

Center Voice

FALL 1996

the newsletter of the Center for Sacred Sciences

Special Focus: Pilgrimage

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In This Issue . . .

We've all heard of mystics from the past and present who have set off on pilgrimages. But how useful is it for the ordinary modern day seeker to put everything else on hold while they set off on an experience that may spiritually enrich their life?

In this issue of the Center Voice, the spotlight is on pilgrimage: that special journey to a holy place or a place unknown in search of the true nature of being.

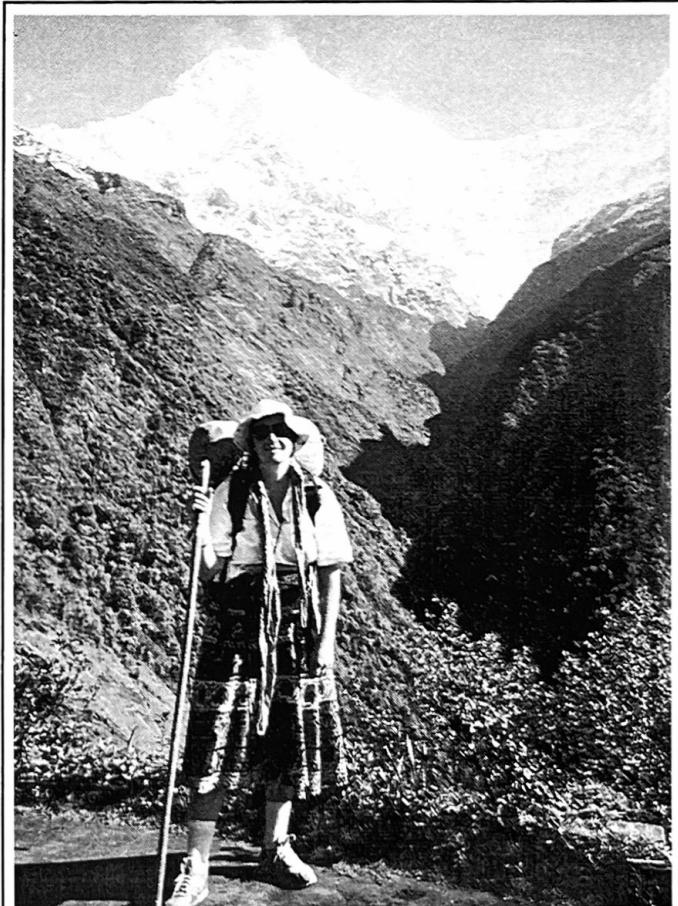
In his overview of the topic of pilgrimage Joel reminds us that "...there is absolutely no security to be found anywhere in this sea of shifting forms we take to be 'reality'..." and that the practice of pilgrimage can help us confront this truth. He also

The Center For Sacred Sciences
will offer a special
Christmas Day service on
Wednesday, December 25,
at 11 a.m.

includes some words of wisdom from his own pilgrimage which had him traveling to various sites across the Western United States.

Next, in "The Abode of our Precious God," Center practitioner Niraja is interviewed on what she found out about herself and about a foreign culture in her account of a four month spiritual quest to Nepal and India.

And lastly, in "Postcards from the Path," Mike reflects on his own four months in India. While there he discovered that his pilgrimage was not to a place, but to the depths of his own soul, as he was led on an ever deepening journey of surrender.



Niraja on pilgrimage in Nepal

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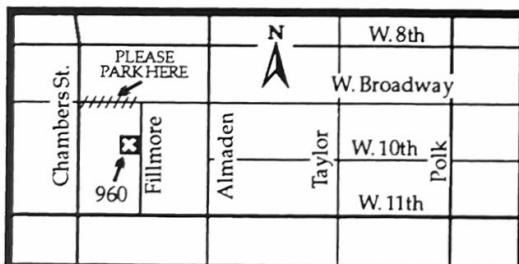
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The Center for Sacred Sciences is a non-profit, tax-exempt church dedicated to the creation and dissemination of a new Worldview based on the wisdom of humanity's great spiritual teachers, but presented in forms appropriate to our present scientific 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.



Meetings: 960 Fillmore St., Eugene

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CENTER NEWS:

Spring Retreat:

"Who Am I?" was the intriguing theme of the spring retreat at Cloud Mountain. The 15 practitioners who attended attempted to grasp "who they are" through teachings and exercises from the Vedantic tradition of self inquiry. During the formal and informal practices, the retreatants focused on "to whom is this occurring?" when confronted with thoughts, emotions and sensations. The challenge was to observe the response to the inquiry and what could be learned from it.



Retreatants: (top row from left) Todd Corbett, Therese Engelmann, Fred Chambers, Clivonne Corbett, Gene Gibbs, Merry Song, David Cunningham, (bottom row from left) Thomas Reinhart, Jim Zajac, Grace Schneiders, Barbara Dewey, Joel, Tom McFarlane

Palo Alto Retreat: In late May, Joel led a well attended retreat in Palo Alto, California, at the home of Sita de Leeuw and George Heaton entitled: "Neti Neti" (not this/not that). Retreatants explored through teachings and meditation who they are not. As always, the experience was accompanied by a lively discussion of the results. Anyone interested in getting information about the 1997 spring retreat in Palo Alto can call Sita at (415)-857-1312.

Enlightenment Day Celebration: Enlightenment Day was celebrated this year by about 25 people at a party hosted by Fred and Jo Chambers at their delightful home outside of Cottage Grove. Their son Chris acted as the parking attendant to ensure we could all get out once we got in! Joel barbequed chicken with two choices of his secretly prepared barbecue sauce. Everyone brought potluck dishes and, as usual, there was more delicious food than 50 people could have eaten. "The Center For Sacred Sciences Ensemble" entertained the group with chants they have been practicing for the fall retreat.

(Center News continued on page 15)

THE DISCIPLINE OF PILGRIMAGES

By Joel

Ever since the dawning of religion, spiritual seekers have undertaken pilgrimages to visit holy sites, to find teachers and teachings, to search out relics, or to receive blessings. From a mystical point of view, however, all these forms of journeying are really the outer expression of an inward journey to the center of one's self. Thus, while orthodox Muslims may make a pilgrimage to Mecca in order to circumambulate the Ka'bah (the sacred stone structure at the center of the Grand Mosque), according to the Sufis, the true Ka'bah lies within oneself. And while a devout Buddhist may travel many miles to visit the Buddha's place of Enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, still, as Lama Shabkar writes, "He may comb the three dimensions of the microcosmic world systems for an eternity, but he will not find so much as the name of the Buddha other than the one in his heart."¹

But this is not to say that the outer pilgrimage should be dismissed as merely an "exoteric" exercise, having no importance for those who are following a mystical path. Indeed, the rigors of a pilgrimage can provide powerful opportunities to expose hidden attachments and practice real surrender. This is especially true if the pilgrimage involves travel in a foreign country or to com-

munities which maintain a spartan life-style, free of the luxuries many of us westerners have come to take so much for granted. There is nothing like the absence of air-conditioning, television sets, and flush toilets, to make us aware of how much we secretly rely on "worldly things" to bring us happiness. Similarly, there is nothing like being placed in an unfamiliar environment, faced with strange foods, strange customs, and strange people, to help us confront our deepest fears and surrender our most ingrained prejudices. All of which is part and parcel of learning one of the most important lessons of the path; namely, that there is absolutely no security to be found anywhere in this sea of shifting forms we take to be "reality."

