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Center Voice

The Newsletter of the Center for Sacred Sciences

The Path of Devotion

Like it or not, we are all on a path of devotion. We all devote ourselves to something. Typically, we give ourselves to something that we think will make us happy. Inevitably, though, we end up repeatedly frustrated or disappointed because we experience this happiness only temporarily. It always slips away, leaving us suffering and struggling to find happiness once again.

But it doesn't have to be this way. It is possible, the mystics tell us, to discover a deep, enduring happiness that does not depend upon experiencing this or that. What obstructs the realization of this profound joy, they say, is that we normally devote ourselves to impermanent things that can never permanently satisfy us. As Jesus put it,

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

So, to find ultimate happiness, we must redirect our heart's devotion from ephemeral, worldly treasures to eternal, spiritual treasures.

But how, exactly, do we redirect our heart in this way? As the articles in this issue show, the mystics of all the great religious traditions have passed down to us specific spiritual practices to make possible this turning about in the depths of the heart. If we allow these disciplines to transform us, we can be liberated from our futile attempts to find lasting satisfaction in transitory objects and can then discover eternal happiness. The key is to put the teachings into practice. As the ancient Upanishads say, "If people thought of God as much as they think of the world, who would not attain liberation?"

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Photography

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Mailing

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Sheila Craven

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The Center for Sacred Sciences is dedicated to the study, practice, and dissemination of the universal spiritual teachings of the mystics, saints, and sages of the world's great religious traditions. In addition, the Center endeavors to present these traditional teachings in forms appropriate to our contemporary scientific culture. The Center also works toward the creation and dissemination of a sacred worldview that expresses the compatibility between universal mystical truths and the evidence of modern science.

Among the Center's on-going events are Sunday public services with meditations and talks by the Center's spiritual director, monthly video presentations, and—for committed spiritual seekers—a weekly practitioners' group and regular meditation retreats. The Center also maintains an extensive lending library of books, audios, videos, and periodicals covering a broad spectrum of spiritual, psychological, and scientific subjects. In addition, the Center provides a website containing teachings, information, and other resources related to the teachings of the world's mystics, the universality of mystical truth, and the relationship between science and mysticism. Twice yearly, the Center publishes a newsletter containing spiritual teachings, interviews with practitioners, book reviews, information and resources pertaining to the Center's mission, and news of Center events.

The Center for Sacred Sciences is a non-profit, tax-exempt church based in Eugene, Oregon, USA. We rely chiefly on volunteer labor to support our programs, and on public donations and membership pledges to meet our operating expenses. Our spiritual director gives his teachings freely as a labor of love, and receives no financial compensation from the Center.

CONTACT THE CENTER

Meeting address: 1571 Buck St., Eugene, Oregon



Web address: www.centerforsacredsciences.org

Phone: (541) 345-0102

Postal address: 1430 Willamette St. #164,
Eugene, OR 97401-4049

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Publications Director

Center for Sacred Sciences
1430 Willamette St., #164
Eugene, OR 97401-4049

publications@centerforsacredsciences.org

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CENTER NEWS

New Board Member

Tom McFarlane, who has been associated with the Center since 1987, has been elected to the Center's board of directors. Assuming the new position of publications director, he will be responsible for Center publications such as the newsletter, website, and other materials. Tom brings to the board his experience as a small-business owner, author, and website developer.

Change in Newsletter Editor

Dawn Kurzka, who served as managing editor of the *Center Voice* for four years, has turned over the challenging job to Tom McFarlane. On behalf of all *Center Voice* readers, we thank Dawn for her years of dedicated service as its editor.

Enlightenment Day and Foundation Studies Commencement

The annual Enlightenment Day celebration was held on August 16, 2002, at the home of Gene Gibbs and included a BBQ potluck dinner followed by music, singing, comedy, skits, and magic. In addition, the twelve members of Tom McFarlane's 2001-02 foundation studies group were acknowledged for completing their year of studying and practicing the basic teachings of the mystics, and were welcomed into the Center's community of practitioners. The 2002-03 foundation studies group is being taught by Sheila Craven.

New CSS Website:

www.centerforsacredsciences.org

Although the Center has had an unofficial website hosted on another site for several years, the Center now has an official website and its own domain name. Please visit the Center's new website at the above address and let us know what you think. Your feedback will be considered as we continue to refine and expand the website. Also, you can now receive information about upcoming events at the Center via e-mail. Ever want to know what the next video will be, when the Center will be closed, or what the dates of the next retreat are? Just send an e-mail to:

info@centerforsacredsciences.org

and you'll get an automatic reply with the current schedule of events. Try it out!

Electronic Newsletter—Save a Tree!

If you have e-mail, you can help reduce the Center's significant newsletter publication and mailing expenses by switching to an electronic newsletter subscription. When future newsletters are published, rather than getting a copy in the mail you will receive an e-mail message containing links to the Center's website. Those links will allow you to easily view the newsletter, using your web browser, or download and print your own high-quality copy. With an electronic subscription, you will get the newsletter long before others receive their copies in the mail, and you can easily share it with your friends by simply forwarding the e-mail to them. We encourage everyone who has e-mail to switch to an electronic subscription. Simply send an e-mail to:

publications@centerforsacredsciences.org including your name and address as it appears on your newsletter mailing label and a request to switch to an electronic subscription. It's that simple!

Conversion to Digital Audio

The Sunday talks by Joel and guest teachers at the Center are now being digitally recorded. In addition to cassette tapes, CDs of these new recordings can now be borrowed from the library or purchased. The Center's vast collection of past Sunday talks is also being digitally re-mastered tape-by-tape so that CDs of these recordings will be available as well. Special thanks go to Damien Pierce for taking on this laborious project.

Thanks to a Library Veteran

For his six years of faithful and continuous service to patrons of the Center library, we extend heartfelt thanks to Gene Gibbs, who has recently retired from his position as library assistant. Among other things, Gene assisted patrons on Sundays, helped check in books and tapes, and assisted with overdue items. He will be missed! Gene also has served the Center community for several years by giving the Sunday morning introduction, a job he has passed on to Bob Hoitt and Miriam Reinhart.

Spring 2003 Retreat

The spring 2003 retreat for members of the practitioners' group is planned for April 25–30. Tom Kurzka and Joel will lead the retreat, which will focus on the fundamental practices of concentration meditation and mindfulness.

Summer 2002 Retreat

The Center's five-day summer 2002 retreat, entitled *Awakening the Heart of Devotion*, was led by Joel Morwood and Tom Kurzka. Joel and Tom gave teachings on the practice of prayer in the heart and other contemplative techniques that awaken our longing for the Divine. The retreat was held July 26–31, 2002, at the Cloud Mountain Retreat Center near Castle Rock, Washington.



Summer Retreatants

Fall 2002 Retreat

The nine-day fall 2002 retreat, led by Andrea Pucci, was entitled *Liberating Afflicted Emotions*. Drawing from the Tibetan Buddhist mandala of the five elements, Andrea instructed us in meditation practices that helped us to liberate five afflicted emotions (desire, fear, pride, envy, and confusion), revealing their true nature as divine wisdom energies. The retreat was held October 11–20, 2002, at the Cloud Mountain Retreat Center near Castle Rock, Washington.



Fall Retreatants





Prayer in the Heart

by Joel

‘God’, according to the mystics, is that Consciousness (Mind or Spirit) which transcends all forms and yet is immanent in all forms as their true nature or identity. Our problem is that, while we have no trouble perceiving the world of forms, we are ignorant of this Formless Consciousness which constitutes their essence. In other words, we do not Realize that all forms are actually forms of God—including, and most importantly, ourselves.

Within all the Great Traditions there are two primary ways of dispelling this ignorance: the *path of inquiry* and the *path of devotion*. The path of inquiry uses various analytical and meditative techniques to negate the inherent reality of forms until the seeker attains a Realization of Identity with that Consciousness which transcends them. On the path of devotion a seeker’s love and longing are focused so intensely on some form of the Divine that all other forms, including the seeker’s, are eventually obliterated. Then, when there is nothing left to distinguish the lover from the Beloved, the seeker Realizes Identity with that Consciousness which transcends both. Thus, the path of inquiry and the path of devotion have the same end.

