no wonder then, that even serious spiritual seekers can be turned off by the mere mention of the word. This, however, is highly unfortunate, because, as one of the great mystics of our own time, Simone Weil, said: "To long for God and to renounce all the rest, that alone can save us."¹

The fact is, renunciation has always been, and always will be, indispensable to any genuine spiritual quest. Consequently, it is important that we try to clear up some of the confusion and dispel some of the fear that has come to surround this term.

First, in reply to the materialists, renunciation can, indeed, be described as "world-denying," and even "life-negating"--but only if by "world" we mean a universe of independently existing objects; and if by "life," we mean the experience of being a separate, individual I, ego, or self. The reason why such a "world" and such a "life" must be renounced is that, according to the mystics, both are delusions. The great Sufi poet, Rumi, wrote:

We and our existences are nonexistences...The worldly man imagines that a nonexistent thing possesses splendor. Oh friend, why would a wise man devote his life to the work of nonexistence?²

Why, indeed? Especially when there is an alternative, attested to by all mystical traditions, which is to Awaken to the *real* World and the *true* Life--called variously "God," "Allah," "Atman," "Tao," "Buddha-Mind," or, as we say, "Consciousness Itself." Thus, what must be renounced on a spiritual path is only an imaginary 'world' inhabited by a fictional 'self'.

Once we clearly understand this, we can also understand why all talk of "integrating" worldly concerns with mystical insights is self-contradictory. The fact is that Gnosis *destroys* the very 'world' we are supposed to integrate our insights with. Rumi also writes, "when wakefulness...prevails, this world is laid flat."³ Or, as the Buddhist *Lankavatara Sutra* puts it: "For the wise all 'things' are wiped away."⁴

What materialists find inconceivable then, (and New Age thinkers fail to comprehend) is that the mystical path calls for something far more radical than a mere revision of our ordinary fragmented way of perceiving things. Rather it calls for a complete revolution in Consciousness--a revolution which abolishes this perception altogether and, in its stead, reveals a Unity that both underlies and transcends all apparent distinctions. And yet, because these two modes of perception--the fragmented and unified--are mutually exclusive, before this revolution can take place our experience of being some separate 'self' existing in a world of individual objects must be thoroughly rejected and abandoned. And this is just what spiritual renunciation is designed to bring about.

The most dramatic way to begin a practice of renunciation is to become what we might call an *external renunciate*--that is, a monk, nun, or wandering mendicant, who has renounced all worldly possessions and disengaged from all normal social relations. The advantage to undertaking this kind of practice is that it provides a powerful "crash course" in *detachment* and *surrender*--two of the most fundamental principles of the path. Yet external renun-

ciation is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for attaining Gnosis. This is why, when asked by his followers whether they should "go into the forest" (i.e., become external renunciates) the contemporary Hindu sage, Ramana Maharshi (himself an extreme external renunciate) usually responded by saying:

The ego is the source of thought...It is no help to change the environment. The one obstacle is the mind; it must be got over whether in the home or in the forest. If you can do it in the forest, why not in the home? Therefore, why change environments?⁵

In other words, genuine renunciation is an inner operation which must be performed whether one becomes an external renunciate or continues as an ordinary householder. The reason, as Ramana Maharshi indicates, is that our real problem lies not in the outer conditions of our lives, but in the deluded thoughts produced by our own egos. More specifically, it is that we take what our egos tell us about ourselves and the world to be true. *Inner renunciation* then, begins with a rejection of those internal messages and commands that come from the ego and are predicated on a false perception of 'self' and 'world'.⁶

Before you can renounce such thoughts, however, you must first learn to *hear* them. This is more difficult than it sounds because normally our thoughts come so rapidly, and our obedience to them is so habitual, that most of the time we are quite unaware of what is happening. The first step then, is to cultivate an awareness or "mindfulness" of your own internal thought-processes. The simplest way to do this is to take up a meditation practice.

As you sit down to meditate you issue yourself a single command designed to override all others: "Be still, and concentrate on one object!" In effect, you are "going on strike" against the ego, refusing to obey any of its commands. This causes the ego to become more insistent, which, in turn, gives you a chance to observe its messages more clearly: "Scratch that itch!" "Move that leg!" "Gee, this is boring." "Why don't you sneak a look at the clock." "Oh God, ten more minutes to go!" "Meditation is a waste of time: give it up!" But if you are firm in

renouncing such commands, and continue to practice in a disciplined manner, eventually you will learn to *hear* the ego's thoughts even in the midst of the hustle and bustle of everyday life. This is the beginning of true freedom, for it is only by becoming mindful of your thoughts that you are free to choose whether or not to act on them.

Another way to begin practicing renunciation is through morality. In adopting moral precepts you give yourself a whole series of commands to be used in countering the ego's as they arise in specific situations--especially those situations in which what the ego wants is likely to harm others. If, for example, you have vowed *not to take what does not belong to you*, then as soon as you hear your ego saying something like: "Wow, look at this! The grocery clerk gave me a twenty dollar bill instead of a ten in change. I should keep this money because, after all, this store is owned by a big corporation and they'll never miss it"--you will remember your vow and so can choose to reject such a self-serving rationalization.

