

International Institute for Humanistic Studies

Yoga of the Heart

By Myrtle Heery, *Yoga Journal*, May/June 1986

An interview with Irina Tweedie - at 79, a "wise old woman" of the Sufi path

Since its publication in 1979, Irina Tweedie's *The Chasm of Fire* (abridged) and *Daughter of Fire* - an account of her spiritual practice under the tutelage of an Indian Sufi master - has become an underground classic, in large part because it was one of the first books to address the difficulties encountered by a modern Western woman on the spiritual path.

When I met Irina Tweedie, I was immediately taken by her rich, thickly accented voice and her relaxing, intimate manner. I felt myself to be in the presence of a very familiar soul, and my questions seemed to emerge of their own volition, from a place deep within myself that really wanted to know. Through her nurturing, clear, strong, humorous, and deeply loving presence, Tweedie revealed herself to be a woman in the fullest sense - and one who has clearly attained some measure of spiritual understanding.

In your book *The Chasm of Fire* you speak about the difference between the spiritual journey for men and the spiritual journey for women. Could you please explain that difference?

The creative energy of the Absolute works in men and in women in a completely different way. The man uses his creative energy to beget children - it manifest in man as semen. But we women hold (or rather keep) the creative energy of the Absolute in our chakras. We have it already, and from a spiritual point of view we don't need to get anything else. Consequently, for men it is rather difficult to reach a spiritual level, because the energy of sex has to be transmuted into something else.

For us women that is not absolutely necessary. What is important for us is not to be attached to material things. You see, we make human beings. The

human being is born from us - nourished by our blood, by our bodily substance - and it is really part, not only of our psyche, but of our body as well. The man contributes a spark; we give everything else. For us, security, money, protection, home, food, and, above all, someone to look after us, like a man (he usually does), are of extreme importance. For us renunciation doesn't consist in trying to get rid of those things. The only thing we need is nonattachment. That is the real renunciation, and that is the most difficult thing for us.

You spoke in your book of the physical and emotional agony one goes through on the spiritual path. Is it possible for a woman not to go through such agony?

Absolutely possible. It depends on the human being. We are all absolutely unique. I suppose in my case it was necessary because I had so much pride. My teacher mentioned one day that I had very bad karma, and of course by nature I was very rebellious. I think that was the reason I had to experience so much suffering. I don't think it is necessary for everyone. In my case I was trained according to the tradition of Tyaga. Tyaga is complete renunciation. Not every human being needs to renounce everything. I was attached to things. My husband left me rather well off, so my home, my money, everything had to go. The spiritual life is absolute insecurity. It's not just like walking on water, it's like walking on air.

You speak of your path. Could you tell us about the Sufi path you are on and how it emerged?

My teacher belonged to the Indian branch of the Naqshbandi Sufis. Sufis were a wandering sect of monks who called themselves the "brotherhood of purity" and went from prophet to prophet in search of truth. They are older, much older, than Islam.

Are there certain practices and beliefs that you follow on your path?

Very few practices. I have found that the Sufi path is the freest imaginable. Nobody spoonfeeds us or tells us what to do. The teacher gives us a few very simple rules, a certain meditation, and the rest we have to do for ourselves.

But the ethics on this path are very strict, especially where stealing is concerned. If one possesses more than one needs, one is stealing. Our teacher told us that even if we don't return the library book in time, we are stealing, because somebody else could have it. And if we are eating more than we need, we are stealing because somebody else could have that food. We have no right to take more from our environment than we absolutely need.

What is your understanding of *ahimsa* on your path?

To refrain from killing, said our teacher, is only a very crude notion of *ahimsa*, harmlessness. *Ahimsa* is much more complicated than that. Above all, human beings must not harm themselves. And how do we harm ourselves? We create habits. When we create a habit, we put ourselves into prison. If I cannot be without tea, I put myself into a prison. If I say I cannot do without cigarettes, I am imprisoned by the cigarettes. According to Sufism, we put ourselves into prison, and we have to let ourselves out. No one else can do it for us. The key is through the heart.

You speak often in your book of the heart. Is Sufism the path of the heart?

Yes. This is the path of love and the path of the heart. Of course, I don't mean the physical heart exactly, but rather the psychic center of the heart, the heart chakra.

How is kundalini approached on this path?