Nevertheless, most seekers find the path of devotion easier to follow because, as Krishna tells Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*,

*Greater is the toil of those who set their minds on the Formless, for the path of the Formless is hard for mortals to traverse. But those who regard me, Krishna, as the End Supreme, who surrender all their works to me and who concentrate on My Form with pure love and devotion—these I quickly deliver from the ocean of death, because they have set their hearts on me alone.*¹

There is, however, a catch. Before you can fully enter the path of devotion, you must have some personal experience of the Divine, simply because you cannot love something that you have never experienced. Still, this does not mean you are completely powerless. If you have even a little faith that there

is some Reality or God greater than yourself, you can begin to search for it. But then the question is, where should you look? Where does this God dwell? Well, here is the answer given by the Hindu mystic Lallehwari:

*He lives in your heart.
Recognize Him.
Don’t look for Him
here and there,
wondering, “Where is God?”*²

What is more, you will find exactly the same answer given by mystics of all the Great Traditions. Listen, for example, to the Christian St. Ephraim of Syria:

*Here within you are the riches of heaven, if you desire them....Enter within yourself and remain in your heart, for there is God.*³

And here is what God tells Muhammad in a famous Islamic saying:

*Neither My earth nor My heaven can encompass me, yet the heart of My adorer contains Me.*⁴

Before going any further, however, it is important to understand what the mystics mean when they use the word *heart*. In fact, *heart* can have at least four different meanings, depending on the context. It can refer to the *physical heart*, the *emotional heart*, the *spiritual heart*, or the *Radiant Heart*. The first three hearts correspond to increasingly deeper and subtler levels of the seeker’s presumed identity as a separate individual self, while the fourth, the Radiant Heart, refers to the seeker’s True Identity as Consciousness Itself. The idea, then, is that by penetrating the first three hearts you can reach the Radiant Heart which lies at the core of your being.

So the next question is, how exactly can this interior journey be made? Perhaps the oldest and most universal method is to practice what Christians call *prayer in the heart*. Theophan the Recluse, an Eastern Orthodox mystic, explains how it works:

*In order to keep the mind on one thing by the use of a short prayer, it is necessary to preserve attention and so lead it into the heart: for so long as the mind remains in the head, where thoughts jostle one another, it has no time to concentrate on one thing. But when attention descends into the heart, it attracts all the powers of the soul and body into one point there.*⁵

Repeating a sacred phrase or name to free attention from distracting thoughts and bring it into the heart is known among the Sufis as *dhikr*. Here is how the Sufi scholar Mir Valiuddin describes it:

*In dhikr the thought is directed towards the heart, and the heart towards God.*⁶

Hindu mystics accomplish the same thing by performing *japa*—the constant repetition of a sacred mantra or syllable, such as *OM*. In the ancient *Upanishads*, for example, we read the following instructions:

*With upright body, head, and neck lead the mind and its power into the heart; and the OM of Brahman will then be thy boat with which to cross the rivers of fear.*⁷

So, let's take a closer look at what this practice of prayer in the heart actually entails.

As anyone who tries it soon discovers, just keeping attention focused on a sacred word or prayer for more than a few minutes is extremely difficult. So, if you really want to practice prayer in the heart, the first thing you need to do is to train your attention to be stable. This usually requires practicing formally every day for a certain period of time when you can be alone and free of interruptions. Ten to fifteen minutes makes a good beginning. Later, you can try to increase your sessions to twenty or thirty minutes, or more. If you can practice twice every day, all the better.

Next, choose a short prayer or sacred word that evokes in you some feeling for the Divine. This could be a Name of God, or a favorite line from a spiritual poem or scripture. At first, you might want to experiment with different words or prayers, but once you have found one that suits you, stick with that, come what may.

When you sit down to practice, first make a commitment to repeat your word or prayer for the entire session, concentrating all your attention on it. Then silently repeat your word slowly with as much love and longing for the Divine as you can genuinely muster. When other thoughts arise, don't get into a battle with them or try to suppress them. Instead, practice detachment by allowing all extraneous thoughts to arise and pass in the periphery of your awareness without getting caught up in them. When you do become distracted, don't be discouraged. Simply notice that your attention has wandered,

and return it to your word or prayer. Be careful, however, not to fall into a pattern of mindless, mechanical repetitions. If that starts to happen, say your word or prayer more deliberately and focus your attention more sharply on it.

After you have attained some stability in your concentration, you can take the next step, which is to bring your attention into your heart. Start by focusing on your physical heart and try to hear your word or prayer as if it were being repeated there. Then, allow your attention to sink down after it, as though you were trying to listen to it more closely.

Bringing attention into your physical heart does two things: First, as Theophan said, it gets you out of your head, which is filled with endless trains of distracting thought. Second, it gives you access to your emotional heart. This happens because the physical heart acts as a kind of barometer for our emotional states. You might notice, for example, that whenever you are feeling some negative emotion—such as anger, envy, or fear—there is a subtle muscular contraction in the heart area. Conversely, whenever you feel some positive emotion—like, love, compassion, or contentment—the muscles

in your heart area relax. Thus, by attending to your physical heart, you can become more aware of whatever emotion you happen to be experiencing.

Becoming aware of your emotions is important because every emotion that arises—whether positive or negative—can be transmuted into love and

longing for the Divine. This is possible because all emotions have love and longing as their root. For example, if you get angry at someone, it is because they threaten something you love; and when you are afraid of something, it is because you fear losing something you love. Moreover, the reason you love or long for anything in the first place is because you believe it will make you happy.

Thus, emotions, themselves, are never an obstacle to the path of devotion. The real problem is that we direct the love and longing which animates them toward worldly things. But, since all worldly things are transitory and impermanent, they can never bring us true, abiding happiness. Only God can do that. So, the way to transmute whatever emotion arises into love and longing for God is simply to identify the love and longing at its root and redirect it towards the Divine Beloved. In fact, the more intensely you feel a particular emotion, the more potential it has to fuel your practice. This is why, when a student asked the Hindu saint Ramakrishna how to become free of lust, he replied: “Why do you want to be free of lust? Rather increase your lust!”⁸

If you continue performing this *alchemy of love* (as the Sufis call it), eventually you will be able to collect all your

scattered loves and longings for impermanent things into a single flame of love that burns solely for your Beloved. In this way, your emotional heart will be purified of all those desires and attachments that keep attention bound to the world of form. And the more your attention is freed from the world of form, the more it will be able to descend from your emotional heart into your spiritual heart.

Entering your spiritual heart allows you to get actual glimpses of the Divine. These may include flashes of inner guidance, experiences of rapture and ecstasy, or states of incredible bliss in which you feel you are basking in the very Presence of your Beloved. Still, you must not become distracted by these experiences and states or start practicing in order to attain them. Why? Because they represent only whiffs of the Divine's perfume and not the Divine Itself. This is why the great Sufi Ibn 'Arabi warned:

*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.*⁹

It is also at this stage of your practice that something quite extraordinary can happen. Your sacred word or prayer may start to repeat itself spontaneously, without any apparent effort on your part. Christian mystics refer to this as *unceasing prayer*. Theophan the Recluse describes it this way:

*At first this saving prayer is a matter of strenuous effort and hard work. But if one concentrates on it with zeal, it will begin to flow of its own accord, like a brook that murmurs in the heart. This is a great blessing, and it is worth working hard to obtain it.*¹⁰

And Javad Nurbakhsh, a Sufi Shaykh, writes:

*When the light of zekr [dhikr] clears the heart of the darkness of agitation, the heart becomes aroused and gradually steals the zekr from the tongue, making it its preoccupation.*¹¹

The advent of spontaneous or unceasing prayer marks a major turning point on the path of devotion, because, as the Hindu mystic Anandamayi Ma says:

*There is all the difference between doing japa and japa occurring of itself. The mind must reach a condition where it cannot remain without the remembrance of God.*¹²

In other words, when your sacred word or prayer repeats itself unceasingly in the background of your awareness, you can maintain a constant remembrance of your Beloved, even

in the midst of worldly activities. This does not mean, however, that you can completely dispense with your formal practice.

In order to reach the deepest recesses of your spiritual heart, you must continue training your attention to ignore even the slightest movements of thought and desire. When attention becomes completely still, it sinks into that space of pure awareness at the bottom of the spiritual heart which opens out into the Radiant Heart or Infinite Ocean of Consciousness Itself. This is a space of profound Stillness and Silence. Here,

all thoughts and images vanish of themselves—including the words of your prayer.

