



1. TIMOTHY CONWAY

This "insubstantial figure in the dream, pointing to the Divine Dreamer," has lived and studied the nondual essence of our sacred traditions for 40 years since an utterly life-changing, spontaneous awakening to God or Reality in his 16th year in the hills of Southern California. Timothy fortunately met many enlightened masters, especially in Advaita Vedanta (Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, Annamalai Swami and others among Sri Ramana Maharshi's immediate followers, Amma Amritanandamayi, Anandamayi Ma, Mother Krishnabai, Dadaji of Calcutta, et al.) and various lines of Buddhism (Taungpulu Sayadaw, Shifu Hsuan Hua, H.H. the Dalai Lama, Seung Sahn, et al.), as well as spiritual adepts in Taoism, Sufism and mystic Christianity and Judaism. Timothy has freely shared the "pathless path" of deep spirituality for over 25 years in satsangs and in free ongoing education classes at the Santa Barbara City College. Author of *Women of Power & Grace: Nine Astonishing, Inspiring Luminaries of Our Time* and the forthcoming *India's Sages--*

Volume 1, India's Sages: Nondual Wisdom from the Heart of Freedom, profiles 40 authentic sages from the modern era; the even more massive Volume 2, India's Sages Source Book: Nondual Wisdom from Hindus, Buddhists, Jainas, Tantrics, Sants, Sikhs & Sufis, features over 120 wonderful sages and scriptures from India's "living past." A trilogy of works focusing on nondual spirituality, religion, science and political justice is also in preparation.

www.enlightened-spirituality.org

INTERVIEW

In the Pali texts the Buddha said, "One should not make Dhamma (teachings) a trade." He also said the "The Dhamma is the highest gift," Ud 6.2 Jatila Sutta.

But some people reason today that "we do not live in India and its two thousand five hundred years later and we do not all want to become Buddhist monks." They suggest that this Buddhist dharma should be reevaluated, reassessed or modified to suit our times and western mindset.

So, should Buddhism be more flexible, adaptable, more user friendly for lay teachers so that they can charge for these sorts of teachings?

Timothy Conway: John, the Buddha made those types of statements because he knew that it can be really dangerous to make a commodity out of the Dhamma/Dharma for selling into a

"marketplace." One sooner or later starts thinking of oneself as having a "spiritual career" and regarding fellow beings as separate "clients," a type of "other" in an economic realm where "marketshare" tends to become a strategic concern and a source of vanity where "successful." So the entire enterprise is insidiously rooted in dualism, a subtle or not-so-subtle attachment to financial security (if not full-blown selfish greed for extravagant wealth at the expense of others), and the ignorant sense that one is some kind of superior spiritual being who is "entitled" to receive compensation for a service and/or set of products. And one can so easily fall into selfishly strategizing how to get more and more "disciples," especially wealthy ones. I have heard or read of far too many so-called "enlightened spiritual teachers" who have succumbed to this syndrome. They take to traveling around to get more disciples, more marketshare.

All of this is anathema to the Buddha's repeated teachings about letting go all clinging, all sense of the "me and mine" conceit, all sense of entitlement, all sense of being a "somebody." It seems very likely, based on the entire Pali Canon sutta literature, that the Buddha might pointedly ask a "spiritual teacher" charging people money whether he/she can truly, unconditionally *love* people if there is any trace of wanting to get or keep them as paying clients. Knowing Siddhattha Gotama's teachings about no stealing, I even surmise that the Buddha might say that a teacher who uses market-manipulation techniques to lure visitors and followers into thinking that they *need* the teacher's teachings is actually guilty of trying to steal from them. This is the manner of the "snake-oil salesman" who tries to foment a sense of problematic need in his listeners and then tell them, "I have the answer to your need, the solution to your problem."

The Buddha's model for the way of healthy, functional (not dysfunctional) sharing or teaching is simply that of the *kalyana mitta* (Skt.: *kalyana mitra*), or "helpful spiritual friend." The *kalyana mitra* is a more-or-less liberated "free being" who, in a spirit of real love, caring, empathy, and yes, heroic generosity, altruistically and charitably serves fellow beings like a good friend, brother or sister by freely sharing with them the highest gift of Dhamma, the Truth that sets persons free into their Supra-personal (not "impersonal") Buddha-nature or Nibbana/Nirvana or boundless Awareness (anidassana-vinnana).

Persons who feel called to a vocation to share Dhamma/Dharma teachings might consider getting useful jobs within society (in keeping with the Buddha's teachings about right livelihood) and then freely share the spiritual teachings in their spare time, without charging fees or even "suggested donations." And I would especially recommend being mindful of any desire to travel around in the role of "teacher," if there are any lurking narcissistic traits in the psyche any desires to be seen, heard, rewarded or adored.

One can trust that the Open Awareness or Formless Source for this miraculous manifest dream-play will certainly provide for the well-being of the body-mind person within the dream. One need not presume to separate other people from their money so that one can role-play "teacher."

Can you please tell me what dana means to you concerning the teachings of the Hindu traditions, of Advaita Vedanta?

