

CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS

Advaita Vedanta

The ancient Indian teachings of the Vedas and Upanishads constitute a timeless treasury of spiritual knowledge that has been passed down through the ages to our contemporary world. This living current of traditional wisdom still resonates in the hearts and minds of seekers throughout the world and has found expression in the lives and teachings of a number of remarkable 20th century spiritual teachers of Advaita Vedanta, the path of non-duality leading to the recognition of one's true nature.

Perhaps the most notable teacher was Ramana Maharshi, who is widely regarded as the most important Indian sage of the 20th century:

Ramana Maharshi (1879 - 1950) was one of the greatest spiritual teachers of modern-day India. At the age of seventeen he attained a profound experience of the true Self without the guidance of a Guru and thereafter remained conscious of his identity with the Absolute (*Brahman*) at all times. After some years of silent seclusion he finally began to reply to the questions put to him by spiritual seekers all over the world. He followed no particular traditional system of teaching, but rather spoke directly from his own experience of non-duality. Ramana Maharshi wrote virtually nothing; his teaching took the form of conversations with visitors seeking his guidance, the brief instructions he left with his followers, and a few songs. His method of instruction was to direct the questioner again and again to his true self and to recommend, as a path to self-realization, a tireless form of self-inquiry featuring the question "Who am I?" The transcribed conversations of Ramana Maharshi are known among spiritual seekers the world over and prized for their great inspirational power, which transcends all religious differences. (1)

He attained enlightenment at the age of seventeen without the help of a teacher through a remarkable experience in which he felt the death of his physical body while remaining fully conscious. Following this deeply transformative event he withdrew to the holy mountain of Arunachala where he sat in 'Divine bliss' for many years. Gradually devotees gathered around him, asking him questions and bringing him sacred books to read and expound upon. The ancient teaching of non-duality that he thus acquired merely formalized what he already felt intuitively.

For the rest of his life he answered questions put to him by devotees and visitors to his ashram at the foot of Mount Arunachala. As a realized being, he spoke from direct knowledge, as he had experienced "the absolute certainty of his divine, immutable, universal Self." Many of these exchanges were transcribed and later published in a series of books:

He spoke freely and his replies were often given with laughter and humour. If the questioner was not satisfied, he was free to object and or ask further questions.

It has been said that the Maharshi taught in silence, but this does not mean that he gave no verbal explanations, only that those were not the essential teaching. This was experienced as a silent influence in the heart. The power of his presence was overwhelming and his beauty indescribable and yet, at the same time, he was utterly simple, utterly natural, unassuming, unpretentious, unaffected. (2)

Many of his followers remarked on the impalpable spiritual force that Ramana Maharshi silently projected: "He constantly emanated a silent force or power which stilled the minds of those who were attuned to it and occasionally even gave them a direct experience of the state he himself was perpetually immersed in. Throughout his life he insisted that this silent flow of power represented his teachings in their most direct and concentrated form."

In his talks and exchanges with students Ramana presented a very pure form of Advaita Vedanta which embraced both quiet meditation and a 'path of action' involving the events of daily life: "In this way, the circumstances of life, instead of being obstacles to *sadhana* or the path to liberation, are made an instrument of *sadhana*, when approached with love and devotion, and without self-interest."

Ramana Maharshi taught that enlightenment is not an alien or mysterious state, but the natural condition of man. The only method he advocated in the quest for self-realization was self-inquiry into our real nature through contemplation of the question, "Who am I?"

Q: What is the means for constantly holding onto the thought "Who Am I?"

A: When other thoughts arise, one should not pursue them, but should inquire: "To whom did they arise?" It does not matter how many thoughts arise. As each thought arises, one should inquire with diligence, "To whom has this thought arisen?" The answer that would emerge would be "To me." Therefore, if one inquires "Who am I?", the mind will go back to its source, and the thought that arose will become quiescent. With repeated practice in this manner, the mind will develop the skill to stay at its source. (3)

One of the most highly acclaimed sages of the 20th century was Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897 - 1981), who lived and taught in a small apartment in the slums of Bombay. A steady stream of Indian and Western seekers came to share his teaching on the nature of Ultimate Reality, and gradually he became recognized as a remarkable teacher of the non-dual path to self-realization. "In the tradition of Ramana Maharshi he shared the highest Truth of non-duality in his own unique way, from the depths of his own realization. His terse but potent sayings are known for their ability to trigger shifts in consciousness, just by hearing, or even reading them."

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj was a teacher who did not propound any ideology or religion but gently unwrapped the mystery of the *self*. His message is simple, direct and yet sublime. The sage's sole concern was with human suffering and the

ending of suffering. It was his mission to guide the individual to an understanding of his true nature and the timelessness of being. He taught that the mind must recognize and penetrate its own state of being, not "being this or that, here or there, then or now," but just timeless being. A simple man, Maharaj was a householder and storekeeper in Bombay where he lived, and died in 1981 at the age of 84. He had not been educated formally but came to be respected and loved for his profound insights into the crux of human pain and the extraordinary lucidity of his direct discourses. Hundreds of diverse seekers travelled the globe and sought him out in his unpretentious home to hear him. To all of them he gave hope that "beyond the real experience is not the mind, but the *self*, the light in which everything appears – the awareness in which everything happens." (4)

Maurice Frydman, who studied with Nisargadatta for many years and translated his "spiritual masterpiece" *I Am That*, captures the simplicity of his being and the universal, timeless quality of his teachings: "No rich ashram was ever built round him and most of his followers are humble working people cherishing the opportunity of spending an hour with him from time to time. Simplicity and humility are the keynotes of his life and teachings; physically and inwardly he never takes the higher seat; the essence of being on which he talks, he sees in others as clearly as he sees it in himself."