Now, if you are like most seekers, when you first enter this space of pure awareness you are apt to find it quite disconcerting. Instead of falling into the arms of the Beloved, it may seem as though you have plunged into an abyss of total Nothing-

ness. What you do not yet realize, however, is that this very Nothingness is your Beloved, naked and unveiled, for as St. Bonaventure writes:

*Our mind, accustomed to...the images of the things of sense, when it glimpses the light of the supreme Being, seems to itself to see nothing. It does not recognize that this very darkness is the supreme illumination of our mind.*¹³

The trouble is, you are still longing for a 'God' whom you imagine exists in some *form*—however subtle—and this is what keeps your attention distracted from the Formless God in Whom you are now immersed. This is why the Sufi Ansari of Herat says of longing:

*In the way of the privileged, it is a flaw, because longing is for the absent, while the One for Whom longing occurs is Present.*¹⁴

But if, having surrendered your love and longing for all other things, you can now surrender this last bit of longing for God as well, there will be nothing left to hold your attention. Once attention has been freed from all distractions—including the forms of your Beloved—it can return to its Source in Consciousness Itself. It is in this moment that the Realization may suddenly dawn: *This is what I truly am! This is what everything is!* Then you will know for yourself what the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart meant when he wrote:

*I receive such riches that God, as he is "God", and as he performs all his divine works, cannot suffice me; for in this breaking-through I receive that God and I are one.*¹⁵

May all beings receive the riches of this Realization!

Notes

1. *Bhagavad Gita*, 12:5–7, my rendering.
2. Lalleshwari, *Lalleshwari: Spiritual Poems by a Great Siddha Yogini*, rendered by Swami Muktananda (South Fallsburg, NY: SYDA Foundation, 1981), 12.
3. Igumen Chariton of Valamo, *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*, trans. E. Kadloubovsky and E. M. Palmer, ed. Timothy Ware (1985; reprint, London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 182.
4. Javad Nurbakhsh, *In the Paradise of the Sufis*, 2d ed. (New York: Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, 1979), 42.
5. Chariton of Valamo, *Art of Prayer*, 94.
6. Mir Valiuddin, *Contemplative Disciplines in Sufism*, ed. Gulshan Khakee (London: East-West Publications, 1980), 65.
7. *The Upanishads*, trans. Juan Mascaro (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), 88.
8. Narada, *Narada's Way of Divine Love: Narada Bhakti Sutras*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda, 2d ed. (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986), 137.
9. Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*, trans. Rabia Terri Harris (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1981), 32.
10. Chariton of Valamo, *Art of Prayer*, 113.
11. Nurbakhsh, *Paradise of the Sufis*, 99.
12. Sri Anandamayi Ma, *Matri Vani: Vol 2*, 2d ed., trans. Atmananda (Calcutta: Shree Shree Anandamayee Charitable Society, 1982), 190.
13. Saint Bonaventure, *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God; The Tree of Life; The Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 96-97.
14. A.G. Farhadi, *Abdullah Ansari of Herat* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), 95.
15. Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 203.

Visit Our New Web Site!

www.centerforsacredsciences.org

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
- Previous newsletters

THANK YOU ❖ THANK YOU ❖ THANK YOU

The Center relies entirely on donations to support its services. On behalf of all those who benefit from these services, we would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the Center. Without the support of these individuals, the Center could not exist as we know it. We wish to acknowledge everyone who has expressed their generosity through their membership pledges, Sunday offerings, volunteer labor, and other gifts.

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Following the Call of Love

by Tom Kurzka

Deep sleep. An initial sound arises out of the pool of Stillness. At first, there is nothing other than this sound appearing from and disappearing back into Stillness. Then thoughts slowly begin to arise and pass, providing meaning to the sound. It is the voice of a young man yelling throughout the neighborhood in the early morning hour, showing off to the world a sense of self-importance. Beneath this bragging, larger ripples cascade across the pool of Stillness: immense pain, profound mournful yearning, craving for completion, utter worthlessness, loneliness, despair.

Each of us knows this primal wound. No matter how many layers of distraction we build over this wound, we cannot escape our innate longing to return Home, our yearning for the Supreme Love from which all form arises. This innate longing is our most precious gift from the Divine—without it, we would never be able to return Home. On the path of devotion we ride this longing like a surfer on a wave, following its course as it naturally brings us back Home. Each of us simply wants to be happy.

This yearning to return Home occurs in each instant as form arises out of Stillness and then recedes back into Stillness. Each beat of our heart expresses this ongoing Dance of form and Stillness. Sensation of the beat arises, is recognized as nothing but a creation arising out of the Divine, and then disappears back into the Space of Stillness until the next beat arises. How amazing! How utterly beautiful! This is the Bliss of which we are spectators. The Divine, like an artist painting a picture, simply creates form to reflect back at Itself, only to say, “I see You and I love You.” Love is indeed Truth in action.

Every one of our thoughts arises and passes like a beat of our heart. We are this Process. We are this Dance. We cannot escape It! And who makes this heart beat? Not us! We are at its mercy. At any moment, our heart could stop and this occurrence of a separate self wrapped up in a body-mind matrix would end. This entire display of form and Stillness of which we are a mere audience would disappear back into Eternal Stillness until the beginning of the next show.

Yet, we take each thought and wrap it into a story of “I” which we believe to be real. We miss the simplicity of each

instant, each beat and silence of our heart, each thought display and thought disappearance. We lose track of the simple reality that we are nothing other than this wondrous Dance. We lose our real Home and fall into the fixation of a separate self that is divorced from an objective world. We become the lonesome knight clad in heavy armor, fighting against the world. We realize something vital is missing and go into despair and look out into this objective world for something to fill this fundamental wound of our disconnection. We build layer upon layer of thought stories over this wound. Suddenly we are the young man in the street boasting of our self-importance, protecting what we believe to be “mine,” mesmerized by our fixation with objects. We overlook the more basic, and stronger, undertow beneath this false sense of self-importance—the loneliness and the longing that our primal wound reflects. We fall into a state of delusion.

In essence, the path of devotion starts here—tapping into this yearning for the Love and Eternal Happiness that we know we are missing. We cannot pursue a path of devotion back to the Divine until we experience this longing deep within our heart. Once we know this yearning, once we get a taste of the Love that we are missing, we can use it as the fuel for our path. When we tap into this fuel, we can use it like a magnet to be drawn quickly back to the Beloved. As Paramahansa Yogananda of the Hindu tradition said,

If the Lord once tempted you with His love, you would want nothing more.¹

But our taste of the Divine—assuming we have savored Its sweetness—is only a first step. Just like learning to appreciate an unfamiliar food, we need to cultivate this taste until it becomes our preference over our habitual fixation on objects. In our deluded condition, our attention is constantly focused on objects, seeking each arising form as something to satisfy our sense of a separate, fixated self. We are like a broken record, skipping over the same tune segment, seeking fulfillment from the same thought stories, always seeking the next object or experience to make us happy. We are hopelessly lost in this habit throughout the day, from the moment we wake up in the morning until we drift off into sleep at night, lost in our meandering thoughts. If we could simply stop and

see that we are already the Love in which all this takes place, the delusion would be over. We would wake up. Unfortunately, most of us do not know how to just stop.

So, what is the solution? Since we are already in the habit of focusing on objects, we simply take this habit and redirect our focus toward an image of the Divine. It could be a sense of Presence hovering around us, an image of an incarnation of God (such as Krishna, Jesus, or the Guru), or whatever most nearly reminds us of our taste of the Divine. We use the fuel of our craving and longing for this image to focus our attention, breaking attention free from seeking all other objects. We surrender to this image and focus our attention on it ceaselessly, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Riding the wave of yearning, our attention becomes one-pointed. All we want is the Beloved. There is immense power in this practice. Most of us have been romantically in love with another person, and we know how overwhelming our devotion and love for the other person can be (at least in the early phases of the love affair until we realize that not even our beloved partner can ultimately give us complete happiness). We use this same energy to bring us back to the Divine.

It's not surprising, then, that we find as a common thread across religious traditions the practice of saying a sacred word or mantra both in meditation and throughout daily activity. In Hinduism this practice is called *japa*, in Islam it is called *dhikr*, and Christians call it *unceasing prayer in the heart*. We choose a sacred word or phrase that brings to mind our sense of the Beloved and we use this as our object of concentration. We mentally say our sacred word repeatedly. When we are distracted by thoughts or other phenomena, we simply return to the sacred word. We say the sacred word with love, devotion, and reverence. We surrender to the sacred word because it points us to our Beloved. In daily activity we continue to say the sacred word. Our sacred word becomes our anchor.