The more you check your habitual egoic behavior, the more you will see how much of your life is conditioned by selfish desires and aversions. Under the delusion that we are separate beings inhabiting a world of external objects, it seems the only way to attain happiness is to acquire the things we like and avoid the things we don't like. Far from bringing us true happiness, however, this strategy actually increases our suffering, because the 'things' we try to acquire or avoid are, in reality, as impermanent as mirages. This is why Jesus cautioned us not to set our hearts on the treasures of this world, which "moths eat and rust corrupts," and why the Hindu saint, Anandamayi Ma, warned:

Everything in this world is transitory. So also worldly happiness: it comes and the next moment it is gone. If permanent, abiding happiness is to be found, That which is eternal will have to be realized.⁷

Even when we are able to hang onto some particular object for a time, this only creates an attachment, and becoming attached to anything, only sets us up for greater frustration, anguish, or grief when we lose it. Consequently, the more we can renounce

actions based on our self-centered likes and dislikes, the more we can free ourselves from attachments and the whole syndrome of suffering they cause.

But just as we are not fully aware of our thought processes, so we are usually not fully aware of our attachments, or the power they have to bind us. The best way to become mindful of attachments is to vow to renounce for a time some object or activity around which you suspect an attachment has been formed. Since different people become attached to different things, these kinds of renunciate vows should be "customized" to suit your individual personality. If you are indifferent to food, for instance, there is little point in fasting. On the other hand, if your happiness seems to depend on the quantity or quality of the things you eat, then adopting some form of dietary discipline can be highly instructive.

A common mistake beginners often make when undertaking specific renunciate vows is to confuse them with New Year's style resolutions. For one thing, spiritual renunciation is not something that can be brought about all at once by a single act of will. Rather, as in the case of meditation and morality, renunciate vows must be practiced over a period of time. Nor are such vows designed to make you into a "better person." Their real purpose is to provide opportunities for gaining insight into your own ego and how it functions. Thus, even when you fail to live up to some particular vow, there is much to learn about the compulsive nature of your desires and attachments, and how ephemeral the satisfactions gained from fulfilling them actually are. For this reason, renunciate vows should not be undertaken as some kind of duty, but in the spirit of a scientific experiment designed to show you something about yourself. A good way to begin a vow is to ask yourself, "What would happen if I gave up this thing or that activity for six months?"

Those who persevere in renunciate practices will eventually be convinced that trying to satisfy worldly desires is ultimately futile. This is not something that can be decided intellectually, but must be *seen* directly in one's experience. Then, when the full force of this insight strikes home, it leads to what we might call a *categorical renunciation of any hope of finding happiness in worldly things*. Although

worldly desires continue to arise and worldly attachments persist, the seeker no longer takes any pleasure in them. On the contrary, activities prompted by these impulses will seem increasingly mechanical and barren, plunging the seeker into what St. John of the Cross called a "dark night of the soul," and which others have described as a "desert experience," and a "wasteland." Here, the things of this world lose their savor, while the Way to the Real World is still largely concealed. Consequently the seeker often feels isolated and lost.

But no matter how painful or desolate this spiritual night may seem, passage through it actually represents a major turning point on the path. Indeed, if the night is dark enough, it forever secures the seeker against backsliding into a worldly life, for the simple reason that he or she now sees clearly there is nothing in *that* world or life worth going back to.⁸

To those who have not arrived at this stage, renouncing all hope for worldly happiness may seem downright morbid. But this is because they are still slaves to their own desires and aversions and so cannot envision any other motive for acting. "Why would anyone do anything," they ask, "if not to get what they like and escape what they dislike?"

The answer, given by the mystics of all traditions, is really quite simple: *One acts out of love and compassion for others*. In Tibetan Buddhism this is called cultivating *bodhicitta*, the mind of awakening. Here is how Bokar Rinpoche describes it:

The person living in the mind of awakening wishes to take on others' suffering, and to give them happiness in exchange. Egocentric vision is abandoned. The only remaining thought is for the benefit of others and love directed towards them.⁹

Actually, love and compassion are always present because they are inherent in the very nature of the mind of awakening (or Consciousness Itself). However, we cannot access their full power as long as we cling to our own selfish desires and attachments when dealing with other people. Practicing renunciation of our own self-interest in all our relationships is what dissolves these barriers and allows love and compassion to start streaming unhindered into our lives. This is why St. Teresa of Avila told her Carmelite nuns:

You must do violence to your own will, so that your sister's will is done in everything, even though this may cause you to forgo your own rights and forget your own good in your concern for theirs.¹⁰

It is at this point that the path gets particularly steep and the fainthearted turn back, fearing that what lies ahead is only misery and martyrdom. How mistaken they are and how sad for them, because they will never have a chance to discover what another, little known mystic found out through his own experience doing precisely these kinds of practices:

All these disciplines, renunciations, and services which the Holy Ones perform and which others admire so much because they imagine them to be difficult and austere are in reality joys and privileges to the performers. This is one of the great sacred Secrets, and it will always be a secret, no matter how many people give it away, because no one will ever believe it who has not tried it.¹¹

Moreover, if you *do* make it over this hump, you will find that the path becomes increasingly illumined by miraculous graces and glimpses of the Divine. For as the boundaries of 'self' are weakened and dissolved through love and compassion, so, too, are the boundaries that divide up the rest of *this* world, rendering it ever more transparent to the Real World, whose Radiance can now begin to shine through. When this happens, rocks will no longer be simply rocks, but occasions for wonder and delight. Trees will no longer be merely trees, but signs and symbols marking the Way Home. People will no longer be just people, but each one will appear as an ambassador from God, bearing sacred teachings of inestimable value.

Even your attitude towards renunciation itself, will be transformed. Instead of viewing it as a harsh and burdensome discipline, you will be eager to intensify its practice, so that you can uncover even subtler desires, more hidden fears, and deeper attachments. And, indeed, the more you practice, the more you will be stripped of these egoic veils, like a snake shedding its skin, until at last you will have

only one desire left--to attain that Gnostic Awakening which abolishes suffering once and for all.