Of course, the mere fact that one visits a foreign country or strange land does not, in itself, constitute a pilgrimage. Many people travel for purely worldly reasons--to conduct business, to shop for bargains, to further their education, or simply to "get away from it all" by taking an exotic vacation. What distinguishes the spiritual pilgrim from the secular traveler are motivation and discipline. The secular traveler is primarily motivated by a desire to enhance him or herself, whereas, the

spiritual pilgrim wishes to expose and, ultimately, "die" to that self, in order to Awaken to the True Self which is the Ultimate Reality underlying all that is. For this reason, pilgrims of all traditions have adopted special disciplines to serve as reminders of their journeys' sacred purpose. In the Middle Ages, for example, Christians headed for the Holy Land often donned horse-hair shirts and went barefoot. Muslims traveling to Mecca wear white robes and observe strict celibacy during their journey. Some Buddhists on the way to visiting sacred shrines will stop to make a certain number of prescribed prostrations every few steps they take.

But even if you do not belong to an established tradition, which already possesses disciplines for undertaking a pilgrimage, you can still create your own. The last phase of my own spiritual quest unfolded in the context of just such a "pilgrimage." In the summer of 1983 I traveled throughout the Western United States, visiting various spiritual communities. The outer purpose of this journey was to perform a service by taping a video newsletter in which each community would have ten minutes to present a sample of their activities. When the newsletter was

completed, I then sent copies to all the communities that had participated so that each could see what the others were up to. The inner purpose of the journey, however, was to find the Holy Grail of Enlightenment--something I had vowed to do or die trying. What follows is a short excerpt from my book, *Naked Through the Gate*², which describes the disciplines I adopted for my travels.

1. Although I would ask free room and board wherever I videotaped, I would accept no money, nor would I sell the tape at a later date. I wanted the newsletter to be a true service to which I had no financial attachment or expectation of reward.

2. I would travel with a low profile, asking no preferential treatment, participating in whatever tasks were at hand, and generally making

myself useful. Specifically, knowing that many of the communities I visited would be vegetarian, I resolved to obey Jesus' instructions to his disciples when he sent them forth to preach, "And into whatsoever city ye enter, and they receive you, eat such things as are set before you." And I resolved to do this without secret disdain or concealed complaint.

3. While traveling between communities I looked forward to spending some time by myself, but I would not stay in motels. I would camp out whenever possible and shun all luxuries. Further, I would adhere to no fixed schedule and remain flexible in my route, allowing time and fate to work their will in guiding me.

4. Finally, and most important, I would not judge the people I stayed with. I would keep inner silence and outward humility, as I had been instructed in my testing dream.

Obviously, these rules were tailored to the particulars of my own journey, and will not suit everyone's needs. I offer them here only as an example of how one can convert an otherwise ordinary adventure into a true spiritual pilgrimage which, in my own case, stripped away the last of my worldly desires and attachments and so led directly to the Gate of Gnosis.

May all your pilgrimages be so blessed!

❖ Joel 1996

NOTES:

1. *The Flight of the Garuda*, comp. and trans. Keith Dowman (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1994) p. 91.

2. Joel, *Naked Through the Gate* (Eugene, OR: Center for Sacred Sciences, 1985) p. 201-202.

The Abode of our Precious God

One Seeker's Pilgrimage to India

Last January, Center practitioner Niraja Cheryl Lorenz of Eugene set off on a four-month pilgrimage to India and Nepal which took her to two large ashrams, seven major cities, and several wilderness areas. She covered countless miles, as well as spending twelve days on foot trekking in Nepal.

After returning to Eugene and readjusting to the twelve-hour time change, she was interviewed by Center practitioner, Merry Song.

CSS: Some people travel to distant countries like India and

have a fascinating time going sightseeing, but it's not necessarily a spiritual quest. What made your journey distinctly spiritual?

Niraja: I went to India specifically to spend time with one of my spiritual teachers, Mata Amritanandamayi (Amma) and spent approximately two months with her. But I think in addition to that, it was a spiritual journey because of where I am in my life right now. Even the time that I didn't spend with Amma, when I was visiting other ashrams and temples and sightseeing, really

was a spiritual journey for me.

CSS: You say that it has to do with where you are in your life right now. Can you say more about that?

Niraja: For me every day has become a spiritual journey, whether I'm in India or Eugene. And hopefully every moment, I'm involved in my practice — in remembering God.

CSS: If that's the case, then why did you feel it necessary to go on this pilgrimage? Was your calling to go far away?

Niraja: Last summer I spent approximately a month travel-

ing with Amma on her tour of the United States. While I was with her, I felt very drawn to spending even more time with her and to going to her ashram in India and finding out what that was like.

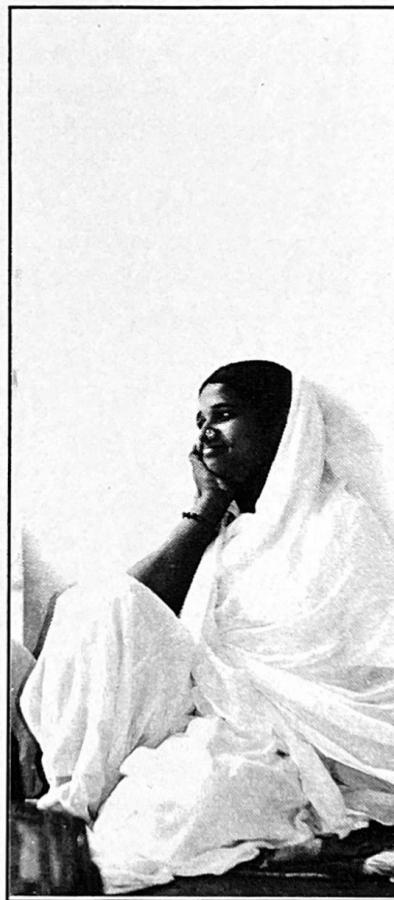
CSS: Did the actual experience live up to your expectations?

Niraja: No, but that doesn't mean it was any worse than my expectations. It was very different from my expectations. I don't think I could have ever had an accurate image of Amma's ashram until I experienced it. It was a very busy place with thousands of people coming every day to see Amma, and there were constant programs going on, bhajans being sung, classes being given. One day I wanted to get away from it all for a little bit so I went up on the roof and thought, "AHH, I found some silence." I was sitting up there enjoying the peace and quiet when suddenly I stopped and actually listened to what I was calling peace and quiet. Probably ten feet behind me on the other side of the wall I was leaning against, people were hammering and sawing on a construction project, I could hear the pots and dishes clanging in the kitchen six floors below, and there were children running around in the room next door. This was quiet for me, probably because I wasn't seeing any activity and there wasn't anything directed at me. The noise and activity level, even in the middle of the night, was al-

ways high.