In addition, we serve our Beloved in all situations. We become a slave to our Beloved. We talk to our Beloved. For instance, throughout the day, when we need to make a choice to resolve a problem we might ask, "What is it that You want in this situation?" Or we might say, "I will act and I will think, but guide my acting and thinking." We experience what the Christian monk Brother Lawrence experienced when he said,

Sometimes I think of myself as a piece of stone before a sculptor who desires to carve a statue; presenting myself in this way before God I ask him to fashion his perfect image in my soul, making me entirely like Himself.²

So, like Brother Lawrence, we meet each situation throughout our day with *willingness* instead of our habitual *willfulness*. Instead of choosing what we want, we look at each

situation globally and ask, "What does my Beloved want?" More than likely, half of the time what we want will correspond to what our Beloved wants, and we will be happy and joyful and be thinking, "It's so easy and wonderful to be following my Beloved's will." Do we grasp at these situations and the pleasant emotions that accompany them, or is our experience that of an empty mirror of surrender, a silent vessel of expression of the Beloved? The other half of the time, what our Beloved wants will be completely opposite to what we want. Do we avoid these situations and the unpleasant emotions that accompany them or do we, again, become an empty mirror of surrender? Can we fully open and surrender our hearts equally in all situations to what our Beloved wants? Are we at all times an empty vessel through which our Beloved moves?

If we are sincere and surrender completely to our practice, our lives begin to transform—first in small ways and then in larger ways that are beyond our comprehension. Bliss may start to arise spontaneously for no clear reason whatsoever, even in what we may have previously considered adverse situations. For instance, we may be in the midst of a frenzy at work. Our co-workers are all upset about a mistake we made that is costing thousands of dollars and destroying everyone's working lives. We are at the center of blame for the entire problem, because the truth of the matter is we had a major role in making the mistake. We are the center of attention and the situation is not good. We feel the emotions of worthlessness, despair, fear, or other

negativity. Rather than escaping the situation and these feelings, or attempting to cast blame toward someone else, we open our heart to these feelings and say to our co-workers, "Yes, I made a big mistake and accept full responsibility for this mistake." We meet the situation with willingness and become flooded in its complete turbulence—but without resistance. We become the clear mirror of our Beloved's expression.

For some inexplicable reason, even in the midst of these terrible circumstances and emotions, in our willingness we may feel a sweet sense of bliss pervading the entire scene as we ceaselessly devote our attention to our sacred word and our Beloved. Where is this bliss coming from? It is Love in action, or form arising out of Stillness; it is the Divine saying, "I see You, and I am You. I am both this continual pool of Stillness and the waves of experience arising out of this Stillness." Life begins to appear miraculous, lovely, and fresh, no matter what the nature of its content. Life begins to move us, rather than us moving life. We start to know directly the meaning of this verse from an old Hindu Bengali chant: "The Life of my life is You."

Notice here that, while our motive is to love and serve out of yearning for our Beloved, we do not suppress our other emotions—we feel these expressions of the Divine ever more fully. This is one of the pitfalls of a path of devotion. Too many devotees gloss over their emotions—especially negative ones—by masking them and thinking they are practicing correctly by surrendering their emotions to God, when, in fact, they are avoiding these emotions through suppression and ignorance. For instance, suppose someone insults us and we feel anger. Rather than avoiding the anger by saying to ourselves, “That’s okay, I surrender this to my Beloved,” we can fully surrender to that experience of anger and allow it to simply run through us as an expression of the Divine. When we do this, amazing things are revealed. For instance, as we open to the expression of anger, a sense of worthlessness may arise. So then we open to our experience of worthlessness as an expression of the Divine. As we surrender into worthlessness, despair and loss of all hope may arise. Underneath this may be a fear of death. How interesting! From anger we went to fear of death, which is love or protection of self.

Once again, we returned to love. Beneath all emotions there is love, love being the root of all emotions. And why is this? Because our one true desire is to be happy and at peace, even if we have to be in misery to obtain this happiness and peace. Moreover, this desire for happiness and peace is really a reflection of our yearning to return to our Beloved. So we take each situation and its accompanying emotion, surrender into it, find our yearning for love behind the emotion and situation, and direct this yearning back to our Beloved. In short, we transmute everything into our love and devotion for the Divine. At the same time, we experience everything fully as an empty vessel of the Divine; we become that piece of stone that the Divine Sculptor is carving.

As we proceed in our practice, though, we need to drop even our yearning for this Love and Bliss we are beginning to feel, because in essence we are nothing but Love Itself. How can we ever catch Love when we already are this Love? We must let go of everything, including even our desire to surrender to God. This is where the path of devotion gets difficult. We were able to get past our habitual tendency toward seeking objects as the source of our happiness by funneling all our attention, energy, and desire into our image of our Beloved and the beautiful gifts of love, contentment, and bliss that our Beloved bestowed upon us as a result of our devotion. Now we need to let go of our Beloved, even if this letting go makes the Beloved seem far away and we sink into hopelessness, despair, or fear.

So, our next step—once our attention is focused—is to drop our sacred word and yearning for the Beloved and to simply abide in Love Itself, or the Stillness that is there between each beat of our heart. We surrender to this Stillness and simply attend unceasingly to whatever type of form,

however attractive or repulsive, arises. As lovers attending and surrendering to everything in Stillness, whether in meditation, in the midst of daily activity, eating, dreaming, or sleeping, we become, as the Sufi Ibn ‘Arabi so exquisitely puts it,

*...like the clear and pure glass goblet which undergoes constant variation according to the variation of the liquid within it. The color of the lover is the color of the Beloved.*³

Form being the color of the liquid and Stillness being the Goblet or the Beloved, we simply attend, even if the story of “I” colors the liquid. There is nothing left for us to do.

Whereas at first it seemed that we were the turning force behind our lives, now the Beloved turns us. Where do we end and the Beloved begin? We fall into Love Itself. We do less than nothing and the Beloved carries us, like a mother holding her newly born infant, casting Her ray of light on all our dark shadows and transforming them into a delicious sweetness. Grace takes over.

And if we truly become naked, if we completely fall into Stillness, if we remain as the Goblet accepting whatever color or liquid appears, an amazing thing happens—our Beloved reveals Herself. We see all along that we were looking right at Her. We see Her playing in Her Divine Dance of Love as the breeze blows through the leaves of the trees against the horizon, as the richness of a chirp of a bird arises out of and sinks back into the space of Stillness, as one thought arises and completes itself going back into the perfection of thoughtless clarity. We see that this path of devotion, this intense yearning for Love, was unnecessary because—all along—we were Love Itself. Yet, we see how utterly perfect our path of devotion and even our own misperception was. We would not change one piece of the entire story. Why would we want to, and how could we?

We are the Divine Goblet with its endless array of colors—even when it manifests as a young adult hiding from pain through boastfulness in the early morning hours. We realize that we ever-always are nothing other than Love Itself. There never was and never will be any other thing that we will ever need or want. Through the grace of the Beloved, our misperception, or clay, is transformed into Truth, or the Beloved’s gold. All along, this clay was simply covering the gold. As prodigal children, we return to our one true Eternal Home.

Notes

1. Paramahansa Yogananda, *Man’s Eternal Quest* (Los Angeles, CA: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1975), 195.
2. Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, trans. Salvatore Scurba (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1994), 54.
3. William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 109.

What is the Role of Devotion in Your Life?

We recently interviewed five Center members and asked them what role devotion plays in their lives. They shared with us the meaning of devotion for them, how it came to play a role on their spiritual paths, how their devotional practices relate to other types of spiritual practices, and what spiritual insights or experiences have resulted from their devotional practices.



Carol Mizera has been coming to the Center since 1988. She volunteers at the Center Library. Raised in Oregon, she currently caretakes property and lives simply.

When I was around seventeen, my mother died. A few days after that, I stood out one night on the levee and I just kind of called out to God—I was in a lot of pain—and I said, “God, there has to be something more than this. Please show me where it is, what it is.” That was the beginning of my spiritual path. I started looking into psychology, yoga and meditation—mostly I was looking for a teacher and a group that I resonated with. I moved to Eugene in 1984 and then I found the Center in about 1988. When I started going there, I felt like I’d found my group. I’ve been going there ever since.

