

Musings of a Cyber-Bodhisattva, Part II

From Ashram to Activist

by Dennis Rivers, M.A.



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MUSHROOMBURGERS AND BHAkti

In the summer of 1963, I was a 22-year-old in search of Nirvana, the cessation of all suffering. Having grown up in the metaphysical fringe of Los Angeles, full of temples, teachers, health food stores and flying-saucer enthusiasts, I had a rather open-ended approach as to where such Nirvana might be found.

Reading *The Autobiography of a Yogi*, by Paramahansa Yoganada, in the fall of that year was like being catapulted out of a circus cannon into a new world of possibilities. For several months I attended services and classes at the Self-Realization Fellowship temple on Sunset Blvd. near Vermont Ave., immersing myself in the ideas, feelings, chants and sandalwood aromas of Bengali Hindu devotionalism. During that time I stumbled upon a circle of disciples of the Sikh mystical teacher, Charan Singh Ji Mararaj, and over the course of the following year I became his disciple, a discipleship which was to continue for the next nine years.

My life has been a string of fruitful calamities, and while I have learned a lot along the way, I can hardly take credit for any of it, since I would usually avoid learning the lessons for as long as I possibly could. For example, while waiting to be accepted into the Self-Realization religious order, I spent all my spare time happily praying and washing dishes at the Hollywood temple. There, one Sunday afternoon, my gaze fell upon the most beautiful young nun I had ever seen, and I instantly (and wordlessly) fell in love with her. This jolted me into an intense awareness of both the physical and emotional parts of myself that I was about to abandon. My career as a monk ended suddenly before it had even begun, because I knew I could not do it. I never spoke to the young woman in question. As sad and embarrassed as I was, I was also deeply

grateful that I had been forced by circumstances to face the truth of my own temperament.

SEEDS OF ECO-BHAkti

From 1963 to 1968 I lived a total of about four years in an informal Radha Soami ashram on Catalina Street in LA, across from the old Cedars of Lebanon Hospital. Our life together included many hours a day of study and meditation. Those years turned out to be an intense seminar on the difference between loving God and hating the world. These two processes, I am sorry to report, are often scrambled together in the popular religious teachings of India just as they are in the West, and they were certainly scrambled together in our own minds. It was as though we had concluded that where we lacked love, we still might enter a state of God consciousness by pushing the world away from ourselves with furiously energetic disgust, like backing into heaven in reverse gear. "Like a worm in filth wasteth he his time who tarryeth in this world," said the ancient books. I threw myself into these two practices, loving God and disavowing the world, with all the strength I could muster. And toward the end of the four years, after much pain, I made a solemn and beautiful discovery: a single human heart cannot contain an overwhelming love and an overwhelming hatred.

If you tried to hate the world strongly enough to blast your soul into another dimension, your soul would be consumed by such a hatred, there would be nothing left of you but shreds. And if you chose to open yourself to a love so strong that it would cause you to let go of everything else, you would find, as Khalil Gibran observed, that you were not in charge of such a love. You would not guide the course of that love. That love, if it found you worthy, would guide your course. The lesson for me was this: a love strong

enough to transform your life will cause you to love everything and everyone who comes before you. You won't be able to turn it off and on like a flashlight, or just point it in one direction. It will shine through you with what seems like the light

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of a thousand suns, causing you to hold in your heart, surrounded by infinite compassion, the children and the bees and the frogs and the termites and the neo-Nazis and the swindling Wall Street financiers. Here we are, all together in this fragile boat called life.

WISDOM OF THE LICHENS: LISTEN

That realization propelled me out of the ashram. Within a few years of leaving, I was living on a ranch in the mountains above Santa Barbara, making picture frames for my wife, Sarada (who was a painter), building a studio, and reading books by Alan Watts and Hermann Hesse. This mountain area, along the ridge that runs for miles between Santa Barbara and the Santa Ynez Valley, is sprinkled with lichen-covered boulders, many of which are the size of a house. Watching the lichens change with the seasons was my first true meditation in nature. It was as though the boulders were trying to say something to me through the lichens, but I would have to slow myself down to listen

to this year-long sentence. So much of what I had learned in my traditional meditation training was me busily doing stuff, chanting, repeating, praying. Perhaps because meditation was the ticket to get out of this painful world, it came edged with a deep anxiety. Am I doing it just right? Am I doing it enough? Will I finally get my ticket to Nirvana, or will I flunk out at the last minute, and have to come back as a scorpion or a tapeworm?