CSS: After spending about a month at the ashram you then went on a tour of North India where Amma gave programs. I understand that this involved, among other things, extremely crowded buses.

Niraja: Right. There were three bus loads of people that went on tour with Amma...



Mata Amritanandamayi

CSS: Nice new city buses?

Niraja: They were the ashram's private buses. They were not new. Two of them were named Kali and Durga. They squeeze five people across in Indian buses. In addition to having every seat filled, the aisles were packed full with people

who had taken vows of renunciation. And they didn't get seats on the bus. They stood or sat in the aisles along with boxes of books and other things to sell along the way.

CSS: Were you able to keep a spiritual practice going at times like that?

Niraja: It was probably the time when I really learned to let go. To not be attached to how things happened. We would drive and maybe we'd be on the road for a couple hours and then the bus would stop. We'd be given no explanation but we'd sit there for an hour or two and then we'd drive on again. There'd be flat tires. There'd be running out of gas. Everything happened along the way. And I, as well as most of the people on the tour, just accepted it as it came and with a great sense of humor. At times it was just amazing. One thing that often happened was that we'd arrive in a new city and get lost. The drivers wouldn't know how to find the ashram that we'd be staying at. And it would amaze me that we could drive around the city for a long time and not know where we were going and that they wouldn't have had directions ahead of time. But it happened over and over again. And I just sort of accepted it as it came — a real change for me.

CSS: After a while you left the tour and went off to travel with a friend. How was that experience different?

Niraja: Being with Amma was very easy in that everything

was taken care of. So initially the hardest thing was getting used to having to take care of all my material needs again, having to find a place to eat, find a place to stay, and make all the arrangements for everything. But I think that after I was over that adjustment period I became much more... I guess you could say... much more self centered. I lost some of the ability to just accept things the way they were. I wanted to control the way things happened, where I went, when I went, how I went, where I ate, what I ate. Fortunately I was able to observe within myself this desire to control — or rather, this belief that I could control.

CSS: Can you think of an experience that you had while in India that demonstrates one of the lessons that you had to learn?

Niraja: One of the things that I was really practicing was to be present with people and not to judge them just by looking at them. One day I was on a very, very crowded train. There weren't any seats left and I was sitting on my pack squeezed in the entry way. And sitting next to me were a couple of men without fingers — lepers. They were sitting right in the doorway with their legs hanging out. The lepers were not a problem for me. My problems started when a man came and sat down next to me. He reeked of alcohol, wore only one shoe, and was very belligerent towards the lepers. He

spoke some English but in his drunken state it was very hard to understand his slurred speech. He kept trying to engage me in conversation and I kept trying to talk to him and listen to him. He was asking me different questions like why his life was the way it was and why he only had one shoe. After about an hour of this, it became very difficult for me to not just shut him out. I wanted him to leave me alone — to stop leaning on me, to stop breathing on me. I was having a hard time staying present. Suddenly I was inspired and I pulled a picture of Amma out of a pouch I had hanging around my neck. I showed it to him and he grabbed it away from me. Instantly he was silent and stayed silent. This experience had a couple of lessons in it for me. One lesson was just in my practicing staying present with him when I felt repulsed. But what I really learned from this was to trust to ask my guru, to ask her for help when I needed it. And she gave it to me, you know? By showing him her picture, that was it. There was no more belligerence. He was a changed person, and I don't know how it all happened, but it was as though Amma came and rescued me from that situation.

CSS: I understand that besides spending time at Amma's ashram, you also visited the ashram of Osho, once known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh.

Niraja: Yes, after leaving

Amma's tour, I went to Osho's ashram in Poona and spent about two and a half weeks there.

CSS: Can you describe that experience for us?

Niraja: Even though Osho died in 1990, the ashram is still quite active. The main meditation hall, which is called Buddha Hall, holds about 7000 people and was often quite crowded. I feel like I really learned a lot from my experiences there — from listening to Osho's discourses twice a day and participating in many of the six daily meditations. The first day I arrived I was browsing in the book store and I read a chapter entitled, "To Be Miserable or Ecstatic?" The next day the same topic was part of the morning discourse. When I heard this idea twice in such a short time — choosing each day, each moment to be ecstatic — I really listened.

One morning I woke up feeling very depressed. I didn't want to get out of bed. I felt resistant to everything that was going on at the ashram. Finally, I pulled myself out of bed and said a brief prayer that I would meet each moment new and with joy. In that instant, my mind shifted and I was able to allow the rest of the day to unfold with love.

CSS: After about three months of traveling around in India, you spent 4 weeks in Nepal, much of the time exploring the Himalayas. What

have the Himalayas meant to you? Have they been some kind of a spiritual peak?

Niraja: I think mountains and nature and the outdoors have always been a place for me to really regenerate, and the Himalayas are the peak of that. So I was hoping just to see them. I didn't know that I would actually get to go right up close to them.

CSS: Was Nepal quite a different experience from being in India?

Niraja: Yes, one of the first things that struck me in Nepal was that people really do greet you with a bow and "Namaste." Little children would run out with their hands in prayer mudra calling, "Namaste, namaste." It was wonderful. In general, being in Nepal was like taking a vacation after India. It wasn't such a struggle. Being in India was always a struggle.

CSS: Why?

Niraja: Partly I think it had to do with the crowds in India — the intensity, the noise, and the constant energy. Also with language difficulties. It was such a foreign culture that even after being there for months, I still didn't know all the rules and how to behave in certain situations. Going to Nepal was much more western. Most people spoke English and I wasn't constantly being approached as a single "loose" western woman by local men to be picked up and carried home with them or even marry them in some cases. In a way being in Nepal, and especially

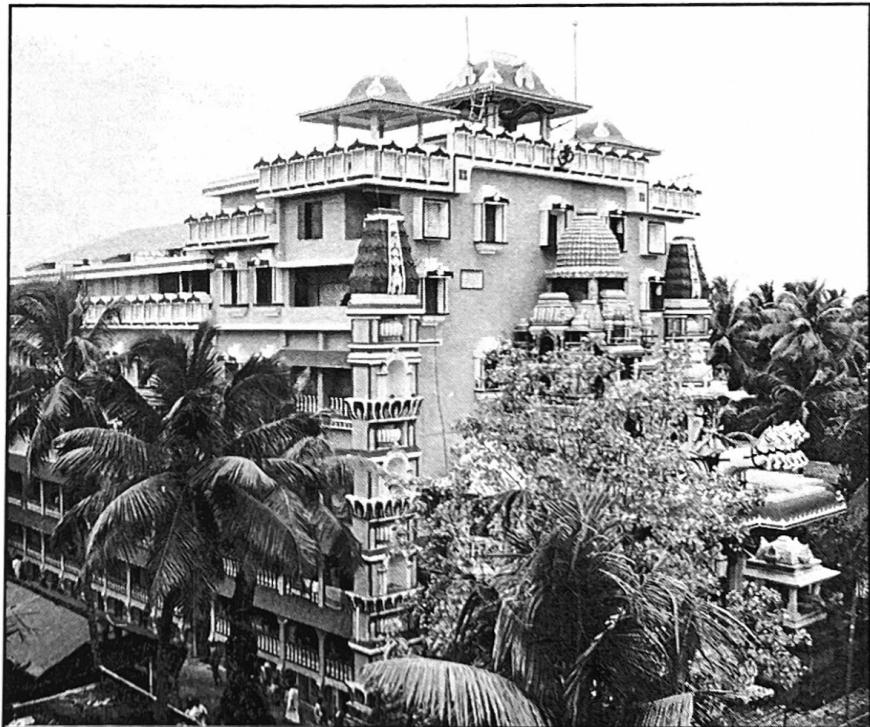
Pokhara, was like coming back to Eugene in some sense.

