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KUNDALINI: INTERVIEW WITH DR. SVOBODA

CONDUCTED BY RICK ARCHER OF BUDDHA AT THE GAS PUMP

CONDENSED AND EDITED

WELCOME TO *BUDDHA AT THE GAS PUMP*. My name is Rick Archer and my guest today is Robert Svoboda. Robert is the first white member of Kenya's Pokot tribe, and the first non-Indian ever to graduate from a college of Ayurveda and be licensed to practice Ayurveda in India, where he lived for more than a decade. During and after his formal Ayurvedic training, he was tutored in Ayurveda, Yoga, Jyotish, Tantra, and other forms of classical Indian lore by his mentor, the Aghori Vimalananda. For a decade he was involved with thoroughbred horses as Vimalananda's Authorized Racing Agent. The author of more than a dozen books, since 1985 he divides his time between India and other lands. I'll be listing his books on my website.

RA Welcome, Robert. Thanks.

RS Good morning.

RA Good morning. Robert is out in LA and just experienced an earthquake last night, so his world got rocked a bit. We are going to be talking mostly about *kundalini* today, but there are a couple of points in my introduction here that people might have questions about. Firstly, the point about racehorses. What was that all about?

RS Well, Vimalananda, my mentor, was a native of Bombay—Mumbai—and his family had been there for fifteen generations. They were quite prominent until the generation immediately previous to him. He was a very versatile man; he had studied many things, Eastern and Western alike, and he was very familiar with animals as well as plants and minerals and so on. He was very fond of horses. He enjoyed betting on his horses but even more than that he enjoyed looking at the possibilities in a colt or a filly and seeing how he could, with appropriate training, bring

out those possibilities. He was not a trainer himself, he had to work with other trainers but he exerted a strong influence on how they worked with a horse. We would use Ayurvedic or homeopathic medicines to assist getting the horses into shape so they could do what they're supposed to do at the racetrack, which is run and win.

I value that time tremendously—not because I made a lot of money. I never bet. I have never bet on a horse race. Even when I am in Las Vegas, I will put a single dollar into a slot machine, just symbolically.

But in learning about horses, I learned a tremendous amount about life. I love horses, and have fortunately been around them a lot, and still periodically get chances to ride; I was out on a horse in Costa Rica just last month. But beyond that, the race course was—for me at least and for him as well, I think—a microcosm of the entire gamut of human culture: you have the virtuous people and the non-virtuous people; the people who are not only interested in horses for winning but are also interested in horses as horses and so want to treat them properly, and the ones who didn't care about that at all and treated their animals with great cruelty. You have the ones who made money and could hold onto it—almost nobody—and the ones who make money and then lose it—a sizable number—and the ones who lose only. Losers are most numerous, of course. It was a valuable part of my education.

RA My wife's father was a gambler and she spent a lot of time at the racetrack when she was young and also loves horses.

You mentioned in one of your YouTube videos I listened to that your mentor was a connoisseur of whiskey, he enjoyed drinking whiskey. As the son of an alcoholic and someone who's been on the spiritual path for 45 years, it's a little hard for me to wrap my head around that. I don't reject it, but it's hard

for me to understand why someone who is quote-unquote "enlightened" or in a higher state would find that whiskey could in any way enhance his experience. I should think it would almost invariably dull the mind. It's considered tamasic and so on, so maybe you could riff on that just a little bit before we get into kundalini.

RS Well—I'm speaking here about his opinion—his opinion was that many of the things that are written in the Vedas are true but they are not necessarily true in exactly the way that they are written there. Because, of course, trying to use ordinary human language to describe something that is not directly part of the physical world is not an easy thing to do. When, for example, the Vedas would talk about *soma*, and the uplifting effect of soma and how it could take you into the astral world and how it could put you into a place where you would be able to commune with reality much more directly, Vimalananda was very much of the opinion that the soma that the Vedic rishis were taking was something that we will never be able to replicate ourselves, at least not that specific soma substance. But he maintained that soma's effects can be replicated, provided that you, as an individual, understand how your organism works, how your own physiology works, and you identify that substance that works for you like soma—the thing that uplifts you, that sends you into the astral world, that permits you to communicate more easily not only with gods and goddesses but with the supreme reality as well.

RA And whiskey did that for him?

RS Whiskey did that for him. It doesn't do that for me; other things work better for me. But for him it worked very well. On dozens of occasions, I would be sitting there pouring him whiskey—not a lot at a time, just a little bit—and he



would be sipping it. As he sipped, his awareness would become more open, his communication would become more refined and more sophisticated and the breadth and depth of his vision would become perceptibly augmented. Of course, one of the reasons why he and many people might choose to employ a substance for facilitating this is—suppose you were living, as he did, in Bombay?

I know that nowadays people call it Mumbai but I was there when, in Hindi and English, it was always Bombay, and in Marathi and Gujarati, it was always Mumbai. My Marathi and Gujarati are no good, but if I tried to speak them, I would always say Mumbai because that's how it fit in those languages; in Hindi I would always say Bombay. My Hindi is much better than my Marathi or Gujarati.

Bombay is a very difficult place to live in. Now it's a city of about 20 million people. But even before, Vimalananda used to call it *moha mayi nagari*—the city that is completely filled with delusions, which is something that you can really feel if you spend any time there.

A big part of his philosophy is explained by the concept of *rmanubandhana*, a big Sanskrit word which means 'the bondage of karmic debt,' the things that you owe to yourself and to other humans and to animals and to places and families and teachers and what-have-you. *Bandha* means a thing that binds you down. You're bound down by karmic obligations, karmic accounts that have to be settled. Of course, things can only be settled at certain moments, and sometimes one must bide quite a bit of time waiting for the opportunity to settle a particular debt. While you're biding your time, if you are stuck in any kind of big modern city that's full of human beings—well, Vimalananda had to interact with people in Bombay and he had to interact with them in a meaningful way. Bombay is such a complicated place. It was very useful for him to be able to interact with the city, which would inevitably involve taking the substance of the city into his tissues, and then to employ a substance that could permit

him to return promptly back to the place where he normally existed and where he preferred to exist and that allowed him to obtain the perspective that he required in order to be able to continue living in a place where he felt like he needed to live in order to deal with those karmic obligations.

RA In a piece that you sent me about kundalini, which we'll be talking about in some detail, you talked about the tendency to individuate—for *ahamkara* to become more calcified egoism—and you referred to that as *maya shakti*. Then you said that the flip side of that is *chit sakti*, where the force turns towards the spiritual. I wonder if possibly the appeal of alcohol is that it relaxes the rigidity of the ego and in some cases allows people to taste a more ego-free, unrestricted space. Obviously, in the long run, it is counterproductive for most people because it damages the brain and results in greater and greater bondage, but maybe that explains why people find it alluring and maybe in more homeopathic doses it has that effect without deleterious influence.

RS Yes, I certainly think that's part of it. In his case, another reason why he employed alcohol is because he was a long-time worshiper of Tara, who is one of the ten *mahavidyas*, one of the ten great embodiments of wisdom shaktis from which the universe is generated and by which the universe remains and into which the universe is resolved. Smashan Tara—the Tara of the cremation ground—is very similar to Kali, both iconographically and in the sense that she is fond of blood and of alcohol. So by drinking, Vimalananda, in addition to drinking in the context of his own personality, was making an offering directly to that goddess.

My friend Dr. Fred Smith is the author of a 700-page book called *The Self-Possessed*, which is all about the fact that, even though in India and nowadays in other countries, people believe Indian religion—I'm deliberately not using the word "Hinduism" because, as Vimalananda pointed out, the word Hindu is a Persian word. The ancient

Persians language, Avestan, used *S* for many of the words that are similar in Sanskrit but use *H*; for example, the Sanskrit word *soma* appears in Avestan as *haoma*. The word *Hindu* is thus the Avestan version of the word *Sindhu*, and *Sindhu* is the Sanskrit name for the river the British called the Indus. The word 'India' is derived from the word 'Indus.' The Persians called that river the 'Hindu,' and the area bounded by that river on the west they called 'Hindustan', and all the inhabitants of that area they called Hindus, whether they follow the Sanatana Dharma or not. Sanatana Dharma, which means something like "The Eternal Ordinance," is the original name of what is now popularly called Hinduism.

A large part of Indian religion has always involved being possessed, which means permitting personalities other than your own to enter you and take you over, usually temporarily. As Dr. Smith discovered during the extensive research he did for his book, you can find mentions of possession everywhere in ancient Indian texts, including even the Vedas. Possession is not the sort of thing that the Victorian Establishment approved of; there is something very non-Victorian about being taken over by a disembodied intelligence amidst loud music and wild dancing. The possession aspect of the Sanatana Dharma was therefore deliberately downplayed back when the British had a very strong influence on Indian thought. For the most part, the Brits of the nineteenth century thought of Hinduism in general as being debased, debauched, corrupted, and polluted, and possession states as being exceptionally degraded.

Vimalananda would often permit himself to be taken over by a deity or a dead saint or a force of nature, and while he was thus possessed he would be able to make direct offerings via his own body to that personality that had taken him over.

You can find similar rituals all over India. In the Himalaya, for example, you will find oracles. When you need advice about something you go to your local temple and request that deity's oracle for advice; it will be delivered by

the deity via a human into whom the deity enters. In Kerala a practice termed *theyyam* exists, in which low-caste people get possessed, often at the behest of high-caste people. For the time that they're possessed, though, the low-caste people are worshiped as embodied gods and goddesses by the high-caste people.

In any state of India you can find this sort of possession ritual and worship. It is something that is very much part of, I can't say the majority, but a large plurality of the population, a part of what a large plurality of the population normally does, well within their standard belief systems. But we don't hear much about it nowadays because possession is not very 'vedantic.'

RA What you've just said in the last few minutes raises a number of interesting points and it's fun to kind of explore a few of these things that are just coming up spontaneously. This probably all relates to kundalini anyway.

RS It all does indeed relate to kundalini.

RA Great. Well, a couple of questions arose in my mind as you were speaking. One was, I have heard of instances—and you are probably much more familiar with this than I am—of people using this argument of consuming various substances and doing various things in the name of Tantra which kind of bastardizes the whole thing, cheapens it. It becomes a form of hedonism without any real spiritual significance.

And to bring up the other point—about possession. Obviously this is something which existed in most ancient cultures and even modern—we have all kinds of channelers these days and there was Edgar Cayce and there are the *ayahuasca* people. There are all sorts of instances where people are connecting with and perhaps allowing some entity of some sort to come through them and provide wisdom. Of course, there's the dark side of that, too, where many times you don't know who you're inviting. Just because you're dead doesn't mean you're smart and there's been all kinds of devil worship and all kinds of strange stuff that muddies the reputation of this sort of thing.

RS Absolutely. Many people in India claim to be wonderful *sadhus* and *sadbakas*, and many of these smoke chillums all day long. As Vimalananda pointed out, give somebody a chillum or a bottle of whiskey and within a few minutes you will find out exactly what is really going on with him or her, what is underneath the facade.

Twenty years ago, or more, I visited Tarapith in West Bengal, which is the chief center of Tara worship in India. Though there is a temple there, the main place of worship at Tarapith is its *smashan*, its cremation ground. More than a century ago a famous saint named Bamakhepa lived in that smashan. Born a year later than Ramakrishna Paramahansa, he lived many years longer. While at Tarapith he built a hut into whose walls dozens of skulls were implanted. That hut, the *khopadi ki jhopadi*, still exists; when I visited it still had quite a nice vibe to it, as did the cremation ground itself. What disturbed the vibe for me were the four or five so-called tantrics who busied themselves with drinking cheap alcohol and doing what people normally do when they drink alcohol: talking loudly, arguing, thinking about getting into a fight, becoming really effusive, then finally lying down and trying to sleep it all off. That was disappointing, but I got used to being disappointed in India a long time ago, because there are so many charlatans there, many of whom I've met, or at least seen. At least the cremation ground was not disappointing, and I thanked my lucky stars that I had for that night a fine place in which to sit and spend some time ruminating over the fact that at any moment the possibility exists that an earthquake (one just happened here last night), a tornado, a lightning bolt, an eagle carrying a turtle, something might easily be the end of you. I like to remind myself often each day that in our world mortality is everywhere, and death can take you away at any moment.