In the humble abode of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, but for the electric lights and the noises of the street traffic, one would not know in which period in human history one dwells. There is an atmosphere of timelessness about his tiny room; the subjects discussed are timeless – valid for all times; the way they are expounded and examined is also timeless; the centuries, millennia and *yugas* fall off and one deals with matters immensely ancient and eternally new. The discussions held and the teachings given would have been the same ten thousand years ago and will be the same ten thousand years hence. There will always be conscious beings wondering about the fact of their being conscious and enquiring into its causes and aim. Who am I? Whither am I? Such questions have no beginning and no end. And it is crucial to know the answers, for without a full understanding of oneself, both in time and timelessness, life is but a dream, imposed on us by powers we do not know, for purposes we cannot grasp. (5)

The essence of his teachings is remarkably simple: "Dwelling in the sense 'I am' is the simple, easy and natural way. There is no secrecy in it and no dependence; no preparation is required and no initiation. Whoever is puzzled by his very existence as a conscious being and earnestly wants to find his own source, can grasp the ever-present sense of 'I am' and dwell on it assiduously and patiently, till the heart of being is realized."

The *Nisarga Yoga*, the 'natural' yoga of Maharaj, is disconcertingly simple – the mind, which is all-becoming, must recognize and penetrate its own being. This timeless being is the source of both life and consciousness. In terms of time, space and causation it is all-powerful, being the causeless cause; all-pervading,

eternal, endless and ever-present. Uncaused, it is free; all-pervading, it knows; undivided, it is happy. It lives, it loves, and it has endless fun, shaping and re-shaping the universe. Every man has it, every man *is* it, but not all know themselves as they are, and therefore identify themselves with the name and shape of their bodies and the contents of their consciousness. To rectify this misunderstanding of one's reality, the only way is to take full cognizance of the ways of one's mind and turn it into an instrument of self-discovery . . . For all the gateway to reality, by whatever road one arrives to it, is the sense of 'I am.' It is through grasping the full import of the 'I am,' and going beyond it to its source, that one can realize the supreme state, which is also the primordial and the ultimate. (6)

Jean Klein (1912 - 1998) was an important Western teacher of Advaita Vedanta who taught a 'direct approach' to spiritual knowledge which pointed directly to ultimate reality: "Within us there is this profound stillness waiting to be received. In order to open ourselves to it, can we abandon our habitual references to the past, recognize how our projections into the future are incessantly striving for security, and live intimately with whatever the present moment may unfold?"

Jean Klein studied medicine and music in Berlin and Vienna and spent his early years inquiring about the essence of life. He had the inner conviction that there was a 'principle' independent of all society and felt the urge to explore this conviction. His exploration led him to India where he was introduced through a 'direct approach' to the non-mental dimension of life. Through living in this complete openness, he was taken, one timeless moment, by a sudden, clear awakening of his real nature. It was not a mystical experience, a new state, but the continuum in life, the non-state of light in which birth, death, and all experience take place. (7)

Klein returned to Europe in 1960 at the request of his teacher to teach non-dual spirituality in a form suitable for Westerners. In the 1980s he expanded his teaching to the United States where, for many years, he conducted workshops and seminars. But he never styled himself as a spiritual teacher: "People come to me. I have never taken myself for a teacher, so I never solicited students. The teacher only appears when asked to teach."

Klein's fundamental teaching is that our true nature is 'pure awareness' which exists independently of any object of perception, including thoughts. This ultimate state of being is silent and tranquil, beyond name and form, or space and time. "You are primal awareness. Life is only primal awareness. You know moments in your life when a thought completely disappears into silence, but still you are."

Klein authored many insightful books on non-duality in a language appropriate for our contemporary world. His exposition of the teachings of Advaita Vedanta remains faithful to the essence of the tradition while casting them in a uniquely modern form and idiom. Professor Andrew Rawlinson: "The striking thing about Dr. Klein is his independence. He teaches Advaita but rarely uses its technical terms. In fact, he has developed his own vocabulary which consists

mainly of the special use of words like 'listening,' 'transparency,' and so on. Nor does he refer back to the tradition for any kind of confirmation, or mention other teachers. He has his own unique voice."

Do you regard yourself as coming from a lineage of masters?

In a certain way, yes. The way of approaching truth belongs to a certain current, but there are no entities in a line.

So you were not interested in who was the teacher of your teacher?

In the teaching of my guru I saw the teaching of his guru, but when the teaching is strong there is no reference to the past. There is only eternal presence. What does "lineage" mean? It is still a someone looking for security in a something.

Do you regard yourself as belonging to a certain tradition?

A tradition of truth seekers. *Advaita* is not a system, a religion or technique. It is not even a philosophy. It is simply the truth. (8)

Zen and Tibetan Buddhism

The Buddha's teaching, or *Dharma*, evolved into two main branches: the Hinayāna (Lesser Vehicle) and the Mahāyāna (Greater Vehicle). The Hinayāna school arose in southern India and spread to Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia; the Mahāyāna moved from northern India to Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan. "Unlike southern Buddhism, which tended to remain conservative and doctrinaire, the Mahāyāna adapted itself to the needs of peoples of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds and varying levels of understanding." The Hinayāna teachings emphasized personal liberation by overcoming ego-based desires, while the Mahāyāna stressed the ideal of the *Bodhisattva* who, following enlightenment, dedicated his or her life to compassionately helping others attain liberation.

The most esoteric strain of Mahāyāna became known as Ch'an in China and Zen in Japan. According to Buddhist tradition, a semi-legendary monk known as Bodhidharma came to China from India about 520 A.D. bringing a powerful esoteric teaching of spiritual transformation, and established the Dharma in northern China. Bodhidharma described his teachings as:

A special transmission outside the scriptures,
No dependence on doctrine;
Direct pointing to the human heart,
Seeing into one's own essence.

The Chinese Ch'an teachings were introduced to Japan in 1191 with the founding of the Rinzai school by Eisai. The essence of the teaching is surprisingly simple: "The great truth of Zen is possessed by everybody. Look into your own being, and seek it not elsewhere. Your own mind is above all forms. It is free and quiet. Transcend the intellect, sever yourself from it and directly penetrate deep into the inner mind."

