

WINTER - SPRING  
1999

# Center Voice

The Newsletter of the Center for Sacred Sciences

## Special Focus: **The Seeker**

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### **In This Issue . . .**

This issue of the Center Voice focuses in on you, the seeker. Whether we realize it or not, we are all seekers. We all seek happiness. Some of us seek it through worldly avenues such as possessions, relationships, sensory pleasures, doing good works, reputation, or one of the many other egoic satisfactions. But perhaps we have heard the call to seek our happiness in the spiritual realm. It is to the latter search that this issue is dedicated.

If we seek to find our ultimate satisfaction in spiritual Truth, we will find ourselves swimming against the current of much that our worldly society holds as self-evident. The spiritual seeker truly chooses "the road less traveled," and will come upon obstructions and obstacles different in nature from the seeker of worldly satisfactions. In our lead article

"**Never Underestimate the Ego,**" Joel examines the many ways that our ego-self will seek to subvert our spiritual quest and points to three qualities of our True Nature that will powerfully serve us by leading us through the traps our ego sets.

Then, in "**Center Voices,**" four of our Center's practitioners share with us their own experience of the spiritual quest. Coming from diverse backgrounds and paths, they reflect on some of the many questions and issues that commonly arise for the seeker of spiritual Truth. The Spirit speaks to us in many voices—perhaps some spark of the truth that these practitioners share will illuminate something for you.

Also in this issue, you will find quotations reflecting the seeker from numerous mystics of the great traditions. Then, in the "**Library Corner**" we will bring you up-to-date on changes in progress as we adapt our library to its new home in the Buck Street house, as well as some capsule reviews of biographies pertinent to our theme. And from the realm of financial practicalities, we bring you our yearly financial report, as well as special mention of some notable contributions of effort and resources by our friends that have helped make the Center all that it is to each of us. We hope you find something of what you seek in these pages.

*And if everything in the universe should be spread before you, receive it graciously—but do not stop there. Persist in your quest, for He is testing you. If you stay with what is offered, He will escape you. But if you attain Him, nothing will escape you.*

— Ibn Arabi (Sufi)

## CENTER NEWS:

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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, informed by the Enlightenment or Gnosis of Joel, our Spiritual Director. Among the Center's current offerings are Sunday Programs with meditation and talks by Joel, once a month Sunday Video presentations, twice yearly meditation retreats, and periodic dream workshops. 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 small stipends for our bookkeeper and newsletter managing editor, the Center has no paid staff. We rely entirely on volunteer labor to conduct our programs, and on donations and membership dues to meet operating expenses.



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### ***IT'S FINISHED!***

After months of dust and distraction, the new meeting room at Buck Street is finished! The construction process went well and was capped off by an intensive interior painting party in which many in the Center community participated. The first meeting in the room took place on Wednesday, July 29th, when Joel led the Practitioners Group in a special ceremony consecrating the space to spiritual practice. Reviews have been very positive regarding the contemplative feel of the room design, the comfortable new seating, and the new audio and video systems. Thanks again to Joel and Jennifer for creating this very special space for our spiritual community!



*New Meeting Room*

### ***PALO ALTO WORKSHOP***

Joel traveled to Palo Alto, California, the weekend of June 26–27 to give a two-day workshop entitled “The Role of Relationships on a Spiritual Path.” Approximately fifteen people attended the teachings and practiced looking at their relationships to self, the environment, other people, and to Ultimate Reality. Those wishing to attend Joel's Palo Alto teachings next spring are invited to contact Sita DeLeeuw at (415) 857-1312 for more information.

### ***NEW MANAGING EDITOR***

The Center Voice welcomes a new name to our masthead with this issue. Dawn Kurzka has accepted the newly created position of Managing Editor, while Mike Craven moves into the new post of Production Manager. This change has come about in response to the increasing time demands that this newsletter makes on its staff. Starting with this issue, Dawn will be responsible for overall management of the editorial aspects, while Mike will oversee the actual production of the newsletter, from computer input and layout to final printing. We are pleased to be able to make this change and look forward to continuing to provide our readers with thought-provoking spiritual content.

## **ENLIGHTENMENT DAY CELEBRATION**

Practitioners and friends of the Center gathered at the house on Buck Street on August 12th for a gala potluck celebrating the 15th anniversary of Joel's enlightenment. As is our tradition, Joel served up his special barbecue chicken along with an impromptu talk on the significance of this celebration. Entertainment was provided by folk-duo Wayne Leeds and Diana Taylor; Gene Gibbs playing guitar and singing his famous Center Parodies as well as old time favorites; and Karen Fierman performing one of her incomparable poetic odes, this time to Joel and his lot in life (us) since that evening fifteen years ago. All said, it was a very warm event that caused us to ponder and appreciate once again the great gift of Joel in our lives.

## **SUMMER PARTY**

Our summer social season kicked off on July 11th with a party at Gene Gibbs' home on his apple orchard outside Cottage Grove. A great many of the Center community gathered at this particularly beautiful and peaceful rural setting for potluck food, drink and enjoyment of each other's company. Gene's pond and canoe proved an irresistible attraction, inspiring creative boating skills by one member ("whadaya mean ya can't stand in a canoe?") leading to full immersion of our minister, considered a high point of the evening by many. Said baptism included, a fine time was had by all.



*Summer Party*

## **ANACORTES VISIT**

On September 12th Joel visited members of our extended Center community in Anacortes, Washington, to give an intensive one-day workshop on "Mindfulness." Approximately 25 people attended the teachings and did meditation experiments looking at various aspects of their lives in which to practice mindfulness.

## **FALL RETREAT**

A capacity group once again gathered for the Center's nine-day Fall Retreat, held from October 9th–18th, 1998, at Cloud Mountain Retreat Center in Castle Rock, Washington. "Tasting Emptiness" was the theme explored by the teachings of Joel and Andrea, who co-led the retreat. Described by Joel as an "express train" through the terrain of an entire spiritual path, the formal teachings examined the second of our Five Fundamentals in reverse, starting with suffering and its root cause in desire for and attachment to impermanent objects, all the way through the illusory nature of self and our seeming separation from the Divine. The formal teachings were augmented by the equally profound instruction and meditation guidance offered by Andrea, who shared with us a real gift for spiritual guidance. As always, each of us ate of this rich banquet to our fill, and will be nourished by our experiences as we continue on our way.