In the yoga of the heart, the kundalini awakens gently; one doesn't notice it at first. One becomes aware of it only when it has already reached the heart chakra; then one feels peace, release, great gladness, and much love. Before that, kundalini is awakened so gently that one doesn't even notice it. Kundalini can only be awakened through deep meditation that just happens by itself. To meditate in order to awaken kundalini is, I think, to pick up the wrong end of the stick. The energy called kundalini is earth energy. It's considered to be feminine and is the same energy that is at the center of every atom. This energy is absolutely necessary to reach reality. That is why all the scriptures say that to reach reality we have to have a physical body. If we

don't reach it in this lifetime, we have to wait for another reincarnation. If kundalini awakens by chance or by mistake or with the help of a teacher who is not competent enough, it can be very dangerous. The person can end up in the mental hospital or even die. Our teacher once told us, "People die of it, people go mad. But with me, nobody ever did," and he smiled. He was a very powerful teacher.

On your path, is it necessary to have a teacher?

Sufis say that it is necessary, but the outer teacher always points to the inner teacher. Strictly speaking, one does not need a guru. Life is the greatest teacher. But to see that life is the greatest teacher, one must already have reached a certain stage of spiritual evolution. Otherwise, it's like saying that everybody will be wise when they reach eighty. Of course, not everybody is. Sufis say that a teacher is necessary because the Sufi path is the path of the mystics. On the mystical path tremendous things can happen: visions, voices, powerful dreams, appearances, ecstasies. If you have never experienced such things - which of course you usually haven't when you first begin - you need a teacher to help you along. And later certain experiences are of such magnitude that you really think you are going mad, and you need someone to take you by the hand and say, "No look, it's all right."

You spoke of the teacher guiding you, once he left his body. What was your experience of this?

The goal of every yoga is to lead a guided life. If the teacher is really a great being, he can bring the disciple to a level where the disciple can reach the teacher after death, and vice versa. I did not know that at the time, however, and when he died, I felt he had betrayed me. I was desperate, and I felt I needed to be absolutely alone. I went to the Himalayas. There one day, in deep mediation, I discovered I could contact my teacher. At that moment my real spiritual training began. From that moment, I had to lead a double life: a normal life in this world and a kind of constant listening within.

Is this what you refer to in your book as the ever-presence of God?

Yes, it is as if one lives on two levels. Part of you is constantly listening to

this inner guidance. It happens quite naturally. And the other part is living in this world. At the beginning it is not easy, but later you get used to it; it becomes quite automatic.

This experience did not happen until after his death?

Yes, this experience happened when I discovered I could contact my teacher. One night in deep meditation my teacher was there. I can't explain how, but I suddenly knew that it was the teacher. He had no physical form; he was just pure power. The whole of my being shrank down in absolute terror. But little by little I got used to it. There was total communication, total guidance. Somehow, you just know. The mind absolutely accepts that this is not you speaking, but something else. As the years went by, this guidance came to me less and less. More and more I was left alone to make decisions, and in the beginning I was very uncomfortable. I would try to contact it, and there would be nothing there, just absolute silence. And then, in one split second, when I deeply needed it, my mind would know. It was like an impression in the heart, and it was clearly not me because one split second before I had known nothing about it. Sometimes the answers to the questions were things I couldn't have known as a human being. I am a very ordinary person; how could I have known the answers to the complex problems that human beings sometimes have. What is so much more wonderful is that the answers were inevitably correct.

This state you are speaking of is actually quite practical, then?

Yes, quite practical. Such knowledge is not acquired, but rather reflected from a different plane of existence. You see, it is said in the scriptures that at the end of the spiritual path the soul, or atman, of the teacher and the soul of the disciple are united. I never understood this sentence. Perhaps the clue is to be found there. A union takes place on a certain level of which the mind knows nothing, and perhaps the knowledge comes from there. I have nothing to say on that because I myself do not know how it works. When I need it, it is there. And I know also that I earned the right to have it for others, never for myself. I paid for it with myself.

It sounds like your state of desperation opened you to a mystical

experience.

Yes, that's exactly what happened. When my teacher sent me back to London, I told him, "I will be alone. What shall I do?" He just shrugged and said, "You will be desperate, and you will cry out. He's always there. Just tune in." I think this state of desperation, the state of utmost necessity, triggers something off in us, opens something within us, that lets that knowledge come through.

Is the mystical experience one that anyone can attain?

A mystical experience is something perfectly normal that every human being experiences in his or her life at one time or another, without knowing that it is a mystical experience.