Some historians have suggested that Zen actually originated in Afghanistan, and that Sufi teachers from there travelled to Japan to introduce esoteric ideas and practices. Such a diffusion from Afghanistan to the Far East is supported by cross-cultural evidence: "Archeologists have shown that certain Japanese religious statues are in a style derived from the Afghan shrines of Bamian. Further, the similarity of the Japanese Zen system to that of the Sufi training method may be due to oral transmission by the same route."

The term *Zen* is a transliteration of the Sanskrit *dhyāna*, which refers to the process of concentration and absorption by which the mind is first quieted and brought to one-pointedness, and then awakened. "Zen is a religion free of dogmas or creeds whose teachings and disciplines are directed toward self-realization – the full awakening that the Buddha himself experienced." In many respects Zen is similar to Taoism with its sense of immediacy, openness, spontaneity and a natural harmonization with the flow of life itself.

The two main schools of Japanese Zen are the Rinzai and Soto. The Rinzai sect is characterized by its vigorous dynamic style and systematic *koan* study. A koan is a story or dialogue used as a meditation object under the direction of a teacher. Short koans often take the form of an enigmatic statement such as "What is your face before your parents' birth?" or "What is the sound of one hand clapping." They act as an 'impact teaching' or 'shock technique' which challenges one's assumptions and preconceptions about the nature of reality, in order to awaken a deeper intelligence beyond the discursive intellect. "The koan is thus an impossible question, or demand, aimed at outwitting, defeating, paralyzing, one's ordinary thinking – to uncover, discover, expose an inner level of consciousness normally overlaid and hidden by this outer kind of thinking. It is not possible to 'answer' it by ordinary thinking. The response must arise from a different source – an inner spring of spontaneity."

Its original meaning in Chinese was a case which established a legal precedent. In Zen a koan is a formulation, in baffling language, pointing to ultimate truth. Koans cannot be solved by recourse to logical reasoning but only by awakening a deeper level of the mind beyond the rational intellect. Koans are constructed from the questions of disciples of old together with the responses of their masters, from portions of the master's sermons or discourses, from lines of the sutrās, and from other teachings. (9)

The Soto school was founded by the great Japanese Zen master Dōgen in 1243 and emphasizes silent meditation or "just sitting" and its application to everyday life. The practice of meditation, or *zazen*, is considered the foundation of Zen, leading to spiritual illumination. "With the cultivation of a profound silence in the deepest recesses of the mind – in other words,

through the practice of *zazen* – there are established the optimum preconditions for looking into the heart-mind and discovering the true nature of existence.”

Both Rinzai and Soto communities attach the highest importance to meditation or “sitting Zen” (*zazen*). The relevance of *zazen* to Zen is obvious when it is remembered that Zen is seeing reality directly, in its “suchness.” To see the world as it is concretely, undivided by categories and abstractions, one must certainly look at it with a mind that is not thinking – which is to say, forming symbols about it. *Zazen* is not, therefore, sitting with a blank mind which excludes all the impressions of the inner and outer senses. It is not “concentration” in the usual sense of restricting the attention to a single sense object. It is simply a quiet awareness, without comment, of whatever happens here and now. (10)

Like many spiritual traditions, Zen is based on the master-student relationship whereby a teacher who has received that teaching from his own master passes it on to a successor. This direct transmission of spiritual knowledge has been called a “direct pointing at the heart” and ensures the continuation of a teaching over time. “This is aptly called ‘The Transmission of the Lamp’ – as when the flame of one lamp lights the wick of another, which then lights another, and so on in a flowing sequence of light.” Thus, the inner teaching and wisdom of the ancient Zen masters has reached today’s world in an unbroken line of spiritual transmission.

D.T. Suzuki (1870 - 1966) was almost singlehandedly responsible for introducing Zen Buddhism to a Western audience in the early 20th century. A renowned scholar and author of many books on Buddhism and Zen and translator of Chinese, Japanese and Sanskrit literature, he also lectured at many Western universities. His three-volume *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, published between 1927 and 1934, are considered classics in their field and influenced both the academic world and generations of spiritual seekers.

He was highly regarded for his insightful presentation of the essence of Zen and his own personal spiritual development. Carl Jung: “Suzuki’s works on Zen Buddhism are among the best contributions to the knowledge of living Buddhism. We cannot be sufficiently grateful to the author, first for the fact of his having brought Zen closer to Western understanding, and secondly for the manner in which he achieved this task.”

Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki was a remarkable man of our century. Throughout his long life he worked untiringly to bring the message of Zen, and Buddhism in general, to the West, and his reputation as a scholar and gifted teacher was internationally recognized. Above and beyond his scholarship, however, Suzuki the man touched in some special way everyone who met him. He embodied the Satori – Awakening – that he had experienced while still a young man studying with his own Zen master; his simplicity in the midst of complexity and his utter lack of intellectual snobbery combined to create the extraordinary impression of warmth, yet quiet authority, that he gave. And indeed, he touched the lives of many – from theologians and philosophers to psychologists, poets, musicians, and artists the world over; thinkers

as diverse as Thomas Merton, Paul Tillich, Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, Dr. Hu Shi and Allen Ginsberg – to name a few. (11)

Philip Kapleau (1912 - 2004) was an accomplished American journalist who served as Chief Allied reporter at the Nuremberg Trials and later at the Tokyo War Crimes Trials. While in Japan he became intrigued with Zen and upon his return to America met D.T. Suzuki. In 1953 he moved to Japan to study Zen formally. He rigorously trained with renowned Zen masters Dauin Harada and then Haku'in Yasutani. In 1965 he was ordained by Yasutani and given permission to teach.

In 1966 he founded the Rochester Zen Center where he taught for almost forty years. His style of teaching was more serious and structured than the popularized "Beat Zen," or Alan Watts-inspired interpretations of Zen fashionable at the time. He adapted traditional Japanese Zen to Western culture as he was able to distil "the essence from the form." He made significant modifications to many of the rituals of traditional Japanese Zen, such as chanting the *Heart Sutrā* in English. His most important written work, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, was published in 1965 to great acclaim and translated into many different languages.