The 60's hippy culture is alive and well there.

CSS: You spent 12 days trekking primarily by yourself. Did you find that to be a meditative experience? Did you find yourself feeling closer to God?

Niraja: I spent a lot of time chanting as I was hiking up the trails...

chanting and taking each step with a mantra and a breath. In this way I forgot the struggle of climbing and of breathing. One of the things that was really beautiful was that often along the trails there were small Tibetan Buddhist shrines and prayer flags strung from trees. Seeing them would just always remind me of God. One place along the trail there was a sign that said,



Amma's ashram in Kerala

CSS: Were you in a happy state of mind?

Niraja: Yes, everyday became more and more beautiful and I was totally present as I climbed up the trails. I really saw where I was and I loved where I was. I climbed from about 2,000 feet up to around 13,000, and as I got higher it became more and more difficult to breathe. I found that the best way for me to climb was by

PLEASE DO NOT SPIT OR THROW LITTER FOR THE NEXT QUARTER MILE AS THIS IS THE ABODE OF OUR PRECIOUS GOD. I walked ahead through a deeply wooded area and came to this wonderful little shrine. There were lots of flowers and leaves placed in it and different prayer flags hanging from it. I added a piece of fabric and some prayers. Just ahead was a view point that over-

looked a very deep gorge. Across the gorge was the face of a cliff with a dozen waterfalls coming down. It was a very magical place.

CSS: Now that you are back home, can you say that this pilgrimage really changed you in any important way? Was it worth it?

Niraja: Yes, it was definitely worth it. How has it changed me? One thing that does really feel different for me is that I feel a lot more accepting of whatever happens...

CSS: Change?

Niraja: Change or no change—whatever happens. A lot of this came from the tour with Amma. From those dozens of hours of sitting on the bus. Sometimes the bus would be moving and sometimes it wouldn't and it didn't really matter because the journey was what it was about. It wasn't about the goal. It wasn't about getting somewhere. It was the journey. I have brought this back home and can say this journey is what it's all about, too.

CSS: Which journey do you mean?

Niraja: This life journey. This daily activity, whether it involves going to work or sitting at home watching TV even, the journey is what's important. There's not a goal. There may be a goal out there but all that's important right now is this journey. Let me give you an example of something that's happened since I've been home. Several days after I returned, my car had a flat tire out on the

street. I think in the past I would have said, "AGH, a flat tire!" and there would have been a lot of anxiety and a lot of struggle. There was a little struggle about how to deal with it, but mostly it was, "OK, this morning I'm going to fix a flat tire and that's what I'm going to do." It was OK that there was a flat tire and that was how I was going to spend my morning.

CSS: So, after your various struggles and realizations, do you recommend that other people go on this type of pilgrimage?

Niraja: Definitely, everybody should go to India. I say that partly because experiencing a culture and a way of life that is so different from what you're used to really helps to shake up your mind and shake you out of some of your belief structures that are so ingrained...beliefs about how the world is and how you should be.

CSS: Would you recommend people going on a pilgrimage to India specifically because it is thought of as an ancient spiritual place?

Niraja: I think I would recommend India because spiritual life is a part of the everyday world there. My second morning in India I was staying in a guest house in a small rural town. Not yet adjusted to the time change, I woke up before dawn. Shortly thereafter, still before it was light, I heard music being broadcast over a loud speaker. I went out, it was still

dark, and slowly I found my way towards the music and eventually came to a temple. It was an open air temple. Dozens of people were coming and spending maybe five minutes there, saying their morning prayers, making a little offering and going on with their daily lives. It seemed like everybody came and spent a few moments at the temple before they started their day. That kind of remembrance is not something we see here in very many people. It's normal there. It's just how they all live. And I think that kind of energy is wonderful to be around. It's so ingrained. It's everywhere. There are temples and shrines everywhere.

CSS: You say that trekking was probably, as it turned out, the most spiritual and illuminating part of your journey.

Niraja: Yes, trekking in Nepal was probably the most powerful experience for me. To go into those mountains, and be surrounded 360 degrees by peaks that are over 22,000 feet tall, gave me a real sense of the power of God. The beauty of the place, the power, the strength. I would walk along the trail and come around the corner and see some amazing new vista and I would remember God. I would remember the beauty of this world, the power. I don't know how to describe it. Tears were in my eyes. It was like, YES, this is it!

❖ Merry Song and Niraja

POSTCARDS FROM THE PATH

by MIKE

Dear friends:

When I first sought to write about my recent journey, I was reminded of the computer Internet. I had spent four months on my own in India, and reducing to just a few pages what was a very rich and intense experience seemed an impossible task. It was like doing a subject search on the Worldwide Web and getting 12,580,785 matches - "click here to see items 1-10." I obviously needed some way to narrow down my reflections to what others might be most interested in. So, for this installment of "Postcards" I have changed the format slightly to respond to questions some of you have asked about my experiences in India.

My trip was, in the deepest sense, a pilgrimage, although I wasn't sure what it was a pilgrimage to. Unlike most pilgrims I wasn't really interested in holy places and temples, and I wasn't looking for more teachings or a new guru. Frankly, I wasn't quite sure why I was going, except that I seemed to have been guided to it, and I felt a responsibility to honor that guidance. What unfolded from following that guidance, though not what I would have desired, was an unsettling and profound experience. In responding to the following questions, I am happy to share some of that experience with you.

Q) How did you prepare yourself spiritually for India? How did God prepare you?

If anything, I did my best *not* to go, to try to maintain my life as it had been. It seems that God had different plans for me. For the previous year I had been involved in a very painful divorce. I had lost my home and family, and was soon to lose my place of business, a photo studio I had invested most of my energy the previous year in building. I had tried for months to find a suitable new home for myself, my cat, and my business, but with no success. It seemed that for whatever reason, I was not going to be able to put my life back together like before. All of this created a space of opportunity for a pilgrimage that would not have otherwise seemed practical.

This material-level ground work was important and seemed guided by providence. But the psycho-spiritual preparation was

even more painful. I was attached to justice and to the world being the way I thought it should be, and that attachment had dragged me right through the wringer. I was caught up in a world that didn't play by any rules I was familiar with, and my emotions and spirit felt badly damaged in the encounter. I was being shown the darkest depths of my soul as I struggled to cope with feelings of betrayal, grief, and loss. By the time I boarded the plane for India, the destruction of my old way of life seemed almost complete.