Joel is one of my teachers. I’ve also traveled to India five times, and have met a couple of different teachers there whom I consider my gurus. The main teacher I was drawn to was Ramana Maharshi, a *jnana* teacher who is no longer alive. But I found a couple of other teachers that were in that lineage, whom I was drawn to as well. I wasn’t really able to practice *jnana*, because I didn’t really understand it. Instead, I was drawn more to *bhakti*, or devotion, with Poonjaji and Laksmana Swami. The teachings are more *jnana*, or the path of self-inquiry; but Laksmana Swami says most people aren’t ready to practice that. So he suggests to people that they continually think of their guru, and to practice *japa* (inner repetition) with their guru’s name.

Devotion has played a huge part in my spiritual path. I would say that it’s mostly what I’ve practiced. *Japa* used to be my daily practice. For me now, life *is* devotion. I practice devotion by being attentive, being mindful. From that, devotion just naturally happens, it comes freely—just from being mindful. Devotion, love, or whatever you want

to call it, is kind of a combination of many things: appreciation, praise, love, happiness. It’s an experience of God’s grace being in everything. And gratitude for that.

About eight or nine years ago, my life went through a lot of changes. I got divorced, had a house fire, and became physically ill. Afterwards, I felt very lost, and I began to pray to God for a guru. I didn’t know exactly why, I just knew that I needed help. And a short time later, a month or two, I had a vision of a woman guru. She appeared before me, and she said “I am your mother, you are my daughter, and I will never leave you.” I could feel this love from her start pouring into me. I instinctively or intuitively knew to just sit, and give my full attention to her. I could feel her presence, and kind of see her, visualize her. I would sit for hours and focus my attention on her. And this was kind of the beginning of experiencing devotion towards something greater.

About a year later, I started longing for a living guru. I was in India at the time, and I was pulled to Poonjaji, a devotee of Ramana Maharshi. I basically practiced in the same way as I did with my inner Divine Mother. I focused all my attention on him, whether I was in his presence or not. I heard him say once that one should put their ear to their guru’s mouth. So that’s what I did. It felt the same as it did with her. There’s this other kind of language, another kind of speaking that happens, that’s spoken within the heart. It’s a language of love, a language of trust and faith. And it’s something I knew. That was what I kind of tuned in to. The more I practiced in the space of focusing all my attention on his presence, the more love or devotion I felt towards him. That prompted me to pay even more attention to him, which in turn created more devotion towards him. This practice becomes like prayer. It isn’t a prayer to get something, but it’s prayer that comes out of gratitude, or love, for my guru.

When Poonjaji died in 1997, I didn’t really feel much of a change—I still experienced his guidance and presence. But my life and my path took me in other directions, for quite a few years. Last year I was in India again, and as I was sitting in *satsang* with a teacher, I heard him say that

one must grab hold of the feet of their guru, and surrender themselves, and the guru takes over their path for them. And when I heard those words, I began to feel that same longing for a guru again. A couple weeks later, through a dream and through reading a book, I was drawn to this other guru named Laksmana Swami, another devotee of Ramana Maharshi. He is a very reclusive guru, and he doesn't take students. So at first, I had some doubts because I couldn't see how this was going to work. He wasn't available. But at the same time, I felt very strongly that he was my guru. I could feel that same feeling in my heart which I had with Poonjaji, and with this other woman guru. And so I started just going to his gate, and I would sit down outside his gate, sometimes for five hours at a time. I would sometimes see him walking about or driving out of his compound. I read in this book that what he recommended to practice is to think continually of your guru, and to do *japa*, to recite the guru's name unceasingly. That just kind of automatically started happening. As I sat at his gate, I would just think of him continually; and if I were walking around, I would do *japa* with his name. And as I was doing *japa*, I would also use a *mala*. This practice involved the body, mind, and heart all at the same time. It just kind of took over, on its own, without me doing it. I practiced continuously, for a couple of months. I was even waking up at three or four in the morning to practice, and more and more I felt the connection between us grow stronger. It felt like my mind was becoming his mind. Then one day, I was sitting at his gate, and I was having this intense energy happening in my body, and my body was shaking. I felt that I was being filled with light. The mind was returning, being pulled inward. The experiences became extremely intense, so that I just grabbed hold of his gate and I called out "God, God, God!" And after that moment, the separation and distance of God was gone. The practices that I'd been doing—the *japa*—stopped. I couldn't do it anymore. Afterwards there was just a feeling of life being lived as devotion. Of gratitude and love.

seriously. I prayed a lot, and said a lot of rosaries. I can remember when I was eight years old, just after having had my tonsils removed, crying and crying because I couldn't go to mass. This devoutness lasted until I was about twelve—when I discovered life, being in this world and a part of it. It was then that I began to question everything.

Until I was about twenty I can't remember exactly how I conceived of the Divine, but I could feel the Divine with me. But as my mind became a very questioning mind, I'd question everything, and I did not devote attention to questions of the Divine. I thought at the time it was not part of my life. I just put it aside. I would not have called myself an atheist, but perhaps an agnostic. I could feel this presence, but not knowing what it was and not wanting to get any easy labels. I took a great many philosophy courses in college, and the metaphysics and epistemology were really interesting. When I started with the Self-Realization study, I kept my mind open, without making judgments. The attitude that I had was that if I wanted to know what they were talking about, I had to go along with their program. "I don't have the answers, and I don't know if there even are answers," I thought, "but I will go along with what these teachers are saying and try these different things, and see what I find."

I dropped prayer as a spiritual practice in my early twenties. It was not in accord with the way I saw myself—as a thinking being rather than a feeling/irrational being. But about twenty-five years ago, the Presence would come up, and start questioning my questioning. That was when I started doing the prayers that were advocated in the different courses I was taking. I read a lot, too, and would try out different things I'd read. Ram Dass, I remember, wrote about how he had this kind of doubting mind earlier in his life. Then when he decided that there was some Presence that he needed to look at, he thought he would, of course, become something that was intellectually acceptable, like a Buddhist. But instead, he ended up devoted to a Hindu guru. And I laughed at that, and wondered, "Will that happen to me?" And it did happen to me, eventually!

Here's the story. After years of questioning I had some great disappointments, and thought, "I need positive thought," so I went to different churches and stayed with Unity Church for a few years. Joel came to give a talk to our book club there. I started taking classes at the Center then. Eventually, I took Joel's class, and I could not believe the wisdom of the man. I was very, very impressed. He gave these teachings, and I was also taking meditation instruction from him. Joel asked if I would like to join the Practitioners Group. So I did, and started going on Sundays and Wednesdays, and that's been my practice. My main *sangha* has been the Center since October of 1991. When I first came to the Center, one of the things I really liked about Joel was his offering of inquiry. I really loved that, because I knew I



Therese Engelmann has lived in Eugene since 1970, has four children and thirteen grandchildren. She and her husband are both retired. She is devoted to her family, and enjoys writing, painting, sculpting and meditation.

I was very devout as a child. I was raised in the Catholic Church and took everything—all the stories I was told—very

was a *jnani*. We did all sorts of retreats, and I did many, many spiritual practices; a lot of them entailed forty-hour vigils, and this kind of thing. These were my solo retreats. I decided that I would do Tibetan practices we had just been studying during one of these. I was doing a deity practice, for Avalokiteshvara, and just using all the powers of my mind. Now this is in the middle of the night, and I'm in this very meditative state, and in my mind appears a grinning Jesus. His image just grinned at me—that was it. And then the next retreat of the Center, it turned out, was a devotional retreat. I did some of those exercises there at night, after hours. In doing that, Jesus went into my heart, and has never left. So, yes, there is Jesus.

That was about six years ago. And I had a shift in how I did practices at that point because all I had to do was just tune in, and do whatever was right, or told, or said. Since then I've experienced qualities that weren't fully there before: bliss, peace, tranquility, willingness to engage in all of life. It turns daily life into a sacrament.

It's made me easier to live with. It's taken away the "me first" attitude that I used to have. Most of the day, I feel gratitude. I don't want to call it a feeling, because it's more than a feeling. I haven't thought about classifying gratitude, and Joel classifies it as a virtue. But it's not a virtue that I cultivated much. One day I had some realizations, and ever since then I've had gratitude and bliss. And it's all just sort of a part of everything.