RA Yeah.

RS And these drunken *sadhus* at Tarapith probably started off reminding

themselves of that fact as well. But somehow they lost the plot; they meditated a little and convinced themselves that they were powerful *tantrikas*, then reinforced that pattern repeatedly with alcohol. It is very easy to fall into such a rut. There's a good reason why alcohol used to be called spirits. When you drink alcohol and let the alcohol take you over, you attract to yourself disembodied beings that feed on alcohol, and unless you are very careful it won't be long before those things take you over. Pretty soon your own personality will begin to dissolve, and eventually so much of it will disappear that it will no longer be able to function independently; at that point your personality has become dependent on alcohol, and on the beings you have conjured up, in order to function at all.

RA It's interesting. In the thing I read that you sent me, you were talking about spiritual crisis being mistaken for insanity. You were saying that sudden kundalini awakening can shut out the nervous system and blow a hole in the person's aura. And that the aura's job is to insulate us psychically from one another and from disembodied influences. I think that might be something that would be useful for people to understand more clearly. You know, you hear about auras all the time; people want to see them and some people say that they do see them. But what their actual function is—this whole notion of disembodied entities might seem esoteric to some people and fanciful or mythological or whatever, but in my opinion these entities very much do exist. I had a few little experiences of them myself but there needs to be some sort of protective shield. Perhaps many people who are mentally disturbed or even criminally insane have lost that shield and are just tools of some darker forces.

RS That happens quite often and of course sometimes it's even more complicated than that. Sometimes people become tools of forces that are not so dark while at the same time serving as tools of forces that are indeed dark. Some people who can at times channel positive

and beneficial entities may sometimes also channel something very negative that is pretending to be positive.

RA Like the good angel, bad angel thing, on the shoulders.

RS Exactly. There's no reason why, simply because you're open to the one, that you're not going to be open to the other. You are going to be open to both of them, at least initially.

When people think about possession, usually they're imagining disembodied human beings or demons or Lucifer sitting somewhere, laughing maniacally and sending out all sorts of bizarrely caparisoned Hieronymus Bosch ghouls. But there are many other ways to become possessed. You can get possessed by anger, lust, greed, or any other powerful emotion. Certain disease 'beings' can take you over, as can influences conjured up by black magicians. Many get possessed by ancestors. You don't have to think of your ancestors as still existing to know that, because you've received your genes from your ancestors, they can affect you. And not just the genes; epigenetics tells us that the patterns of which genes are going to turn on and turn off can also be passed down, sometimes three or four generations. So, if you have someone who, let's say, is an alcoholic—we know that there is a type of alcoholism that is often passed down from father to son. People in the past, maybe they were thinking we can find a gene or even a few genes that would be responsible. But it's not so much the genes themselves as it is the pattern of which genes are turned on and which genes are turned off, and the circumstances under which a gene might be turned on or off in the context of this bigger pattern. And this is but one way in which your ancestors can affect you.

And then come mind viruses—fascism, communism, capitalism—all infections of the psyche that took over the minds of hundreds of millions of humans, with catastrophic results. Some of the mind viruses are most curious. My sister and I both enjoy watching sports; the two boys at this house where I am now both play basketball. All of us have been watching some of the

NCAA tournament games. St. Louis University played a game. St. Louis University is a Jesuit university; their mascot is the billiken. When I Googled "billiken," I discovered that the billiken was an image that came in a dream to a woman in 1908 in the United States, one that must not be confused with the kewpi doll which appeared the next year, which the billiken resembles. You will find the billiken on Google—a little big-bellied baby-like presence with carefully composed ears and feet. As fate would have it, later that year a temple in Yokahama installed an image of this billiken in its sanctum. The billiken went from being an American woman's dream to a Japanese deity within just a few months, and it remains the mascot—or totemic animal—of a Jesuit university in the United States.

RA Funny. It's interesting what you are saying about forces taking over collective mentality, collective consciousness: consumerism, fascism, Nazism—all those different things. There's something in the bible about the sins of the father visited upon the son or some such thing—

RS —up to the seventh generation, like at the racecourse. While I was in India studying Ayurveda, I spend a lot of time reading the Thoroughbred Stud Book. All thoroughbred racehorses are derived from three foundation sires: the Darley Arabian, the Byerly Turk, and the Godolphin Arabian, and 90% of all racehorses today are descended from the horse Eclipse, who was foaled during an eclipse and never lost a race.

When you mate a thoroughbred stallion with a non-thoroughbred mare, you have to continue crossing the progeny with thoroughbreds for seven generations before you can call the progeny of the eighth generation thoroughbred. Why? Because by the eighth generation less than 1% of the blood of the original non-thoroughbred mare remains. It takes seven generations to completely dilute a genetic influence.

RA And we think of genetic material, of course, as being physical, but perhaps

you and I would agree that the genetics are just a physical representation of an even subtler realm.

RS Absolutely.

RA For instance, in terms of reincarnation, if you reincarnate and you bring in certain qualities from a previous life, obviously there's no way that, physically, your DNA could be carried from one life to the next, but there's some subtler vehicle which carries along and then manifests a physical structure and physical DNA appropriate to its tendencies and the tendencies you have to live out.

RS Or, as appropriate to its tendencies as can be the case in the context of the genetic material of the father and mother, which is one place where complications can start for human beings. You have these tendencies that are part of you, that want to continue to express themselves through you in your next lifetime. The tendencies have developed momentum, for music or whatever, and those tendencies will have to align with a womb that can provide an appropriate milieu through which that pattern can continue to express itself.

RA They say you can't choose your parents—but you do choose your parents.

RS You do choose your parents. The usual case, however, is that just because you choose your parents in the context of one thing that is essential for your current incarnation doesn't mean that the fit will be perfect. Sometimes the fit is perfect: the parents and the children create a unit that's completely and utterly harmonious with no seeming effort. They move ahead as if they had been born to do that, which they were. And sometimes—in my case, I never felt that I fit in, in Texas, Oklahoma, or Louisiana, and I was drawn elsewhere as soon as I could travel. My family never understood why I was there and I never understood why I was there. We found a way to relate to one another in a healthy, loving way, but living rather different lives. On the other hand, although when

first I arrived in India I hated the place, it didn't take too long until it was all so familiar to me that I started wondering why I hadn't been born there.

RA Maybe the climate in the places where you grew up got you prepared for living in India.

RS Oh, absolutely.

RA Wouldn't you say that if we zoom back enough and realize that we're swimming in an ocean of intelligence—it's kind of a cliché to say that everything happens for a reason, everything's perfect as it is, but I ascribe to that. If you look at it deeply enough, how could there be accidents in an ocean of infinite intelligence?

RS I agree entirely. And I do not believe that this was an accident at all. It's just that human beings get to where they are sometimes as a result of influences that promote their efforts, and at other times in spite of influences that tried very hard to dissuade them from achievement.

I think of there being three main channels of inheritance that everybody grows up with: the inheritance that you bring with you from your previous incarnations, what you bring with you genetically from your mother and father and their parents and those gone before, as well as the effect of the culture in which you develop. My father's parents were from Moravia, Czech Republic, and my mother was not. Had his parents remained there and had my mother's parents somehow ended up in Moravia, and had I been born there, even from the same parents, I would have grown up very differently than I did growing up in Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma.

For one thing, I would have grown up with different languages, and language is extremely important. My father was born in Texas in 1920; until he was six, he only knew two words of English—*aunt* and *uncle*. Otherwise he spoke Czech, because his parents and siblings spoke Czech. My grandfather's hired hands were Mexican and spoke Mexican. Though my father retained his fluency in Czech and Spanish throughout his life, he felt embarrassed

speaking either, because of having no education in language.

It is difficult for me to envision culture without language. Human language is to me an absolutely required foundational element for culture of all kinds. Each language has its own flavor, its own history, its own attitudes. As Vimalananda used to say, English is very good for commercial things, for minutely describing very specific things in the external world; it's not very good for bringing all of those things together. Sanskrit is much better for bringing all of those things together. Charles V was reported to have stated, "I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse." So many beautiful songs to God have been written in Spanish because it has that kind of flavor to it; French is an excellent court language. Italian is a wonderful language—I love Italian. It's especially good for wine, women, and song.

RA Inuit is a good one for talking about snow probably.

RS Inuit, I'm sure, is excellent for snow.

RA We were talking about tendencies and collective consciousness. We can think of political parties or cultural phenomena or the battle over global warming—I always think in terms of a sort of vertical strata of creation and how the surface expression of things we see on the news is representative of much deeper layers of reality.

You kind of alluded to this when we were talking about blowing a hole in the aura and being overtaken by subtle influences. It seems to me that there is a sort of an epic battle taking place on subtle levels between various forces, positive and negative. Of course, you know that kind of thing is depicted mythologically and in the Vedic literature, in the Puranas, the gods and the demons are always battling it out. Maybe it's always been intense, but there seems to be a greater contrast these days, as if positive and negative forces are both increasing in their strength and distinctness. Those puppeteers

are polarizing humanity in a variety of ways. Do you have any comments on that line of thinking?

RS Well, if we do nothing but recognize that nothing would exist without duality and if we look at duality—we use the terms "positive" and "negative" and they have certain associations; the word "negative" has a pejorative association to it. The main message is that they are polarizing.

A positive charge is attracted to a negative charge, but under certain conditions they will repel one another, and the more they repel one another the greater the polarization of charge until the point where a spark crosses the gap, or a lightning bolt strikes, or the polarization is resolved in some other way. I agree with you in thinking that currently there is quite a bit of polarization in human society and that it is quite possible that this polarization will keep intensifying until some dramatic event causes it to resolve again.

We've seen this happen throughout history. Intense polarization took place during World War II, with democracies confronting totalitarian societies, and two different types of totalitarian society, fascist and communist, hating one another even more than the freer societies hated the totalitarians because hate was so much a part of the way that the totalitarians defined themselves.

It does seem to me that polarization is increasing, and that something in the environment is facilitating that increase. The Bush-Gore election brought into clear focus the fact that the USA is currently divided into two camps more or less equal in size with very different visions of reality, which is why it is now so difficult for our government to get anything done. People get very invested in their concepts of how things ought to be, and are often willing to defend these concepts to the death.

I am reminded of something that Ouspensky wrote in his book *In Search of the Miraculous* about his studies with Gurdjieff back in Russia in and around the time of the Russian Revolution and World War I. At one point Gurdjieff observed that it was exceedingly fortunate

that his group was able to meet during that time of great social turbulence because that great crisis was causing the consensus reality of the inhabitants of Russia to fray. ‘Consensus reality’ is that field of ordinary accepted parameters of reality shared by the members of a group. It can be quite difficult to spread radical knowledge at a time when a society and its consensus reality are relatively intact, because the pressure of thought of all the people who buy into a particular vision of reality is usually strong enough to make it very difficult for any alternative vision to compete. But a century ago in Russia the shared awareness of the populace had been so damaged by the war and the revolution that the suppressing pressure of the consensus reality was reduced and became more tenuous, which allowed those like Gurdjieff—who tried to see things more clearly, more genuinely, more uniquely—to do so with greater ease.