Q) Did your pilgrimage show you anything new about yourself?

One of the first and most basic things I was shown was how much I needed other human beings, especially when I felt in crisis. My first one or two weeks had many times of near panic, feeling alone and lost in a land where I understood nothing. Finding an En-

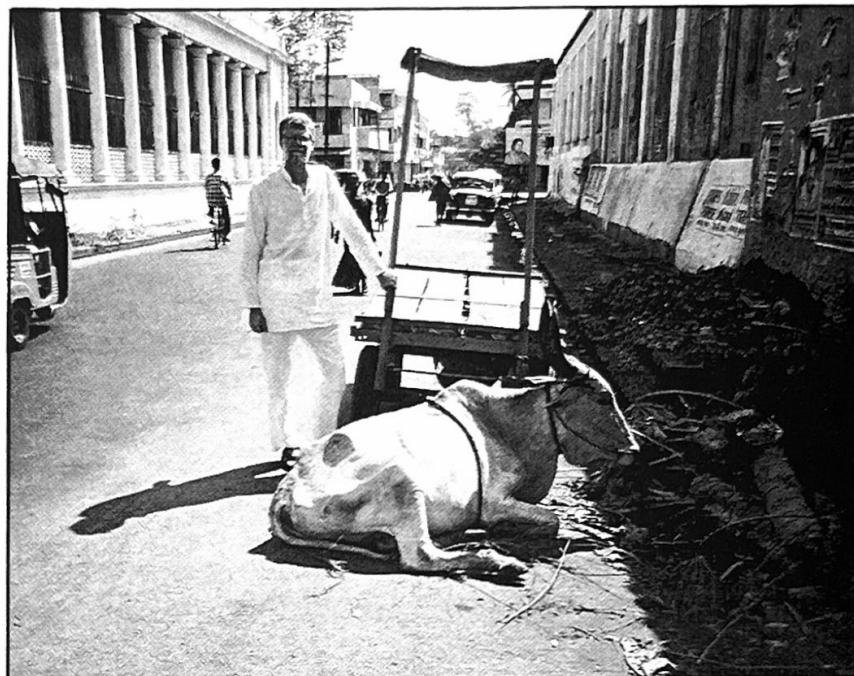
glish-speaking Westerner was a huge relief at those times. I was surprised how primal that need for companionship felt. But when the basic need for human contact was satisfied, I was faced with a deeper longing for spiritual people with similar values and interests. Eventually, I found other seekers and formed some meaningful friendships among them, but it still wasn't enough. I still felt empty, and then I knew that my real need, my deepest desire, could be fulfilled by no other human being, but only by God. But at the times I lacked this human connection, I also felt cut off from any sense of connection to the divine.

Another early revelation was about my own unconscious. About a month into my journey, I was getting very frustrated by my inability to attain any level of peace or depth in my practices. At first I attributed it to the lack of a suitable meditative environment, but when I was given a solo hut at

the Christian ashram, Shantivanam, a relatively peaceful oasis amid the clamor of life in India, I had to realize that the problem wasn't my environment. One night I had a powerful dream, and one of my friends helped me see some of what it meant. But it wasn't until I consulted one of the Brothers there that it all came together. In my sincere attempts to practice forgiveness as Jesus taught, saying "love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you," etc., I had denied and stuffed away my own battered but very powerful emotions.

Brother Martin shared how in his life he had had a similar problem, and discovered how he was doing violence to his own psyche. He taught me that when one part of this delusory self battles another part, it just adds fuel to the fire of delusion, when what we want is for the fire to burn itself out. I went back to my hut and employed a simple practice he suggested. I soon experienced great anger arising in consciousness, and when that energy passed cleanly through me I discovered that hiding under it were feelings of the deepest grief. After tasting deeply of this emotion I felt the mercy of God lead me into a most profound and peaceful state of contemplation that lasted many hours, and colored the entire next day with bliss. I had been shown something very powerful about the relationship between the emotions and spiritual practice!

These, and other experiences, have led me into a continuing investigation of the role of the



Mike in Pondicherry

fulfillment or denial of psychological needs in spiritual growth. It is an investigation that by its very nature is intensely personal. I am not sure that it will lead to any general principles of use to others, but it seems to be where my path leads right now.

India provided many other fruitful opportunities to learn about myself and others, and I was shown much indeed. The baser aspects of human nature, long disguised and hidden from me by the myths and manners of my own society, were plain to see in this foreign land with its very different conventions. India directed a spotlight on most, if not all, of my remaining attachments to the world being the way I wanted it to be. It was very disillusioning at times. But this mystical path is about Reality - and illusions, however comforting, cannot be carried to the path's end.

I thought Life had shaken my

psyche to its very roots before embarking on this trip, but the intensity of India and my experiences there seemed to finish the job. I felt totally shattered. I wondered if I might have a nervous breakdown. But it seemed even that dubious relief would be denied me, and instead I just felt stripped to my core and profoundly humbled. With no home and no plans, each decision I made was a surprise even to myself. I couldn't begin to do justice to the many experiences and insights I was led to, but in a very active way Life Itself had become my tutor. My everyday waking experiences came to be imbued with the symbolic richness and metaphoric significance of the most powerful dreams.

Q) What was the worst thing about yourself that you had to face?

I think the hardest thing that I had to deal with was a recurring

and deepening crisis of faith. After my first fearful days in India, I realized that somehow I was being taken care of, often in miraculously perfect ways. I would be given just precisely what I needed, just when I needed it, or be given the perfect lesson for what I needed to see at any moment. And yet at times I would still be overcome with fear or anxiety. Eventually, I came to realize that it was a question of faith. My own experience had convinced me that I was being guided and taken care of. It was only when I forgot this and lost faith that I would feel fear.

Seeing fear in these terms made it serve as a reminder that my faith was slipping. So reminded, I would again surrender to faith, and everything became much easier. Lessons became even more plentiful, and life became even more synchronistic and miraculous. Although I had many spiritual crises on my journey, and felt more and more lost and often full of despair, this faith was always under it all, and it seemed to give being miserable some kind of cosmic purpose. I was willing to suffer to be purified, or to continue to progress on my path. And if my suffering was not strictly needed for my own path, I was helped to bear it by the thought that lessons I was being shown about myself or the world might be of service to others someday.

This served me well until about 2/3 of the way through my pilgrimage, when I spent time with a friend, who, in an ornery mood and with laser precision, attacked what seemed like the very foundations of my faith. My confidence in reaching the end of my

path, my remaining purpose in life of being of service to others, subtle attachments to roles and expectations, were all flushed out into the light of day. There, in the harsh light of attention, I could see that they were all in one way or another rooted in self. Seeing this clearly, my belief in them withered and died, and with it the last perceptible evidence of my faith. By the time this divine emissary had completed her task, I had succumbed to a crisis of faith that penetrated to the very core of my being. It looked like I had irretrievably thrown my life away, and any hope or expectation of deliverance through gnosis, or at the very least of service to others, was seen to be self-centered, built on the quicksand of delusion. I was in free-fall into a black hole that my path had left me no escape from. Any grasping at salvation in any form could only come from the self.