*RETREATANTS: (Bottom row from left) Grace Mikesell, Clivonne Corbett, Jim Zajac, Karen Fierman, Niraja Lorenz, Rani Herman, Maurelle Wyeth, (middle row) Michael Taylor, Ellen Finneran, Shan Ambika, Joel, Andrea Pucci, Damien Pierce, Therese Engelmann, Mike Craven, (top row) Carla Wenzlaff, Dawn Kurzka, Tom McFarlane, Maggie Free, Fred Chambers, David Cunningham, Jim Patterson, Gene Gibbs, Todd Corbett, Merry Song, and Sue Orbeton.*

*Center News (continued on page 14)*



# NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE EGO

by Joel

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From the Ultimate perspective, the Truth which Enlightenment reveals is not something particularly subtle, obscure, or difficult to apprehend. On the contrary, it is the most intimate and obvious thing in the world. It is simply the Truth of our own Identity. In reality, we are that Infinite and Limitless Consciousness (known in various traditions as “God,” “Brahman,” “Buddha-Mind,” “Tao”) which is the Transcendent Ground and True Nature of all things. All we have to do to become Enlightened, then, is to Realize who we TRULY ARE—right now, right here, in this very moment!

But if Enlightenment is really that simple, we might well ask: *Why, as a matter of historical fact, have so few seekers ever managed to attain it?*

The reason so few seekers have attained Enlightenment lies not in the Truth of Enlightenment *per se*. Rather, it comes from a failure to clearly identify and completely destroy the main obstacle that obstructs its Realization. This is the delusion that we are *not* that Infinite and Limitless Consciousness but, instead, some limited and finite entity, ego or self. Even though this ‘ego’ or ‘self’ has no real existence, as long as so much as a trace of this delusion remains, the Truth of Enlightenment cannot be Realized.

In the East, this situation has been compared to someone who sees a piece of coiled rope and mistakes it for a snake. Even though the apparent ‘snake’ is an illusion, as long as that is what the person is perceiving, he or she cannot apprehend the rope. Only when the appearance of the snake has completely vanished can the reality of the rope be seen.

The same applies to the spiritual seeker, only in this case the delusion of being an egoic self is far more complex and, therefore, difficult to dispel. This is because the ego possesses a kind of will of its own which seems opposed to what the seeker wills. To use a modern analogy, it is as if the seeker were playing a computer game against an alien from outer space. Even though the ‘alien’ is an imaginary creation of the human mind, it nevertheless has been programmed to employ various tactics and strategies designed to thwart its human opponents. Similarly, even though the ego is an imaginary creation of our own minds, it also comes programmed with an array of tactics and strategies which it uses to prevent us from Realizing our True Identity.

As long as we remain deluded, then, the ego appears to be very real and constitutes a very formidable foe. This is why so many mystics have characterized the spiritual path as a kind of warfare in which the seeker must strive to subdue and

ultimately slay his or her own ego. Rumi, for example, defined the true *jihad* (holy war) as “the killing of the ego and the abandonment of personal wishes.”<sup>1</sup> Catherine of Siena insisted: “No matter what your state in life it is essential to kill this selfish-love.”<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the Buddha declared: “One may conquer a million men in a single battle; however, the greatest and best warrior conquers himself.”<sup>3</sup> And here is how

the great Hindu saint, Lalleshwari, described her own internal struggles on the path: “With great effort I rooted out the enemies—lust, anger, and ego.”<sup>4</sup>

For the spiritual seeker then, the old adage, “You are your own worst enemy,” is quite true. Moreover, this is an enemy that is both incredibly tenacious and extremely cunning.

*“...even though the ego is an imaginary creation of our own minds, it also comes programmed with an array of tactics and strategies which it uses to prevent us from Realizing our True Identity.”*

There will be many times during the course of our journey when we think we have finally vanquished the ego, only to find that it pops up again in a new guise. For this reason, our number one rule must be: *Never underestimate the ego!*

On the other hand, we should not underestimate the powers inherent in our True Nature, either. As Consciousness Itself, we already have within us qualities which, if we can but awaken and develop them, will prove more than a match for the ego's machinations. So what are some of the main strategies the ego uses to impede us, and what are the qualities we need to overcome them?

In the early stages of the path, the ego's most common strategy is outright resistance. Whenever we try to conduct a focused inquiry, for example, the ego will produce a host of idle musings and obsessive fantasies. When we try to train our minds in meditation to be stable and calm, the ego will respond with feelings of restlessness and boredom. When we try to check our selfish behavior by keeping moral precepts, the ego will conveniently forget to apply them to concrete situations in our everyday lives. And if we want to foster devotion by praying to some manifestation of the Divine, the ego will greet our attempts with skepticism and scorn. In such cases, we may actually hear the voice of the ego saying things like: "This meditation is a waste of time. You'd be better off doing something constructive!" or, "This prayer business is ridiculous. Only suckers and simpletons believe in a God!" Obviously, if we succumb to such thoughts, our journey is short-circuited even before it really begins. So what can we do to overcome resistance?

One way to deal with resistance is to ignore the ego and simply try to muscle our way forward. However, this method often yields little more than discouragement and fatigue. A more skillful approach is to arouse our own *natural curiosity* and apply this quality to our practices. Curiosity is actually an expression of Consciousness's innate Wisdom, which is forever prompting us to discover the truth for ourselves. So if we can arouse our natural curiosity, about meditation for instance, then when the ego objects that it is a waste of time, we can admit it may be right. Nevertheless, our curiosity will motivate us to continue practicing so that we can find out from our own experience what benefits it may hold.

Moreover, because curiosity makes us genuinely interested in and attentive to our practices, they will bear fruit much more quickly than if we had persevered merely out of

a sense of duty. Soon we will start to get flashes of real insight, attain states of calmness and tranquility, and receive intimations of a bliss we never imagined possible. Once we start having these kinds of experiences, the ego's resistance will be neutralized, because through them we will come to know, firsthand, the value of our spiritual path and be eager to pursue it further.

Of course, this does not mean the war as a whole has been won! On the contrary, as soon as the ego sees that continued resistance is useless, it switches gears and tries something else. The strategy it usually adopts at this juncture is to try to negotiate a compromise with the seeker. We might hear the ego say something like: "I see you're actually beginning to enjoy these practices and find them worthwhile. Very well, but you must recognize that I have needs, too. So,

*“There will be many times during the course of our journey when we think we have finally vanquished the ego, only to find that it pops up again in a new guise.”*

here's what I propose. We'll set aside some nights for your reading, meditation and prayer, but you must allow me to have my fun as well. So, on other nights we'll go out partying, or to a movie, or just kick back and watch TV. As for moral precepts, I'll acknowledge they have their place. But we must also be realistic. After all, we still have to get by on this earthly plane, and if this means bending the rules now and then to

protect our interests, then so be it. So, the deal is this: I'll stop interfering with your spiritual life, but when it comes to minding the store of this world, you leave that to me."