Nowadays the US is divided into Red and Blue visions of reality, each with its own increasingly polarized consensus reality that promotes further polarization. And to complicate the situation further, we have, in the form of the internet, a method of interacting that is generating its own consensus reality. Don’t get me wrong—I use the internet every day—but the fact is that the internet is an externalized consensus reality whose momentum is now sufficiently strong that is dragging almost everybody into it, creating what I think has the potential to be an extremely pathological and bizarre set of results. You’ve heard of the technological singularity, I’m sure. We have people who sincerely believe that at some point it will be possible to upload our personalities onto servers somewhere. They don’t explain—or I haven’t heard anybody explain yet—what’s going to happen when the power to the server gets cut or when a virus gets into the program. I don’t spend much time thinking about that because by the very fact of proposing something that is utterly impossible, it is obvious that their thinking is quite muddled.

Those people who have invested heavily in this concept are overlooking the fact that human beings are utterly dependent for their sanity on getting

regular inputs from the external environment. Continual interaction with the outside world is what keeps us able to function. Whether or not we’re aware of it, we’re always hearing subliminal sounds, always receiving micro-movements of air via our touch receptors, always seeing one thing or another. All of these sensory inputs reassure us, remind us that we are part of our surroundings, that a ‘to and fro’ exists between us.

I have a young friend who works developing software for complicated imaging applications, some involving radar. He was invited one day into a room where they test radars and similar devices, a room in which, because of the way it’s constructed, there is no reflection of sound and no reflection of light. If you shine a beam of light directly at someone they can see the beam of light but as soon as you turn the beam so that it is not directed at them, no light will be visible to them. If I talk directly at you, your ears will detect the vibrations from my mouth and you will hear me, but if I turn even slightly no sound will reach you. This friend said that after twenty minutes he felt so weird that he had to leave, and he discovered that even the guys who work in there everyday have to limit themselves to one hour at a time.

RA Wow. Because they need the normal stimulation.

RS They need that normal stimulation. So an hour and a half after John Doe ends up in the giant server in the sky, then what?

RA Also, you know that the whole notion that our personality can be uploaded to a computer—I mean a single cell, a single neuron, is far more complex than the most sophisticated computer we’ve ever designed. You wouldn’t have much of a personality if you only had a single neuron; you need trillions of them and they need to all be interconnected in ways that are—you know, there are more connections between our neurons than there are stars in the galaxy, so I think it’s going to be a long time before we design a computer that could store a personality.

RS And those connections are continuously running the so-called default mode network which takes up something like 80% of the brain’s energy and is running all the time and you’re never aware of it. It’s running in the background and it’s just continuously creating the foundation of this thing that we call the personality, so no—

RA Yeah, it’s a nice sci-fi notion but—

RA Well, this might be a good segue into talking more explicitly about kundalini. Why don’t you start by just defining it. Most people understand kundalini as some kind of energy that resides in the base of the spine and can be awakened; it rises up the spine and when it rises up you get enlightenment. I mean that’s probably, in a nutshell, what most people understand, but I think there’s probably a lot more to it, so let’s go for that.

RS I’m going to start out by saying that, first of all, language is a very powerful thing. The more that people use the word *kundalini*, the more they apply their own concepts as to what the word means. Their concepts will adhere to the surface of whatever it is that kundalini really is. As time goes on, those who look at kundalini will see less of her in her real form, and more of the various concepts adhering to her, concepts that people have projected in her direction.

RA And you’ll please explain why you’re using the word *her* as you go along here?

RS Yes, I use the word *her* not because she has any permanent affinity with some embodied female, human or otherwise, but because in our universe we employ the concept of her-ness and femininity to represent that energy and that protoplasm and those hormones and that organization of a living being that can reproduce, that can actually—especially in the context of vertebrates and mammals—give rise to an individual that belongs to the same species as the individual that is reproducing.

RA But not only that. Whenever I have

heard anything about kundalini, it’s not presented as merely some sort of abstract energy, but as being intelligent and having a marvelously intricate way of transforming us in various ways. If it’s intelligent, then we could certainly imagine it being a her or a him, having some kind of personification in some way, could we not?

RS We can, definitely. And, of course, wherever there’s a him there will always be a her; where there’s a her there will always be a him. We’re living in a world of duality. Fundamentally, from our perspective in the dual world, there is great benefit in looking at things with two eyes, at least to begin with, and trying to understand who we are and where we’ve come from and where we’re going. There is a lot of use in looking at it from the perspective of Shakti and of Shakti’s partner, call him Shaktiman or Siva or whatever—from the perspective of one principle of intelligence that maintains relative stability of intent, position, and awareness, and another principle that is more dynamic. It’s just like what we see in the atomic world: you have the nucleus (protons and neutrons) and you have electrons. The electrons are always moving; that’s their job. Relative to the electrons, the protons and neutrons are sitting in a state of relative inaction, letting the electrons move around them; that’s their job.

RA And the protons have a positive charge and electrons have a negative charge and it keeps the whole show going.

RS And everything goes around. It just so happens that we applied the words ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ to these particles; we could instead have described them as ‘have’ and ‘have-not’ or something similar, some other pair of dualities. Or, protons might have been assigned a negative charge and electrons a positive charge; in fact, in the anti-matter world, a positron is an electron that carries a positive charge. The facts remain that the nucleus of an atom carries one electrical charge and that atom’s electrons carry another charge, and that these charges are opposite, and repel one another even while being

attracted to each other. The nucleus is relatively stationary, but is also moving.

In the universe, so far as we know, nothing is stationary: the sun orbits the center of the Milky Way at more than one hundred fifty miles a second, and our galaxy is being dragged towards the Great Attractor at nearly four hundred miles per second, and God only knows what the Great Attractor is being attracted by; but every thing is moving. Relatively speaking, the nucleus is not moving and the electrons are moving around it. Relatively speaking, energy—let’s call it Shakti—is moving and Shakti’s opposite—let’s call it Siva—is, relatively speaking, unmoving. This dynamic has been around since the days of the Big Bang, which was billions of years ago, and you and I exist within this very dynamic. This dynamic is the kundalini dynamic, the kundalini shakti.

Earlier you referred to the ahamkara shakti. Ahamkara is a nice Sanskrit word. *Aham* means *I*. ‘A’ is the first letter in the Sanskrit alphabet ‘HA’ is the last one—so aham is the alpha and the omega, the origin and termination, of all manifestation. Everything that you personally can identify with as being part of you is aham. Ahamkara is the force that creates aham. If we visualize kundalini as coming from the bottom and going up to the top, we should think of ahamkara proceeding from the top to the bottom. Ahamkara starts out as shakti that is utterly unidentified with anything, limited by nothing other than itself, but that progressively becomes increasingly limited as it descends into individuation—in our case, into the human being. The reason why the texts talk about kundalini being asleep is that in the average person, the vast majority of the shakti in the body is being employed to keep the organism functioning in the context in which that organism has evolved. We’ve evolved over many, many millions of years for the purpose, in my opinion, of being able to act as an environment in which consciousness can manifest itself.

RA Beautiful.

RS And it has taken billions of years for

us to get here, going through various stages to get to a point where we can, in fact, have awareness of things that we can be aware of, like the fact that there is something other than our organism. I think it’s very useful to remember that the human organism—we like to think of ourselves as human—the human organism is made up of, more or less, roughly 100 trillion cells, only 10% percent of which are actually human.

RA Just so people understand what you’re saying: 90% of those cells are various bacteria and other microscopic organisms that are completely non-human, but on whom our lives depend.

RS On whom our lives depend. And they also have awareness, though theirs is not the same sort of awareness that we enjoy. In a way that’s good, because we don’t have to be talking to them all day long, negotiating: “Ok, do you agree that we should go to the movies?” But we do have to negotiate with them in the context of what we eat and how and when we eat it, and if they’re working well, we think more clearly, and if they’re not working well, we definitely do not think clearly. They’re an integral part of us, even though we like to claim that they are separate from us.

This whole situation is extremely complicated. What are now human cells were originally single-cell bacteria as well, until they began to take in other bacteria. Our mitochondria were independent at one point, until they thought, “These animal cells are the going thing. This is where our future lies!” and decided to move in. As part of the bargain they have retained their own genetic material, separate from our genetic material; they are part of us, and also separate from us.

RA We’d die without them.

RS We would die very quickly without them, and without our other allies. When we try to negotiate who we are, we must remember them. How do we define ourselves?

We humans like to think of ourselves as individuals, but really we are more

“dividual,” because parts of us are separate and other parts are shared. So many components make up a person, but the most ‘personal’ part of a person is the personality. And here also we are ‘dividual.’ To paraphrase E.J. Gold, the most noteworthy characteristic of our species is that each one of us possesses a set of often unrelated personalities, with no particular ability to determine which personality will operate at any one moment.

RA But if reincarnation is true, then it again goes beyond the physical level. There’s something which carries a package of information from one vehicle to the next when the first vehicle no longer functions and we need a new one. Perhaps the *jiva* is the core of what we are as an individual. Yes? No?

RS Yes, except for the fact that we can’t even think of a *jiva* necessarily as being individual, because sometimes you will end up having one *jiva* manifesting itself in more than one human being and sometimes you’ll have more than one *jiva* manifesting—occasionally at the same time—in the same human being. Few believers in reincarnation want to hear this, because almost everyone likes to think “I am an individual.” The job of *ahamkara* is to identify things that I believe are mine: this is mine; here’s my shirt; here are my glasses; here is my knowledge; here is my spouse; here is my house. It’s just the nature of *ahamkara*.

The nature of any *shakti* is that it is attracted to something. The nature of the electron is that it is attracted to the nucleus; it can never quite reach the nucleus, but it moves about the nucleus ceaselessly, trying to reach it. The nucleus is attracted to the electron but it remains relatively immobile, serving as a center around which the electron can move. The *kundalini shakti* craves to reunite with the unity from which it arose, and so it searches for the supreme reality. But, once the *kundalini shakti* has entered the human body, it searches within that body, and does not find. While the *jiva* is in the womb, *kundalini* is busy acting in its role as *ahamkara*, creating and identifying the body’s various limbs, generating

the plethora of connections that link different cells. As its attention becomes monopolized by all this multiplicity in manifestation, this *shakti* becomes progressively less *kundalini* and more *ahamkara*. The greater its familiarity with the five elements—earth, water, fire, air, and space—the less it can recall what it was like to be aware of consciousness without limitations. That’s why people suggest that the *kundalini* is sleeping—not because she’s forgotten that reality, but because she’s retained only slight awareness of that reality thanks to having become aware of the many other realities that require attention if we are to exist.

RA As I understand it, the word *ahamkara* means I-maker right? Could we sort of zoom out and say that there are, simplistically speaking, two fundamental forces in the universe: one is the I-maker force which is responsible for individuation since the time of the Big Bang and individuates with greater and greater and greater sophistication to the point where a second fundamental force can begin to function in a conscious way, which begins to reverse the whole process? In other words, it takes a sophisticated nervous system to begin to wake up to the notion that, ultimately, I am unbounded, I am universal consciousness, and to begin to seek the experience of that until it’s established. There’s a sort of feedback loop or cycle from I to I, from source, through course, back to source.

RS In one sense there are these two fundamental forces that you mention, but ultimately they are but aspects of a single force. Of the approximately eighteen years in total that I’ve spent in India, I spent six studying Ayurveda in Pune. Not far from Pune is the small town of Alandi, which boasts the *samadhi* of Maharashtra’s most famous saint, Jnaneshvar Maharaj, who wrote my favorite commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*; officially titled the *Bhavarthadipika*, everyone knows it as the *Jnaneshvari* (literally, Jnaneshvar’s Book).