Kapleau was an important force in the establishment of an authentic Zen presence in the modern Western world. He believed that enlightenment is available to anyone, whether monk or layperson. A number of his students, such as Albert Low and Toni Packer, have become highly accomplished teachers in their own right. His legacy has been widely acknowledged in spiritual circles: "The first Westerner fully and naturally at home with Zen, Roshi Kapleau made it his life's work to translate Zen Buddhism into an American idiom, to take Zen's essence and plant it into American soil."

Shunryu Suzuki (1904 – 1971) was one of the most influential spiritual teachers of the 20th century and is widely regarded as a founding father of Zen in America. A Japanese priest of the Soto lineage, he taught in the United States from 1959 until his death. He was the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center and the Tassajara Zen Center, the first Soto Zen monastery in the West. His *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, published in 1970, is considered "one of the great modern spiritual classics, much beloved, much reread, and much recommended as the best first book to read on Zen."

He used a simple language with few technical terms, and the situations of everyday life to teach his students. "Suzuki's main teaching was silent – the way he picked up a cup of tea or met someone walking on a path or in a hallway, or how he joined with his students in work, meals and meditation." Devoid of ego, Huston Smith observed, "he made no waves and left no traces as a personality in the worldly sense." A tribute by student Trudy Dixon, editor of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, captures the essential nature of her teacher:

A roshi is a person who has actualized the perfect freedom which is the potentiality for all human beings. He exists freely in the fullness of his whole being. The flow of his consciousness is not the fixed repetitive patterns of our usual self-centered

consciousness, but rather arises spontaneously and naturally from the actual circumstances of the present. The results of this in terms of the quality of his life are extraordinary – buoyancy, vigor, straightforwardness, simplicity, humility, serenity, joyousness, uncanny perspicacity and unfathomable compassion. His whole being testifies to what it means to live in the reality of the present. Without anything said or done, just the impact of meeting a personality so developed can be enough to change another's whole way of life. But in the end it is not the extraordinariness of the teacher which perplexes, intrigues, and deepens the student, it is the teacher's utter ordinariness. Because he is just himself, he is a mirror for his students. (12)

Shunryu Suzuki's direct style of teaching, grounded in pragmatic realism, is encapsulated by some of his quotations:

- "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few."
- "Strictly speaking, there are no enlightened people, there is only enlightened activity."
- "When you do something, you should burn yourself completely, like a good bonfire, leaving no trace of yourself."
- "The way that helps will not be the same, it changes according to the situation."
- "If it's not paradoxical, it's not true."
- "Life is like stepping into a boat which is about to sail out to sea and sink."
- "States come and go, but if you continue your practice, you find there's something underneath, timeless and eternal."
- "You will always exist in the universe in some form."
- "I just try to teach my students how to hear the birds sing."

A third important strain of Buddhism, less well known than the Hinayāna and Mahāyāna, is the Vajrayāna or 'Diamond Vehicle' associated with Tantric (Tibetan) Buddhism. According to tradition, the Buddha taught certain selected pupils secret tantric teachings. It is believed that he taught the Mahāyāna later in his life and the Vajrayāna teachings toward the end of his life, an action sometimes referred to as "the final turning of the Buddha's teaching."

The Vajrayāna tradition is an unbroken lineage passed on from generation to generation, from the Buddha himself up to the present day. The first Buddhist tantric texts have been traced to India in the third century A.D. According to legend, in the 8th century the Indian master Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche) introduced the people of Tibet to the practice of Tantric Buddhism and founded the Nyingma school to preserve and transmit these secret teachings. Many of the greatest Tibetan Buddhist masters received and taught the Vajrayāna tantric teachings, including Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa and Milarepa. The lineage has survived in an unbroken line to contemporary times where it has been given expression in a form appropriate for the modern Western world by, for instance, Chögyam Trungpa.

The Vajrayāna is the most mystical and esoteric of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism and is believed to be a quicker, more effective path to enlightenment than the Hinayāna or Mahāyāna paths. The Vajrayāna builds on the foundation of the Hinayāna and Mahāyāna teachings and can only be transmitted from teacher to student during an initiation or empowerment. It cannot be simply learned from a book:

The *vajrayana*, the *tantric* teachings of the Buddha, contains tremendous power and magic. Its magic lies in its ability to transform confusion and neurosis into awakened mind and to reveal the everyday world as a sacred realm. Its power is that of unerring insight into the true nature of phenomena and of seeing through ego and its deceptions. According to the tantric tradition, the vajrayana is regarded as the complete teaching of the Buddha: it is the path of complete discipline, complete surrender, and complete liberation. It is important to realize, however, that the vajrayana is firmly grounded in the basic teachings of the *mahāyāna*, the teachings of egolessness and compassion. Frequently, the exceptional strength and efficacy of the vajrayana are misunderstood as a promise of instant enlightenment. But one cannot become enlightened overnight; in fact, it is highly deceptive and even dangerous to think in such a way. Without exception, the Buddhist teachings point to the erroneous belief in a self, or ego, as the cause of suffering and the obstacle to liberation. All of the great teachers of the past practiced the preliminary meditative disciplines diligently before becoming students of the vajrayana. Without this basic training in the practice of meditation, there is no ground from which to work with the vajrayana at all. (13)

Tantric teachings typically employ a wide variety of techniques and practices: meditation, yoga exercises, mantras, visualizations, mandalas, mudras, rituals and devotional practices. But the cornerstone of the teaching process is the master-disciple relationship. "The Vajrayāna path is a deliberate mobilization of the resources of the body and mind, under the guidance of an experienced teacher, for the purpose of exploring human existence."

The Vajrayāna stresses the interdependence of all things and the importance of working with all aspects of life. It holds that seemingly opposite principles can be reconciled in the unity of enlightened truth. "The Tantric path in Buddhism is less a program of study than a series of experiments wherein the student ventures into different regions and tests the possibilities of life. From the Vajrayāna viewpoint every second of life is to be welcomed as the proper time for advancing in the spiritual quest, that every aspect of human behavior must be seen as holy and meaningful and rife with opportunity."