Now, at this stage of the path, most seekers are not yet spiritually strong enough to decline such an offer, and so they are forced to accept it—at least temporarily. This in itself is not a problem, and there's no reason to feel guilt about it. The real danger lies in allowing this sort of compromise to solidify into a permanent state of affairs. If this happens, our spiritual progress will, at best, be slowed to a crawl, in which case we will probably not be able to attain Enlightenment until the time of our death. At worst, our practices may degenerate into a series of empty rites and meaningless rituals, or be abandoned altogether. Then, even the opportunity which death presents will be lost.<sup>5</sup>

What we must do to insure this doesn't happen is to begin cultivating another quality inherent in our True Nature, and that is *mindfulness*. Mindfulness is an expression of what we might call Consciousness's innate Wakefulness or Clarity. Actually, this Clarity is always present, but under delusion it becomes veiled by the intensity of the ego's dramas. By cultivating mindfulness, however, we can start to make space in our lives for this innate Clarity to shine through.

Cultivating mindfulness begins within the context of our formal practices—especially meditation. But we must also learn to cultivate mindfulness in our everyday lives. If we can maintain mindfulness in our everyday lives, then even when the ego is busily pursuing its self-centered desires, we have an opportunity to gain insights. We do this by appointing a portion of our minds to stand back as a witness who carefully observes what the actual results are when the ego has its way.

If we are vigilant in practicing this kind of mindfulness, we will soon see for ourselves that, even though the ego sometimes gets what it wants, the pleasures it derives from these things are always fleeting. And even though the ego sometimes manages to avoid the things it fears, in the end, it cannot avoid what it fears most—suffering and death. So the ego is playing a losing game, and if we continue to identify ourselves with it, in the end we, too, will lose.

The more we realize how futile the ego's activities truly are, the less it is able to seduce us with its desires or terrify us with its fears. As a result, the spiritual balance of power starts to shift in our favor. Although desires and fears continue to arise, we can now view them with a certain amount of detachment, and, thus, no longer feel as compelled to act on them as we once did. This, in turn, brings even more spaciousness into our lives and a new sense of freedom.

When we cease to be dominated by the ego's needs, our self concerns naturally begin to fall away, and we can afford to feel more loving and compassionate toward others. Eventually we can afford to feel compassion even for the ego itself because we come to recognize that it, too, is a suffering being! We see that all its obstinacy and resistance has been motivated not by any evil intent but by its own past sufferings and its horror of future annihilation. Consequently, instead of treating the ego as the "enemy," we learn to embrace it with an open heart, just as a loving mother would a wounded child.

For most seekers this represents a momentous step, and it may well seem that the end of our journey is at last in sight. But just because we have learned to love the ego, this does not mean that the ego reciprocates and is now ready to give

up the ghost. On the contrary, it is precisely at this point that the ego is likely to try out one of the most deceptive, and therefore dangerous, ploys. This is to offer to join the seeker as a full partner in the spiritual quest!

Initially, accepting such a novel proposal may strike us as an ideal way to resolve the internal combat that has consumed so much of our energy. What's more, with the ego on board as an actual ally, it seems there is virtually nothing our combined efforts cannot accomplish! The truth, however, is that if we agree to this pact, we will have accepted a Trojan horse into the innermost citadel of our spiritual life.

At first, the pace of our spiritual progress may, indeed, seem to accelerate in remarkable ways. Since we are no longer wasting time in worldly pursuits, all our energy can now be funneled directly into our practices. As a result, we find we can reach deep meditative states with relative ease. When practicing inquiry, a host of new insights is likely to come cascading through our minds. We may also become exceedingly scrupulous about keeping moral precepts and, during periods of devotion, we may well attain yet-undreamed-of heights of bliss.

The problem here is not that our path has suddenly started to produce such an abundance of fruits. The problem is that the ego now begins to claim these fruits for itself. "Look at what a great meditator I have turned into," we will hear it say. "See how profound my understanding has become!" "Look how free I am of attachments." "No one knows the subtleties of bliss I have experienced!" Moreover, relatively speaking, all this is quite true! We *have* become better meditators, gained genuine insights, acquired some real measure of freedom, become veritable connoisseurs of bliss—which is precisely what makes the trap we have fallen into so difficult to detect.

In reality, the ego has relinquished its position of dominance in our worldly affairs only so that it can usurp control over our spiritual life. And the more the ego succeeds in doing this, the more we fall prey to the most powerful of its spells, spiritual pride.

Because of spiritual pride we grow self-satisfied and complacent about our own progress while looking down on

*“Spiritual yearning is based on an intuition of the Eternal Love and Indestructible Happiness inherent in Consciousness Itself. Deep in our hearts we know that this Love and this Happiness exist. Whether we have been aware of it or not, this is what we have been searching for all our lives.”*

those who have not attained what we have. Although worldly praise and blame may no longer affect us, if anyone questions our spiritual accomplishments, our pride in them causes us to take great offense. And, worst of all, because we have become so enthralled with the subtleties of our practices, we become more interested in refining and perfecting these than in actually reaching the goal of Enlightenment.

To extricate ourselves from this thicket of pride, we must awaken, or rather reawaken, a third quality of our True Nature—*spiritual yearning*. Spiritual yearning is based on an intuition of the Eternal Love and Indestructible Happiness inherent in Consciousness Itself. Deep in our hearts we know that this Love and this Happiness exist. Whether we have been aware of it or not, this is what we have been searching for all our lives.

The trouble is, up until now we have been willing to settle for lesser delights. As worldly seekers, we were fixated on the transitory pleasures of worldly life. Then, as spiritual seekers, we became enchanted by the greater but equally ephemeral consolations that spiritual life brings. If, however, we now allow our deepest yearning for the Ultimate to burn freely in our souls, then we will see that everything we have experienced so far is nothing compared to that shoreless OCEAN of LOVE and HAPPINESS which is our true birthright and to which our hearts most truly incline.

But the question still remains, how to attain it? Apparently, all our struggles on the path have been for naught. Just when we thought we had conquered the ego once and for all, we discover that it has outfoxed us. Although this realization shatters our pride, it also leaves us feeling more helpless than ever. Having exhausted every ounce of our energy, there seems nothing left to do but concede defeat and abandon the struggle. And so that's just what we begin to do.