Aside from *Jnaneshvari*, Jnaneshvar’s most famous work is the *Amritanubhava*,

which can be translated either as “The Ambrosia of Experience” or “The Experience of Ambrosia.” In this remarkable book, Jnaneshvar states that, though the supreme reality desired to perceive itself, it could not do so because nothing external to that reality existed, including space, time, and causation, via which it could experience itself. The will of the supreme reality therefore caused the universe to emerge, to act as a mirror in which reality could perceive itself. According to this theory, which I too espouse, in order to perceive itself, the universe had to create within itself a part of itself that believed it was different from itself. The moment of that creation of a sense of difference was the moment of the Big Bang. A trillionth of a trillionth of a trillionth of a second later the energy thus generated so repelled itself that the cosmos went from an infinitesimal size to being trillions of times larger—an indescribable speed and violence that we can’t even begin to conceptualize. As a result of that sudden expansion, there was immediately afterward, since karma is equal and opposite, an immediate and opposite return of awareness directed toward attempting to achieve that unity again.

Now that portion of awareness that believes itself to be separate is attempting to find the unity in the context of the existence of this giant field of what appears to be separation. Ever since this beginning, the entire universe has been trying to return to that state of unity but cannot do so because of the various forces that were generated at that moment of separation so that the mirror could be created. The human being serves as a microcosm of the big cosmos, the macrocosm, and within the context of this tiny replica of the giant cosmos—that replica being the human being—one can, under certain conditions and for a certain period of time, act as mirror for that consciousness, and have one’s awareness be completely freed, at least temporarily, from all of those limitations that have been added in the ensuing billions of years. The supreme in the external and the supreme in the internal can thus recognize their ultimate identity.

RA It seems to me that what you end up with is something more than the original unity, because you have a situation in which unity can be a living reality. It’s not like the universe is striving just to go back to the un-manifest with nothing going on; it’s that the universe seems to be forming a more and more sophisticated instrument through which it can know itself, human beings being one. The human instrument can be fine-tuned to the extent that the fundamental unity can be known and perceived while yet living within the boundaries of human life. Those boundaries become universal in their nature with the proper sort of fine-tuning.

RS When I was in college in Oklahoma, I became very fond of the works of Alfred Jarry, a French surrealist and dadaist writer. Jarry once defined god as the tangential point between zero and infinity, and this formula of his has stuck with me ever since I read it. I do believe that the cosmos is trying to employ us to facilitate an awareness of the fact that the creativity that is inherent in the universe can best display itself when unity and diversity meet at that boundary where both display themselves but neither is in fact present. That’s where the real creativity is, and that is very much what the *kundalini*, in my opinion, is attempting to do. For some people, the proper path is to sit down, do their *sadhana*, awaken *kundalini*, send it out the top of their head, and return to wherever it is they came from. But for other people, the right direction to follow is to direct *kundalini* to identify progressively less with their individuality and progressively more with the unity. In such circumstance, a dynamic interplay between those two forms of identification will develop, which will foster creativity in the context of the world in which that individual lives, with the people and places and things, and the dogs and trees, and all of those things that we can bring more awareness and more love and more reality to.

RA You said an interesting thing in our correspondence. You were talking about

integrating physical and spiritual life, and that health and longevity require that *ahamkara* identifies strongly with the organism so that sufficient *prana* will enliven the body while spiritual life requires that *ahamkara* relinquish most of that identification. No incarnate being can be either wholly worldly or wholly spiritual; too much spirit burns the world out of you and makes it impossible to retain your body, too much attachment drowns your consciousness in worldliness. There’s a term you’re probably familiar with, *leshavidya*, which is the faint remains of ignorance. You need to have that little greasy surface on the palm after casting off the butter ball, you need to have the faint remains of ignorance in order for unity to be a living reality.

RS Absolutely. This is one of the things that is not generally comprehended about spirituality in general and *kundalini* in particular: if you want to stay in the world, there will always be some grease on the palm, always some blind spot, however tiny. As my Jyotisha guru, a very eccentric Punjabi gentleman, likes to say, a real guru makes only one mistake every ten thousand years; that is, however, still one mistake. All of the deities and rishis made mistakes; the story of the great rishi Viswamitra documents his several mistakes, one every ten thousand years or so. A mistake is still a mistake, still a limitation. Jesus Christ on the cross asked why he had been forsaken. He was otherwise utterly aware that he had not been forsaken, but for that tiny moment he lost that awareness. And that was Jesus Christ—that’s not you and me.

Everybody has some limitation, and there’s no use in pretending otherwise. There is in my opinion no use to announce that we’ve come to the end of history, or the end of the Vedas, or the end of anything else; and there is certainly no use to declare that you’ve become enlightened. As soon as you say that you’re enlightened—well, I don’t even think there’s a word for enlightenment in Sanskrit, in the sense that the word has taken on in the modern world.

RA Don’t you have *moksha* and words like that?

RS Indeed, but does *moksha* really mean enlightenment? *Moksha* literally means emancipation or liberation; it means that you’ve been freed. As my mentor liked to say, “*moham kshayati iti mokshah*”: the destruction of delusion is *moksha*. Vimalananda liked to say that what enlightenment really means is thanks to the grace of your gurus and benefactors, and your own hard work, the weight of your karmas has diminished, which lightens you. Once you are lighter you can see more clearly, your energy moves more clearly, and you can connect more readily to clarity itself. *Moksha* doesn’t mean that you’ve become supreme in the universe; it means that you have gained the ability to function within the universe as you are meant to function.

RA So you would probably agree that there is no ultimate state beyond which there is no possibility of further refinement or clarification, but there’s always a next horizon no matter how many horizons you’ve reached.

RS As far as I have been taught, and as far as I have myself seen, every experience that can be had can also be transcended somehow. I see no more end to horizons than I can see an end to universes, and the way it looks now, to modern physics, big bangs are happening all the time, even as we speak.

RA Some physicists say it’s like bubbles in ginger ale; there are just infinite universes all bubbling around. A few minutes ago you rattled off a description of what some people might like to do, which is sit down, awaken their *kundalini*, have it rise up, go out the top of the head, and they’re out of here. Anyone who could do it so easily and smoothly and quickly is one in a billion. For most people, it’s a delicate, long drawn out, perhaps arduous, perhaps extremely intense, process, full of all sorts of potential pitfalls and sidetracks and difficulties. Let’s have a discussion about the realistic experience as most people are going to

experience it, if they do, of what happens when kundalini begins to awaken and the various stages of progress that one has to undergo in order for its awakening to reach its full blossoming or maturity.

RS I think the best thing that can be said about kundalini awakening is that it is truly individual, absolutely different for everyone who experiences it. I think it is unfortunate, though understandable, that people try to talk about a standard kundalini experience, as if there were such a thing. In fact, merely knowing the word ‘kundalini’ and having some idea about the *chakras* offers your awareness—offers your ahamkara and kundalini—something to identify with, and can in some cases distort your experience. Maybe, possibly, you have awakened kundalini without bothering to awaken any of the chakras or maybe you’ve only awakened one chakra but you read that there are six chakras that all have to be awakened and then you start to pay attention to all of those six chakras when you may not need to, since ultimately you don’t need to pay any attention to anything other than the supreme reality. What is important, for kundalini awakening, is that your prana needs to enter the innermost sheath of the central channel—the *sushumna*.

RA OK, so you’re saying that kundalini can awaken without you really knowing anything about kundalini, all the various chakras can become enlivened and awakened without you really knowing anything about chakras, that you can sort of shoot for the highest first—the supreme reality. You know, seek ye first the kingdom of heaven and all else shall be added unto thee—that kind of thing. Is that what you’re saying?

RS Yes, that may work for some people and may not work for others. The chakras are definitely very useful, when they actually exist. The word chakra has taken on its own constellation of connotations that have now become implicit to it, connotations that work on us without us necessarily being aware of how they’re working. The chakras are centers of energy, and certainly

centers of energy exists at the throat and the heart and so on. Many of the texts in which the chakras appear do not identify six; some texts talk about nine, some mention only one. But the chakras are energy centers that do not exist in ordinary human organisms, that have to be created within us by shakti that penetrates to the subtlest levels of those locations in order to enliven the potential chakra that exists in the subtle body at that location.

RA So you’re saying that for the average person who hasn’t enlivened any of the chakras, they’re there in the subtle body but they’re in a sort of latent or dormant form—

RS —a seed form that is not yet sprouted.

RA So they don’t really serve any kind of function whatsoever? There’s no sort of digestive area chakra, heart chakra, intellect chakra—they’re just sort of non-functional potentials that don’t actually do anything until they get enlivened?

RS Well just suppose for a moment that here is a seed at the heart chakra and this seed is in the subtle part of the subtle body. Being a seed, it has a strong energy and that energy, even though the seed itself is not yet displaying everything that it can do, still radiates in all directions. That radiation is picked up by the rest of the subtle body, which transmits it into the pranic body, and creates strong pranic centers—

RA Just let me ask, is the pranic body more manifest or less manifest than the subtle body?

RS It’s more manifest.

RA More manifest, OK.

RS Right. We have the physical body—the physical body is, in Sanskrit, the *annamaya kosha*. *Anna* means *food*: the physical body is made out of food, nourished by food, made sick by food and made well by food. The pranic

body, or *pranamaya kosha*, is made out of prana; it is made sick by prana and made well by prana. The subtle body is the *manomaya kosha*. *Mano* means *mind*—literally, “the thing that measures”. The mind is made out of thoughts, emotions, concepts, memories, and all sorts of similar matter; it is made sick by those things and made well by them. The mind is the field in which we represent the five elements in non-physical form; the body is the field in which we represent the five elements in physical form. Prana communicates between the two. Now prana, of course, is an expression of the supreme reality, which makes prana extremely intelligent, in a limited way—

RA —individuated.

RS From the perspective of the body—especially our commensal bacteria but also our human cells—prana *is* god, because it provides all of our cells with life and vitality. The amount of manifested awareness in a bacterium is, to be sure, not large, but the amount of awareness manifested in prana itself is indeed vast. Prana possesses consciousness; not precisely the sort of consciousness that we humans think of when we think about consciousness, but rather the consciousness of life itself. Prana was born at the moment that protoplasmic life appeared on Earth, and has evolved its own awareness, the awareness of the life force itself, via the life experience of all protoplasm ever since.

During the more than three billion years of life on Earth, this awareness has incarnated in bacteria and trees and dogs and every other living being, by virtue of which it has gained immense experience, immense awareness about how awareness and matter interact and can cooperate with one another. Prana has driven evolution on our planet, as it seeks always to create the best possible protoplasmic platform through which to radiate awareness. It would appear that the human being is the best-evolved organism (thus far) for this purpose, though prana basically has to recapitulate evolution each time a new human being appears, first in the womb, then outside it.

When conception occurs, awareness has first to build a body, growing it during pregnancy and then infancy and childhood; this is a full-time job. It is only after puberty begins that individuation really starts, because of the agenda of our species. Everything in the universe has its own agenda; the agenda of nature is that all existing species should evolve, which require all species to reproduce. Individuals are born, grow, age, and die, and new individuals must emerge, so that the species-pattern that has been established in living protoplasm can continue and eventually create new species. Tremendous energy has been working tirelessly via the various species of humans for millions of years for the purpose of moving us in the direction of increasing openness to the supreme reality, and the energy of nature has been simultaneously moving us equally ceaselessly in the direction of continuing to evolve the various species of human. Both these agendas require reproduction, which can only happen when one sperm and one egg meet, which can only happen when the producers and bearers of sperm and ova come together. In plants pollen must get to flowers, via the wind and bees and what-have-you; in animals you have mating seasons and displays and the like. Modern humans have rock concerts—

RA bars—

RS and bars—

RA Match.com, Christian Mingle—

RS There are now so many methods, but they all serve the same purpose. Puberty is a crucial phase of individuation; it’s nature telling the organism, “Congratulations! You have survived long enough to truly individuate! But there is no free barbecue for you,” as we say in Texas. “You have been given this organism and it is your task, now that you are able to reproduce, to do so, to produce more of your kind or at the very least to provide meaningful assistance to your relatives and friends who are producing more of your kind.” If you’re not going to have kids yourself you will do well to do something nice

for somebody else’s kids, so that you can pay off the RNA, the debt that you owe to the *yoni*, to the species in which you were born. That debt has to be paid, one way or another.