Tibetan Buddhist Tantra is based on a non-dualistic perspective of reality, allowing the practitioner to work with the primordial, all-pervasive energy of the universe and "dance with life's energies." In this sense it is more adventuresome than the Hinayāna and Mahāyāna paths. "While the hinayana is the way to understand your mind, and the mahayana the way to understand your emotions, the vajrayana allows extremely direct contact with phenomena and situations just as they are, and a recognition that the world is sacred."

The Vajrayāna teachings have been transmitted to the West in the last few decades by a number of gifted Tibetan Buddhist teachers, notably Chögyam Trungpa, who adapted ancient tantric ideas and practices in a form suitable for the contemporary world.

Chögyam Trungpa (1939 - 1987) was born in Tibet and was recognized at a very early age as a *tulku* (incarnate teacher), following which he studied Buddhism under the guidance of Tibetan masters. He escaped Tibet in 1959 following the Chinese invasion and relocated in India. In the 1960s he studied comparative religion, philosophy and fine arts at Oxford University, London and in 1968 founded the Samye Ling Meditation Center in Scotland. He moved to America and during the next two decades established major centres in Vermont, Colorado and Nova Scotia, as well as founding Naropa Institute in Boulder, the first Buddhist-inspired university in North America. His books *Meditation in Action*, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, *The Myth of Freedom* and many others recast Tibetan Buddhist teachings in a Western idiom and influenced countless seekers to explore this powerful esoteric Eastern teaching.

During this period, he taught selected students the advanced teachings of Vajrayāna, sharing them only with those who had a strong foundation of intellectual understanding of Buddhist teachings and meditative experience. Trungpa presented the tantric teachings with great skill in a form suitable for Western students of the Dharma: "The tantric path requires complete engagement and fierce dedication. It is said to be a more rapid path but it is also more dangerous. Vajrayāna practitioners recognize that the most challenging aspects of life, the energies and play of confused emotions and formidable obstacles, can be worked with as gateways to freedom and realization."

The vajrayana or "diamond vehicle," also referred to as tantra, draws upon and extends the teachings of the hinayana and mahayana. As with the hinayana and the mahayana, the formal acceptance into the vajrayana is marked by a vow, in this case the *samaya* vow. There is an emphasis at this stage on the student-teacher relationship and on the quality of devotion. Generally, students must complete preliminary practices, called *ngöndro*, to prepare themselves for initiation into the vajrayana path before going further. Having done so, they then receive the appropriate empowerments to begin tantric practices. There are empowerment ceremonies of many kinds, called *abhishekas*. The vajrayana includes both form practices, such as visualizations and *sadhanas* (ritual liturgies), and formless practices based on allowing the mind to rest naturally in its inherent clarity and emptiness. Although on the surface there is much greater complexity in tantric practices, the principles of mindfulness and awareness and the cultivation of compassion and skilled action continue to be of central importance. (14)

Perhaps Chögyam Trungpa's greatest contribution to Western Buddhism is his recently published three-volume collection (*The Profound Treasury of The Ocean of Dharma*) of the comprehensive teachings of the Tibetan Buddhist paths of the Hinayāna, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna teachings: *The Path of Individual Liberation*, *The Bodhisattva Path of Wisdom & Compassion* and *The Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness*.

Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way

G.I. Gurdjieff introduced a powerful spiritual teaching of ancient origin to the West which was tailored for the modern world. Vast in scope and encompassing both psychological and cosmological elements, the teaching was based on self-knowledge gained through practical 'work on oneself.' Gurdjieff began teaching in Moscow in 1912 and, after many challenges and tribulations related to the political and other instabilities of the times, eventually settled in France where he lived and taught until his death in 1949.

During his lifetime, his teachings were largely unknown to those outside the immediate circle of his groups and they only became widely available to the general public following his death, with the publication of his magnum opus *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* and the writings of some of his principal students such as P.D. Ouspensky.

The teaching that Gurdjieff brought to the West is known as both 'the Work' and the 'Fourth Way,' and has had a significant impact on those seeking answers to the fundamental questions of life and the way to approach an understanding of the "sense and meaning of existence." The source of his remarkable teaching has never been definitively identified but it has been associated, by some, with esoteric Christianity, Sufism and a number of other spiritual and metaphysical traditions.

Gurdjieff discovered elements of a forgotten knowledge of being that reconciled the great traditional beliefs. He called it "ancient science" but did not identify its origin, those who discovered and preserved it. This science viewed the world of visible matter as modern physics does, recognizing the equivalence of mass and energy, the subjective illusion of time, the general theory of relativity. But its inquiry did not stop there, accepting as real only phenomena that could be measured and proved by controlled experiment. This science also explored the mystic's world outside sense perception, the vision of another reality, infinite beyond space and time. The aim was to understand the place of man in the cosmic order, the meaning of human life on the earth, and actually to know and experience in oneself the reality of both worlds at the same time. It was a science of being. (15)

The Fourth Way is based on the principles of a balanced, harmonious development of body, mind and emotions, and an active engagement with everyday life as a means of self-study and inner growth. "Gurdjieff brought the help of a Fourth Way, which excludes nothing and takes account of the development of the different functions [body, mind, feelings] in contemporary people. This way is not new. It has always existed, but only within a limited circle."

He presented his teaching as a "Fourth Way" that requires work on all three aspects at the same time. Instead of discipline, faith or meditation, this way calls for the awakening of another intelligence – knowing and understanding . . . The first demand on the Fourth Way is "Know thyself," a principle that Gurdjieff reminded

us is far more ancient than Socrates. Spiritual progress depends on understanding, which is determined by one's level of being. Change in being is possible through conscious effort toward a quality of thinking and feeling that brings a new capacity to see and to love. Although his teaching could be called "esoteric Christianity," Gurdjieff noted that the principles of true Christianity were developed thousands of years before Jesus Christ. In order to open to reality, to unity with everything in the universe, Gurdjieff called for living the wholeness of "Presence" in the experience of "I Am." (16)

Gurdjieff's avowed aim and purpose was ambitious, as he wanted to harmonize "the wisdom of the East with the energy of the West." In order to accomplish this task he presented to the 20th century West an ancient esoteric teaching, "formulated and calibrated to exigencies of the contemporary world."