And my mind's response was to laugh. It laughed, and that's what it still does today. There's always this looking, looking there, so I can see that whatever story there is about this is just a story. My mind can see that everything is a story, even this image or "Presence."

The devotional approach isn't opposed to the mental approach. They're the same thing. It's like, you have a coin, you have heads and you have tails. Then when you look at either side, it's all the same metal. As for me, I'm right in the middle of the coin.



Niraja Lorenz joined the Center shortly after moving to Eugene nine years ago. In addition to studying with Joel, she has been a devotee of Ammachi (Mata Amritanandamayi, or Amma) since first meeting her in 1989. Niraja is a quilt artist, works as a research assistant, loves to travel, and is also devoted to her partner and her cat.

As a child and teenager, I rarely attended church. When my family did attend, it was a Congregationalist church. I remember writing for confirmation that I didn't believe Jesus was really the Son of God. And they still confirmed me, which confirmed my disbelief in everything. It really wasn't until I was about thirty years old that I became interested in spiritual life. I was actually first introduced to it by a Hari Krishna devotee. It was clear to me that that wasn't my path and that those weren't my teachers, but I was very taken by the devotional practice.

I now follow a *bhakti* (devotional) path. Devotion to Amma is what keeps me connected to the practice—to both a daily practice and the larger practice. There's a certain devotion, or love, for the guru that is ever-present. It's the background—it's not necessarily the foreground of my life. For me, that means if someone were to observe my life and come into my home, they might not see me in overt practices of devotion. And yet there is devotion in my heart that is always there. There's a certain awareness that is there—much of the time it's the filter through which I see the world. I offer myself.

Another practice I do is the chanting of mantra—*japa*. That is chanting the names of God, so I suppose that is a devotional practice, although I see it as more like meditation. The mantra is the focus of the mind. Mantra is often just a background for me. It comes and goes a lot throughout my life. I'm not so aware of it when I'm at work. But I find that if something occurs that I find disturbing—whether it's almost getting in a car wreck or somebody yelling at me—the first thing that comes is mantra. And so it's there to remind me to breathe, and that I don't have to react. And there are times when I do just practice *japa*—I just sit and chant. I often do that kind of meditation when I'm waiting. I chant a short mantra like *Om Nama Shivaya*.

Another practice is devotional singing. For me that involves playing tapes and singing along. That's generally what's in my car—devotional songs—as well as at home. Devotional music is ninety per cent of the music I listen to.

I spend three or four weeks out of the year with Amma, on several different occasions while she tours the U.S. I spend time with her doing *seva*—selfless service—probably ten to twelve hours a day. I'm just there to serve and to facilitate in whatever way I can the programs that are happening with people coming to see her. My experience is that the more *seva* I do, the more selfless I feel. I'm standing up twelve hours a day and my body doesn't hurt. I'm not tired even though I'm sleeping four hours a night (until I get back to Eugene). The energy comes to do the *seva* in a way that it doesn't come to serve my self when I'm at home. I don't know if I'd be motivated to do it without devotion, without the experience of selflessness.

When I'm at Amma's, I'm surrounded by hundreds of people who are there to serve, and there's an energy that is there from Amma and from the environment. It is a wonderful experience, and it is a pleasure to go and help. I've done volunteer work all my life. I was raised with that, I guess that was part of my spiritual upbringing, that aspect of selflessness. I don't see *seva* as specifically a devotional practice; it is a common practice in many traditions. But when I serve God, or Amma, or anyone and I remember that I am serving God, that is devotion. When I hear the word *devotion*, it brings up a certain connotation of love and worship, and to sacrifice everything for the one you love. Service is not a sacrifice. It's a pleasure.

When Amma is in the U.S., she gives Darshan to thousands of people a day. *Darshan* is a word that means being in the presence of a saint—and for many saints that means sitting in their view and maybe they'll look into your eyes. For Amma it means actually touching everybody. Recently in California over four thousand people came to a program. Many wanted her embrace. But I don't go to listen to Amma's talks, I don't go to get Amma's hugs—I go to be in that environment of Amma, to have the opportunity to experience selflessness that I don't seem to experience when I'm here at home. In my daily life and my work world I become very self-focused.

I received the name "Niraja" from Amma in 1995. It means "she who has offered her life to God." This is a wonderful reminder for me.



Damien Pierce grew up in California. After studying physics there he worked as a physicist at various universities and laboratories. As time went on he started becoming less interested in "the outer" and more interested in "the inner." This process was accelerated when he met Joel in 1997 while doing research at

Stanford. After quitting physics in 1999 he moved to Santa Cruz, and over the next two years he twice traveled to India. He moved to Eugene in January 2002 to be with Joel and the Center community.

When I was nineteen I met someone in college. We started talking about life's big questions and she said, "You should read Krishnamurti." I found out who Krishnamurti was and became very interested in his

writings, and I went to see him. Somehow I had this innate interest, which came from a sense that there was something—some truth waiting to be known, or wanting to be realized. I just had this sense there was *something* beyond what I had always been taught about who I was and what the world was. That was really what inspired me to investigate Krishnamurti, and then other spiritual teachers and teachings.

Devotion functions in my path as my responding to that sense of knowing that there is something beyond the mundane world. That's devotion to me because responding to it has to do with faith, with some deep heart calling. This sense of knowing that there's *something* there—that has been what I can't shake, and what has come back to take hold of my life again and again, and sort of steer it and guide it. It's like there's this divided whole, where one half is calling to me and the other half (which is "my" half) is my responding to it—and that's my devotion.

I am predominantly mind-oriented, and in the beginning of my path I was even more so. Over the years I have come to appreciate devotional practices and also entered into them myself. The willingness to try new things comes out of recognizing that they are just other ways of approaching truth, of approaching what I am most interested in. So I'm interested in approaching the truth in various ways. Some ways feel more natural or come more easily, but I at least appreciate all the ways, and as time goes on I continue to try new ways.

I don't consider the kind of practices that I've been involved with more recently, like Zen bowing and chanting, to be traditional devotional practices of a *bhakta*. To me they're more the practices of a *jnani*, but they have a devotional flavor to them. What I'm working with in doing these devotional practices is mindfulness. It has to do with attention, and knowing why I'm paying attention—and in this case paying attention because I'm devoted to the truth, to the spiritual path, to breaking through. And so these sort of ritualized forms are a means to focus attention and to return attention again and again to that which I most deeply want to return my attention to. It's like a support system for someone who is acting in a habitual way. They need that support to help break their habit.

I don't experience any conflict between principles of Advaita and practices of devotion. It's quite clear to me that they go hand-in-hand for everyone, at least eventually. All along the spiritual path they are both playing a role. I really don't make that distinction—to me it's all

one thing, one movement of Consciousness realizing itself through form. That one movement has these two aspects of devotion and truth. There's no conflict; it's like describing water as being both clear and wet. It's just a description of a single thing.

Dr. Wolff was a good example of this, where you could say he was a classic Advaitist, being very truth-oriented in his approach and very inquiry-oriented. And yet he was devoted to that inquiry and there was a tremendous depth of feeling that fueled his search—devotion to the truth. So the difference is that the *bhakta's* path is one of devotion to a particular form of God, whereas *jnanis* are equally devoted to Truth, or the formless. It's just a different guise—but it's the same God, and ultimately the same devotion.

I have seen, during meditation or during a retreat or some period of more focused spiritual practice, that surrender is absolutely necessary. It is absolutely the only thing between me—as a deluded self—and the Truth being revealed. And it's also very clear to me that this surrender is exactly what I—as a deluded self—cannot do. And yet, paradoxically, I must do it.



Leslie Maguire is a poet and artist who enjoys working with found objects. Living in Eugene now for ten years, she first came to the Center in 1999. She resides with "a lot of metal, an overgrown garden, and a couple of dogs."

My path has been an intense weave of depth psychology, devotion, mediation, and inquiry. When asked if I'm going on one of the Center's retreats, I respond by saying, "I've been on retreat for the last ten years!" And it's true. I pretty much cut myself off from the world and dove in. My house became my hermitage.

Growing up, I had little exposure to religion. I was brought up in a family culture that denied love. As a result, much of my life was spent numb, imprisoned by fear. My spiritual path—although I didn't realize that's what it was at the time—began over ten years ago, as a quest to

connect with my heart. I wanted to find the truth of me—the essence of my being.