But then, at some point along the way, it will occur to you that, if *all* selfish desires are to be renounced and abandoned, this must also include the desire for Gnosis. As the Tibetan master, Lama Lodö, observes: "If anyone says 'I' am going to achieve enlightenment, this [very] grasping prevents him from reaching a non-dual state."¹²

This insight brings you face-to-face with the final act of renunciation required by a spiritual path--sometimes called the *Great Renunciation*--which is to surrender, not only all hope for worldly happiness, but also the desire for Gnosis and the hope for ultimate spiritual happiness which it holds. But because the desire for Gnosis will have by now become entrenched in the very center of your soul, the demand to surrender it will be tantamount to a demand to annihilate yourself completely. And yet, as you soon discover, self-annihilation can never be accomplished by any effort on your part, for as long as you are making an effort, *you* will still be there. So what can you do?

The answer is literally nothing.

But if, in the meantime you have really renounced and abandoned every other desire and attachment--whether for worldly pleasures or spiritual consolations--then, by the time you reach this stage all your bridges will be burned. Thus, although there will be no way to move forward, neither will there be any way to turn back. You will have no choice but to remain right where you are. This is Kenosis (emptiness), the last stage of the path, the gateway to Gnosis. Here, is how Ramana Maharshi describes it:

Sadhanas [practices] are needed so long as one has not realized it. They are for putting an end to obstacles. Finally there comes a stage when a person feels helpless notwithstanding the sadhanas. He is unable to pursue the much-cherished sadhana also. It is then that God's power is realized. The Self [Atman] reveals itself.

In other words, when there is nothing more for the ego to do, it disappears, like the circle of light which disappears when you stop whirling your sparkler on the night of the Fourth of July, and you realize there never was any real circle there to begin with. It was

simply an illusion, created by your own activity. And when this activity ceases, the illusion vanishes of itself and the reality is seen. And so it is with the ego. When it vanishes, Gnosis dawns: all things are "wiped away" and "this world is laid flat," along with the 'self' which seemed to inhabit it.

In one sense, then, we can see that the whole effort at spiritual renunciation is, from the beginning, doomed to failure; and we can also see why. Ultimately, it is impossible to renounce yourself and the world because no such 'self' or 'world' really exists--which, of course, is precisely what must be Realized. And yet, in another sense, renunciation in all its forms--starting with the simple refusal to scratch an itch, and ending in the quandary posed by the Great Renunciation--is indispensable to the spiritual path. It is the thread upon which all the practices are strung. And it is by pushing these practices to the limit that all desires, all effort, and all will--that is, everything we imagine constitutes our separate selves--are finally exhausted. Thus, by engaging in a total effort to renounce self and world, the seeker fails totally; and yet, paradoxically, it is only by failing totally that the seeker can succeed.

Having said this, however, it must be admitted that there is still another sense in which spiritual seekers are not renunciates at all. The ones who are the true renunciates are those most dedicated to pursuing worldly things, and most zealous in trying to satisfy their worldly desires. As Anandamayi Ma says to such people:

You all are relinquishing the highest Bliss and thus you actually are the renunciates! By abstaining from the Supreme you have become supreme renunciates.¹³

May all of you be spared this Supreme Form of Renunciation!

Peace

❖ Joel 1995

Notes

1. Simone Weil, *Waiting For God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (1951; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), 196.
2. William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1983), 24.
3. *Ibid.*, 59.
4. *A Buddhist Bible*, ed. Dwight Goddard, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 302.
5. Ramana Maharshi, *The Spiritual Teachings of Ramana Maharshi* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1972), 49.
6. In fact, the word "renunciation" comes from a Latin root which literally means to reject (re) what has been announced (nuntiare).
7. Anandamayi Ma, *Matri Vani: Vol. II*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Shree Shree Anandamayee Charitable Society, 1982), 56-57.
8. In actual practice, most seekers go through several less intense dark nights before the stage of categorical renunciation is reached.
9. Bokar Rinpoche, *Death and the Art of Dying in Tibetan Buddhism*, French trans. Francois Jacquemart, English trans. Christiane Buchet, ed. Jennifer Pessereau (San Francisco: ClearPoint Press, 1993), 77.
10. St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, a division of Doubleday, 1961), 117—Needless to say this does not apply when someone's will is directed toward harming themselves or others.
11. Joel, *Naked Through the Gate*, (Eugene, OR: Center for Sacred Sciences, 1985), 224-225.
12. Venerable Lama Lodo, *Bardo Teachings: The Way of Death and Rebirth*, red. ed. (San Francisco: KDK, 1982), 57.
13. Anandamayi Ma, *Matri Vani: Vol II*, 127.

Postcards From The Path - "Seeking"

BY MIKE

Looking back on my path, much of my most useful guidance has come from the first-person accounts by various mystics of their own experiences on the path. These accounts have often been just what I needed to inspire me in my own practices and insights. With this issue, the Center Voice inaugurates a regular feature where I will share observations from my path with you. These observations and experiences will be presented from the perspective of my own unique biases and veils. But, with the help of grace, maybe something I share will be a key that fits one of your locks. If nothing else, I may serve as your 'canary in the coal mine' as we walk together on this path to the Unknown.

I have been led over many years to a deepening exploration of the quality I call "seeking." My investigation was originally sparked by surprising discoveries I made during the practice of our 2nd precept, which deals with self-discipline and escapist entertainment. I used to take some pride in how productive I was, and didn't think I had any issues with overindulgence in escapism - I didn't have *time* for that. But one morning, reading the previous week's grocery flyer with breakfast because my newspaper hadn't arrived, I had to wonder if some of my behaviors weren't a bit compulsive. This gap in my usual breakfast routine was distinctly uncomfortable. Without the precept to call attention to it, I wouldn't have noticed the subtle undercurrent of desperation to my seeking for a substitute distraction. Like everybody else's, my patterns of distraction and escape were so habitual I just hadn't noticed them.

