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integrate the fundamental
principles of contemplative
spirituality into our
modern lives."

— Lama Surya Das

A
MONK
IN THE
WORLD

CULTIVATING A SPIRITUAL LIFE

WAYNE TEASDALE

author of *The Mystic Heart*

FOREWORD BY KEN WILBER

“Teasdale’s account of spiritual life in the midst of the city touched me with its compassionate understanding of the real dimensions of the search for God and the moral work of growing our souls. Although he writes from another tradition than mine, he is an ecumenical and post-triumphalist pilgrim. Reading how he shares his rich contemplative life, I felt often the tug of spirit refreshing me in my own devotion. He will most likely do the same for you.”

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— Brother David Steindl-Rast, OSB, www.gratefulness.org

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WAYNE TEASDALE

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*To Thomas Keating,
my spiritual father, brother, and friend*

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F O R E W O R D

This is a beautiful, wonderful, wise book that gently touches and compassionately evokes the deep spirituality in all of us. But more than that, it further invites us — challenges us — to carry that awakened spirituality into the world, thus integrating inner life with outer life, drenching both in a radiance from the realized heart that allows grace the room to do its divine work. A more balanced, a more complete, a more “integral” spirituality — uniting both inner and outer — is the theme of this moving book.

It seems that humankind’s spiritual aspirations have often fallen into two major camps, what we might call “this-worldly” and “otherworldly,” or earth-oriented and heaven-oriented. The latter portrays salvation as existing in a dimension or realm that is somehow apart from this world, not of this earth, profoundly beyond this plane of existence. Whether this is a mythical heaven beyond earth, or a nirvana divorced from *samsara*, or a contemplative ascent that leaves the senses far

behind, we find in these traditions a concerted proclamation that this world is, at best, a prep school for the Divine, and, at worst, an active source of evil, sin, duality, and despair, the escape from which is a prerequisite for salvation.

This-worldly traditions, on the other hand, are headed in more or less the opposite direction. All true liberation and salvation must be found on this earth, in this body, in this life; any aspirations for a transcendental heaven are not only based on childhood illusions, but actively deny and repress present human potentials that alone can lead to a bettering of life for millions of human beings. This-worldly traditions include a wide variety of approaches — from classic paganism to modern Marxism to scientific materialism to virtually all ecology movements — but what they all have in common is the belief that transcendental religions are not only the opiate of the masses, they devastate effective action in the only arena that actually matters — this earth, this world, right here and now.

Is my ultimate salvation to be found in this world or out of it? It seems that the first step to a more integral or comprehensive approach to spirituality would be discovering a way to truly bring together the important truths of both this-worldly compassion and otherworldly realization, thus uniting the immanent and transcendent aspects of a spirituality that charitably embraces both.

But that challenge, daunting enough in itself, is only the first in a series of difficult but incredibly exciting opportunities for discovering a spirituality that is at home in both this world and the other: a heaven that transcends and includes the earth and all its blessed inhabitants, a spirituality that does not cloister its realization but ecstatically shares it with the world, a nirvana not divorced from *samsara* but embracing *samsara* in the radiance of its own self-realization.

It appears that a truly integral spirituality — the spirituality of a monk in the world, of a contemplative heaven embracing this earth — would have to integrate or include a vast range of truths from across the entire spectrum of human possibilities, including not only this-worldly and otherworldly spirituality, but also the undeniable truths of modern science. In short, a truly catholic spirituality, as a matrix of manifestation, would have to include the very best of premodern, modern, and postmodern truths, bound together by a Spirit that transcends all and includes all, that goes beyond but intimately embraces this and all possible worlds.

A tall order, yes? But what is so exhilarating about this quest is that many spiritual adepts and practitioners from around the world are rapidly converging on the outlines of what a truly integral spirituality might look like. This truly catholic spirituality does not deny the revealed truths of any tradition, but gently sets them in the context of each other's realizations, fostering an interspirituality that deepens, not denies, the truths of each. I have suggested one such approach in *A Brief History of Everything*, but the important point is that these approaches are beginning rapidly to emerge around the world, and Brother Wayne, in the following pages, will introduce you to some of the truly great pioneers in this move toward a more integral spirituality — toward a more catholic communion of all souls in the radiance of being, the radiance of a timeless otherworldly Spirit that finds its own body and its own substance and its own realization in the glories of this world, in the pulsing of this earth, in the beating of the hearts of all sentient beings, moved by grace and found by a glory that reminds us all that the temporal and historical are simply the ecstatic self-expressions of the timeless and eternal.