As I began the last leg of my journey, I felt completely desolate. I no longer felt that I was on a spiritual path. I couldn't read or even think about anything spiritual, and nothing else interested me any longer. Even despair required more of a core of self than I could muster. I didn't know what awaited the remains of this being, but it didn't look good.

My last stop, Dharamsala, was situated in the most attractive landscape that I had seen in India. In addition to being the center of the Tibetan refugee community, it is what the *Lonely Planet Guide* calls a "freak center." With no purpose left, I decided to just hang out with some new counterculture-type friends and just do all the things that people did there: shop;

eat at this restaurant and make small talk; shop; have coffee and make small talk; shop; eat at that restaurant; get high; go have tea; more talk, etc., etc. I should have been happy, everyone else seemed to be. I mean, I was in a pretty nice area, staying in a comfortable room in a small farming village fifteen minutes by footpath from town. The people I met were friendly enough. For all practical purposes I was rich, considering the exchange rate, and there was good food and lots of restaurants in town and shops full of very pretty things. But even though it was all enjoyable enough, I was totally untouched, bored by it all. I now knew without a doubt that *this* world had nothing to offer that could truly satisfy me. And my hopes for escaping this wheel of samsara had been dashed. There was no denying that I was in deep do-do, and I could see no way out.

It wasn't until I was back in the States for a month that this crisis was resolved with a profound revelatory experience. I was made to realize a Faith that was anchored so deep in my soul that it had no perceptible form, in fact was not other than God itself. I had feared that I had lost God, but only the illusory, impermanent signs of my faith had been removed. What had actually happened was that I was being led to a much subtler stage of this path, obscured in the absolute darkness of faith that St. John of the Cross writes of. Since that experience, my faith has felt much deeper and not so attached to outer signs which can be buffeted by the events of life and the machinations of the mind. I pray that I

never again lose touch with this faith, no matter what life has in store for me.

Q) Did your trip give you a new virtue or strength?

It doesn't feel that way, at least not in any conventional sense, other than the faith I discussed above. If anything it was a very humbling experience for me. Instead of your usual pilgrimage to a holy place or teacher, mine in retrospect seems to have been a pilgrimage to surrender. If there is one thing that being in India excels at, it is in exposing one's attachments. I was confronted by my attachments to honesty, peace and quiet, security, my need to communicate with others, health, comfort, clean air, honorable transactions, an attractive environment, and many other things. Basically, it was an advanced course in what I had been struggling with at home. I had to deal with the world not being the way I wanted it to be. I could fight it and be miserable. Or I could surrender.

One example might help to illustrate the power of this experience of suffering and surrender. About 12 hours after arriving in India, I finally collapsed onto the bed of a guest house in Pondicherry. I hadn't slept in over two days, hadn't eaten for about 14 hours and was on the verge of hypoglycemic shock. I had walked with my pack for miles in the noonday sun seeking lodging and being turned away, and was suffering from dehydration and heat exhaustion. Too wasted to find out how to obtain food, I wanted only sleep or at least a peaceful death. But the midday

traffic outside my window was creating an unbelievable cacophony of bus and truck air horns, a din unlike any I had ever experienced before.

I realized then, collapsed on the hard bed, that trying to resist this brutal assault of noise would take the very last drop of my life's energy, and still be futile. On the other hand, I realized that all of



Hindu temple in Tiruvannamalai

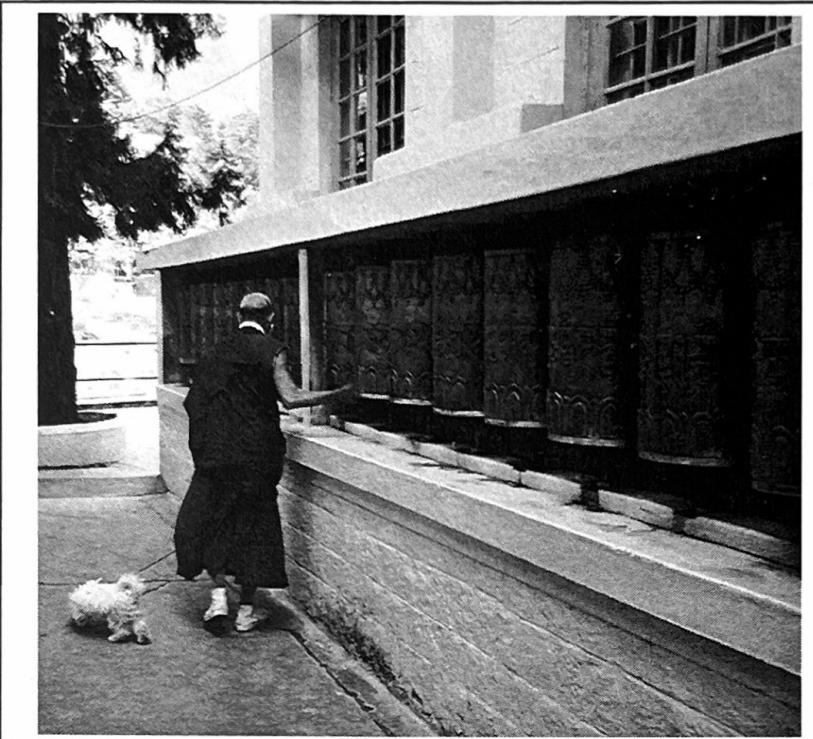
this noise and commotion was nothing other than a manifestation of God, a manifestation which I had been resisting with all my might. With this realization, I instead opened my heart to the

din, surrendered with love to this incredible sonic energy. In that very moment, what had just a moment earlier been horrible torture to me became instead a powerful wave of pure bliss! It washed through me and bathed my heart, and disturbed me no longer. And from that moment on, I ceased all resistance to the everpresentnoise of India. While those around me complained bitterly about it, my earplugs never came out of my pack, and I slept peacefully through the most incredible noise.

This is just one example of how powerful negative experiences in India spotlighted my attachments, and led to surrender. It often felt brutal, and is not something one is likely to seek out, but the result felt like some kind of purification. It was like my time in India was a stint in purgatory, and I was being washed clean of my resistance to God, parts of me being ground down until, little by little I was brought closer to total surrender.

Q) How did your previous perceptions of spiritual teachings from the East compare to your observations while there?

I think religion has a much more central role in the day to day life of the Indian people than what we are used to here in the States. Hindu mandalas of welcome are beautifully created of rice flour each day on the street in front of most homes. There is a brisk trade in ritual offering objects outside the temples. Every bus and public conveyance I rode in had a devotional picture of some God or Guru at the front, and it was not uncommon for the driver to stop at the side of a dangerous



Buddhist monk turning prayer wheels in Dharamsala

mountain road to do puja at a roadside shrine. After hiking to a mountaintop, one might find a symbolic Shiva Lingam.