For many seekers, this can be a devastating experience—a kind of “spiritual death,” as many mystics have described it. But then, even as we die, we may notice something quite surprising happens. The more we cease to struggle, the more it seems does the ego! It's as though we have been wrestling with our own shadow all along—which, indeed, we have—so that now that we are dying, our shadow is dying with us. And if we can surrender to this process unconditionally, when our sense of being a separate self vanishes completely, lo and behold, we find that our ego vanishes as well!

With the disappearance of self and ego, the way is finally cleared for the Supreme Realization that, from the very beginning, neither has ever truly existed. All that ever was, is, and will be is Consciousness Itself. This is who you REALLY ARE! And to know this is ENLIGHTENMENT!

Looking back, however, we may still ask a final question: If there never was an ego or a seeker, what was the purpose of all this spiritual combat?

*“...while all forms of seeking for some thing can be surrendered in favor of seeking Enlightenment, the one thing the seeker can never voluntarily surrender is seeking itself..”*

From the Ultimate point of view, of course, it was quite unnecessary. And yet, from a relative point of view, the whole purpose of the path has been to get the seeker to surrender seeking. For it is the very activity of seeking that creates the illusion of a ‘seeker.’ And, while all forms of seeking for some *thing* can be surrendered in favor of seeking Enlightenment, the one thing the seeker can never voluntarily surrender is seeking itself, because trying to do so places the seeker in the paradoxical position of seeking to surrender seeking. So the final act of surrender must, in a sense, be *forced*. And this is what the spiritual path is designed to bring about—a situation in which the seeker is left with no choice *but* to surrender.

Seen from this perspective then, all the struggles required of the seeker by the spiritual path are not only necessary to its ultimate success—they are themselves actual manifestations of the Infinite Wisdom, Clarity, and Compassion of our own True Nature as Consciousness Itself, which is even now calling us to Awaken...to Awaken!

❖ Joel, Fall 1998

1. William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1983) p. 154.
2. *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke, O.P. (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) p. 111.
3. *The Dhammapada: The Path of Truth*, trans. The Venerable Balangoda Ananda Maitreya, revs. Rose Kramer (Novato, Calif.: Lotsawa, 1988) p. 30.
4. *Lalleshwari: Spiritual Poems by a Great Siddha Yogini*, rendered by Swami Muktananda (South Fallsburg, NY: SYDA Foundation, 1981) p. 72.
5. For a detailed exposition of why death constitutes a golden opportunity for Enlightenment, see Joel's booklet, *Through Death's Gate: A Guide to Selfless Dying* (Eugene, OR: Center for Sacred Sciences, 1995).

## WHAT DOES BEING A SPIRITUAL SEEKER MEAN TO YOU ?

*In mid-September of 1998, we had the pleasure of talking with four members of our Practitioners Group regarding their experience of being spiritual seekers. Recounted here, in their own words, are their reflections on questions such as what and why they seek, the obstacles they have confronted and how they have overcome them, the role of the student in relation to the spiritual teacher, what personal qualities are important on the path, and how their lives have changed as a result of their spiritual work. How do their shared thoughts relate to your own experience?*

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*Therese Engelmann is 66 years old and married with four grown children and twelve grandchildren. Raised Catholic in a large family, she worked as an attorney and currently enjoys writing and sculpting. The Center has been her spiritual home for about nine years.*

All my life I was seeking something. Seeking things. I went for a great many years seeking happiness through materialism. It was a gradual thing—the shift from material seeking to the spiritual. I had thoughts about what life was about, and what was important, and then circumstances arose and showed me that wasn't the case. I tried healing myself by going to church, and that's when I heard about Joel. I met Joel and then joined the Center.

What I was seeking was peace of mind, and the path brought me peace of mind—peace of mind in the sense of being strong enough to withstand whatever might happen and to fulfill whatever duties I have in life. That's probably what I was seeking. I have that now.

Have my spiritual practices been important in helping me find this peace? Absolutely! The inquiry practices were very

crucial—and the meditation practice in order to even understand the inquiry. In reading these books, I could not understand what the words meant without the meditation. The precept and virtue practices, and the inquiries tied in with them...I think, if I had to choose from Joel's four disciplines of meditation, inquiry, morality (precept and virtue practice) and devotion, I'd say that the precept practice was most important.

For me, the two practices that were most influential were ones I did for several years. First, practices of attempting to acquire the virtue of humility. The other a gratitude practice—to take any negative thing, let go of judging thoughts, and just feel gratitude for it. My attempts to acquire those two virtues were most important.

The biggest obstacle I ran into was my pride. The other main obstacle to practice and to getting on with the path—and this is one that Joel saw in me—was a need to control, the need for life to be orderly, the need for life to be the way I wanted it to be. And that is related to pride, too. Giving that up is something I've worked on with those virtue practices. Some of the other practices, like inquiry practice and meditation, can tend to foster a certain kind of pride in accomplishment. These virtue practices tend to help avert it.

It wasn't easy to get past my obstacles. It took persistence. I think I was blessed with the virtues of courage, and persistence, and the willingness to be corrected. Luckily my



pride wasn't such that I had to save face. I could be corrected, and I was correctable. Sometimes I found I took pride in finding ways to overcome pride. You get into these little roundabouts. When I would be tempted to feel pride in my progress and wonder if maybe I was due for advanced-advanced work, I would force myself to go back like a beginner and start again. It was good for me to do that. That was the persistence. The courage to let go of what I had learned and go right back to the beginning again.

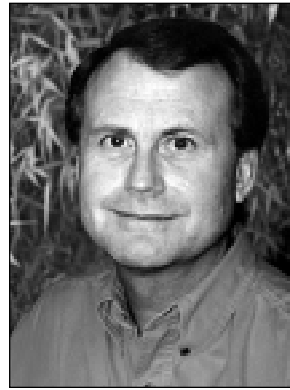
I think it is important for a spiritual seeker to be open to correction. That's the student's role—to attempt to follow suggestions that fit with the inner voice and be open to correction and criticism. Then trying over and over. And submitting oneself for correction. Luckily, in my case, I had Joel who is a master corrector. Most of the time he has a wonderful touch and never hurts the ego so bad that one can't come back.

What motivates or energizes my life now is a very loving feeling. It's sort of a mixture of beauty and surrender and love. Years ago when many people were going off on treks looking for something, I looked at my life and thought, "Well, this is what I'm supposed to do. This is the service I give to my family and the community. This is where I'm supposed to be, and the work that I feel called upon to do is what I do." There's the old business of "Here to learn, here to love, here to serve." That's about the size of it. This point of awareness I call "I" has spun itself a web. It's in this web. It's living in this web. It's very fine, happy in this web. It just does what it's supposed to do in this web.