What you can say about this kind of meditation is that it is not at all relational. It is just me alone trying to crank myself out of my pain. But the boulders seemed to want to have a conversation. They were waiting for me to listen, just listen, and touch. I began to discover that just listening, with a fully attentive heart, has a quiet dignity of its own. The lichens taught me how to listen. You can't tell them, hurry up, hurry up. They are going at the just right speed, as the weeks and months go by. Listening implies--good grief!--that I am not the only person in the universe. There is a you, and you have something to tell me, and I might have something to learn from you, and my listening might comfort you, and in the act of listening, I walk along beside you, not trying to make anything happen. Personally, I like to make things happen, but I have come to see how easily this can become an obsession, a mania, just as eating, a fundamentally healthy activity, can also spiral out of control.

Deep listening, like love, is one of those processes that you can cultivate but not control. In the quiet of my mountain-top retreat on Camino Cielo Road, not only did the boulders speak to me, my inner life also spoke to me. On a Saturday morning in the fall of 1974, I had something like a conversion experience, or, to use the language of another tradition, a spontaneous bodhisattva moment. I realized that for the preceding 10 years of my spiritual life, I had been obsessed with trying to extricate myself from the world,

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and from the cycle of birth and death. What I came to understand in a powerful thirty minutes of inner change, was that withdrawing from the world was not my dharma, not my spiritual destiny.

I had been born, my inner life revealed to me in those blazing thirty minutes, not to escape from the world, but to give myself to the world completely, and to participate in nature's evolution toward love. All my spiritual friends were counting the lifetimes (three, maybe only two, maybe just one) until they could go back to Sat Purush, the infinite heart in the sky. If life on earth is understood to be a prison, then spirituality becomes a jailbreak. Within a week of my awakening to life, I turned to them and said, "Whatever good karma I have accumulated that

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might allow me to escape from this world, I relinquish completely and bestow upon you!!! May I go wherever the evolution of love leads me, wherever the evolution of love needs me. I have no other goal or loyalty but this." They were very upset with me (and some still are) for blaspheming their long term travel plans, but I achieved in that moment a serenity that has never left me. I know where God/The Universe wants me: here. And I know what God/The Universe wants me to do: to love more radiantly, think more clearly, act more creatively, and embrace all beings as if they were each my precious three-year-old child. I am no longer much afraid of dying. What worries me now is the possibility of not really living, of not really accepting and fulfilling the gift of life that Mother Universe has bestowed upon me.

THE SHAMAN'S SPIRAL JOURNEY

My time listening to the lichens came to an abrupt end when the owner of the mountain-top ranch gave all the residents ten days in which to convert to Scientology or get off the property. Down we came to Santa Barbara, Sarada and I, into a little

house on Canon Perdido Street that seemed as though it had just been waiting for us. At that point I had been studying and meditating intensively for ten years, and I wanted to learn more about how other people understood the spiritual life. The nearby campus of the University of California had a religious studies department, and in 1975 I enrolled to do a BA in religious studies.

It was the work of mythologists Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade that allowed me to put my ashram years into perspective. The study of Shamanism around the world reveals the outlines of a spiral journey that is at the heart of tribal spirituality. Confronted with a problem in need of care, or a person in need of healing, the Shaman prepares himself or herself, enters into a trance, leaves this world, communes with the ancestors, communes with the spirits of the four winds, communes with the mighty forces behind and underneath nature. Then the Shaman returns, returns into the midst of her or his people, and the Shaman brings to the people the fruit of that otherworldly communion. It may be an instance of healing, it may be where to find the buffalo, it may be when to plant the crops. The Shaman, in these classic studies, is not on a lone journey to get free from his or her pain. And when we encounter forms of Shamanism that do have an emphasis on individual powers and escape, as in the case of the stories reported by Carlos Castaneda, it is worth inquiring about the influences on those individualistic strands. After all, even if he was telling it exactly as it happened, about which there is some doubt, my intuition is that Castaneda was reporting on the shape of Yaqui mysticism after four centuries of Spanish occupation. That might explain how it could have drifted so far away from the more communal emphasis of Shamanism around the world.

This information about the communal heart of Shamanism was tremendously encouraging to me. My spontaneous bodhisattva moment had not been an aberration at all. The spiral journey motif suggested very strongly that the purpose of the spiritual journey is not to disappear forever into the heart of God, but instead to enter into the heart of God again and again, and then to come back with a gift or offering to serve the life of your people. Heal the sick, plant the corn, build a school, comfort a grieving friend, prevent otherwise sane people from building nuclear power plants directly on top of earthquake faults. (You can see where I am

heading with this.) Serve the unfolding of love. It was all so clear to me. Then, when I looked back at Christianity, I saw the same themes, hidden in plain sight: "love one another as I have loved you," "whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me," and "God is love, and whoso dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in them." I actually don't need more than this. This is my comfort and my compass. In the great and simple words of the Dalai Lama "My religion is kindness."