Is a mystical experience different from living with the full presence of God, or is there a similarity?

Yes and no. Mystical experiences are like everything else: they are relative, and they can be of different intensities. The great mystical experience of the presence of God is, of course, the highest. There are some people who I thought were not at all spiritual, yet they experienced that state after only a short meditation. They can have tremendous, absolute, transcendent experiences of something that could be called God. Now how do you explain that? It is said in the scriptures - not the Sufi scriptures, mind you - that perhaps they have had this experience in a previous life. I have no explanation for it.

It sounds as if a very significant portion of your experience was left out of your book the experience that actually started after your teacher's death, which opened you to a more fully spiritual experience of God's presence being with you all the time.

I know that in order for these communications to be possible, part of me must always remain in infinite peace, as if at the feet of God. What do people see? Just a human being, an old woman with her mannerisms. That is something one can ignore. But if the human being is able to identify himself or herself

with that within which is eternal, then things happen constantly in the most mysterious way.

There is a lovely girl who has been coming to me every day for many years, and somebody asked her, "But what do they do in this group? You just drink tea, you are together, you meditate, and there is hardly any discipline." "Nothing happens there," she said, "except the extraordinary." Every day miracles happen. Our teacher is really palpably with us. In this group all sorts of things are happening. We are very much involved in humanity. Babies are born, people die, couples get married everything happens there. And help is given and given and given. People pass exams, children get well, because they are asking. There is a way of asking with the heart. If you ask with the mind, nothing happens. But if you lift your heart with faith and love, things happen so easily.

People have visions, of course, and those can create some problems, not only for the one who has the vision (because it's very confusing) but also for the one who has to sort it out. Usually we do it in a group. And we interpret the dreams in a Jungian sense, because what started me with my teacher was that the ancient yoga tradition of Sufism is absolutely identical to Jungian psychology. My teacher interpreted my dreams. All the dreams were left out of the original version of the book because the publisher didn't think them important. But they were extremely important. My teacher sent me back to London just because of a dream. I complained to him, "You are sending me back just when it seems that I am getting somewhere. Why?" "Your dream told me that you should go," he said. "You will not progress with me here. You have to go into the world and do some work. Sitting here is no good for you."

What is the relationship between Jung's individuation and the spiritual life?

I think that spiritual life starts where individuation ends. After all, Carl Jung said himself that individuation is never a spiritual event; it is entirely psychological. It makes a human being capable of marrying, creating a relationship, of working - leading an ordinary, normal human life. But the spiritual path takes one a step further, beyond the personality. Even during the process of individuation, there are many signs that the human being is more than what we see of each other. Sufis believe that we are eternal, immortal, and ancient, that we are without beginning and without end. We are just a ray of God, a part of the spiritual sun.

It seems that, in psychotherapy, even in the Jungian tradition, you are building the ego up, while in the spiritual tradition the ego is being destroyed. Is it necessary to have a strong ego before entering the spiritual path?

As far as I have seen, and as I have read in the works of Carl Jung, psychotherapy doesn't exactly build the ego up. Rather, it makes a human being conscious of the part of himself called the ego. The process of individuation is an intensely humbling experience in which you understand what you really are and have to swallow all your darkness. The moment we realize that everything is latent within us, all possible crime, all possible ego, we can never judge another human being anymore.

With all the different spiritual groups emerging now, it seems important that there be an acceptance of different paths to God instead of a competition among them. Is it possible for people to know in their hearts that all paths do lead to God?

Yes, I think it happens automatically. The so-called competition really takes place only on the surface. You see, the human being has to understand everything through his or her conditioning. It is tremendously difficult. We are absolutely individuals; we must see that every religion and every philosophy will suit somebody somewhere. Christ had to speak to the ignorant fishermen in a different way than Mohammed spoke to the Arabs who were riding on their camels and fighting constantly, tribe against tribe. The sophisticated Buddha had to speak to the elegant priests of the Hindus in a completely different way than, say, Zoroaster. Of course, in many groups they say, "My teaching is better than the teaching of the other," but that's not good. Scratch a little below the surface of every religion, every philosophy, and you find one truth underlying everything. But at the beginning I don't think it's necessarily bad that human beings belong to different groups and become dogmatic. What is dogmatism? It is limitation. A time comes when everyone transcends this limitation in meditation and begins to understand that really all paths are different roads to the top of the mountain.