I came to the path of devotion about three years ago. It was a year after I began having mystical experiences. Although I didn't know what they were, I knew they were real—more real than anything I had ever known. I came to understand that after years of relentless inner mining, that which I sought, the truth of me, was beginning to unfold. It was like coming out of a journey through the past to find myself arrived in the present. The Sufis would call this process the elimination of the veils between the individual and God.

At this point, I felt drawn to find some kind of formal spiritual path; however, beyond traditional religions, I didn't have a clue. So, I went to the public library. Standing before rows of books in the religion section, my hand suddenly reached out—as if on its own accord—for a book that, at the same time, seemed to be moving off the shelf toward my hand! It was a book about Sufism. I opened it up, read a few lines and knew I had found home. It spoke directly to my spiritual experiences, put a name to my path, that of the mystic. Six months later, I was initiated into a Sufi Order.

Sufis are the lovers of God, the pilgrims of the heart. They view the essence of God as Love. For them, there is only God, whom they call the Beloved. Idolatry has no place in Sufism. There is no intermediary between the Lover and the Beloved. The Sufis attune to the underneath, the essence underlying form, not the form. To Sufis, everything is symbolic, everything points to an underlying deeper meaning, or essence. Thus, the altar in my house is symbolic of the altar I make of my heart for the Beloved. For Sufis, the ego is surrendered on the altar of Love. The devotional practice of remembrance, *dhikr* (the repetition of Allah's name) is the fanning of our longing to return to the One, it is the cultivation of Love, the opening of the heart. In *dhikr*, one forgets oneself in the remembrance of Allah. It is God calling Itself to Itself, dissolving oneself into Love, until the Lover is burned away and only the Beloved remains.

While the practices of Sufism remain an active part of my life, I feel at home in the devotional practices of any tradition. For me, it's all the same. The Sufis recite, "La ilaha illa'llah." There is nothing but God. For a Sufi, Love, only Love.

In the Words of the Mystics

HINDUISM

He is immeasurable in his light and beyond all thought, and yet he shines smaller than the smallest. Far, far away is he, and yet he is very near, resting in the inmost chamber of the heart.

—Mundaka Upanishad

As when rivers flowing towards the ocean find their final peace, their name and form disappear, even so the wise become free from name and form and enter into the radiance of the Supreme Spirit who is greater than all greatness. In truth who knows God becomes God.

—Mundaka Upanishad

The blessed Lord alone is to be worshipped day and night in and through every aspect of life without any distracting thought.

—Narada

All desire must be for God only. Whatever you do, whether with your hands or with your brain, do it as His service. Whatever you accept, physically or mentally, accept it as God coming to you in this shape. If anything is to be given, it is surrender of yourself at His feet.

—Anandamayi Ma

In all forms, in action and non-action is He, the One Himself. While attending to your work with your hands, keep yourself bound to Him by sustaining japa, the constant remembrance of Him in your heart and mind.

—Anandamayi Ma

When the mind stays in the Heart, the 'I' which is the source of all thoughts will go, and the Self which ever exists will shine.

—Ramana Maharshi

So long as there is still a little ego left, the consciousness that 'I am a devotee,' God is comprehended as personal, and His form is realized. This consciousness of a separate ego is a barrier that keeps one at a distance from the highest realization....to him who attains the highest truth and experience, Brahman is absolute and impersonal. His real nature cannot be defined in words.

—Ramakrishna

JUDAISM

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

—Shema

This is what all our worship is about: to purify these qualities within us from their own evil and to raise them up to God by using them in the act of His service. This comes about by means of proper seeing.

—Menahem Nahum

In prayer seek to make yourself into a vessel for God's Presence. God, however, is without limit; "Endless" is His name. How can any finite vessel hope to contain the endless God? Therefore, see yourself as nothing; only one who is nothing can contain the fullness of the Presence.

—Hasidic Masters

BUDDHISM

[The seeker] may comb the three dimensions of the microcosmic world systems for an eternity, but he will not find so much as the name of the Buddha other than the one in his heart.

—Shabkar Lama

CHRISTIANITY

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

—Jesus

You should love him [God] as he is a non-God, a nonspirit, a nonperson, a nonimage, but as he is a pure, unmixed bright "One," separated from all duality, and in that One we should eternally sink down out of "something" into "nothing."

—Meister Eckhart

The man who has God essentially present to him grasps God divinely, and to him God shines in all things; for everything tastes to him of God, and God forms himself for the man out of all things.

—Meister Eckhart

He is far above every outward thing and every thought, and is found only where thou hidest thyself in the secret place of thy heart, in the quiet solitude where no word is spoken, where is neither creature, nor image, nor fancy.

—Johannes Tauler

CHRISTIANITY (cont.)

Wholly intent upon God, this simple blind love beats unceasingly upon the dark cloud of unknowing, leaving all discursive thought beneath the cloud of forgetting.

—Cloud of Unknowing

You must wash away the dirt that has come to cling to your heart like plaster and then your divine beauty will once again shine forth.

—Gregory of Nyssa

Grant your pure love, which will extinguish all other loves in me and will annihilate me and busy me so much with you that I will have no time or place for anything else.

—Catherine of Genoa

As the soul feels itself being drawn upwards, the soul feels itself melting in the fire of that love of its sweet God.

—Catherine of Genoa

God so transforms the soul in Him that it knows nothing other than God.

—Catherine of Genoa

Neither finesse nor learning is required to approach God, only a heart resolved to devote itself exclusively to him, and to love him alone.

—Brother Lawrence

Our sanctification depends not on changing our works, but on doing for God what we would normally do for ourselves.

—Brother Lawrence

If the practice of prayer is to proceed successfully, it is always essential at the outset to lay everything else aside, so that the heart is completely free from distractions. Nothing should obtrude on the mind: neither face, nor activity, nor object. At such a time all is to be driven out.

—Theophan the Recluse

[The mystic] breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united by a completely unknowing inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.

—Dionysius the Areopagite

ISLAM

*The real work is in the Heart:
Wake up your Heart!
Because when the Heart is
completely awake,
Then it needs no Friend.*

—Rabi'a

The purity of the heart...is the sinking of the heart completely in the recollection of God.

—Al-Ghazzali

*My eyes have never gazed
on other than His Face,
My ears have never heard,
other than His words!*

—Ibn 'Arabi

O Lord, busy our hearts with remembrance of You above all other remembrances and occupy our tongues with thanks to You above all other thankfulness. O Lord, open my heart to Your Loving-kindness, and fill me with Your remembrance.

—Imam Zeinol-'abedin

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

—Rumi

Love alone is worth hunting—but how can you catch it in your snare? Unless, perhaps, you become His prey: Leave aside your snare and enter His!

—Rumi

Every one sees the Unseen in proportion to the clarity of his heart, and that depends on how much he has polished it.

—Rumi

Once the mirror of your heart has become pure and clear, you will see pictures from beyond the domain of water and clay. Not only pictures, but also the Painter, not only the carpet of good fortune, but also the Carpet-spreader.

—Rumi

Here the intellect must remain silent, or lead us astray. For the heart is with Him—indeed, the heart is He.

—Rumi

*There was a time I was looking for Him
and I was finding my "self".
Now I look for myself
and I find Him.*

—Abdullah Ansari of Herat



Library Hours: Tuesday evenings 6:00 - 8:30 p.m.

Book Reviews

The Ascent of the Self

by B. N. Parimoo. *Motilal Banarsidass, 1987*

This scholarly treatise from India describes the life, spiritual practices, and enlightenment of Lalla-Ded, also known as Laleshwari, a fourteenth-century Kashmiri mystic. Revered by Kashmiri Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, she realized her oneness with the Supreme primarily through the practice of lala (kundalini) yoga and followed the nondual philosophy of Kashmir Saivism, also known as Trika. Her name *Lalla* means “to seek” (the truth), and she is known primarily for her inspiring spiritual verses. This book presents a collection of her verses in English translation, together with detailed footnotes illustrating their similarities to other classics such as the *Upanishads*. They are arranged, first, in an order intended to represent her ascent from the first to the crown chakra, and her ascent to samadhi and Oneness. In her words, “By constant practice, the individualized limited self was dissolved into the Ultimate Self.” There is also a chapter grouping her verses by subject, and a detailed analysis of their composition. The author dispels the commonly held notion that Lalla went about naked—references to nakedness in her verses are metaphorical.