*“ I just don't have that feeling of separation from people that I used to have. ”*

When I thought of myself as a spiritual seeker years ago, I used to feel better than many people because I was a spiritual seeker. It's not that way anymore. It's like I'm just like everyone else. I see other people seeking. They may not seek what I'm seeking, or what I think I had been seeking. But they're seeking too. I just don't have that feeling of separation from people that I used to have.

Thinking of myself as a spiritual seeker is gone. I'm still very interested in matters of religion and spirit. And I still do all my spiritual practices and more. Almost all my day, everything I do is a spiritual practice and feels sacred to me. There's just less "I" there to do the seeking than there used to be. I have found what I sought when I first joined the Center.



*Mike Craven is 54 years old, married, and the father of two grown children. An accomplished artist and computer professional, he came to his spiritual quest in 1987. Mike has been a member of the Center for about three years.*

I think of myself as more of a spiritual student than a spiritual seeker. Seeking usually has some kind of goal in mind, and I'm less goal-oriented than I am interested in the process of the spiritual path. What I gain from the path is that it helps me be a better person and I am able to deal with life in a calmer way. I find that if I do get angry or upset, I am increasingly able to move to the point of the observer and watch myself do it—I'm more aware of catching myself. Sometimes I'm still doing it and don't stop myself, but there's a side of me that's aware of what I'm doing. So it's like I may have a long way to go, but as I look back down the path I have traveled I see some improvements in these areas.

Trying to maintain a constant awareness of the spiritual dimension of life has helped me. I try (not always successfully) to meditate and repeat the precepts every day. The precepts just seem to become more embodied in me as time goes on.

Some of the challenges on my path have to do with scheduling and discipline. When I get up in the morning of a day where I have a tough schedule, I don't feel quite as relaxed. I'll often say, "Oh, I'll meditate later," and I don't get back to it. I think it's usually a lack of discipline in scheduling that keeps me from my practice.

Lately, my meditation has been tougher. When I am doing my practice I have a very difficult time. I'm almost completely distracted and rarely get to the point of the observer to catch myself and bring myself back. So I've lost part of my discipline in practice lately. But it doesn't keep me from sitting there almost every day even if it's a complete zero. I do think lately it's more the distractions of mind and thought that come up, as opposed to laxity and zoning out and falling asleep, which is often my practice during retreats.

One trait that I have that helps my practice is that I hate to give up—I feel obligated. If I'm at a retreat, I want to stick it out. I'm like a little bull terrier. So it's just a matter of still showing up, trying to be present. That seems to be about the only quality I would bring to the party—the rest just seems to happen.

Another thing that really helps is having Sheila, my wife, be on the same path and, although we're different, we have

a similar spiritual focus. We meditate together much of the time. We read together and talk about it. We talk about Joel's lessons and our discussions provide great reflective thinking. Just sharing this with her is one of the significant things that's made a difference in my practice.

I really resonate with so much of the teachings here. The study of all the traditions all pointing the same way—when we boil it all down, it always comes back to selflessness. It's the heart of the matter at many levels. It's a phenomenal key. Joel's teachings always circle back to this central focal point.

Joel is certainly the most profound teacher I've met. I've looked at many other teachings as sort of the outside of a whirlpool on the ocean gathering people in who were just floating on the waves. Joel calls to us from the bottomless center. This is really serious and I'm stunned that we happened onto it. Other teachers have led me towards this point, but I never felt that they were that much different than I. Joel certainly calls from a different place.

*“...the student has got to show up with an open mind and a certain amount of cautious trusting...”*

As far as the relationship between the student and spiritual teacher goes, if it's to be a valid relationship, the student has got to show up with an open mind and a certain amount of cautious trusting—he's got to trust the teacher to a certain degree. For me, I have to have respect for the teacher. One of my great failings is being judgmental. When I hear a spiritual message from a teacher, I don't just listen to the message, but I also try to look at the teacher and their validity—are they practicing the message as well?

Joel is the greatest teacher in that regard. In my view, I haven't seen a chink in his armor in the three years I've known him. I'm skeptical enough that I'm always observing his actions to see if they fit with the Gnostic paradigm—they always do. On occasion, when I feel they haven't matched, I've been wrong in my assumption. It's me, not him, that's failed. That means a lot. It allows me to be more trusting of the message. With him there's also no danger because he asks nothing of us that we're not willing to give.

Since I began studying with Joel, I'm much more aware of the nature of suffering. I have a better understanding of the causes and cures of my own suffering and the suffering of others. I believe that my suffering has diminished to some degree in both severity and frequency.



*Sheila Craven is 56 years old, married, and owns and manages her own business employing 19 people. Raised Jewish, she has been questioning the true nature of things since she was a little girl. Her quest brought her to the Center about three years ago.*

I think I've always sought spiritual truth. Peggy Lee sings the song, "Is That All There Is?" That was my theme song. Is that all there is? This can't be all there is. One day after another, same old, same old. Different person, same argument. Whatever. That just can't be all there is. There has to be something beneath it. That's what I've sought. The discontentment with what I perceive to be life that I've had all my life is what drives me on. I want to know more about what's underneath it all.

In my 20's and 30's I pretty much let go of my search, because all I ran into was religion, and religion was not, in my mind, the answer. I could only see in religion what kept people apart—not what brought them together in any love or support. So I left religion. In the 70's I got into psychic phenomena, I read *Seth Speaks*, that whole genre of literature and thought. But I sort of hit a wall with it because it seemed too airy-fairy. I have a tough time with things that can't be demonstrated. On the other hand, I discovered that I have my own psychic powers—I think everybody does. And that comes from some place. It comes from a level or realm that we can't see or touch or feel with our regular senses. From that I got the idea that there is a level of being that one could tap into spiritually. After that I hit a wall until I found Unity Church.

There's a saying I heard at Unity—"God and I love you just the way you are." Boy, that just pierced me, because I didn't think anybody could love me. How could that be? There were other things—"God and I are one." How can that be? These things rang true for me somewhere inside that I needed to get in touch with. Now, the Center and Joel's teachings have given me a very direct focus on what I'm looking for—a firsthand realization that I am of God. I expect that with that realization comes peace.