I personally have no children, but I spend and have spent a lot of time in and around families that do have children, including this very family in whose home I am now sitting. I’ve known the lady of the house for forty years thus far; I met her husband a quarter-century back, and the two boys when they were born—they are now 24 and 19. I’ve met them regularly every year since their births, and now I often do things with them as adults, including traveling together.

RA Some people probably don’t do either.

RS Many people do not do either. Perhaps they’re helping out in some other way; I hope so. In any event, nature obliges all individuals of all species to reproduce, and reproduction in humans happens solely as the result of the union of one female human and one male human. Now we’re talking real individuality. Nature furthers its agenda by promoting individuality, and this is why adolescence provides us an opportunity to introduce adolescents to the kundalini shakti. Only an opportunity is not feasible; today especially, kids get so easily taken over by Facebook and Twitter and other similar forms of addictive social media that they spread their awareness so far into the “fake” archetypal world that they never become acquainted with the world of genuine archetypes.

Even when it is feasible to introduce awareness of kundalini it may not be easy, though it is often easier for girls than for boys, because girls enjoy a natural “initiation into adulthood” in the form of menarche. As soon as a girl starts to bleed, a wise mother will take advantage of that radical shift from childhood into fertility by presenting to her to the basics of female spirituality. In the past this used to be done for boys also, and it is more necessary for boys

because a boy’s physical transformation is less dramatic than a girl’s. Boys would be taken out by the elders of the tribe and beaten up a little bit and subjected to privations and forced to do something really difficult, to force them to understand that there was something more to life than just indulgence. In some societies, the really sensible ones, the boys would also be shown how the transformation happening within them provides an opportunity for them to learn what their goals in life really are, in particular their ultimate goal, which is to reconnect to the supreme reality.

RA You’re saying that ideally, in a culture, when the hormones start to kick in and sexual desires begin to become strong in adolescence, one is at the same time introduced to the idea that there is a higher purpose to this energy aside from just procreation, that you have to counterbalance the procreative drive with the desire for spirituality.

RS Exactly. We humans are microcosms, so even if all you did was to introduce children to the concept that they are small units of the big universe, but reflecting everything that goes on in that universe, that would be really useful.

RA I think what you’re implying here is that—and, of course, most people who’ve read about this stuff have come across this idea—that the sexual energy is the very same energy that one uses to awaken the chakras and rise to higher levels of spirituality and it should be used responsibly and not just squandered, in order to facilitate that awakening. It has its purpose for sexuality but that has to be put in proper proportion, as does everything in life. Food has its purpose but you can become a glutton.

RS Yes. Sleep has its purpose but you can lie around in the hammock doing nothing all day. Because sex is such a primal drive, central to the continuation of life on earth, nature goes out of her way to make this desire so strong. On the one hand, yes, it’s a specific desire, but desire is desire. You can take a specific desire and, if you alter its direction, you may end up

in a very different place than you would have had you simply followed that desire to where it was leading you, directed by your personal karmas, the karmas of your parents, and the karmas of your culture. That's of course where we hope that your guru, mentor, or benefactor guides you, gives you an idea about potential creative uses for this energy, uses other than simple procreation, uses other than what everybody else is telling you to do with it, and what you may be imagining about it. Interesting transformational possibilities do exist, subject to practical limitations.

In my case, I never wanted to become a professional dancer, but had I had that desire, I would not have been able to fulfill it, because I was never coordinated enough to become a dancer, even when I was young and vital and enthusiastic. I could've tried, but I would have failed miserably. You have to know your limitations. But, in the context of those limitations, there are still many, many things that you can do that will move you in the direction where you really need to go, which is the direction of being as transparent as possible to the supreme reality while at the same time being a functional human being.

RA We could talk about priestly celibacy, which probably arose in the Catholic church from this principle we're discussing here, but it's not for everyone and if it becomes something that's mandated for everyone, at least for a whole class of people, then there are problems.

RS And we see what the problems are. If celibacy is something that's natural and spontaneous, then that's great. If you realize to yourself, wait, this is not really what I want to do, I don't really want to be part of the world as it is, I want to spend my time more in that other world even though I'm going to be partly in this world—that's a wonderful thing. But not everybody can do this, and especially not in the context of an institution. When things start to get organized—you know the old saying: God said "Look, here's awareness!" and the devil said, "Great, I'll organize it!" When spiritual things get organized—

not just in the Christian church, in any organization—problems will arise. Consider India's sadhus. Though some are really genuine, fine human beings, and a few are most amazing, probably 90 or 95% are just ordinary individuals who should not have taken sadhu vows. A few of them are actually malign. Many wander around saying, "Yes, I'm celibate," meaning "celibate" in a very particular sense. As they say in India, "*Mile to mari, nahi to sada brahmachari*," which translated loosely means "If I find her I will enjoy sex with her" (actually a stronger word is used), "otherwise I'm always a brahmachari." So, "I'm a brahmachari—whenever I'm not having sex."

RA Yeah—so a lot of hypocrites and phonies out there.

RS All of us, at some time or another, me especially, have acted hypocritically, but there is great value in being able at least to admit to yourself what you are doing, and to find a way to stop doing it. Unfortunately, once you develop in yourself a really strong pattern, it can become so strong that it can take you over. As Vimalananda would very frequently say when I was pouring out whiskey for him, "Whenever you drink, remember one thing: either the drink is going to drink you or you are going to drink it." What he meant was that whiskey will change your internal chemistry, which will change your awareness, and either you will use that altered awareness to become more open to the supreme reality, or you will use it to reinforce all the limitations of your awareness, which will drive you to repeat your usual mistakes. In this context your biggest mistake will be to drink even more, since that is alcohol's chief agenda. Alcohol wants you to drink it, so that people will brew and distill more of it, so that more people will drink it. Michael Pollan—his name is so appropriate, since he writes about botany—wrote a book entitled *The Botany of Desire*, a book about how four popular species—the apple, the tulip, cannabis, and the potato—have learned how to induce humans to serve them.

The cultivation of carpet grass is another good example of how plants can induce us to assist them in their spread. Think about it: otherwise rational humans, mostly men, spend hundreds of hours of their valuable free time each year doing nothing but tending to smallish patches of green in front of and behind their houses which they have to regularly cut. In this way a handful of grass species have colonized millions of acres all over this country and others. We could argue, in fact, that the grass has taken over those humans that care for it, and is driving them around telling them what to do. It has been suggested, and I personally endorse this view, that almost every species out there very much wants to get humans to work for them. Other species are aware that humans are the world's paramount species, and that humans can make big changes in the world. Look at our pets: dogs control us, cats control us. They have found strategies that work well for them. These strategies work because humans are willing to identify these other species as members of the extended human family; for some people, their pets are their family. Our species does things like this because of ahamkara, the ability to identify as self things other than our selves.

When you start to release ahamkara from your normal self-definition, you start to ask, "Who am I? Now I know that I'm not only the body, and if I am not just the body, then who exactly am I?" Just asking the question "Who am I?" was sufficient for Ramana Maharshi. Unfortunately, it's not sufficient for everybody, because everybody doesn't have that supreme ability to see things as clearly as he did. My mentor used to say that although people give discourses on the *Bhagavad Gita* all the time, they don't realize that the *Bhagavad Gita* was delivered by Krishna, an *avatara* of a Vishnu, to Arjuna, who was nearly a rishi himself. We only have the record of the words they used; unless you're at a similar level of awareness, how will you be able to perceive the actual prana that was being conveyed between them, the emotions that were being conveyed? You won't, and because you won't you will only be able to see the words, and you will try to interpret

the words without the shakti that they transmitted. Maybe you'll come up with some novel interpretation, and you'll find some people who will go along with those interpretations, and they will build you a temple and ashram, and you will sit there amid your interpretations, creating more complications instead of disconnecting yourself from your already-existing complications.

RA You brought up some interesting points there. The one about the plants, if I were to summarize that, I would say that there's an evolutionary force that permeates and ultimately motivates all creation and that you can see it functioning in various plant and animal species in that they conduct themselves in such a way as to have other species, namely us, the most influential one, serve them. There's sort of a higher intelligence that can be discerned in these so-called more lowly intelligent species. That seemed to be the key point.

RS And the more that we think of ourselves as being the higher species, the easier it is for these other so-called lower species to manipulate us.

RA And then the point about the *Bhagavad Gita* and the temples and all that. You're basically saying that people can speak or write, and do naturally speak or write, from their level of consciousness but that's usually not the level of consciousness from which people hear or read what they've said or written and so there's a communication gap. And knowledge crumbles on the hard rocks of ignorance. Things can be completely garbled and misinterpreted and misunderstood and watered down. People on a spiritual path find that they can read a book like the *Bhagavad Gita* every five years for fifty years and that every time they read it, they get a new level of meaning out of it. Their level of consciousness has inched its—

RS It's evolved.

RA It's come closer to the level at which it was expressed.

RS Exactly. In certain Indian contexts, that's what the guru would do. The guru would find a text or a practice—let's use a text as an example—and he would tell the student to go study the text. The idea was that the text provides a framework into which you can take the experiences that you have—both your internal experiences and the experiences you have externally—and you can try to use them to understand how you as an individual interact with the idealized world of the text. The text conveys something mythic, something that's out of normal time. The text is in mythic time and you are in normal time, and the creative dynamic between those two time streams facilitates even more evolution, both in you and in the myth itself.

RA Interesting. Let me bring it back to kundalini again. I've seen all sorts of things over the years. I've been on long meditation courses. In one particular case there was a whole group of people who were actually asked to sit on the stage who were going through *kriyas*—just kind of flying, thrashing around. I've seen people almost literally bouncing off the walls. I have a friend whose body was cooking so much that he could sit with the windows open in the wintertime with hardly any clothes on and he was still hot. I have another friend who really went through hell with kundalini and was unable to sleep and was burning up lying on the bathroom floor at three in the morning with this sort of intense energy frying her. Eventually she passed through that and it all settled down. I just told her I was going to be interviewing you and she read something you wrote about kundalini. She said "It sounds very scholarly. I'd like to know if this is coming from his own direct experience." So that's one question for you. How much have you experienced all this yourself—going through the whole kundalini awakening process? And she added that, "It's interesting you should send this now because I've had the deep insight recently that the whole kundalini experience is illusion, just more maya, just another belief system. I'm saying that as someone

who has been thoroughly convinced of this reality of the energetic journey for thirty three years." I didn't respond to her, but if I were to respond, I would probably say you can write off anything as illusion. Gravity is an illusion but it's still a phenomenon in relative creation that you have to deal with and respect. In any case, the key question here is the intensity of your own kundalini experience, on what foundation you speak and write about it. Also, perhaps, what advice and even cautionary notes you might give for those who want to get more involved in it and think it would be cool to awaken their kundalini—what they might actually be getting themselves into unknowingly.

RS Well, let me start off with my advice to people who think it would be neat to awaken kundalini. My advice is: Don't. You absolutely do not have any clue as to what you might unlock in yourself, what you might unleash, and you have no clue as to whether you'll be able to put a leash on it.

RA Once awakened, kundalini cannot be put back to sleep.

RS Exactly. In my personal case, I had no idea at all about kundalini when, just a few weeks after I turned 16, I took LSD for the first time. All of a sudden, without knowing anything about India's spirituality—OK, I had read the *Bhagavad Gita* maybe, without understanding anything or thinking it was particularly interesting—that was of course the Edgerton translation which was a bit—

RA Pretty dry—

RS Dry, yes. All of a sudden—I had never heard the word "prana" before but all of a sudden I KNEW what prana was, I felt it moving, I understood how it was moving, and I also understood that if I permitted myself to do so, I could easily depart from my body. I also understood without knowing how I understood it that if I did exit my body at that moment—having never had any thoughts of this sort of thing before—I

still somehow understood that if I exited right then that I would be unlikely to be able to return. There was a strong pull to leave, and a strong sense of needing to stay; I spent quite a number of hours in that in-between state. Those hours during which I hovered between leaving and not leaving created some tensions in my pranic body that took many, many years to work out.