SHAN AMBIKA

Amma: Healing the Heart of the World

by Judith Cornell. *William Morrow, 2001*

She has been called “The Hugging Saint” from South India. In her world tours she blesses over a million people a year with her hugs—sometimes more than twenty thousand people a day without rest! She is Mata Amritanandamayi, Mother of Immortal Bliss, more commonly known as Ammachi (revered Mother), or Amma (Mother). This wonderful, comprehensive, and accessible book chronicles Ammachi’s birth in 1953 in Kerala, South India, and her childhood of poverty and abuse. It then describes her Enlightenment, her calling to aid humanity, the establishment of her ashrams, and her extensive charities. The author—once a skeptic, but now Amma’s devotee—believes she will be remembered as one of the greatest healers and spiritual leaders in the history of religion. Ammachi’s life shows that God Realization is possible even under the worst circumstances. Despite attempts on her life by her family and villagers, her intense focus

on the Divine never wavered. The book describes parallels between Amma’s spiritual experiences and those of mystics of other traditions. There are also interesting chapters about Indian scientists’ views of Amma and about her healing of deep spiritual wounds suffered by former devotees of gurus who abused their power. It also discusses Vedic dharma and the guru-devotee relationship, so misunderstood in the West. Compelling and inspirational, it’s a miraculous tale that—although true—reads like fiction.

SHAN AMBIKA

Hidden Spring: A Buddhist Woman Confronts Cancer

by Sandy Boucher. *Wisdom Publications, 2000*

The marvelous treasure of having a true teacher is discovered in Sandy Boucher’s story of surviving cancer. Throughout the unfolding diagnosis, surgery, and chemotherapy, Boucher is “visited” by the teachings of Ruth Denison, who continues her selfless service at Dhamma Dena Vipassana Center in Southern California.

A student of Ruth for more than twenty years, Sandy reveals how she benefits from the practice, the reminders, and the loving kindness. Sandy brings to life Ruth’s valuable teachings and shows the day-to-day service of this extraordinary lay teacher in action.

Besides exposing the bare facts of Stage III colon cancer and the effects of chemotherapy, Sandy skillfully demonstrates how her Buddhist practice lights her path of suffering and points her to embracing rather than resisting the consequences.

Sandy Boucher is a writer, teacher, and long-time Buddhist practitioner. The disease that thwarts her life becomes a jewel that reveals the Buddha’s four noble truths. The reader may feel gratitude for this brave writer who weaves words through her own ordeal and ends up delivering a powerful teaching. If you ever wanted to know about surviving an illness, how illness can devastate your personal life, and the real value of spiritual teachings at a time like that, read Sandy Boucher’s *Hidden Spring*.

MERRY SONG

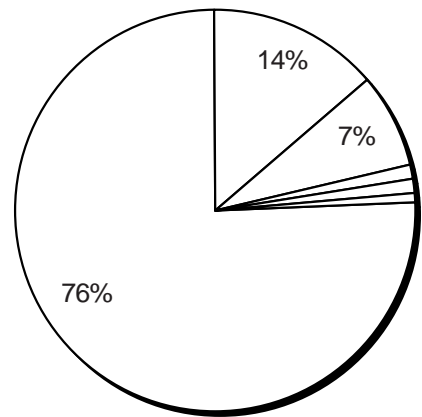
Annual Financial Report

Fiscal Year August 2001 – August 2002

From its inception, the Center has been run almost entirely as a labor of love by volunteers. Our spiritual director, Joel, receives no compensation and, aside from small stipends for our treasurer and audio engineer, the Center has no paid staff. We rely entirely on the continuing financial support of our members to defray expenses as we continue providing services to increasing numbers of seekers. Any donation to help support Center programs and services is greatly appreciated. The Center for Sacred Sciences is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt organization, and any contribution is tax-deductible to the full extent of the law.

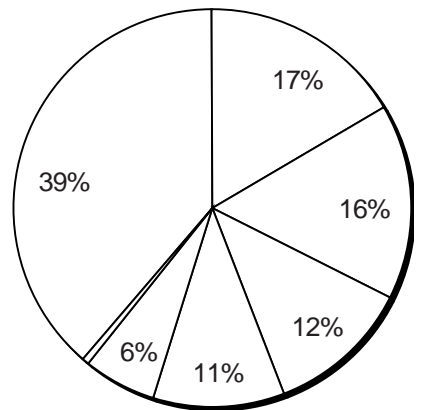
Income

Membership Dues	20,436	76%
Special Gifts/Memorials	3,720	14%
Sunday Offerings	2,023	7%
Interest Earned	353	1%
Newsletter Donations	255	1%
Library User Fee	234	1%
TOTAL INCOME	27,021	100%

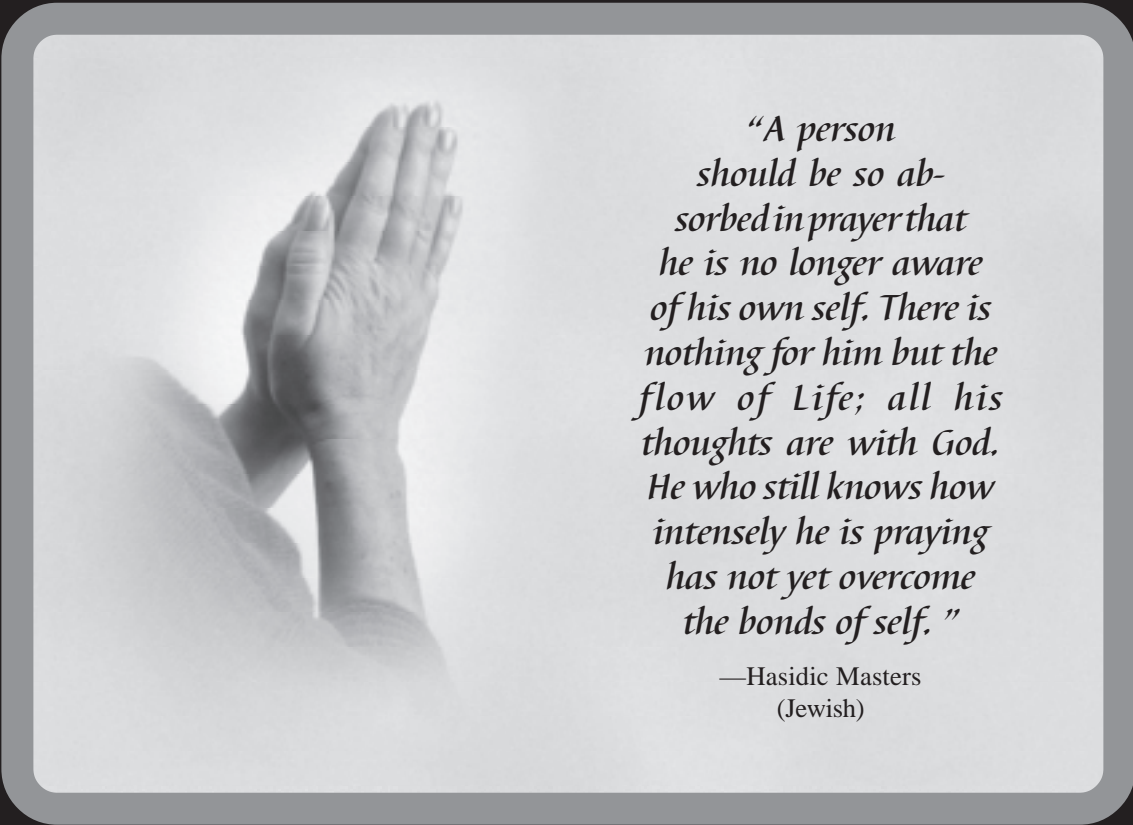


Expenses

Meeting Facilities	9,029	39%
Digitizing Audio Recordings	3,846	17%
Library Exp. & Acquisitions	3,699	16%
Newsletter	2,693	12%
Organizational/ Admin.	2,491	11%
Programs/ Meetings	1,320	6%
Web Site	152	1%
TOTAL EXPENSES	23,230	100%



Note: Amounts are rounded to the nearest dollar.



“A person should be so absorbed in prayer that he is no longer aware of his own self. There is nothing for him but the flow of Life; all his thoughts are with God. He who still knows how intensely he is praying has not yet overcome the bonds of self.”

—Hasidic Masters
(Jewish)

 Center for
Sacred Sciences

1430 Willamette, #164
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