The practices we do, and the help I've had learning how to meditate, have been very beneficial. I love to meditate. I look forward to it, and I do it about five days a week, no matter where I am. Meditating every day, and observing the ego as something separate from the true self is the instrument I use in my search. It lets me be much more open with people and therefore invite greater intimacy. It's the awareness—just seeing what I do, and being conscious of the feelings and aware of the reactions to the feelings.

My mind and all the thoughts in it are the main obstacles in my meditation practice. Thoughts about work primarily, or perhaps if I'm having an emotional conflict with somebody, that will come up. I'm just as distracted as the next person by whatever is up for me at the time. The challenge is to set that aside. To separate myself from that and stay with the focus.

What I've run into in other areas of my practice is recognition of the obstacles that have always been there, that I had no labels for. I have always created certain separations between me and other people, perhaps through emotions that I don't want to acknowledge, or through behaviors. What was causing this in me and between people was a mystery before. I have a much clearer understanding now of what's going on because of the teachings.

For me it's a very step-by-step uphill path. Sometimes I feel like I'm not progressing as fast as I would like — I mean I want to be there. And I'm not there. I know that I have such a long way to go that I just don't focus on that. I try to just focus on each step that I manage to take. I could get frustrated, but why bother.

I think success as a spiritual seeker requires a real commitment to follow the teacher and teachings as best as one can and in that commitment, if there's confusion, to seek enlightenment from the teacher. To do the readings, and actively seek. Not be passive about it, but to show up, pay attention. I think that if you have the intention to get all you can get from those around you and from the teacher, you're gonna get it. Something good's going to happen. A commitment and a dedication to the practice is really important.

Because of my search I think my attitude has turned from negative to more positive. I'm not chasing after every thing and dream. I'm a lot more contented with a lot less. But I still have a lot of the same old devils. They're me. They're in my mind, they're in my psyche. I would like those to mellow out. There are probably fewer of them, now. But they still come up. My discontentment with myself — I would like to know what it's like to truly be at peace with oneself. But I think that the moments of discontent in that area are fewer and further between. They're not as often, and not in such a depressing way.

Another thing that happened is that while on my search, I found Mike, my husband. When I look at him I see God. I don't think I ever would have recognized that before. It's really important to see God, for me, in the people who I love and like and care about. And when I look at people with whom I have difficulty, to trust that connection and also try to see God in them.



*Ellen Finneran is 48 years old, a teacher, artist, and mother of a teenaged son. A military child, she grew up in many countries around the world and was exposed to many religious traditions. Spiritual enlightenment has been the main goal of her life since she was eleven years old. Ellen joined the Center community last June.*

For a long time I have felt that I have a function in life. That function is to release my limiting beliefs, on the one hand, and for the extension of love on the other. I don't really identify with the term "spiritual seeker." I see myself more as a dreamer who's being gently shaken by my beloved to awaken.

From 1977 to 1988, I worked every day with *A Course in Miracles Workbook*. As a direct result of this work, I had a powerful revelatory experience culminating in a direct linkup with divine inner guidance in the form of writings. These writings have never been wrong in the ten years they have been guiding me, even though many of them have been prophetic of future events in my life. This guidance has constantly challenged and confronted me to change my limiting beliefs and ideas. Despite my resistance, I have been deeply changed because of this guidance.

The day after my first practitioners Group meeting, I actually experienced one full day without "Ellen". Without the pictures, without the thoughts, without the clamoring, without the self—it was totally gone. I wasn't in an enlightened condition, not seeing everything as God, but was in a state where I was just looking. I spent that day with a friend and I was totally there for her. It was extremely joyful. From that moment on I had tremendous faith and trust in Joel and his instructions, and in my partner Michael and everything that he's taking me through. There's a part of me that knows what's happening and I'm very happy about it.

I find that the main obstacle to the release of my limiting beliefs is that a lot of these beliefs are repressed. So I think it's all in the recognition of what's going on. That's the hard part. Most of my life I've been an isolationist. I've been a kind of independent person—not knowing that what I've actually been doing is being very safe, so I don't have to reveal my vulnerability to anyone or anything. I can be very strong and competent in the world, but what I'm finding as I'm looking at some of this stuff is that I'm not nearly so strong, and perhaps much more vulnerable than I had ever suspected.

This "looking" brings up fear. It brings up tears. It brings up a gasping for breath. It brings up from the very depths of my being all sorts of traumatic, very visceral things. I've been

going through a lot recently. It goes back to the core and the root of the seed of fear that's been in my life, that's colored my life, that's made me protect myself and isolate myself from other people.

Just that knowing, then, is allowing me to see people differently. And as I see people differently, it seems to be dissolving the obstructions to that unconditional love. I've always had this idea of wanting to get to a point where I see a saint behind every pair of eyes that I see. I think anytime you have anything that obstructs that sight, that view, it is an obstacle. It's an obstacle to experiencing and expressing that deep soul-level recognition of love.

My inner guide is very gently guiding me throughout the entire process, through inner visualizations. And even though it's frightening, I have a safety net that won't quit. I have Michael, I have Joel, I have my inner guidance. And I have a world that's becoming more and more beautiful all the time. So these are the things that are creating a safety net that is allowing me to look at this stuff.

My teachers and my inner guidance and everything that I've been working on in the last number of years point totally to faith and trust. Faith and trust that I will have the recognition of what is real. That's what I want, the recognition of what is real.

Some qualities that have been important for me on my path lately are, number one, courage. The courage to look at myself and to look at things. The second thing is the ability to actually look and listen. To actually listen and watch what the outer world is telling me about my inner world. To be aware

of whoever comes in my presence and what they're actually telling me about myself. And then, to open my heart to the fact that I'm not perfect. I'm probably not anything that I think I am. So just open my mind and start questioning what I am. So the courage, the awareness of what's coming at me, a questioning mind, and just to open to what might be there—these are the things that have been important to me.

I have never gone and sought a teacher. They have always been right there, right in front of my face. I can't get away from them. They always say if you want to know where you're going, look at somebody who's there. I am looking at Andrea<sup>1</sup>. She says, "Listen to Joel and do what he says, and trust it's going to get you there." That's what I'm doing. I'm listening, I'm doing, and I'm trusting. That's my entire commitment at this time—just to be aware, to listen, to do, and to trust.

This process has been changing my life. I'm much more sensitive to and aware of subtle energies coursing through my body—these are energies that are just absolute plain, raw love. When I look at my partner, for example, I'm just melted with happiness and love. It's very different. I've come through a lot of that fear. And now I'm beginning to see the beloved in the eyes of other people, like I have known them for eons, as if there is a recognition of who they really are. That's beginning to come to fruition for me.