That was the first time I took LSD; I took LSD—I don't know—another 100, 150 times, even though it didn't benefit me by providing me further clarity about how to proceed. However, LSD and the other entheogens I later experimented with were, at that time in the 60s in Oklahoma, the only things that I knew of that I could use to expose myself to an immaterial reality that I knew I had to get more of.

Once I realized that I had to find another path to follow, I knew I had to go abroad to try to find it. When in the mood I can be methodical, so I figured out a way to graduate from college after two years, and then I went to Africa, which was, at the time, the most exotic location that I could think of. I crossed Africa overland from the west coast to the east coast. In Kenya I got an opportunity to participate in an ethnographic expedition during which, for a variety of reasons, I was invited to join the tribe. I did so; I am the first white man ever to become a member of Kenya's Pokot tribe.

Joining the tribe was quite an experience, and, though I had to proceed to Europe shortly afterward, I intended to return and spend a longer time there—something that never happened. Even though I've never been back there, and even though the main reason that I was invited to join was so that the initiation could be filmed and otherwise documented by the ethnographers (to preserve something of the tribe's traditions, many of which have, sadly, already disappeared), something real happened during that initiation, sufficiently real that I can still feel the earth of Africa deep in my own organism. Africa is a place of great reality of a certain variety, and this experience was the culmination of

several other unusual experiences I had had while crossing the continent. I was, for example, cured of a severe disease by a "witch doctor" in Ivory Coast, and while I was recuperating there, I read *Autobiography of a Yogi*. After finishing it, I knew I needed to check yoga out.

I flew from Kenya to England, crossed overland to India, got robbed there, hated the place, went to Nepal, loved the place. After three months in Nepal I heard the Dalai Lama was going to give some teachings in Bodhgaya in India. Though I had heard of the Dalai Lama and Buddhism they then meant nothing to me, but everybody else was going so I thought I'd go too. In January 1974, I and 500,000 Tibetans and a bunch of other people landed in Bodhgaya for only the fourth Kalachakra initiation that the Dalai Lama had ever performed. The Kalachakra really blew my mind; the whole thing, and His Holiness, for sure, but most significantly, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. There was something about him—even physically, he was a very large man—but there was something else about him that I could sense but not name. I saw him and thought, "I don't know what he's got and I don't know how he got it but I gotta have some of that myself." My whole organism aligned with that experience, and I intuitively knew that I had to go in this direction. That meant that I needed to stay in India for an extended period, which meant I needed a long-term visa. The easiest way to get such a visa back then was to become a student; but I had no idea of how to go about getting a student visa.

In the event, I procured one within a week: after the Kalachakra ended I took the train from Gaya to Bombay, where a few days later I met a couple and their son outside a restaurant who introduced me to other people through whom I met India's then most eminent Ayurvedic physician, who immediately arranged for me to be accepted into the Tilak Ayurvedic College in Pune. I began my studies there in May 1974; sixteen months later, in Pune, I met Vimalananda.

After I was introduced to kundalini I had no idea of where I was going to go or how I was going to get there, but I knew that whatever this energy was

in me, I had to work with it, to try to do something good and to try to hold together while I was doing it. Of course, I had no real idea of what I was doing, and so I made mistakes; happily, none of them were fatal. Several accidents befell me, and I was jailed twice, once for four hours and once overnight. Each time the energy dragged me back into the right direction, often in spite of myself. Back at that time, no, it didn't manifest in me as a bunch of kriyas or heat or whatever; it manifested in a different way. It was completely transformative, but in an often harsh way until I finally started to comprehend how to refine the experience, which took some years.

Was all that an illusion? It was, in the sense that I was experiencing something that I could not have explained or communicated to anybody else; ordinarily I wouldn't have believed that what I was doing was "spiritual", but this energy had taken over and was moving me in the direction of where I clearly needed to end up, without knowing how I was going to get there.

RA You're saying that perhaps your LSD use actually awakened kundalini and that once awakened that energy began to direct the course of your life in ways that probably your peers back in Oklahoma couldn't have imagined and you could never have imagined would happen. One thing just kept leading to the next. But you're kind of crediting awakened kundalini with this orchestration of your destiny—this intelligence woke up within you which began to direct the course of events in mysterious and ultimately beneficial ways.

RS I think it's important at this point to draw a distinction between the physical kundalini, the pranic kundalini, and the mental kundalini, because self-definition happens at all these different levels.

RA As we have our existence at all those levels, would you say that kundalini has its kind of manifestation and functioning at every different level?

RS Absolutely. If you are existing at any

level, the only reason you're existing at that level is because there's a part of you identifying as being at that level—that which we call ahamkara. Ahamkara and kundalini are the same thing—the only difference is one is directed towards greater manifestation in the externalized multiplicity of the duality of the physical world and the other is directed in the opposite direction. The *prauritti marga* is the life path that extends outwards in all directions, and the *nivritti marga* is the path back inwards. Expansion and contraction, externalization and internalization, this duality is continuous at every level.

RA Kundalini then is responsible both for accreting and preserving our individual identity and at the same time for dissolving it. But as we discussed earlier, its dissolution is not its destruction; it dissolves the binding influence so that we grow to realize that we are not only that but we are both the universal and the individual and can live the two in an integrated way. Is that what you're saying?

RS Exactly. I would propose that anytime that your awareness becomes disconnected from your individuality and becomes connected to the cosmic or the ultimate or whatever you want to call it, to the extent that your awareness is able to connect to that reality, to that extent it is kundalini that is connected to that reality. At this stage it would probably be good not to call it kundalini all the time, because that word has now accumulated additional associations, even in India, but especially outside India. Even though I was born in the West, in the United States, I was fortunate to be born to parents who were Christians in the real sense of that term. I have had a personal connection to Jesus Christ since I was very young—not just an intellectual and not just an emotional connection, but gut level connection as well. As that developed, and to the extent that it had developed by the time I took LSD, I had already established a connection to the non-physical world in a positive way, which was incalculably valuable for me.

Many get connected to the non-physical in a negative way; some for example when very young are taken over by a disembodied human or some other astral being with a not-particularly-spiritual agenda, and that being becomes part of their reality from a very young age, and directs much of what they do thereafter. Thank God that didn't happen to me. Thank God. Instead I was able to experience, to a very small degree no doubt, the reality of Jesus Christ; and it was in that inner environment, however distorted it might have been by my mental & emotional impurities, that the awakening of the prana kundalini occurred. The prana kundalini seeks to enter the central channel and move in it without obstruction.

As my mentor used to say, there are two basic routes to spiritual development: the right nostril and the left nostril. The right nostril is the sun, the left nostril is the moon; the right nostril is jnana, the left nostril is bhakti. Eventually you need both jnana and bhakti, because the only way to get kundalini into the central channel is to get your nostrils, and the channels in the pranic body that are associated with them, into balance. But that's not so easy.

Once you grab hold of the tiger, and the tiger starts to sprint, it will be a roller coaster ride, and you will have to hold on, somehow. Your body will do whatever it can do to try to compensate. If the energy floods the right nostril you'll start to burn up; if it takes over the left nostril you'll get cold, constricted, frightened. If you feel sufficiently terrorized you will grab hold of some concept and use it as a post on which to tether your sanity. It's understandable; your body can't have all of its cells suddenly waking up to the supreme reality; you would explode. Your body has to find a way to hold onto some of that prana, somehow; later, if you are fortunate, you'll learn how to let it go. Or maybe you'll never let it go; I've seen many people who've had partial kundalini awakenings who freaked out and got stuck, and never let go. They can still make progress, but that progress will be limited so long as

they continue to cling to whatever belief or idea or image it was that kept them from completely flying to pieces when they were going through that initial awakening.

Of course, your situation will be far worse if prana is unable to move freely because your pranic channels are obstructed. Anything that you consume but do not digest—including food, prana, thoughts, emotions and ideas—will behave within your body like toxins, which will make your adaptation to the energy all the more challenging. If I had it all to do over, I would have started doing yoga at age one month, and I would have continued doing yoga as I grew so that I developed a foundation of good control over my prana. Then, when the awakening dawned, I would have been able to circulate the prana, insuring that I had sufficient downward-moving *apana* to keep myself stable and using the rest to connect to other realities.

RA You probably would have skipped the LSD altogether—

RS Yeah, there would have been—

RA no need—

RS no particular use for that.

RA Right. What you've just been saying points to several things in the notes I took. One is that you mentioned that, ideally, kundalini must awaken in a slow and controlled way. With practice and preparation you have to build a foundation. As you said, you would've started yoga at one month and you would've built a strong physiological foundation for its awakening. Maybe we can also refer to something else you wrote, that kundalini without, perhaps, that necessary preparation, can awaken in such a way that it inflates and empowers limitations, so one may end up with an insatiable hunger for sex or food, or a huge ego inflation or deflation. You wrote of half-baked aspirants, inflated with the power and charisma of kundalini, becoming gurus.

RS Well, let's suppose that the kundalini is awakening, the prana is moving now, trying to get into those very, very, very subtle spaces where it can activate the seeds of those chakras—

RA Are you referring to the sushumna here?

RS Sushumna.

RA OK.

RS Getting your prana to move into sushumna is doable, with some effort. But prana moving in sushumna means nothing more than prana moving in sushumna. Prana has to become much more subtle before it can attain to the level of sushumna where the chakras are, which is the level where the five elements exist, the five elements that make up the fabric of our external reality. When you start to be able to directly connect to those five elements it is critically important that you be calm and stable, otherwise you can do real damage to yourself. That's why the chakras are buried so deep in the pranic body: so that you will have to willfully apply abundant attention and subtlety of awareness if you want to reach them.

But, of course, sometimes kundalini starts to move before your awareness has been thoroughly clarified. She is moving upwards, trying to find her way to the supreme reality, but her awareness as ahamkara can still be reactivated. Suppose you have an inordinate fondness for food. Your regular expression of desire for food directs much of your attention, and therefore much of your prana, to the fire element, which is in charge of appetite and digestion. The fire element in its subtlest form appears within the most rarefied portion of sushumna, and in its less subtle forms appears in less subtle regions of the pranic body, as well as in the gut, the solar plexus, in your physical body. These locations are all centers of fire energy; they are not chakras in the ultimate sense of what a chakra is supposed to be, but they are energy centers nonetheless.

Any energy that flows into these

less subtle centers will, if you allow it, encourage more energy to project itself preferentially into those less subtle centers. If kundalini flows into these less subtle centers, your pranic and physical bodies will be delivered tremendous amounts of prana which will create within you a strong desire to activate those regions of your organism. Since this happens before the process of transformation has progressed very far, your personality will still retain substantial limitations, making it unable to see things from a wider perspective. You will then think, "I'm so hungry that I simply have to eat," and you will eat, and then eat some more. The more you eat, the more you will be hungry for, and you can easily find yourself spiraling into a food addiction.

This can happen in any part of your organism, and it can happen to anyone, anywhere. How many so-called gurus have we seen, in this country and others, who have achieved perception of a certain quality and degree of absolute reality, but then fail to recall that such perception must be continuously re-refined, and all detectable personality limitations continuously re-dissolved, if one is not to reinforce one's blind spots? Your organism will make use of whatever personality structures you may possess for the purpose of maintaining a sense of stability to permit it to continue to exist while kundalini is trying to dissolve it; and the personality structures that are most likely to be available to be self-identified with are those very blind spots.