However, it seems that this religion is often of the most exoteric variety (much like we commonly find in our own culture). Many temples were blatantly commercial affairs, with multitudes of stalls selling everything from ritual offering objects to housewares and toys for children. Politicians would frequently go to gurus and astrologers for advice and rituals to get themselves elected. Business men would do the same for competitive advantage over their rivals. It seemed that many gurus and pseudo-gurus would cater to these powerful people, and you would often see their photos in the media. One also regularly reads in the newspapers and magazines about "God Men" or "God Women," as they refer to realized people, or those that claim to be (which seem

to be much more numerous). Unfortunately these stories often have to do with gross abuses by these people in the name of religion. Apparently, the West has no monopoly on those who use the spiritual needs of their brothers and sisters for their own selfish ends.

On the other hand, the few enlightened (in my estimation) gurus that I did meet were very true to the core teachings as testified to by the mystics of all ages and traditions, and I felt no dissonance at all from my previous knowledge, other than the sometimes unfamiliar cultural trappings.

Another observation I would like to share is that of the different religions I contacted while in India. I spent most of my time among Christian, Hindu, and Tibetan Buddhist communities, and also a week in a Zendo. Each tradition had a very distinctive

character, something that wasn't so clear to me from my studies here at the Center, where we focus more on the universality of the Great Tradition than on the differences between the individual traditions. The one difference that struck me most was in the Tibetan Buddhist community at Dharamsala, the seat of the Tibetan government in exile. The level of integration of spiritual practice into everyday life was quite impressive, and it was not at all unusual to see Tibetans counting their silent mantras on their malas as they walked through the marketplace. I saw them doing their spiritual practices of all sorts wherever I went. But the most impressive thing of all was that in general, from the Dalai Lama (whom I had the good fortune to meet) on down through the monks walking the streets and the lay people in the shops, these were the most joyful, happy people I had seen in all of India, and maybe anywhere. I know it wasn't due to an easy life over the last four decades as refugees.

Q) Did you find it easy to do spiritual practice in India?

In many ways India is an ideal place to do spiritual practice. Ashrams, or spiritual communities, where one can go visit and be fed and housed and do spiritual practice for varying lengths of time, are a common feature of Indian society. Whereas in the States I find I must make reservations months in advance and usually be limited to a short visit of a week or so, at a cost that strains the budget, in India, I could often drop in with a couple of days notice, or none at all, and stay for

weeks or months at a time with room and board of \$1.50 to \$3.00 per day. If it wasn't so expensive to get there, India would be the ideal spiritual retreat for the American seeker of modest means needing extended time for practice.

On the other hand, India can be a very challenging place to maintain a formal practice, and a very rich place for unstructured practice. It has the ability to push just about any button you have. Ashrams are often not the peaceful, relatively comfortable places you might expect. There might be extreme heat or humidity, major mosquito infestations, noise at all hours of the day and night, not to mention beds that are as hard as boards (because that's what they are) and other potential distractions.

Q) Who is the best teacher



Buddhist shrine with prayer flags

you met, and why?

Life Itself was my best teacher in India. Being there was a major frontal assault on most all of my expectations and attachments. It was also a very rich and positive opportunity to meet and make friends with other seekers, and I learned much from this.

Q) Did you meet any teachers you didn't like, and why?

See answer above. I didn't find being in India to be a pleasant experience much of the time, so I guess you could say I didn't like my best teacher.

On another level, regarding formal human gurus and teachers, I don't know that it is particularly helpful to share my personal opinions. I had the rare opportunity to get to know many of the people that had gathered around a number of different gurus. I had many wonderful conversations with them about their own paths. One thing that I realized is that in the case of Enlightened Gurus anyway, different disciple personalities find just what they need in very different teachers and teachings. In the case of a guru whose approach may not appeal to me personally (say bhakti, where the guru is the object of love and worship), I could see why it was the perfect thing for another seeker. It is really quite miraculous how God guides each of us to what we need. Whatever lack of understanding or compassion I might have had about paths different from mine just evaporated on its own as I got to know and compare notes with so many other seekers. This broader understanding of the different traditions and paths is one of the gifts I am most

appreciative of from my journey.

Q) What can the West offer the Eastern traditions, spiritually?

I don't know that they need anything from the West. While the Christian and Jewish traditions have, ever since the Renaissance, tended to deny the possibility of God-Realization, the Eastern traditions, whatever their faults, have retained a basic awareness of what this life and the spiritual path is all about. Both East and West, however, display a universal human tendency to lose sight of the esoteric meaning of their own traditions, and to need periodic renewal from the mystics that arise within them.

It is interesting to note that at Shantivanam, the Christian ashram made internationally famous by Father Bede Griffiths, most of the liturgy, symbolism and iconography in use today is pure Hinduism, as well as much of the overt teaching. This ashram, and others like it, were founded to bring Christianity to the "heathen Hindu masses." It is very telling that their founders ended up pursuing very eastern paths, to the extent that Father Abhishiktananda, a founder of Shantivanam, became a Sadhu, or ascetic Hindu wanderer. In saying this, I don't want to in any way deny the great value and help that I have personally found in the writings of the Christian mystics through the ages. But I was sad to find that even in Christian ashrams in India, there was woeful ignorance of Christianity's own mystical heritage.

There is one huge advantage that the West does have over In-

dia, spiritually. And it is something that portends a great spiritual crisis for India. And that is that we people of the West have had the great spiritual opportunity of having our material needs fulfilled with unprecedented abundance, with many of us noticing how unfulfilling that truly is, leaving us with a spiritual void in our lives that no amount of luxury can hope to fill. On the other hand, India is just starting to get a taste of modern materialist culture, with TV and advertising and all that goes with it. Teachers in India confirmed my own impression that the Indian culture is being seduced by materialism in a powerful way. Fancy consumer goods now seem much more appealing than an austere spiritual path, and young people are much more interested in watches and clothes than in gurus. It is unfortunate that we in the West cannot share the wisdom we (some of us, anyway) have gained about the limitations and dangers of materialist values. But I am afraid that this is something India and other developing countries will have to discover for themselves.

Q) How can Eastern teachings be better adapted for this culture?

There are obviously many seekers who are well served by the Eastern (and Western, too) religions in their traditional forms, especially if they are fortunate enough to be guided by teachers with a deep esoteric understanding of the tradition. But it is just as obvious that there are many seekers, having grown up in a materialist, scientific culture, who cannot relate to these traditions. They may be disillusioned by bad experiences, distrust fundamentalist interpretations, or find that their scientific skepticism balks at the cosmologies and theologies of a bygone era.

I cannot think of any better way to meet the needs of these seekers than what is offered here at the Center for Sacred Sciences. To distill the core teachings, removing the extraneous cultural baggage while retaining the essential and powerful teachings and practices is the most effective approach I know for our time and culture. It is not necessary to

deny our rationality to pursue our spirituality. At the same time it is very valuable to read the original writings of the mystics of each tradition and, as we do, to appreciate the full richness of their expression in their cultural form. Developing such a cross cultural perspective can often illuminate teachings in one tradition that might otherwise be obscure to us with understandings we have gained from another tradition.