1. See interview with Andrea in the Summer/Fall '98 Center Voice.

❖ All interviews conducted Fall, 1998

## ***In the Words of the Mystics***

*It is by seeking to know one's Self that the Great Mother of All may be found.*

— Anandamayi Ma (Hindu)

*The Perfect Man uses his mind like a mirror—going after nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing.*

— Chuang Tzu (Taoist)

*She holds all things in reverence, the left hand as well as the right, trouble as well as consolation, hunger and thirst as well as eating and drinking, cold and heat and nakedness as well as clothing, life as well as death, honor as well as disgrace, distress as well as comfort.*

— Catherine of Siena (Christian)

*If you wish to understand, know that a sudden comprehension comes when the mind has been purged of all the clutter of conceptual and discriminatory thought-activity.*

— Huang Po (Buddhist)

*Self-importance is as wily as the devil and cleverly conceals itself behind humble words, settling itself firmly in the heart so that we swing between self-depreciation and self-praise.*

— Theophan the Recluse (Christian)

*Love is that flame which, when it blazes up, burns away everything except the Beloved.*

— Rumi (Sufi)

*The nameless uncarved block  
Is but freedom from desire,  
And if I cease to desire and remain still,  
The empire will be at peace of its own accord.*

— Lao Tzu (Taoist)

*God has shown you what is good; and what He requires of you is only this: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.*

— Micah (Jewish prophet)



## CSS Library Hours:

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

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Because of our recent move to a new location (and the remodeling this required), for most of last year our library had to be temporarily housed in a small, cramped bedroom. Now that the remodeling is finished, we have been able to transfer our collection to a considerably larger area next to the meditation room. This should allow for easier access to the books, more browsing space, and room to grow besides!

In keeping with this issue's theme, "The Seeker," we present two reviews of the numerous autobiographies we have in our library which were written by spiritual seekers, describing the joys and hardships of their own journeys. We hope these inspire and inform your own quest for Truth!

### **The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues His Way**

by *Anonymous*

Translation by *Helen Bacovcin, c 1978*

Published by *Doubleday, 1978, 1992*

Reviewed by *Dawn Kurzka*

In the *Bible*, St. Paul encouraged followers to "pray always." This is a sweet, simple, autobiographical account of one man's attempts to learn how to obey. The pilgrim is an anonymous Eastern Orthodox Christian in nineteenth century Russia. The journey is external, across time and geographical space. It is also internal, through humility, obedience and devotion to an ever increasing depth of prayer. Carrying only dried bread, the *Bible* and the *Philokalia*, our pilgrim goes where teachings and compassionate service lead. As a seeker, he exemplifies the

Center's universal principles of attention, commitment, detachment and surrender, and can be a profound source of inspiration to one following this path. This account is published in various editions and translations; the one here described and another are available in the Center library. In addition, audiotaped excerpts from the *Philokalia* are also available for loan.

### **Daughter of Fire—A Diary of a Spiritual Training with a Sufi Master**

by *Irina Tweedie*

Published by *Blue Dolphin Publishing, 1986*

Reviewed by *Merry Song*

Irina Tweedie's *Daughter of Fire* remains vivid in my mind even though I read it nearly ten years ago. In this substantial 800-page journal, the reader travels along with a woman irresistibly drawn to the spiritual path. Tweedie, 52 years old when the journal opens, finds her teacher in India—Bhai Sahib, an elder Sufi master. Throughout the course of her daily writings, Tweedie invites the reader to a close-up look at her most intimate thoughts and agonizing struggles as she surrenders to the Guru-disciple relationship and finds ultimate transformation. Her teachings are exemplified in a short letter I received from her in 1990: "My dearest, if you meditate, pray and fill your heart with love to God and His creation, you will become a student of HIM as we all are following this path."

*Daughter of Fire* is available in the Center Library, as is a shorter version, *Chasm of Fire*.

*"You have read a book? Then read it, reflect on what it says, and apply the words to yourself. To apply the content to oneself is the purpose and the fruit of reading. If you read without applying what is read to yourself, nothing good will come of it, and even harm may result. Theories will accumulate in the head, leading you to criticize others instead of improving your own life."*

— *Theophan the Recluse (Christian mystic)*

## FOOD FOR LANE COUNTY

For about the last year members of the Center community have been helping the hungry by volunteering their time at the Food for Lane County (FFLC) food rescue project. Every fourth Saturday of the month Center members and friends gather at Sheldon High School to make soup and repackage surplus food donated by area restaurants and dormitories into family-sized servings. These food packages are then frozen and distributed by various social service agencies to people in need. The food rescue project saves an immense amount of food that would otherwise be wasted and gets it to where it is most needed. Those who have volunteered find the experience to be enjoyable and very well organized by FFLC staffer Dan Budd. If you are interested in joining us for our regular night, you can contact Center member Niraja Lorenz for more info at 684-0636, or if you are interested in volunteering for other evenings call FFLC staffer Sheyla at 343-2822.



## Visit Our Web Site!

[http://  
www.integralscience.org/css](http://www.integralscience.org/css)

The Center's web site includes:

- General information about the purpose, activities, and philosophy of the Center.
- Details about Joel's books and other Center publications.
- Some of the previous newsletters.

## THANK YOU ❖ THANK YOU ❖ THANK YOU

*The Center for Sacred Sciences has always depended on the generosity and volunteer labor of its members and friends to sustain it. For instance, other than small stipends for our bookkeeper and newsletter Managing Editor, we continue to have no paid staff and all our programs and services are produced as a labor of love by all those involved. We would like to take this opportunity to thank some of our friends for their gifts and contributions above and beyond their membership pledges.*

For their especially generous gifts for the general support of the Center, sincere thanks to **David Cunningham** and **Dawn Kurzka**. And very special appreciation goes to **Gene Gibbs** for his inspiring gift of the entire proceeds from his apple orchard business.

For their very generous support of the Center Voice newsletter with their special gifts, we send a great big "thank you!" to **Mora Dewey** and **Jan Mackey**. This newsletter is the second largest single expense in our budget, and gifts in support of it are very important in allowing us to continue sending it free of charge to all who desire it. If you too wish to help sustain the newsletter, please mark your check "newsletter donation".

And a special note of thanks to **Mike and Sheila Craven**, **Tom McFarlane**, and **Andrea Pucci** for their generous support of the Retreat Scholarship Fund. Their special gifts have provided a valuable opportunity for in-depth practice to members of the Center community whose circumstances would otherwise not allow it. If you too would like to aid this cause, please note "Retreat Scholarship Fund" in the memo section of your check.

