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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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NEW WORLD LIBRARY
NOVATO, CALIFORNIA

New World Library
14 Pamaron Way
Novato, California 94949

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Cover and interior design: Mary Ann Casler

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Teasdale, Wayne.

A monk in the world : notes on cultivating the spiritual life / by Wayne Teasdale ; foreword by Ken Wilber.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 1-57731-181-7 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 1-57731-437-9 (paperback : alk. paper)

1. Spiritual life—Catholic Church. 2. Teasdale, Wayne. I. Title.

BX2350.65 .T44 2002

255—dc21

2002001425

First paperback printing, October 2003

ISBN 1-57731-437-9

Printed in Canada on acid-free, partially recycled paper

Distributed to the trade by Publishers Group West

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

There are so many people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude, especially those who have contributed something to my vision of living as a mystic in the world. First, I wish to express my deep appreciation and friendship for my literary agent, Joseph Durepos, and my editor at New World Library, Jason Gardner, both of whom have given so much of their time and energy to shepherding this book into print. Thank you to Jim Somerville and Beatrice Bruteau, especially for her invaluable assistance with the text. I would be remiss if I didn't mention a special circle of friends in Chicago who rallied around me when I had a bout with cancer. In particular, I want to remember Diane Kelleher; Barbara Fields Bernstein; Terry Burson; Josie and Patrick Evans and their children, Shenade, Lauren, Brett, and Zzak; Michael Terrein and Ali, his daughter; Brian Muldoon and his children, Molly, Micky, and Sean; Nick and Carolyn Groves; Bill and Clare Epperly; Nancy Ging; Bill Sheenan; Sean McEntee; Jim Barry; and Judy Walter.

I mention with fondness my friends in the monastic world: Thomas Keating, Theophane Boyd, Basil Pennington, William Mennenger, James Connor, Donald Corcoran, Pascaline Coff, Robert Hale, Bruno Barnhart, Johanna Becker, Katherine Howard, Meg Funk, Gregory Perron, and Terrence Kardong; the Snowmass community; St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, especially Matthew Flynn and Kevin Hunt; the Monastery of Christ in the Desert; Holy Cross Monastery in Chicago; Sacred Heart Monastery in Lisle, Illinois; and New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, California, and Brother David Steindl-Rast. I would be remiss if I didn't mention my brothers and sisters who are also *sannyasis* here in the states, Brother Francis Ali, Michaela Terrio, Kateri Kautai, Romulad Roberts, and Richard Rosenkranz. Special thanks are expressed to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, his staff in the private office, and especially to Tenzin Choegyal, who is the Ngari Rinpoche, his wife, Rinchen Khando, their children and extended family; to Tenzin Geyche Tethong, Ven. Thakdor, Rinchen Dharlo, Lodi Gyari, Dorjee Wangdue, and the members of the Tibetan community scattered in exile, as well as everyone in the International Campaign for Tibet, including Lesley Fridell, Mary Beth Markey, Bhuchung Tsering, and John Ackerly.

In the Chicago area, I'd like to remember Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., Lou Cameli, Dan Coughlin, Tom Baima, Joan McGlinchey, Rebecca Armstrong, Andrew Shepherd, Tom O'Bryan, Don Fink, Jennifer Harris, Michael Elliot and all other members of the Friends of Compassion, and the Friends of Bede Griffiths; Felex Machado, Bishop Michael Fitzgerald, and Francis Cardinal Arinze and Chidi Denis Isizoh of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Then there are all my friends in the Parliament of the World's Religions, especially Bob and Judy Thompson, Jim and Cetta Kenney, Dirk

Ficca, Josh Borkin, Francesca di Britto, Irfan Khan, Rabbi Herb Bronstein and his wife, Tamar, Travis and Gia Rejman, Kevin Coval, and Eboo Patel. There are many others in the Parliament to whom I am grateful, but space does not permit me to list all their names here. I would also like to express thanks to all my friends and associates in Common Ground and at DePaul University, especially Michael Skelley, Nancy Davis, Michael DeAngelis, and Bill Hyashi of Columbia College. At Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, I'd like to mention Don Senior, John Pawlikowski, Mary Frohlich, Scott Alexander, Vaughn Fayle, Barbara Doherty, Horacio Perez, Harietta Holloway, Francise Hawkins, Jim Doyle, Pauline Lerch, Claude Marie Barbour, Joann McCaffrey, Gene Lauer, Robert Ludwig, Ken O'Malley, and all the members of the Passionist Community at C.T.U.

I would like to also acknowledge Bob and Kathy Fastiggi, Francis Tiso, Eric, Sarina, Mila, Yoji, Margie, Michael, Mark, and Hugo Montenegro, Sofina and Glen Rozich, Asa Sandlund and Preston Singletary, Jonathan and Lisanne LaCroix, Robert and Barbara Muller, Steve and Sue Delaronde, Pam Delaney, the Delarondes, Olivia Hobletzelle, Gary Mallalieu, Luke O'Neill Jr., Tommy Sullivan, Martha Howard and Gene Arbetter, Gary and Megan Shunk, Russill and Asha Paul D'Silva, Mohammed Zaffarkhan, David and Naomi Wilkinson, Tim and Barbara Cook, and all the members of the Church of Conscious Harmony in Austin, Texas, and Art DelVesco; Jeff, Lisa, Jordan, Crista, Abby, Hope, Don, Alicia, Greg, Alex, Didi, Max, and Gretchen Genung. Mention should also be made of Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler, Carl Arico, Ken Warner, Sergio and Chris Rojas, Jamal Rahman, Guy Petruzzelli, Clif and Ibi Matthews, Eric and Sandy Carlson, and Pat Brennen. There are also Jim and Patti Slama; Paula Hardin; Magdalena Gomez and James

Lescault; Simon and Teresa Irizarry; everyone at Sounds True, especially Sarah Wheeler and Matt Lacata.

I would like to thank in a special way Ken Wilber for his visionary foreword, and the many members of the Integral Institute; the faculty, staff, and students of the Institute for Spiritual Leadership; all my students wherever they are; T. J. and Kris McGovern, Larry Korass, Robert Hopper, B. C. and Stacey Calma, Don and Johann Wrona, Darrell and Jeannie Jordan, Bob and Jane McGuffey, Hal and Betsy Edwards, Astarius An, Joel and Gwen Beversluis, the Gustafson family, Rick and Lynn Doblin, Ron Miller, Dan, Trish, Rory, Marshal, Ryan, Kattie and Stockton McEntee, James Klassen, Brennan Young, Matt Paterson, Nathan Katz, Martin Wall, Quincy Fernandez, and Steve Wiseman, Arlo and Jackie Guthrie, Ewert and Janet Cousins, Jeff Jaeger, Lorene Wu and Francis D'Ario, Alan Race, Marcus Braybrooke, and Brent Hunter. And finally, all the members of the Spiritual Life Circle of the Parliament of the World's Religions, especially Harold Kasimow, Omie Baldwin, Asayo Horibe, Joyce Kemp, Kathy and Tory Sarator, Ann Patterson, and Carol Henning.

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 Abishiktananda 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 other-worldly 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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