Brother Wayne dedicates this book to Father Thomas

Keating, whom he calls “my spiritual father, brother, and friend,” and who, I deeply concur, will be judged by history to be one of the great founding saints of a more integral and catholic spirituality. Brother Wayne discusses several others who, I also agree, are among the founding souls of this more charitable embrace — Thomas Merton, Abhishiktananda, the Dalai Lama, Bede Griffiths, Raimon Panikkar, Brother David Steindl-Rast, Amma, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Rabbi Zalman Schachter (and he certainly would not exclude the great historical forerunners of such, from Plotinus to Lady Tsogyal to the remarkable Sri Aurobindo).

While the timeless truths of Spirit are surely just that — namely, timeless — it appears that the temporal truths of Spirit ceaselessly unfold, with new truths emerging daily, new revelations constantly accumulating, screaming surprises jumping out at us from every corner of Spirit’s astonishing creativity, as evolution itself searches secretly through the stream of time that is Spirit’s great unfolding sport and play. And it does appear, or so it seems to this poor soul, that today’s world — today’s modern and postmodern world — is slowly groping its way, guided by the cunning of grace, to find forms of spirituality more intimately suited to the times, which is to say, suited to Spirit’s unfolding in this historical arc of its own manifestation.

And it does likewise appear that truly catholic souls such as Brother Wayne will join the ranks of those who are compassionately acting as Spirit’s contemplative witness to a yet more encompassing, more compassionate, more glorious embrace, so that each and every sentient being may truly become a monk in this world.

— Ken Wilber
Spring, 2002

Living as a Monk in the World

It has been said that sometimes we have to go halfway across the world to discover what lies right under our noses. And sometimes what we discover, and the consequences these discoveries generate, become a defining moment for us. My defining moment came in India; what I experienced there has become the foundation of my identity. In 1986, I accepted an invitation to visit Father Bede Griffiths, an English Benedictine monk who had been living in India and studying Hinduism for many years. He invited me to stay with him for a time at Shantivanam, or “Peaceful Grove,” a Christian ashram established in 1950 by two Frenchmen, Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux, who later became known as Abhishiktananda. Father Bede, who took over the ashram in 1968, was invited to India by a friend to establish a Benedictine monastery on the subcontinent. In 1968 he was asked to assume leadership of Shantivanam when Abhishiktananda left to meditate in a cave in the north of India.

Shantivanam is in the village of Tannirpalli, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, some 280 miles southwest of Madras. It sits on fifty acres on the banks of the Kāveri, one of India's seven sacred rivers, often called the "Ganges of the south." For millennia the land around Shantivanam has been held as sacred, a consecrated place for sages, *sannyasis*, or monks, and mystics. More recently it has become a refuge and sanctuary for countless pilgrims of many different traditions. It is a tiny patch of paradise in the midst of India's poverty, disease, and overpopulation, serious problems of a struggling democracy. Rich in mangos and rice, Shantivanam possesses a beauty, serenity, and peace that welcome the many weary pilgrims who come to it for sanctuary. Once travelers find it, they quickly fall under its spell and don't want to leave.

Into this secluded forest I arrived in early November 1986, already a lay monk from Hundred Acres Monastery, a small religious community in New Hampshire. I first stayed for six months. I then returned for another six months each of the following two years. On my third visit, with the new year approaching, Father Bede sent for me and asked if I would consider taking *sannyasa*, or Indian monkhood, from him as a Christian, not as a Hindu. I hadn't considered this step when I planned this third trip, but to my utter surprise I found myself agreeing before I even had a chance to think about it. I felt a strange peace about his invitation and my decision, even though I wasn't sure I was ready to take such a momentous step.

Several days later, twenty-five of us assembled on the banks of the river an hour before dawn to share in the *sannyasa diksha*, the ceremony of initiation that goes back to the Vedas and the Upanishads, the sacred Hindu texts. We sat in meditation under a grove of eucalyptus trees as we prepared. The river was quiet and still, but nature was awake with life, and across the

Kāveri an eerie chanting emanated from a Hindu temple, a timeless harbinger of the coming day. Although it was cloudy that early morning, an energy moved through the air. The atmosphere seemed charged with countless presences, angelic beings who had come to witness what was about to happen. In India, a *diksha* is a timeless event woven into the fabric of the country's religious history and culture, a sacred occurrence in a spiritual society.