OUT OF THE CHAPEL AND INTO THE STREETS AND FIELDS

I thought that my years of studying religious studies and theology in the 1970s were going to result in my becoming a minister, but life had other surprises in store for me. I gradually realized that my relationship with the great Whatever-it-is-that-ties-us-all-together was so unpredictable and intense that it was not a good idea for me to try and hitch another three hundred people up to it. People wanted a warm and stable father figure (or mother figure) for a minister, not an inspired madman in love with the Milky Way. (How would the latter sort of person be able to balance the annual church budget?) But just when it seemed that I would never find a spiritual community to be a part of, the antinuclear movement swept thorough

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California in the late 1970s and became for me a kind of Earth Sangha, a Church of the Earth.

The local inspiration of the antinuclear movement in my hometown of Santa Barbara was the nearby (and appropriately named) Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant. It was about to be built on top of an active earthquake fault and was also guaranteed, after its forty year life, to be a radioactive waste heap for approximately 250,000 years. Everyone who was going to participate in the Diablo Canyon protests needed to attend a day-long nonviolence

training session. I went, and it was the first time in my life that I had ever reached a deep agreement with a large group of people about something really important. In struggling to change the world around us, we agreed that we would be the change we wanted to see (Gandhi) and overcome hostility with patience and kindness (Martin Luther King, Jr.). I was amazed by all this and volunteered to become a nonviolence trainer. I had found a path toward love-made-visible.

Beginning with the Diablo Canyon protests and continuing over a period of thirty years, my life has become an ongoing experiment in protest as sacrament and the mysticism of kindness. In opening to the mysticism of kindness, I have come to care more and more deeply about people and bees and frogs, and everything that "creepeth upon the face of the Earth." Not because of some high ideals, but out of a growing realization that I AM all those people and all those creatures. My life and fate are infinitely interwoven with theirs, and my personality, which I used to think of as "mine," is in fact the sum of all my relations with them. I am what I intend toward all of you. As I intend to nurture you, I myself am nurtured. As I intend to injure you, I myself am injured. The problem with seeing this as an external law is that people then think they can get around it, can hurt others and not be hurt in the process. As I came to understand infinite interwovenness as a fact of my existence, caring about others was no longer an externally imposed burden, it was the unfolding of my own heart energy, the true me.

I explore this spirituality of infinite interwovenness in my book, *Prayer Evolving*. Inspired by the Sikh practice of not charging for spiritual teachings, I offer these prayers free of charge in PDF format at www.prayer-evolving.net. Please feel free to rewrite them, and replace the word "God" with the Higher Power name that means the most to you.

May each of our hearts become an ever-widening window through which new blessings pour into the world.



Dennis in 1969

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A PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION
by Dennis Rivers / www.prayer-evolving.net

I am in the loving Mind of the Milky Way
that sings through every cell of my body
with millions of angelic voices
and fills me with energy
to help with the healing
of all that is wounded
in the world around me.

I am in the Beautiful Energy of God
which washes through me
with a trillion singing sparkles
washing away all my confusion
and filling me with light...
washing away all my grudges
and filling my heart with the fragrance of flowers.

Anyone who may have wronged me,
I release into the infinitely beautiful light of God.
Anyone who may have abused me,
I release into the infinitely beautiful light of God.
Anyone who may have hated me,
I release into the infinitely beautiful light of God
and bless them to be healed in all ways.

In my mind's eye they grow smaller and smaller
as I let them go... let them go... let them go...
into the endless light of God's healing love.
The beautiful energy of God's healing love,
warm as a mother holding her newborn
is filling the space where I used to carry them.
A deep sense of gratitude
for all the blessings of today, the sun, the sky,
the earth beneath my feet,
for every act of kindness anywhere,
is filling the space where I used to carry my resentments
and I open myself to be a window
through which new blessings can pour out into the world.

As I open myself to be a window of blessing
the beautiful energy of God washes me
more and more deeply.
Everyone I have ever hated or resented
I release into the light of God,
asking for forgiveness
and opening myself to be forgiven.
Everyone I have ever injured or abused
I release into the light of God,
asking for forgiveness and
opening myself to be forgiven.
The light surrounds me
and I experience a forgiveness
that expands in all directions.
I forgive them, they forgive me,
and the infinitely beautiful heart of God
forgives us all, setting us free.