One thing that was impressed upon me through my travels was the vital importance, no matter what the tradition, of direct guidance from an enlightened master, ideally in the flesh. Without this enlightened perspective, any tradition degenerates, and seekers lose the way. My travels have served to make me all the more appreciative of what we have at the Center, and ever more grateful (if that is possible) of the great blessing that Joel is in my life.

Until next time, may all your journeys bring you closer to Home.

❖ Mike

(Center News, cont. from page 2)

Dr. Wolff Convention in Lone Pine: In August, Joel and Fred drove down to Dr. Wolff's former home, now called the Great Space Center, in Lone Pine, California, in the foothills of the high Sierras to attend the Dr. Wolff Convention. Joel presented the keynote talk, "Consciousness and Compassion" on Saturday. Fred reported that he felt the spirit of Dr. Wolff in the sudden bursts of wind which seemed to punctuate Joel's talk. Much of the convention centered on renewing social relation-

ships with regular attendees and lively spiritual discussions. Joel presented a one day workshop called "Entering the Mandala of Compassion" at the home of Andrea and her husband Dean in Bishop, California. One of the exercises included meditating on a rock which led to the usual enthusiastic discussion which Joel's teachings encourage.

Sufi Symposium: Last March, Jennifer and Joel attended the International Association of Sufism's annual *Sufi Symposium* held in San Francisco. Sufis from all over the world attended this remarkable three day

event, leading workshops, lectures, and prayers. Highlights included an inspiring lesson in dhikr taught by Sheikh Tijani from North Africa, and a stunning whirling dervish ceremony performed by members of the Mevlevi Order of America. Less tangible, but no less inspiring, was the extraordinary spirit of brother/sisterhood that prevailed among people hailing from such diverse parts of the globe. If you wish information about when and where next year's symposium will be held, write the International Association of Sufism (IAS), 25 Mitchell Blvd, Suite 2, San Rafael, CA 94903, or call (415) 472-6221.

*"Here every pilgrim takes a different way,
And different spirits different rules obey.
Each soul and body has its level here
And climbs or falls within its proper sphere-
There are so many roads, and each is fit
For that one pilgrim who must follow it."*

Farid Ud-Din Attar, 12th century Sufi poet

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November 1996

January 1997

March 1997

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
		CLOSED	1	2	3	4
Video 11 a.m. Library 2-4 p.m.	Library 5:30-8:30	Practitioner A 7:30 B 8:00	9	10	11	
6	7	8				
Talk 11 a.m. Library 2-4 p.m.	Library 5:30-8:30	TBA				
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Talk 11 a.m. Library 2-4 p.m.	Library 5:30-8:30	Practitioner B 7:30 A 8:00	21	22	23	24
19	20					
Talk 11 a.m. Library 2-4 p.m.	Library 5:30-8:30	Practitioner A 7:30 B 8:00	29	30	31	
26	27	28				

March 1997

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
						1
						8
						29
Video 11 a.m. Library 2-2:4 p.m.	Practitioner 5:30-8:30 4	A 7:30 B 8:00 6		Practitioner B 7:30 A 8:00 13	14	15
Talk 11 a.m. Library 9-2:4 p.m.	Library 5:30-8:30 11					
	Library 5:30-8:30 18	TBA 19			21	22
	Talk 11 a.m. Library 16-2:4 p.m.	CLOSED 25	CLOSED 26		27	28
	Talk 11 a.m. Library 23-2:4 p.m.	CLOSED 24				
	CLOSED 30					31

December 1996

February 1997

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Video 11 a.m. Library 2-4 p.m.	Library 5:30-8:30	Practitioner B 7:30 A 8:00	6	7	8	1
2	3	4	5	6	7	15
9	10	11	12	13	14	22
16	17	18	19	20	21	28
23	24	25	26	27	28	29

April 1997

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	Library 5:30-8:30	1 Library 5:30-8:30	2 Library 5:30-8:30	3 Library 5:30-8:30	4 Library 5:30-8:30	5
Video 11 a.m. Library 2-4 p.m.	7	8	9	10	11	12
Talk 11 a.m. Library 2-4 p.m.	14	15	16	17	18	19
CLOSED	21	22	23	24	25	26
Talk 11 a.m. Library 2-4 p.m.	27	28	29	30		

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CENTER FOR SACRED SCIENCES

PROGRAMS AND EVENTS: FALL 1996 -- WINTER 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 Sundays 2-4 p.m. and Tuesdays, 5:30 to 8:30 p.m.

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. Once a year Joel leads a course in dream interpretation from a spiritual point of view. Call for more details.

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

SUNDAY VIDEO SCHEDULE

NOVEMBER 3---*The Heart of Being: Moral and Ethical Teachings of Zen*
Zen teacher John Daido Loori administers the Buddhist precepts to members of his sangha. During the course of this ancient ritual he explains their relevance in everyday life and how to use a precept practice in a wise and compassionate manner.

DECEMBER 8--*Coming Home: An Introduction to Christian Meditation*
Laurence Freeman summarizes the theology and tradition of Christian meditation and shows how this simple and universal practice enriches the lives of people of all ages and backgrounds.

JANUARY 5---*River of Freedom*
Heart warming documentary portrait of contemporary western teacher Gangaji. This video follows her travels in India and the west giving satsang and interviews as she presents the tradition of Ramana Maharshi and her teacher Poonjaji.

FEBRUARY 2---*Where the Eagles Fly*
This documentary, from the *Portraits of Women of Power* series, highlights the work of Nadia Stepanova, Siberian shaman, who is reviving and perpetuating the rich and ancient shamanic tradition of her native land, the cradle of shamanism.

MARCH 2---*Awaken to the Eternal: A Journey of Self Discovery*
The life and teachings of Nisargadatta Maharaj, including the only footage available of the great teacher. Filmed in Bombay, India, Nisargadatta speaks of the concepts that keep us from truly understanding what Truth and Freedom really are.

APRIL 6---*Tantrism: The Message of the Tibetans*
This portrait of the legendary Tibetan masters of the sixties is not only a unique historical record but a moving inspirational documentary of the Tibetan tradition including the performance of many sacred rituals and meditation exercises.

MAY 4---*Now I Know You*
Special tribute to Taizan Maezumi Roshi. A Soto priest, he founded the Zen Center in Los Angeles 26 years ago and dedicated his whole life to instilling in his students a deep appreciation for the practice of zazen and its manifestation in daily life.

CENTER FOR SACRED SCIENCES

Publication and Supply Catalog: Fall/Winter 1996

Naked Through The Gate

A spiritual autobiography by Joel, \$11.95

Center Voice

The CSS newsletter, published fall and spring, free.

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

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Joel speaking in Palo Alto on an essential question in all mystical traditions.

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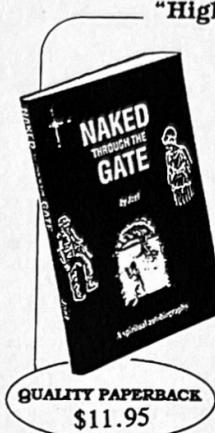
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CENTER FOR SACRED SCIENCES

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All tapes are by Joel unless noted

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