The Center's move and remodel also provided ample opportunities for service, and we would like to thank the many members, too numerous to name, who helped with the actual move, and the all-day marathon interior painting party. Their efforts and attention to detail have gone far to make the new meeting room the attractive and sacred space that it is.

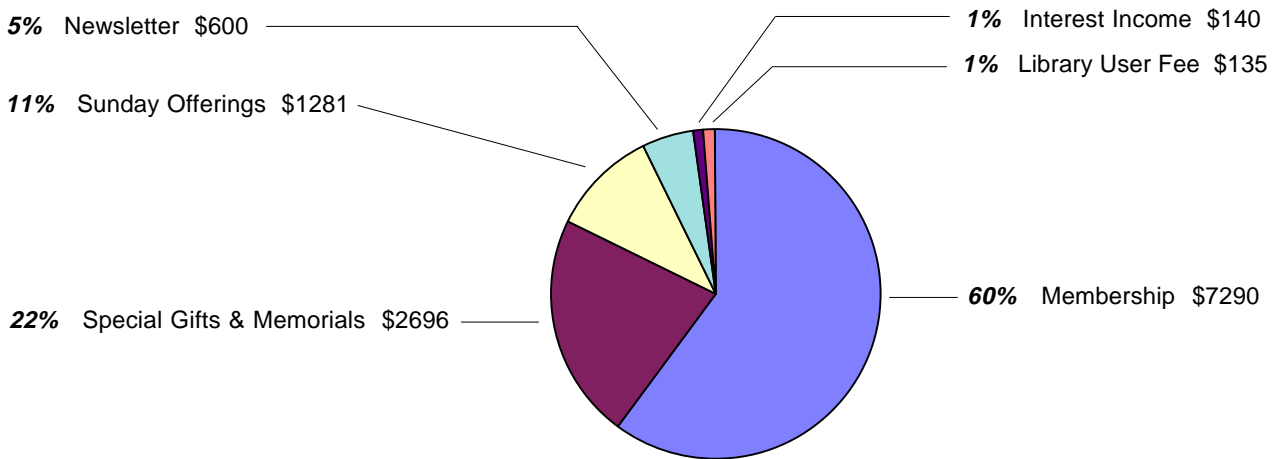
We would also like to thank **Mike Craven** for the shoe racks and coat hooks that he designed and constructed for the entry hall of the meeting room. Special thanks also go to **Ellen Finneran** for the donation of the Yamaha amplifier that forms the heart of our new sound and video system, which was researched, assembled and installed by **Michael Taylor**.

And last, but far from least, a sincere "thank you" to all of the members and friends whose pledges and Sunday offerings form the backbone of financial support for the Center and its work. Without the ongoing generosity of each of you, the Center could not exist as we know it.

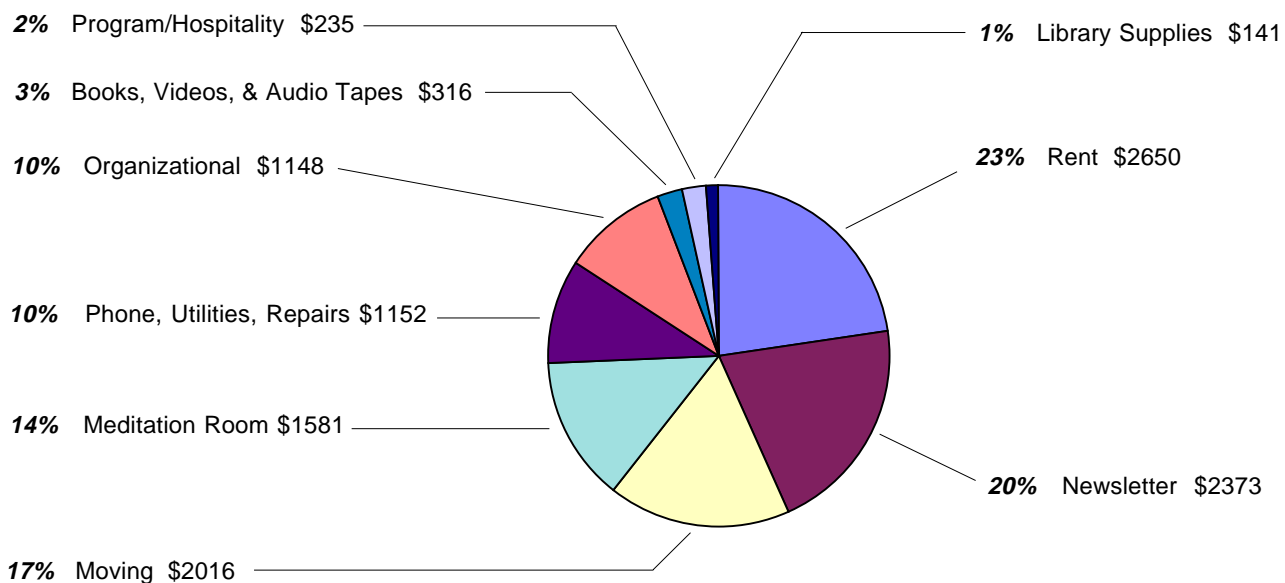
## FINANCIAL REPORT: Fiscal Year ending 8/31/98

In this age of eroding worldly values we feel it is especially important that a spiritual organization's finances be open and aboveboard. From its inception the Center has been run as a labor of love by all those who work to bring you the teachings. Other than small stipends for our bookkeeper and the Managing Editor of the Center Voice, the Center continues to have no paid staff. However, this past year saw the move into our new home on Buck Street, and even though Joel and Jennifer built the new meeting room at their own expense, the Center incurred significant one-time expenses for moving and painting, furnishing the room with comfortable seating and a new sound and video system, as well as somewhat higher overhead for rent and utilities. Even with these special needs, the Board has continued a tradition of fiscal conservatism and living within our means. The generous support of our members and friends has paid for these needed improvements as well as allowing us to finish the year about \$600 in the black. We look forward to your continued support as we enter into Fiscal Year 1998-99. We need to modify our library for the new space and look at the upcoming publishing of Joel's new book as well as other publishing needs. We hope that the financial charts below are self-explanatory, but if you have any questions, please feel free to ask Jennifer Knight, our Treasurer.

### INCOME \$12,142



### EXPENSES \$11,612



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*Seeking essence  
From the cloud of delusion...  
Discovering that the seeker,  
Cloud and essence are One,*

*Omykiam*

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Sacred Sciences*

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