Curious now, I decided to interrupt my pattern to see what was behind it. I made a sacred vow not to read with meals for one month. I highly recommend this "sacred vow" technique. I don't have perfect self discipline, so vowing with deep and genuine sincerity to what I hold most sacred, gives me an added sense of dedication. Writing down the vow and repeating it each day with my precepts helps keep it fresh in my mind. I also find that a clearly defined vow makes it easier to avoid a lot of internal arguments with my desires.

The first thing I learned was that I was much more centered and content when I wasn't caught up in my escapist patterns. One year I vowed to avoid all snacks and intoxicants for the holiday season, a time that my compulsive escapism was most powerful because I tend toward depression during this time. I was truly astonished at what I found. By giving up all the ways I tried

to escape from my depressed feelings I discovered they either didn't arise or passed so easily that they had no effect on me. I was happier and more at peace during this season than I had ever been before! It appeared that my very attempts to escape these feelings gave them their power. Equally surprising was the fact that after my vows expired I would fall back into the same patterns that I could see so clearly caused my suffering. Seeking, whether for distraction or pleasure, took over as inexorably as the tide rolling in - a most humbling realization.

This seeking is pervasive in our lives. Whether we seek stimulation, love, achievement or pleasure, there is an underlying energy that is the same. As we travel our spiritual path, our seeking may become centered on sublime spiritual states. But whatever the object of our seeking, it is a wanting things to be better, a pushing away of what *is* right now in hope that we may become happier by acquiring a different state or experience.

In deep meditation, we may observe this quality of seeking as a subtle "movement" in the mind, from which will arise a thought of desire. This movement is always toward some object that we believe will provide satisfaction. Yet the mystics tell us that the only thing that can ultimately and completely satisfy our deepest desire is the Divine itself. My own experience has convinced me that this is true. As I have become more familiar with heart-centered states of deep spiritual communion, I notice that any seeking draws me *away* from that Divine peace at my core. My own practice has shown me that when I surrender seeking there is true satisfaction. What we most desire is already present.

It is very easy to remain ignorant of this quality of seeking in ourselves. There is a very simple experiment you can do to get a taste of what I am talking about. Just sit and do nothing for a half hour. Don't meditate, sleep, or plan your next holiday. Don't do anything. Notice the urges that rush to fill up the space. Notice the thoughts and desires. Check them all, and just sit. It is only by not getting swept up in thoughts and action that we begin to see the underlying qualities that generate them. Try it!

Get to know the very *feel* of seeking, deep in your flesh and spirit. It is a very distinctive sensation that the experienced meditator will be able to discern. This is the feel of our bonds, to which we hold so tightly. Let go of them, release seeking, and know for yourself the Divine taste of freedom, deep in your heart. ❖ Mike



Library Page

CSS Library Hours:

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



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

Over the last several years we have been developing a section on spiritual biographies and autobiographies. Reviews for two adult books and one children's book follow.

A Door Ajar: The Record of a Spiritual Journey
by Alix Taylor
published by White Wolf Press, 1994, \$11.95

Alix Taylor's account of her lifelong pursuit of mystical truth resonated with me deeply, and should have wide appeal for spiritual seekers of all traditions. Raised in France as a conventional Catholic, she got her first glimpse that there was more to religion than its rituals when a retarded classmate actually experienced the presence of Christ during their confirmation ceremony.

Alix's family moved to the United States just ahead of Hitler's invasion of France. As an adolescent suffering from epilepsy and cut off from the land of her birth, Alix was driven to deeply question the meaning and purpose of life. (Later, reflecting the archetype of the wounded healer, her symptoms disappeared completely with her spiritual growth.)

As a young woman, Alix moved to New York and studied with Theosophist, Fritz Kunz. Returning to Europe, she joined the community of Gurdjieff's famous disciple, J. G. Bennett, in England. (Her detailed descriptions of their communal life and unique practices were particularly fascinating.) Later, Alix moved back to the United States and eventually ended up in Lone Pine, California

where she studied with Franklin Merrell-Wolff. (Alix writes beautifully about the subtle workings of Franklin and the desert on her soul.) Today, drawing on the many insights gained from her rich and eclectic path, Alix teaches meditation in California.

An Interrupted Life

The Diaries of Ety Hillesum 1941-43

Published by Washington Square Press, 1983

The diaries and letters that make up this book were written in Amsterdam by a young Jewish woman facing first the threat, and later the certainty of destruction by the occupying Nazi forces. They recount, in intimate detail, the life, and spiritual awakening and flowering of a contemporary Westerner in the most difficult circumstances imaginable. Ety was a vibrant woman, very much engaged with life, friends and lovers, and her diaries share with us an openness and honesty that is rare even among the best of friends. She opens her heart to her journal as she faces the terror of the Nazis, but more importantly as she undergoes a profound spiritual awakening. The honesty, courage and faith she brings to her spiritual work is truly inspiring, and the manifestation of the spirit flowering in her is awe inspiring. If you have ever wondered how a mystic might face Auschwitz, Ety will provide your answer. The love, compassion, and courage of her actions may cause you to rethink your ideas of human limitations. Ety's words touched this reviewer deeply, uplifting my spirit even as my heart was breaking. I recommend this book most highly.