RA That is a real interesting point you just made. It's insidious. There's this sort of subtle tricky tendency which usually flies totally beneath our radar to reinforce, as you just said, to buttress structures of the individuality of the ego and to prevent its dissolution, to prevent the takeover of unbounded awareness. It's so tricky. That's what they say maya is. There are so many interesting stories in the Vedic literature about maya tripping people up.

RS Yes, like the story of Narada, the celestial musician who wanders from

universe to universe as a devotee of Lord Vishnu—

RA Oh, is this the story about the water?

RS Indeed. Narada asked Vishnu, "Please show me your Maya," and Vishnu said, "OK. Go meditate over there." Narada sat by the river, meditating on Vishnu. Before long a beautiful woman showed up, and suddenly Narada was overtaken by love for her, and forgot Vishnu entirely. Narada and the woman married and had children, and were living happily until one day a terrible flood came that washed away Narada's home and family. This made Narada miserable, and as he sobbed uncontrollably over his loss Vishnu suddenly reappeared and said, "Now have you seen Maya?"

If Maya can do this to a being like Narada, what might Maya do to you or me? What about Moses? Moses was no an ordinary person; he had directly communicated with God, he had extracted the Israelites from Egypt and guided them through decades in the wilderness, and just at the moment when he and they were about to enter the Promised Land God said to Moses, "Speak to the rock over there and it will give you water." Maybe because of the influence of Saturn, or of his ahamkara, or because God really wanted it that way, or for some other reason, Moses didn't speak to the rock; instead he hit it with his staff. Water came out, no doubt, and everyone drank; but then God said, "Oh my goodness, Moses, what have you done? Now, as a result of this, you can't go to the Promised Land which you've been trying to reach for the past umpteen years. Everybody else will go, but you are going to have to stay behind here." Oops! If confusion can happen to someone like Moses, it can happen to you or to me at any time. It has often happened to me, many times; it's depressing to think about it. But there's no escape; you have to keep refining, keep refining, keep realizing every morning as you get out of bed that some degree of abject ignorance is the price that you pay for being able to exist as a human being. You simply have to continue to refine.

RA And you're not going to keep refining if you think that there's nothing more to refine, if you think—

RS You're not going to keep refining if you think you're already refined.

RA If you think you're done. That's actually a key element in these interviews. Usually, toward the end, I ask the person, "What's the next horizon for you now? Where do you see it going from here?" Most people have some sense that there's going to continue to be refinement but some people think it's a dumb question. "How could there be anything more? All there is is this." And the whole notion of further—in fact there are some fairly predominant spiritual circles these days which regard the whole notion of progress and levels of development and all that as utter BS. They feel that it's just a concession to duality and that it's just going to hang you up; you're forever following the carrot and not sort of realizing that you are that now.

RS Just as you were saying that, there was another earthquake.

RA There's no real earthquake; of course, there's no earth.

RS There's no earth and it's all ultimately an illusion. If that's the case, I will gladly watch while you sit in the middle of the Swarovski store and pieces of crystal fall on top of your head and you maintain your calm awareness of untroubled non-duality. And yes, I agree, gutter water is absolutely the same as clean water, and if you can live on dog shit, go right ahead. But I need to see you doing that in order to be convinced, because otherwise I'm not convinced. This I think is something that probably was, at least to some degree, accelerated by the Victorians when they were in India—the concept of *Vedanta*. Now Vedanta is a very noble concept but nobody seems to pay attention to the fact that it is *veda + anta*. *Anta* means *end*; *veda + anta* = the end of the Vedic process. Most people today who talk about Vedanta appear to be unaware that the process of Vedic study was oral. The

Veda was not written down until very recently; for thousands of years, its study was exclusively oral—which means in practice that a student of the Vedas had to sit for three hours a day for twelve years reciting his portion of the Veda.

At the end of twelve years of Vedic recitation you can be sure that you would have perfected both asana and pranayama; you simply cannot sit reciting for three hours without aligning your prana. I've done it; I know. But recitation alone will not offer you access into the Vedic world; if it were sufficient, many thousands of priests and their parrots would have been enlightened by it. No, to enter into the Vedic reality you have to activate the mantras you recite so that they introduce you to various ethereal beings, with whom you will need to establish equitable relationships. Only at the end of this complex process will you be in a position to assert that you are ready for Vedanta, for only then will you be able to see that there is something beyond both the physical and the astral reality that cannot be imagined, much less spoken of.

Just the other day I was re-reading the *Isha Upanishad*, which plainly states that, while those who follow *tamas* go into a very dark place, even that place is not so dark as the place that is attained by those who follow the path of knowledge.

RA I remember that verse.

RS Vimalananda used to say that the worst ahamkara, the worst egoism of all, is the egoism of knowledge, the state that exists when you have a little knowledge and think you have vast knowledge.

RA A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

RS A little knowledge is a terrifically dangerous thing.

RA So what you're saying is, there's nothing inherently wrong with knowledge but—there's a Tibetan proverb which I often quote, "Don't mistake understanding for realization and don't mistake realization for

liberation." I get the sense—I harp on this too much probably—that there are a lot of people who become aware of this whole *Advaita* thing and non-duality and so on, and it resonates with them deeply and intuitively. They then mistake that knowledge that begins to dawn for the actual experience to which these sages and scriptures refer but as you said in the thing that you wrote, what many consider the culmination of their practices may be just be the beginning. There are a lot of people who seem to think they're finished who are probably just starting out, in the big picture of things.

RS And in no way do I suggest that their experience is not real. But it's one thing to have that experience and be in that space, and another thing to integrate reality into your daily life. Otherwise instead of alcohol, it's the experience that takes you over—if you're drinking in the experience, that's one thing; that can be useful, because the experience is an interface between you, a manifested being, and the unmanifest. It's a snapshot of where you are in your process of transformation, but it is only a snapshot; the process is, or should be, ongoing. If you grab hold of the experience and cling tenaciously to it, you interrupt the process, and get stuck there. You must digest your experiences, and understand that they are nothing more than indications of how your relationship with the unmanifest is developing. Everything in life is a relationship. Recently I read something that suggests that, from a mathematical point of view, the entire universe is nothing but relationship. Forget the particles, the waves, and everything else. Relationships alone exist. In India, we say that these relationships are with various forms of awareness interacting with themselves—

RA—consciousness interacting with itself

RS—in different ways. And interaction with the unmanifest is verily blissful. But as an individual human being, you possess certain constraints, constraints that mean that you will not be able to

experience the reality of the supreme 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, without dissolving. You must have some greasiness on you palm, or your nose, or somewhere else, there must be some interface that will permit you to connect to your limited being. Even if you are able to drive your organism from way up in the sky, you will still need to somehow connect the blissful you and your not-always-blissful organism. Whatever is your connection will be your Achilles' heel.

RA Yeah, and to a great extent it's a matter of integration and stabilization. I think there are people who—I think I know some—for whom the experience of whatever phrase you just used—the ultimate, the supreme—is largely predominant 24/7 but it's like a zoom lens which, if they're in traffic, it's gonna reside in the background a little bit because they have to deal with the situation at hand. But it doesn't take long for it to zoom forth again once it's practical for it to do so. You mentioned Christ earlier and getting crucified and kinda losing it on the cross for a bit. I always wonder about people who say they're awakened or enlightened, "How well would this hold up under crucifixion?" I mean it sounds a little morbid, it sounds a little gruesome, but you know to what degree is this enlightenment actually stabilized under the most severe possible conditions?

RS I have traveled to Italy on many occasions, and have often visited Assisi. Several times I have also been to La Verna, the sanctuary where St. Francis received the stigmata. St. Francis went out of his way to make his life difficult and miserable, especially in La Verna. And at La Verna, in the locations that he frequented, a quality exists that you can't help but feel, a flavor of how, despite all of the difficulty he went through, how connected he was to that reality. I believe that the awareness of St. Francis—which you can still sense in La Verna, and at his tomb in Assisi—would be able to hold up under crucifixion. But how many humans have ever attained to the state that St. Francis did?

And there's Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth guru of the Sikhs. The story is that the Mughal Emperor Jahangir was misled by Guru Arjan Dev's own brother, sadly, who testified to the emperor that his brother was a traitor. Jahangir, who was an overuser of wine and opium and so had a tendency to act before thinking, sentenced Guru Arjan Dev to be baked to death in hot sand in the city of Lahore. His disciples were forced to watch, and those disciples were of course very miserable, because their beloved guru was suffering so. Finally one disciple could no longer stand it, and blurted out, "Guruji, just say the word and I will use all of my shakti to burn down the entire city of Lahore." At that Guru Arjan Dev, despite his intense misery, had to smile, and replied, "My dear, you are my disciple. Do you think that if you could burn down Lahore, that I could not do the same thing myself? Do you think that I could not have escaped somehow, had I wished to? No—I submitted myself to this torture because this is the will of God, and the will of God is extraordinarily sweet. I couldn't turn away from the will of the Supreme, no matter what the cost to me."

RA Interesting.

RS Yes. I thank God daily that I don't have to do go through something like this. I have my own difficulties—everyone does—but at least they're difficulties that I can personally weather. I don't mind difficulties; my prayer is, "Let me please survive them."

RA Well they say god never gives you more than you can handle.

RS And I think that's probably true as long as you're willing to handle what you are given, and as long as you're aware that you have to handle it. I fear that this is what goes on with some people who think they have reached. There is a natural desire on the part of your organism—body, mind and spirit—to be stable. Should you reach a state of awareness in which you are able to connect to the supreme reality on a regular basis, and you find yourself

feeling really stable in that state, it will be very easy for you to come to the conclusion that this—

RA—right, that you're done—

RS—that you're done.

RA In a couple weeks I'm going to interview a woman who had sort of come to that conclusion. She'd been on this spiritual path and she was very easily absorbed in samadhi and in a real nice place all the time and then she gave birth to premature twins, both of whom were blind and severely brain damaged and handicapped. Her life tuned into this incredible challenge which brought her to the brink of suicide. But then she somehow managed to digest all this and incorporate it and learn the spiritual lessons from it and kind of integrate it. And now she wouldn't actually trade it for anything because it was something that god gave her which she could barely handle but managed to handle, and turned out to be an evolutionary opportunity.

RS Wow. I salute her.

RA Yeah. We talked about yogis falling. We didn't use that terminology, but people getting egos, getting inflated, and people feeling they're done and becoming half-baked gurus and all that. What would be the safeguard against that? Having a guru oneself who can tell you you're not done, that would be one I suppose or—

RS That is the best way.

RA And having a good measure of humility even if you don't have a guru so as to keep yourself in check, or is that perhaps like trying to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps? And you really do need an external guide who can keep you going?

RS My personal opinion and the opinion of my mentor was that it is very desirable to have an external guide. You know the old saying, The doctor who treats himself has a fool for a patient.

You don't have appropriate perspective. For the same reason a good doctor will rarely want, in a crisis, to treat his—

RA—his daughter or something.

RS Yes. If you can find a human guru, this is a great thing, but maybe this doesn't happen. Lord Siva is a handy guru, Jesus is a good guru. There are gurus out there.

RA But that can just be your imagination. There are people who would say—they wouldn't use the word guru—but they would say that Jesus is their guru and they're handling rattlesnakes to prove it. You can delude yourself.

RS You can delude yourself even if you have a good guru.

RA True.

RS It's happened on many occasions. And if you don't have a guru, there's the famous example of Dattatreya. He's not called Dattatreya in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*; in that text he is known as "the *avadhuta*," but Dattatreya is well known as the original and ultimate *avadhuta*. Dattatreya explains that he had 24 gurus, none of them was ever aware that they were acting as gurus to him. He witnessed what was going on in their lives, learned from it, and transformed himself. Of course, he was Dattatreya. So far there's been only one Dattatreya.