The gentle and sagely Father Bede signaled to a young monk who led us in the *Gayatri* mantra, the most sacred chant of the Indian tradition, found in the Rig Veda, one of the most ancient in the tradition. This was followed by more chants, and then readings from the Upanishads, the Psalms, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Gospel of John. Bede then gave a beautiful discourse on the meaning of *sannyasa*, the ancient roots of renunciation in the life of the *rishis*, the saints, sages, and mystics of Indian antiquity. He described the place of the renunciate in India and in the Church, how the *sannyasi* is a living sign of the transcendent nature of life, of the mystical quest for God, or in Indian terms, the quest for the Absolute.

Father Bede and I approached the edge of the sacred Kāveri. I entered the water and took off my clothes, flinging them into the surface stream, then submerging myself under the water three times. As sunrise quickly approached, and I emerged from the river, Father Bede wrapped me in the *kavi*, the ancient religious garb of the renunciate, the *sannyasi*. This rite of initiation is thousands of years old, and it symbolizes renunciation of the world, of possessions, and of oneself. Quickly I dried myself off, hidden by the morning's pale radiance. Grinning broadly, Father Bede draped me with the *kavi*. Traditionally, the *kavi* consists of two pieces of cloth the color of saffron; one piece is a *dhoti*, worn around the waist and

reaching the feet, while the other is worn around the shoulders as a shawl. The garment itself is simple and elegant, part of the national dress of India that men, women, and children all wear. My *kavi* was saffron, the color of purity, representing the *sannyasi*'s goal of freedom from desire.

The *diksha* was a very powerful experience for me. It left an indelible mark on my spiritual life and became a prominent feature in my interior geography. After I took this radical step of *sannyasa*, the life of renunciation, I thought to myself, "Perhaps I should make a home here and stay in India, living right here at Shantivanam." I had fallen under the spell of Shantivanam and the new life that lay before me.

But it was not to be. Hours later, as I sat with Bede on the porch of his hut, he turned to me and with gentle authority said, "Your mission is in the West." I replied that I was thinking I might like to stay at Shantivanam. But he insisted that I return home. "You're needed in America, not here in India." He went on to describe how the *sannyasi*'s life might look in America or Europe. "The real challenge for you, Wayne, is to be *a monk in the world*, a *sannyasi* who lives in the midst of society, at the very heart of things." Although this charge seemed difficult, I accepted it, only later perceiving the wisdom in it. A *sannyasi* always receives a new name, and so Father Bede gave me the Sanskrit name Paramatmananda, which means "bliss of the supreme spirit" or "joy of the holy spirit." I strove to make the name fit me, finding joy and humor in life and sharing them with others.

FROM WITHDRAWAL TO ENGAGEMENT

The way of a *sannyasi* or a *sannyasini* (nun) in India is an acosmic path — that is, not of this world. It transcends the values, attachments, and obligations of worldly existence. As in their

Christian and Buddhist counterparts, the way of the *sannyasi* and *sannyasinin* is a path of withdrawal, a radical extraction from the ways of selfish, purely individualistic pursuits. This withdrawal makes possible a focus on the eternal, changeless reality of the ultimate. The way of the *sannyasi* concentrates one's life and energy on this eternal quest and the difficult work of transformation, a lonely, often desolating activity. The most dramatic and ancient characterization of the acosmic ascetic, the *muni*, or silent seer, is found in the Rig Veda, where this seer is said to be "girded with the wind."¹ This description emphasizes just how unrelated to this world the renunciate is, underscoring the total freedom and detachment of the otherworldly ascetic. The renunciate's commitment is absolute and final, like that of the Buddha two thousand years later or of Christians Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century and Benedict of Nursia in the fifth. This otherworldly orientation is found throughout the Christian monastic and contemplative tradition and serves as the basis of the Carmelite Order and the influential teachings of the Spanish mystics of the sixteenth century, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, as also of the English mystic Julian of Norwich. For the less contemplative, more active orders of the Church, a way of formulating this calling is *in* the world, but not *of* the world.

Without doubt, there is great value in spirituality that emphasizes and supports withdrawal from society. But in our time, with its special needs, we require a spirituality of intense involvement and radical engagement with the world. It is in the real world that people live their busy lives, and it is in the real world that the wisdom of the monks must be made accessible. It is in the real world that their awakening and development need to occur, not off in remote solitude.

The type of engagement I have in mind is direct, not

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