Gurdjieff came to the West to establish a new teaching, ancient in origin, that was specifically formulated for individual growth in the technologized world. It was stripped of the past, stripped of all mysticism, philosophy, religious rites and dogma. It was, and is, the great bequeathing. It is a teaching that gives to contemporary man and woman the great gift – the gift of practical knowledge and techniques by which he can, by his own efforts and intention, transform himself, and, in so doing, free himself from the abnormal being-existence that is the soul-death signature of our time. And this can be achieved *without* withdrawing to a mountain top or monastery. In fact, the genius of the teaching is that it uses ordinary life, with all its uncertainty, negativity and suffering, to come to Real Life. The Buddha said, "Life is suffering." Gurdjieff said, Let's use it – but *intentionally*. Jesus said, "Love thy neighbor." Gurdjieff said, Yes, but first see that, *as you are*, you can't love. (17)

Gurdjieff challenged our habitual ways of perceiving and interpreting reality, and introduced us to a new way of understanding the inter-relationship and underlying unity of all that is. His life was dedicated to awakening humanity, both individually and collectively, to the fullest possible spiritual development. In the words of Fourth Way author William Patterson: "What Gurdjieff did was to give a major shock to the mechanicality, rank materialism and soullessness of ordinary life. At great cost to himself, he gave his life to introducing and establishing in the West the ancient and sacred teaching of The Fourth Way. Never known before, this seminal scientific teaching of self-development reveals the laws, perspectives and inner practices that will enable us to develop, as he said, into 'genuine, natural men, able to see the real potentialities that were proper to mankind'." The overarching importance of his 'work' of inner transformation and its relevance to the contemporary world is widely acknowledged in spiritual circles:

In the half century after Gurdjieff's death, Tibetan lamas, Indian gurus, Zen roshis have become increasingly familiar figures in Western culture, and many of them have been struck by the traditional aspects of Gurdjieff's teaching. It is more difficult, however, for the Western scholar, theologian, or seeker to place a figure

like Gurdjieff, who seems to fit no formula, wears no robes, recites no mantras, and demands no homage. He seems neither of East nor West. Possibly he is both. And yet in any case we are faced with a man who marked indelibly the souls of those who met him, many of whom continue to transmit something of the force of the man and his teaching. Gurdjieff's place in Western cultural history is that of a teacher – not only a “teacher of dancing,” as he referred to himself in the introduction to one of his books, but a spiritual master. Gurdjieff gave shape to some of the key elements and directions found in contemporary spirituality . . . Accounts by those who worked with him not only show us a man whose knowledge and behavior add an entirely new dimension to the idea of human wisdom and compassion. They also reveal Gurdjieff as someone with an unerring capacity to break down his pupils' illusions and guide them toward their own individual path of self-discovery and self-development. His pupils felt that he opened them to an experience of themselves that was so much deeper than what their ordinary life had brought them. (18)

Gurdjieff left a legacy of inestimable value for humanity. His teachings were preserved for future generations in his writings (*Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* and *Life Is Real Only Then, When "I Am"*) and in the records of his students, principally P.D. Ouspensky (*In Search of the Miraculous*) and Jeanne de Salzmann (*The Reality of Being*). He also composed, in collaboration with pupil Thomas de Hartmann, many works of sacred music which can reach the heart and touch the innermost consciousness of the listener, providing ‘food’ for spiritual transformation. Finally, he taught a series of ‘sacred dances,’ called the ‘Movements’ to his students, which integrated body, mind and feelings and challenged their efforts to attain a conscious attention as a means of inner transformation.

The Fourth Way teachings of Gurdjieff are uniquely suited for people of the modern world: “The seminal and sacred teaching Gurdjieff brought is in essence scientific in that it is centered in continual questioning, verification, exploration, and faith of Consciousness, not belief or dogma.” The circumstances, events and unpredictable challenges of everyday life, and our reactions to them, provide ample opportunities for impartial self-observation and a deepening of self-knowledge and understanding. ‘Know thyself’ is the essential foundation of all authentic inner teachings and leads to a transformation of consciousness and being which is the goal of the spiritual journey. From this perspective, Gurdjieff's relentless efforts to awaken mankind from the slumber of mechanical existence can be seen as an act of great compassion and love:

Gurdjieff's fundamental aim was to help human beings awaken to the meaning of our existence and to the efforts we must make to realize that meaning in the midst of the life we have been given. As with every messenger of the spirit, Gurdjieff's fundamental intention was ultimately for the sake of others, never only for himself. But when we first encounter the figure of Gurdjieff, this central aspect of his life is often missed. Faced with the depth of his ideas and the inner demands he placed upon himself and upon those who were drawn to him, and becoming aware of the uniquely effective forms of inner work he created, we may initially be struck mainly

by the vastness of his knowledge and the strength of his being. But sooner or later what may begin to touch us is the unique quality of selflessness in his actions, the sacrifices he made, both for those who came to him and for all of humanity. We begin to understand that his life was a work of love; and at the same time that word "love," begins to take on entirely new dimensions of meaning, inconceivable in the state of what Gurdjieff called *waking sleep*. (19)

Contemporary Sufism

Although traditionally Sufism flourished in a Muslim environment, it also respected other religions such as Christianity. Sufis believed that there were good and true elements in all the great religions and that the outward and superficial aspects of religion were secondary. "One of the most interesting aspects of Sufi principles is that they are almost identical with those laid down by Christian mystics. Renunciation of the world, humility, and love are the basic preliminaries of Christian mysticism. Sufis and Christians alike believe that proficiency in these can lead to the spiritual experience variously called ecstasy, the vision of God or the Divine Union."