To The Lion Throne: Story of the 14th Dalai Lama
by Whitney Stewart

published by Snow Lion Publications, 1990

This Children's biography of the Dalai Lama covers his early life and flight from Tibet in text and many wonderful photos. It also includes a small section on his current work, a glossary, and suggested further reading for both adults and children.

MOTHER ELIZABETH

an interview by Katie Geiser

The following interview by Katie Geiser of our Practitioners' Group, took place at Carmel of Regina Monastery in Eugene, Oregon on September 1, 1995. Mother Elizabeth has been a member of this cloistered community for 18 years and is currently serving as its prioress. The founder of the Discalced Carmelite nuns was St. Teresa of Jesus (St. Teresa of Avila), who initiated a reform to the Carmelite Order in 1562. Emphasis is placed on smaller monastic communities (of approximately 12 members) and prayer-centered life dedicated to knowing and serving Christ.

CSS: What inspired you to become a nun?

ME: I had a career as a nurse before coming to this community at age 35. When I was 30, I had a conversion experience. God became the center of my life and my desire for God became greater and greater. I wanted to do what God wanted. An active order just didn't seem to fit for me. When I met the sisters here, things really clicked. I didn't really know what I was getting into, but I trusted God. I had the feeling that this was the right thing to do. I knew that what I was doing (prior to becoming a nun) wasn't enough.

CSS: Did you feel that *you* made a "decision" or rather that you were called to live this life?

ME: I was called to this life. I wanted to love God more than myself and that's why I could take chances. It was very difficult after "doing my own thing" for so many years. This life requires one to come face-to-face with all the "junk" and if you don't want to deal with it, you can't stay. I received help from my sisters. God's gift is what makes it work. It's not a natural life.

CSS: How did you "know" you had made the right decision to become a nun?

ME: Over time I saw that I could live it in stages. I always have had the community support, encouragement and feedback. This is very important.

CSS: Did you have support/encouragement from family and friends? How did they react upon hearing about the path that you had chosen?

ME: My parents were very happy that I joined. They always wished that I would do this. My mother had some difficulty accepting that I had chosen a cloistered life but she got over that in about three weeks! I was also supported by the rest of my family as well as my friends. Some work associates were astounded! It is not always this supportive. Some families will respond by kicking the nun out of their family.

CSS: Are there specific requirements which must be met to become a member of your monastery?

ME: You have to be Catholic. You'd be surprised how many inquiries we get from people who are not! You have to want a contemplative and cloistered lifestyle. A desire for deeper prayer life and wanting to come to know Carmel spirituality is necessary. An individual's background (family, etc.) as well as good health and age (usually not over 45) are also important factors.

The process for becoming a member of this community includes an interview by the Prioress as well as meeting with the Council Sisters and then the rest of the community. A one month live-in period then takes place where the individual is given an opportunity to experience this lifestyle more intimately. Then they leave and think about the experience while the community considers their ability to live the monastic life. The first year of involvement at the monastery is referred to as the Postulancy Period and involves deepening discernment. It is concluded after successful evaluation by the candidate and the community. The second year is known as the Novitiate Period and again concludes with an evaluation. First vows are taken on the third year and are renewed annually for the following three years. Upon completion of this process, the individual then becomes a permanent member of the community. It

is possible to extend the time frame for some of these stages, if that seems appropriate.

CSS: What do you see as the main advantage of living in a monastery rather than as a householder?

ME: I wanted to dedicate myself to the Lord and was called in this way to do so. This way of life is His way. The whole work here is prayer and the cloister keeps us from being drawn out to do other things.

CSS: Do you have a daily routine that the community follows? If so, what is it and how does it enrich your spiritual growth?

ME: We run a very tight schedule. It provides good support - if you like structured life. It does offer some challenge, and keeps us focused. It is a very full day and we are usually very ready to go to sleep when it's time to put the lights out.

CSS: How are financial matters dealt with? Do members of the community have any financial responsibilities?

ME: We sell altar breads to different churches and have our own gift shop here. We also have an annual craft sale in November which

is very popular. We have assistance from the Auxiliary and also receive alms. A \$500 dowry is received from each nun upon her entry, and this is set aside for her to use if she leaves. We don't require disposal of personal items until the final big commitment is made.

CSS: Do you have freedom of choice in deciding what your focus/practice will be? If not, who influences this?

ME: Yes, we do have freedom of choice. We also go through a first year training where there is assigned reading about being Carmelite. We also have a large library which includes many subjects in addition to spiritual study.

CSS: Could you comment on the "spirit" of the sisterhood...and how that influences your life as a community?

ME: We live in a very united community. It is very small intentionally, eleven total at this time, so that it is like a family. Friendships are important. In living so closely together we are very aware of our human weaknesses and strengths and are able to help each other see ourselves more clearly. Our main focus is prayer and this is for family and those out in the world as well as for ourselves. People call and

request that prayers be said for those they know. We put prayer requests on a large bulletin board so that all of our community has the opportunity to answer these requests.

CSS: Are you able to maintain personal relationships with people outside the monastery (family, friends, community)? If any, how does this contact affect your life?

ME: We have limited contact with families and friends. We can have visitors once a month. Writing is O.K.

Daily monastic schedule

5:40	Get Up!
6:00	Prayers & Meditation
8:00	Mass
8:30	Community Prayer
8:40	Work
11:30	Prayers, Dinner, Recreation, Community Prayer
2:00	Work
4:00	Vespers (prayer)
4:15	Private Meditation
5:15	Spiritual Reading
6:00	Supper
6:30	Recreation
7:40	Night Prayers
8:30	Silence & Free Time
10:00	In Room
11:00	Lights Out

We acknowledge that it is very important to have family support.