RA There was that story in the *Mahabharata* where Arjuna's rival for supremacy in archery was rejected by their guru because the guru had promised Arjuna that he would make him the best archer. So the guy went off into the forest and built a little statue of the guru, worshiped that statue, and became the best archer, until the guru caught on to it. He made him cut his thumb off but—

RS His name was Ekalavya.

RA Right.

RS I get two main lessons from that story.

Number one is, if you are truly focused, as Ekalavya was, and not cheating your awareness, you may be able to project that quality of guru-ness onto something and have that thing guide you. But it is so easy to cheat your awareness: "Oh yes guruji, are you suggesting that I have lasagna today? OK, I will" or, "The guru has revealed to me that you will become my consort." Provided that you can restrain yourself, you can use such a 'guru-projection' as a guru.

The other lesson relates to Dronacharya, Ekalavya's weapons guru. If you are a guru and someone has gone through that 'guru-projection' process and has succeeded so spectacularly that he actually became a better archer than any of your own personal students, then you need to accept that face that you were in fact his guru, though you were never such in person. Making such a student chop off his thumb, which ruined him as an archer, is a terrific insult to the process of teaching itself; you perfect a student and then destroy him. What a karma! You will have to pay a heavy price for that karma, so it happened with Dronacharya: When during the war he (wrongly) believed that his son Ashwattama had been killed, he became so despondent that he permitted himself to be killed.

RA Interesting. I forgot that that was the resolution of the story. It always bothered me that he made Ekalavya cut his thumb off, I thought, wow, what a creep.

RS India has two epics. The *Ramayana* is all about Rama, who believed that he had a good idea of his personal dharma, and tried his best to follow it. In the *Mahabharata* everyone has some unsolvable question of what dharma to follow and how to follow it. The *Bhagavad Gita*, which forms part of the *Mahabharata*, distills this dilemma for Arjuna. His obligation to his immediate family and his allies and to Krishna Himself is one aspect of his dharma, and his obligation to his cousins and grandfather and guru is another. Arjuna is naturally taken aback when Krishna tells him that he

must boldly go forth and murder his guru, grandfather, and cousins, for it is a central principle of classical Indian society, clearly delineated in the dharma texts, that no karma is worse than murdering your guru—who happened to be Dronacharya. How can Arjuna even come to grips with this? Krishna had to show him his universal form before Arjuna could actually realize that the only answer is for him to keep both those dharmic realities in his awareness simultaneously, acknowledging both, no matter how difficult that might be. Eventually one has to do the same thing with kundalini: to keep both the reality of the infinite and the reality of zero aligned with one another at all times, without permitting cognitive dissonance to take over.

RA And that is probably the key. If you get established in yoga, in being in the absolute and universal consciousness, then perform action, you will automatically reconcile all these polarities and paradoxes and irreconcilable dharmic conflicts that the human intellect simply can't figure out, cause karma is unfathomable.

RS Exactly. That's what yoga really is. It's joining together two things that are in the ultimate sense fundamentally identical but, in the current environment in which we live, are polar opposites. Instead of allowing them to polarize and be apart from one another, one must bring them to a place where, at the very least, they're joined at a point. It's like a placenta. Half of it is created from the mother, half of it is created from the fetus—the two halves of the placenta arise from two different organisms but blood and nutrients can shift between the two.

RA Yeah. We started out this conversation talking about polarities. There are political polarities and then there's the pro-gun and the anti-gun, the pro-abortion and the anti-abortion. There are so many polarities—they're kind of tearing our society apart—which seem irreconcilable. There's very little common ground or communication going on. But the way I see it, and I think

you alluded to this, with an infusion of divine consciousness from the most subtle level into society I think perhaps we'll see that, mysteriously, solutions are found which manage to reconcile and harmonize these polarities. We'll be able to progress and survive as a society.

RS That is certainly my hope. That's the way we've survived so far. Somehow or another, some sort of compromise has always been reached. During the Civil War an extreme level of conflict was required before that compromise could be reached, and the compromise that was reached was quite imperfect: first there was Reconstruction, then Jim Crow and re-segregation. Ironically it was Woodrow Wilson, the man who tried to get rid of war by promoting the League of Nations, who re-segregated the federal government—a good example of how two very different polarities can exist in one person. Frankly, it seems to me that compromise should be possible for at least some of the polarities facing our country now. For example, I don't want to see abortion available on every street corner, and I also don't want to have women going into back alleys and dying miserable deaths as a result of botched procedures.

RA Right.

RS And I certainly am fine with hunters (including many of my relatives) going out and shooting deer and feral pigs for food, but am not fine with people being able to take guns into churches and colleges and airports and—

RA Yeah. If we infuse a more enlightened consciousness into the equation, into the situation, then I think that tendency to polarize diminishes, the tendency to rigidly adhere to one end of the spectrum without appreciation for the other. You're an example of someone can see both sides and they don't have to be mutually exclusive. They can both be incorporated into a larger perspective. Enlightenment has practical applications for the mundane issues that preoccupy our society

and offers solutions to a lot of these destructive conflicts. For instance, take the environment: is global warming real, is it not real? Both camps are divided—of course the scientists are on the side of it being real. But a solution which is holistic is, let's not worry about whether it's real or not. Let's progress and come up with technologies which would be beneficial regardless of whether global warming is manmade or not. There can be an economic advantage; it won't cost us jobs, it will create jobs. You know, that kind of thing.

RS We know that there is more CO2 than has been in the atmosphere for what? Hundreds of thousands of years?

RA Millions.

RS Whether or not this is going to cause global warming or global cooling, it's not normal, and cannot have a good effect. We may not know what the effect is, but we can be very sure that any time—this is basic science—any time you take a system at equilibrium and suddenly add something to it in massive amount, that system will go out of equilibrium. Moreover, there are way too many humans now, more than the effective carrying capacity of our planet if we desire health for our many terrestrial ecosystems. It's our responsibility as the apex species to be all the more attentive to minimizing as best we can our footprint, our impact, on all levels of our existence.

RA The point I keep coming back to in my own thinking is that the best way for us to do that is for higher consciousness, enlightenment—whatever terms we want to use—to become more prevalent in the world. This is part of my motivation for doing this show. As Einstein said, you don't solve a problem at the same level of consciousness at which it was created. You have to go to a new level of consciousness. This is the principle of second element—you don't get rid of the darkness in the room by investigating it or analyzing it or arguing over it; you get rid of it by bringing in a second element, light. Then darkness

is found to just disappear. I think that second element—and this ties back to the whole kundalini discussion—is the sustenance, the essence, the energy which animates everything, is that divine energy. Perhaps all the difficulties we see in the world are due to insufficient flow of it, insufficient supply of it, and if it can be enlivened in the world, it will enrich the world and help all these problems to dissipate, just as a dullness and deadness of individual life is dissipated by an enlivenment of it within the individual.

RS I agree entirely and, sadly, I think a big reason why there is an impediment to progress in this direction is the fact that so many scientists are such dedicated materialists.

RA Yeah.

RS This is for me the basic difference between Indian science and modern science: modern science believes that everything is based in matter and that consciousness arose by some process of *deus ex machina*, while Indian science believes that consciousness is in fact the base of all existence and that matter emerged from consciousness as consciousness became progressively more opaque to itself. In no way do I deny the reality of matter, but I'm often amazed when I read or hear well-trained scientists becoming ridiculously vehement about the impossibility of consciousness existing outside of protoplasm. How can they possibly know? That insistence is so utterly unscientific.

RA I know, and that's a topic for a whole other discussion. Some of the people I interview, we have gone into that to some extent. In fact you might enjoy the science of non-duality conference out in California. It's a whole bunch of spiritual people and a whole bunch of scientists getting together and discussing issues such as that. Probably better wrap it up. It seems like you and I could go on all day just taking little seed thoughts and expanding upon them. This has been great. I really enjoyed this conversation. Is there anything that is in your mind

or that you'd like to throw out before we finish? Anything we haven't covered?

RS One thing more, which I would like to address to people who like your friend went through a kundalini experience and who are now asking themselves whether that experience was nothing but delusion. To these people, and frankly to anyone who is going through any kind of kundalini experience, I would like to say this: in my opinion, the most important thing in life is to stay calm. You can if you like freak out when no crisis is occurring, but when a crisis does occur, like last night's earthquake when we had to wonder whether a wall might actually collapse on top of us, you have to be calm. Maintaining calm is your path to survival. Whatever the crisis, you have to know where to position yourself, when to run and hide and when to do something else. You will only be able to function effectively in a crisis if you can maintain sufficient awareness of what's going on in the world outside, and an understanding about how you might act effectively in that situation.

A calm attitude is even more essential when your organism is experiencing the earthquake of redefinition, so please don't jump to conclusions, don't assume anything. When your transformational energy gets activated anything you imagine has a much greater potential than usual to actually manifest in some way, to become concrete. Please keep coming back to whatever it is that you have faith in. As a friend of mine in India is fond of saying, your real guru is the last face that you would see in your mind's eye as you were drowning. Whatever is most dear to you will come to mind as you go down for that third time; whatever that may be, grab hold of it tenaciously and never let go, because that's the thing that will have the power to keep all your prana and your organism and your energy and all the rest of you focused in more or less the same direction as you proceed through this transformational experience.

RA Well, they say that the last thought at the time of death determines the next birth.

RS That's the same thing here. Because this is a kind of a death and rebirth experience, that thought that you have as you're dying to your previous self is going to determine substantially how you're reborn to your new self, even though it happens to be in the same physical body.

RS Although the last thought at the time of death isn't necessarily edifying. So wouldn't you say that the real anchor that we need to take refuge in is the self, the absolute. That's why Krishna was able to smile on the battlefield, because he was that ultimate reality and therefore the drama unfolding before him couldn't overthrow, him couldn't overshadow him.

RS It's true, but of course he was Krishna and he was always, or almost always, swimming comfortably in that ultimate reality. My mentor therefore used to say that, until you get to a state of similar elevation, you are better off having a form and a name to focus on, whether of Krishna or Jesus or a giant cosmic mulberry. Kundalini has been "put to sleep" by evolution in general and your time in the womb in particular; she sleeps when she identifies with the five elements that make up your physical body—earth, water, fire, air, and space and the five elements from which the subtle body is fashioned—smell, taste, touch, form, and sound. For as long as she is habituated, conditioned to exist within these sensory walls, kundalini will continue to search via your senses for items composed of those gross and subtle elements. Until your perception becomes subtle enough to have "awakened" from the need for name and form, it's often most useful to have a tool that is connected to at least one of them, a name or a form.

RA Like a mantra or something.

RS A mantra or a visualization. The face of god. Something that you can grab hold onto until your awareness is sufficiently stabilized in the expansive way that you can just focus on that expansiveness.

RA Right. And then it won't be a matter of willful focusing. It will just be that you are that and nothing can shake it.

RS Exactly.

RA Are you aware of this kundalini care institute in Tennessee? Joan Harrigan? A number of my friends have gone there and say that they've had great results in terms of kundalini that was blocked or misdirected being unblocked or redirected.

RS I have. In fact a friend of mine went there—it must be 15, 20 years ago—and also reported very good results. I haven't been there myself so it's only hearsay but I heard good things back then, and you can report good things now.

RA Yeah. I haven't been there myself but half dozen friends have gone and said good things about it. So I'm just throwing that out in case there's anybody listening to this who is having kundalini problems. They might want to look that up.

You've written about a dozen books, including *Aghora*, books I, II, and III, and *The Greatness of Saturn*...quite a renaissance man.

RS Well, the more that I learn, the more that I realize just how ignorant I really am, which is a great blessing.

RA That is a good thing yeah.

RS Good to know your limitations.

RA Thanks again, Robert.

RS Thank you.

RA I've been speaking with Robert Svoboda and this interview is part of an ongoing series. There are about 225 of them in the can so far. I do a new one each week. They can all be found at www.batgap.com 🙏