This universal understanding of mysticism is still held today by contemporary Sufis. Sufi teaching is always projected in accordance with the requirements of 'time, place and people.' It can never be standardized and is transmitted in such a way that it harmonizes with the needs of a given culture, the individuality of the students and certain cosmic contingencies:

It is therefore true to say that Sufism is 'the teaching behind all teachings.' It is a tradition, but one which is constantly maintained from and sustained by an extra-dimensional source. Its planetary centre is thus ultimately connected with a cosmic and divine impulse, which it receives and serves. At the same time, Sufis are members of the planetary human community, with which they have indissoluble bonds, and which they have served and guided since the beginning of time. This is why Sufis themselves insist, 'The Way is none other than in the service of the people.' Man, say the Sufis, is part of the Eternal Whole, from which everything is derived, and to which all must return. This requires a certain kind of purification and process of perfection leading ultimately to the Complete Man. It requires the cultivation of 'The Intelligence of Return.' But where does the Return Journey begin? It begins, it *must* begin, exactly *here*, where one is, in the culture in which one lives, and by which one has been formed, shaped and influenced. And within that culture in the very situation one is actually in. It starts where you are – *now*. Clearly the journey can only be effected with the help of a school specially designed for such a purpose by experts who thoroughly understand the culture – its vices, virtues and capacities, and also those of the individual prospective traveller. An authentic school must organically connect with the culture concerned and with the higher level of being beyond. This indeed has always been a distinguishing feature of the genuine Sufi entity, which is never created without sensitive observance of 'the time, the place, and the people.' (20)

The spiritual path of the Sufis is individualized for each seeker and progress occurs at different rates for each person. There is no withdrawal from everyday life, following the dictum: '*Be in the world, but not of the world.*'

For the Way of the Sufi is infinitely individual. We are all wonderfully different, so we must all tread our own particular and personal path – which is nevertheless somehow subsumed within the wider Path. As the Sufis say, 'There are as many ways to Truth as there are human souls.' And how else *could* it be? The Sufi way passes *through* the world. It is intricately intermeshed with the very texture of our terrestrial existence. As each of us and our lives is unique, so is our unfolding. We learn in our *own way in the Way*. The Teaching both exposes our concealed faults and discloses our hidden talents. Sometimes gently, sometimes roughly, we are revealed to ourselves and enabled to grow. Gradually we begin to see our Life manifesting through life. The world becomes more and more transparent to Reality. (21)

The great challenge for traditional spiritual teachings in the modern world is to adapt their ideas and practices in a way that is appropriate for contemporary seekers, while still being faithful to the essence of their teaching:

Although we may be able to study and comprehend them more clearly than ever, the procedures of the "esoteric" traditions remain esoteric, deeply hidden from us. These procedures were for the most part developed for people in other countries at other times, and so their exercises and techniques are doubly strange to us. Sometimes, paradoxically, we may become attracted to the superficial dimensions of these systems merely because they are exotic. The current need, therefore, is to take the essence of this esoteric knowledge and to transplant it into contemporary terms, rather as one can carry a seed from a long-dormant stock and plant it anew in fresh-tilled soil. The product will differ from previously grown plants, and from everything else. The work of Idries Shah and his associates is such an endeavor. It is an attempt to freshly transplant the essence of an esoteric tradition into modern terms and modern methods. Shah's books make material available which has not been seen in the West for a thousand years. It is stripped of local coloration and of the accretions both of time and of translations of translations of translations. It is, then, a manifestation of the *living* traditional psychology, readily available to be investigated by those seriously interested in studying the psychology of consciousness. (22)

For many generations the Shah family has specialized in projecting the Sufi teaching in both Eastern and Western settings, in a form suitable for the times. "From time to time, often at important historical moments, this Family, who appear to be custodians of a secret inner tradition, produce members with a special mission to perform. Thus Jalaluddin Rumi, Bahaudin Naqshband, Sheikh Shattar, and other great mystical masters, were of this line." The leading exponent of this effort in the 20th century was Idries Shah (1924 - 1996) who, through extensive

travels throughout Europe, Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East, collected and integrated traditional Sufi knowledge and then published this “treasure of wisdom” in a corpus of more than forty books:

Idries Shah devoted his life to collecting, selecting and translating key works of Eastern Sufi classical literature, adapting them to the needs of the West and disseminating them in the Occident. Called by some ‘practical philosophy,’ by others ‘templates in straight thinking’ – these works represent centuries of Sufi thought aimed at the development of human potential to its fullest extent. They stress virtues such as common sense, clear-thinking and humour to counter cant and religious dogma. As such they may be viewed as an antidote to radicalism and fanaticism much needed in the world today. (23)

Shah’s works have been highly acclaimed in both spiritual circles and the academic world. Scientists Robert Ornstein and Paul Ehrlich: “Everyone should have some familiarity with Idries Shah’s books, since Shah has been able to make the essential contributions of spiritual thought available to a modern Western audience. He uses traditional stories that, if read over and over again, begin to change the patterns of thinking. Indeed a study of Robert Ornstein’s showed that reading these stories stimulates the right hemisphere of the brain.”

Idries Shah built on the foundation of classical Sufi teachings and brought the scope and depth of this timeless knowledge of ‘applied philosophy’ to the modern world. He did so by integrating traditional Sufism with the discoveries of Western science, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. The result is a universal spiritual teaching, rooted in the realities of today’s world, which applies to both Eastern and Western cultures.