CSS: Does anyone ever leave the monastery and choose a different lifestyle?

ME: Yes, many have found that it wasn't right for them or the sisters saw it wasn't right for them. There may be physical or mental problems that make it inappropriate for them to stay. Some who leave stay in close contact, while others may be hurt that it didn't work out for them. There can be feelings of homesickness. The path requires many years of testing and learning.

CSS: What is your role as prioress and how did you achieve that position?

ME: The prioress is the superior of the community. Each house is individual and one does not "rule" over the other. My superior is the Diocese Bishop. I am here to help the sisters to live the life they were called to. This may include assistance in all areas of life: spiritual, material, health. It is also important to maintain a sense of unity in the community. I have learned to trust in God very much in serving as prioress. There can't be "one big plan" that is adhered to strictly... it is important to be flexible.

The prioress is elected by the community and appointed by the Lord. She answers to the Lord first. This has increased my trust in the Lord. The position has a three year term, with the option of re-election for three years. I have been in the position for one-and-a-half years.

CSS: What is the goal of your practice?

ME: Life is forever and we want to be with God forever. This is one specific road to accomplish that.

CSS: What or who would you say has been the greatest teacher or influence in your monastic life?

ME: The Lord. The Lord has been the only one to reach through the stubbornness! Prayer has been very important. Trial and error and a willingness to face myself have been valuable. We base our life on the scriptures from the New and Old Testaments.

CSS: Do the teachings of St. Teresa of Avila play a prominent role in your life?

ME: Yes, and St. John of the Cross, who were co-reformers of Carmel. The autobiography of St. Teresa, *The Life of St. Teresa*, and *The Way of Perfection* have been very valuable. St. Teresa founded 11 monasteries in Spain and there are currently 800 monasteries worldwide.

CSS: What other writings or passages have you found to be especially inspirational or helpful? Any from other mystical traditions?

ME: *The Wakening Prayer*, written by a Japanese Carmelite priest, and available through the Carmelite

Institute of Studies, makes a comparison between Shintoism, Taoism and Carmelite.

Edith Stein, a German philosopher who converted to Catholicism and to Carmelite, wrote much about women. She was a highly educated woman who came to the monastery with little experience in handling mundane daily chores. The rest of the nuns had no idea of her background, as background information about each nun was not allowed to be shared in those days. Edith was unfamiliar with sweeping floors and her sewing work had to be re-done by the other nuns because it was so bad! Her life ended through execution at Auschwitz. Her books are available through the Carmelite Institute of Studies.

CSS: Could you give examples of how prayer and meditation have affected your life?

ME: That can often be seen better when looking back after some time has

passed. Prayer has brought lots of focus... and strength to face my own and others' problems. It has brought more compassion....calmness, patience and a slower pace which makes it easier to watch for signs.

ME: What practices help you to be less attached to memories?

ME: To live in the present moment and focus on what I'm doing now. If I don't, then I can be all over the place. In the first several years living here, memories were strong and it was painful. But the ability to be "here and now" is stronger and it is easier.

CSS: Have you found that your life here has brought about major changes in your dream world. If so, how?

ME: At first I had dreams about working in the hospital and things not being "right." Then dreams shifted to focusing on not making my final vows.

The Lord has been the only one to reach through the stubbornness! Prayer has been very important. Trial and error and a willingness to face myself have been valuable.

The day I took my final vows, the dreams stopped. Mainly I have seen a shift in attitude in my dreams.

CSS: Do you find that you are ever distracted from your spiritual focus? If so, what has helped?

ME: I am distracted a lot in the job that I am doing (prioress) so that prayer time is especially important. It brings peace after it is done. Small periods of spiritual reading, done very slowly, are very valuable.

Retreats are also a part of our life. "Hermit Day" gives each of us one day per month to be away from the daily routine. Community retreats are held once a year and last for eight days. In addition, each of us also takes a private retreat once a year for an eight day period. There is really a need for retreat where we don't have to do any "running around."

We occasionally go out of the community to see doctors or dentists and this can be very exhausting. Just the driving and the contrast between the two ways of living is very tiring.

When I was newer to being here, I remember seeing a nature show and was amazed at how the images from the show lingered in my mind for days afterwards.

CSS: What does that say about the rest of us who watch T.V. frequently!!

Have you had doubts or struggles in your life here? Do you ever have doubts about the path you have chosen? What strengths or insights did you gain from them?

ME: About two years into my stay here, I had been cooking all day and it was summer and very hot! I was wearing a winter habit because that was all I had. I just had had it and dropped all the pots and pans and went off to the "chicken coop," one of our small outbuildings, and hollered for about 5 minutes. When that stopped I asked myself what I wanted to do. Nothing came to mind so I went back in and began working on the potatoes!

CSS: Have you experienced what is referred to as the "dark night of the soul?" Could you share a little bit about that?

ME: Going through the dark night of the soul is more of an ongoing process than one specific event. It has different stages. It can be experienced in hard times of learning about self and in working with

others. Letting go of ideas about God and seeing that God is different than I expect. My ideas about approaching God may be different than how God wishes to approach me. The dark night of the soul can sometimes be experienced through poor physical health. It is about letting go of everything to let God lead. It's about not always knowing because it is about living by faith.

Renunciation means "going through things" rather than getting rid of things. It is about letting go of control. "Perfection" to a Carmelite means completion. So, St. Teresa's book *The Way of Perfection* is really about the way of completion. It is about going from strength to strength, detachment and renunciation are all strengths. "Completion" is union with God.

CSS: Have you ever wanted to leave the monastic life?

ME: No!

CSS: How have you benefited most in living this lifestyle?