The published works of Shah form a comprehensive body of ‘practical wisdom’ expressed in a diversity of modalities. “Through the rich and resonant literature Idries Shah has collected and contributed to, one senses a tree of living wisdom, with roots in the remote past yet ever pressing its leaves into the present.” Most Sufi materials, based on the principle of parsimony, have multiple purposes and multilevel effects:

All of his books are unique. Many contain diverse materials, such as teaching stories, proverbs, meditations, contemplation themes, dialogues, narratives, and humour. For the student, these materials are useful within their prescribed context of preparatory studies, while for the general public the material can have a multiple impact, including entertainment, information value, “nutrition” for the brain, and practical guidance. Since most of Shah’s materials have several layers of psycho-spiritual impact, normally only the active student can experience the deeper meanings. Most of the materials have been carefully developed by Sufis themselves and designed to function something like “technical devices” or scientific formulas. And as with formulas in physics, different people will perceive the deeper significance of the formulas according to their experience and capacity. (24)

One of the most durable and effective modes of transmitting spiritual knowledge is the teaching story. "According to the Sufis, such stories can affect the latent intuitive functions of our minds, providing a type of 'nutrition' needed for its development. Teaching stories are tools whose effectiveness depends on the motivation of the user and his or her capacity for understanding. As that understanding increases, the user can apply the tools for finer and deeper work."

Teaching stories are found in all traditions: Vedanta, Buddhist, Zen, Hassidic, Christian, and, especially, the Sufi, in which large bodies of instructional material have been preserved and are still used . . . Compared to meditation, teaching stories have received little attention from Westerners and are generally regarded as, at best, instructive parables or expressions of folk wisdom. Actually, they are far more sophisticated instruments than most people imagine. According to the Sufis, teaching stories can contain up to seven levels of meaning, constructed so that the reader or listener perceives the level that corresponds to his or her stage of spiritual development. On its surface, the story can be humorous, moralistic or entertaining, or a combination of these. Such elements ensure the story's survival. However, its teaching function depends on other qualities, one of which is the ability to portray a specific pattern of thinking or behavior. The auditor or reader registers the pattern unconsciously and when a corresponding situation arises he or she can recognize it. As a result, the person gains choice over previously automatic and unconscious behavior. He or she can observe and master the particular pattern. (25)

Teaching stories are an integral component of contemporary Sufi schools. "They are in fact 'work material' with internal dimensions that can only be unlocked and revealed in the course of this work. They are 'operational' texts that can only be fruitfully studied within a whole and authentic teaching context, by a serious student, under genuine guidance."

They are indeed highly sophisticated and conscious works of art, created by people who knew exactly what they were doing, for the help of others willing to align themselves with their influence . . . They are subtly complex creations capable of acting simultaneously in many ways and on many levels. They have various roles. Some show us the nature and inadequacies of certain usual patterns of thought which we have without being aware of them, while at the same time revealing other possibilities. Others move us along unfamiliar pathways of the mind in order to open them up. As a body, and rightly used, they offer 'a way into another form of being.' (26)

Teaching stories are essentially symbolic, employing metaphors, allegories and analogies to great effect. For instance, the various personalities of a teaching tale (king, merchant, beggar, jester) represent different modes of thinking and behaviour present in everyone. "Its symbols are the characters in the story. The way in which they move conveys to us the way in which the human mind can work. By grasping this in terms of men and women, animals and places,

movement and manipulation of a tale – that is, by working on a lower level, the level of visualization – we can put ourselves into a relationship with the higher faculties of the mind.”

Sufi stories, although they may seem on the surface to purvey a moral, or appear intended to entertain, are not literary forms as these things are commonly understood. They are literature incidentally, but teaching-materials primarily. The Sufi tale, and certain Sufic quotations of other kinds, are designed, then, equally to be appreciated by the cultured, to convey information, to instruct and to provide what is called a framework for the reception of the illumination in the mind of the student. One specific thing which can be said about the Sufi tale is that its construction is such as to permit the presentation to the mind of a design or series of relationships. When the reader’s mind is familiar with this structure, he can understand concepts and experiences which have a similar structure, but which operate on a higher level of perception. It could be called the relationship of the blueprint to the finished apparatus. This method, according to Sufi teaching, can yield enlightenment to the individual in accordance with his capacity to understand. It may also form an essential part of a student’s preparation-exercises. The process includes getting beyond the external face of a story, without inhibiting the student’s capacity to understand and enjoy its humour and other outward characteristics. In Sufi circles it is customary for students to soak themselves in stories set for their study, so that their many meanings can become available as and when they are useful for their development. This latter stage may at times require the aid of a teaching master, to indicate the time and place of such development. It is for these reasons that Sufi tales are said to ‘imprison a priceless secret,’ which is ‘released by the power of a teaching master.’ (27)

In order to truly benefit from the stories, the student must be open and receptive to their deeper levels of meaning, rather than imposing their own interpretations on them. “Be available to it, let the tale tell *you* what *it* means. The tales may not so much mean something for you as *do* something *to* you. So *let* them act. Simply absorb them.”

The teaching story transmits wisdom in a way that bypasses the logical, rational, mind and connects with a deeper level of consciousness. An example is a fable by Rumi which illustrates the role of ‘indirect teaching’ in the exposition of Sufi teachings:

The Indian Bird

A merchant kept a bird in a cage. He was going to India, the land from which the bird came, and asked it whether he could bring anything back for it. The bird asked for its freedom, but was refused. So he asked the merchant to visit a jungle in India and announce his captivity to the free birds who were there. The merchant did so, and no sooner had he spoken when a wild bird, just like his own, fell senseless out of a tree onto the ground. The merchant thought that this must be a relative of his own bird, and felt sad that he should have caused his death.

When he got home, the bird asked him whether he had brought good news from India. 'No,' said the merchant, 'I fear that my news is bad. One of your relations collapsed and fell at my feet when I mentioned your captivity.' As soon as these words were spoken the merchant's bird collapsed and fell to the bottom of the cage. 'The news of his kinsman's death has killed him, too,' thought the merchant. Sorrowfully he picked up the bird and put it on the window-sill. At once the bird revived and flew to a nearby tree. 'Now you know,' the bird said, 'that what you thought was disaster was in fact good news for me. And how the message, the suggestion of how to behave in order to free myself, was transmitted to me through you, my captor. And he flew away, free at last. (28)

The Sufi bequest to humanity is a comprehensive spiritual teaching of timeless, universal wisdom attuned to the needs of the contemporary world. The published works of Idries Shah are available free online as eBooks at www.idriesshahfoundation.org.

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