ME: I'm happy. The first month I was very homesick and miserable. Then I noticed that I was miserable, yet very happy at the same time. It's not always a "high."

CSS: What advice would you give to someone who is considering life as a nun or monk?

ME: You have to want to pray. Prayer must be the center of life. Be community oriented. Be able to live in silence. *The Way of Perfection* provides a very good rendition of the essence of Carmelite life - detachment, humility, friendship. It's a very simple life and can be difficult to those with lots of academic degrees.

CSS: How do you see your life contributing to the betterment of humanity? How does one who lives away from society contribute to it?

ME: This is a Christian-oriented, intercessory vocation to serve others, including ourselves, in bringing the needs of humanity to God. When there is very little faith in the world there's an increased interest in contemplative life. This is happening now

CSS: Thank you very much for your time and openness!

❖ Katie 1995

(Center News, continued from page 2)

Mike's Ordination: On June 28, Mike Taylor was ordained by Joel as a Minister of the Center for Sacred Sciences. The ordination ceremony was held at the Center and attended by members of the



Practitioners' Group and their families. Joel gave a short talk before administering the ministerial vows to Mike, who also took the Quan Yin Pledge of selfless spiritual service, honoring the tradi-

tion of Franklin Merrell-Wolff, one of Joel's teachers. Joel then presented Mike with a Certificate of Ordination and, establishing a tradition of ecclesiastical garb, bestowed upon Mike a Mexican poncho similar to the one Joel himself wears. After donning the vestment, Mike gave his first "dharma talk" as a Minister, exploring the meaning of the Quan Yin Pledge he had just taken. The ordination ceremony was followed by a gala reception and a good time was had by all.

* * * * *

Joel and Jennifer's Wedding: Amidst a gathering of happy well wishers, Joel and Jennifer were married on September 9, at the Unitarian Church in Eugene. With soft chords of Celtic harp music in the background, Jennifer was escorted down the aisle by her mother Jane Whitbread. In the ceremony, CSS Minister Mike Taylor wove the tenets of the Center

for Sacred Sciences into a spiritual perspective on marriage, followed by the exchange of traditional marriage vows by Joel and Jennifer.

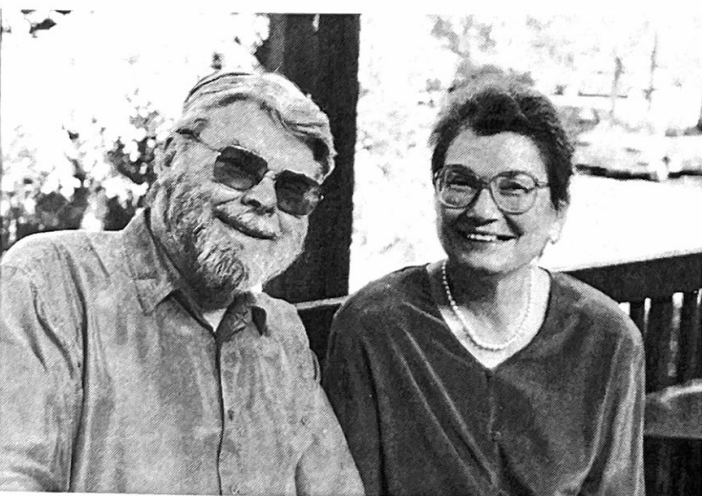
The ceremony was followed by a reception at the church. Friends from as far away as California and Seattle, family, members and friends of the Center, and other guests mingled and celebrated. The hall was decorated in casual elegance with family silver and large bouquets of lilies adorning the buffet tables. Jennifer and Joel, smiling and relaxed, greeted the guests in a receiving line. Numerous toasts, ranging from loving support to hilarious references to past history were offered by guests and, of course, Joel quoted one of his "little stories" by a favorite mystic.

Following the toss of the bridal bouquet and a few steps of his "Zorba dance," Joel and Jennifer left amid showers of birdseed to enjoy a honeymoon in the San Juan Islands.





**JOEL AND JENNIFER'S
WEDDING
SEPTEMBER 9, 1995**



A weak willed person cannot endure a prolonged ordeal and stand his ground. When even the normal good resolution is difficult to keep, how much more so the resolve to die to the world, to renounce every passion and annihilate all our obstinate self centeredness.

Russian Orthodox Saint Theophan the Recluse

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CENTER FOR SACRED SCIENCES

November 1995

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday
			PRACTITIONER A 7:30 B 8:00 1
VIDEO 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 5		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 7	PRACTITIONER B 7:30 A 8:00 8
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 12		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 14	PRACTITIONER A 7:30 B 8:00 15
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 19		CLOSED 21	CLOSED 22
CLOSED 26		CLOSED 28	PRACTITIONER B 7:30 A 8:00 29

December 1995

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday
VIDEO 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 3		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 5	PRACTITIONER A 7:30 B 8:00 6
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 10		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 12	PRACTITIONER B 7:30 A 8:00 13
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 17		CLOSED 19	CLOSED 20
CLOSED 24	Christmas service 11 a.m.	CLOSED 26	CLOSED 27
CLOSED 31			

January 1996

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday
		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 2	PRACTITIONER A 7:30 B 8:00 3
VIDEO 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 7		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 9	PRACTITIONER B 7:30 A 8:00 10
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 14		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 16	PRACTITIONER A 7:30 B 8:00 17
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 21		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 23	PRACTITIONER B 7:30 A 8:00 24
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 28		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 30	PRACTITIONER A 7:30 B 8:00 31

February 1996

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday
VIDEO 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 4		LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 6	PRACTITIONER B 7:30 A 8:00 7
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 11		LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 13	PRACTITIONER A 7:30 B 8:00 14
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 18		LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 20	PRACTITIONER B 7:30 A 8:00 21
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 25		LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 27	PRACTITIONER A 7:30 B 8:00 28

March 1996

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday
VIDEO 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 3		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 5	PRACTITIONER B 7:30 A 8:00 6
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 10		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 12	PRACTITIONER A 7:30 B 8:00 13
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 17		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 19	PRACTITIONER B 7:30 A 8:00 20
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 24		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 26	PRACTITIONER A 7:30 B 8:00 27
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 31			

April 1996

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday
		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 2	PRACTITIONER B 7:30 A 8:00 3
VIDEO 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 7		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 9	PRACTITIONER A 7:30 B 8:00 10
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 14		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 16	PRACTITIONER B 7:30 A 8:00 17
CLOSED 21		CLOSED 23	CLOSED 24
TALK 11 a.m. LIBRARY 2:00-4:00 28		LIBRARY 5:30-8:30 30	

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Special Christmas service, Monday, December 25, 11 a.m.

CENTER FOR SACRED SCIENCES

PROGRAMS AND EVENTS: FALL 1995 -- SPRING 1996

Sunday meditation and talks. Sunday programs begin at 11 a.m. and include a short meditation and discourse by Joel followed by questions and answers. While donations are appreciated this event is free and open to everyone.

Sunday video presentation. On the first Sunday of most months the Center shows a video featuring one of the world's major religions or a well known teacher. This program includes a short meditation, an introduction to the video's topic, and an informal cold-plate potluck. This event is open to everyone.

Library. The Center maintains a lending library of over 2,700 books as well as extensive audio and video collections that is open to the public. For more information see the Library Page in this issue of *The Center Voice*.

Practitioners' Group. This is an ongoing study group for those who want to make a long term commitment to meditate, practice precepts, and study sacred texts together. An interview with Joel is required before joining this group.

Serving the Dream. Approximately twice a year Joel leads a course in dream interpretation from a spiritual point of view. Call for more details.

Retreats. Twice a year the Practitioners' Group goes to Cloud Mountain in Washington for a one week meditation retreat. The library also has resource files for those not in the Practitioners' Group who are interested in going on retreats.

Christmas Day Service: Special service, Monday, December 25, 11 a.m.



SUNDAY VIDEO SCHEDULE

DECEMBER 3---*Ruth Denison*

Contemporary Buddhist teacher Ruth Denison leads a Vipassana meditation retreat at Breitenbush. The video maker, Merry Song of Eugene, will be present to lead a discussion of Ruth's work.

JANUARY 7---*Good Heart*

The Dalai Lama gives an extensive commentary of the Christian Gospels allowing us to view Jesus' teachings through Tibetan Buddhist eyes.

FEBRUARY 4---*Abhishikatananda*

A documentary of Bede Griffith's predecessor, Father Le Saux, who founded the Christian hermitage Shantivanam in South India. Father Le Saux set out in the 1940's to grasp the heart of Eastern spirituality in the context of his own Christian faith. Meditating in the caves at Arunachala and studying with Sri Guanananda he found that Truth which transcends all faiths.

MARCH 3---*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

Acclaimed documentary on the history of the Tibetan Book of the Dead and its traditional application showing the rites and liturgies performed for a recently deceased Ladakh elder.

APRIL 7---*Mata Amritanandamayi*

Explore the Bhakti path of love and devotion with pujas and bhajans performed by the contemporary Hindu teacher called The Holy Mother.

MAY 5---*Wake up!*

Korean Zen master Soen Sa Nim tours Europe with three American monks. A rare portrait of an unusual and provocative teacher who has dedicated his life to bringing the essence of Zen to the West.

CENTER FOR SACRED SCIENCES

Publication and Supply Catalog Fall 1995

Naked Through The Gate

A spiritual autobiography by Joel, \$11.95

Center Voice

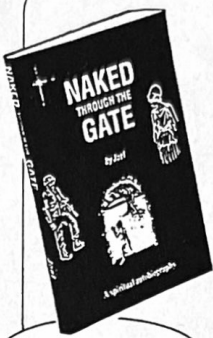
The CSS newsletter, published fall and spring, free.

MEDITATION PILLOWS

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Meditation Magazine

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Interview with Joel, spiritual director of the Center for Sacred Sciences, about the nature and purpose of spiritual enquiry.

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Practical instructions and helpful tips for the beginning stages of a meditation practice by Joel.

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CENTER FOR SACRED SCIENCES

Audio Tape Catalog Fall 1995

All tapes are by Joel unless noted

Single tapes \$6.50 each

THE MEANING OF SACRED SCIENCES
60 min, 1/90

TRUE RELIGION
90 min, 3/91

TOWARDS A SACRED WORLDVIEW
90 min, 10/91

THE PARADOX OF PARADIGMS
90 min, 3/93

FREEDOM'S GATE: BETWEEN FEELING
AND DESIRE, 90 min, 6/93

TWO TRUTHS: THE RELATIVE,
THE ABSOLUTE, 90 min, 6/93

KOAN OF SELFLESSNESS
90 min, 8/93

THE PURPOSE OF PRECEPTS
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TIME AND ETERNITY
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SPIRITUAL DEATH, 60 min, 8/95

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(unless otherwise noted)

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WHAT IS SPIRITUAL LOVE?
2 tapes, 60 min, ea. 11/89

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CONSCIOUSNESS WITHOUT FORM
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THERE IS ONLY ONE ENLIGHTENMENT
& "MY" ENLIGHTENMENT
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