Timothy Conway: John, there are several traditions of Advaita or nonduality in India, starting with the classic tradition based in the

ancient Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Brahma-Sutra (Vedanta-Sutra), strongly revived by Sankara (flourished somewhere around 650-700, according to the best scholarship) and formally carried on by his renunciate successors, the Sankaracaryas and their monastic and lay followers. There are other potent nondual Advaita movements and lineages in India, too. These include early Mahayana Buddhist movements; Hindu sects of nondual "parabhakti" or "abheda bhakti" (supreme, nondual devotion) based on the Bhagavatam Purana (now dated back to the Gupta era) and other philosophically-sophisticated nondual devotional texts; the nondual Buddhist and Hindu tantra movements starting with Saraha, the fabled Mahasiddhas, and Hindu texts like Yoga Vasishtha and Tripura Rahasya from the 7th centuries onward; Kashmir Trika Saivas of the 9th century onward; the Natha Siddha Yogis following Gorakhnath (c. 11th/12th cent.); Allama Prabhu, Basava and the 12th century Virasaivas; the Varkari Sants of Maharashtra starting with Jnaneshvar and Namadev up through Eknath and Tukaram (13th-17th centuries); the Nirguni Sant mystics of north and northwest India from 15th-16th century onward including Kabir and his followers in the Kabir Panth, Dadu Dayal and Dadu-Panthis, Guru Nanak and the Sikhs; and also the various nondually-oriented Muslim Sufi groups.

In some of these groups, one might occasionally hear of someone bringing an offering to the sagely teacher or adept, and that offering might or might not be accepted. But I've never read of any teachers in these traditions charging money for darshan-audiences, for discourses or for dialogues. The teachers in these movements were either 1) renunciates who went on almsrounds or, if they stayed in ashrams or monasteries, they relied on unsolicited incoming donations to keep everyone fed; or 2) they

were householders who usually then supported themselves via some kind of work. If there were ashrams or monasteries involved, a kind of "spiritual socialism" ensued wherein those persons of great means the royalty or wealthy business class spontaneously were inspired to donate from their largesse to support the spiritual community and visitors through the building and maintenance of residential spaces, canteens, health clinics, etc. This was the model inaugurated by wealthy patrons in the Buddha's time and by the beneficent Buddhist emperor Asoka in the 3rd century BCE and carried on since then.

Historically, therefore, it is an aberration of our modern era that many so-called "Hindu gurus" in the last 45 years or so beginning most notably with Mahesh Yogi and his T.M. movement in the West, especially after he brought in those former Gurdjieff followers in the late 1960s to help him heavily organize and expand T.M. have developed a big business model featuring fee-based courses leading to more courses, initiations, promotions, etc., in order to generate considerable amounts of money. Most of the money, in turn, goes right back into growing an ever-larger institution. Very little, in most cases, goes out in charity or good works projects to benefit needy persons in society at large. Many Indian guys (and a few gals) have followed this institutionally-self-serving business model. Rajneesh, Swami Chinmayananda, Muktananda and Gurumayi's SYDA Yoga, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Jaggi Vasudev, the Oneness Movement founder Vijay Kumar (the self-styled "Kalki Bhagavan"), young Nithyananda of Tamil Nadu, numerous western followers of Harilal Poonja (Papaji) of Lucknow, and many others. Even the SRF movement organized decades ago by the followers of Yogananda Paramahansa in the

USA institutionalized and grew itself in this way with courses, initiations, etc.

Again, I see this as an aberration but one that has become widely influential in our time. It fosters the idea that if one undergoes a few unusual "spiritual experiences" (whether or not they actually lead to a bonafide degree of liberation) one is then entitled to start promoting oneself or hiring others to promote oneself as an "enlightened One." A missionary campaign or even crusade mentality sets in and new recruits are lured in for fee-based talks, courses, and initiations. A portion of the money can then be used for even more grandiose "promotion of the Guru" in the spiritual marketplace.

There has been much tragic abuse, chicanery, self-delusion and mass delusion with the more unsavory among these money-oriented movements.

True sages have nothing to do with such karmically-entangling activities within the "me-dream."

To see what I mean, just study the lives of India's modern-era holy men and women starting with Ramana Maharshi, Narayana Swami of Kerala, Swami Gnanananda of Tirukoiliyur, Siddharameshvar Maharaj and Nisargadatta Maharaj, Anandamayi Ma, Anasuya Devi, Papa Ramdas of Kerala, Devaraha Baba, and Mata Amritanandamayi or "Amma the Hugging Mother." In Amma's case, it's true that organizers who facilitate her extensive world tours and India tours every year since 1987 to enable her to spend long hours hugging and guiding millions of people these organizers (many of whom came from the heavily commercial TM and SYDA Yoga movements)

have raised a lot of money for the M.A. movement. But Amma has insisted that the bulk of these funds be used for seva/service projects to the much wider society. Independent investigation has shown that her movement has one of the very lowest overhead rates of any large charitable group on the planet. She takes virtually nothing for herself and her hard-working renunciate sannyasin and brahmacarin followers beyond the most basic alms for food and clothing. So Amma is a good exemplar for a situation where, even if money is raised, in that "spiritual socialism" I mentioned earlier, the funds are quickly recycled back out to the needy widows and orphans and other poor persons, the sick and ailing, the survivors of disaster situations, and so on.

Did your teacher Nisargadatta have anything to say about this subject? Do you know if he ever asked for or accepted "suggested donations" for the satsangs he gave?

Timothy Conway: John, I'll reply to both your questions by affirming that, to my knowledge, Sri Nisargadatta never, ever asked for or accepted donations of any kind for freely sharing his majestically magnificent wisdom over the decades. He never insinuated that students should financially support their spiritual teachers, either, and I heard or read the Maharaj on several occasions explicitly or implicitly critique the pride and greed of mercenary gurus. The Maharaj in his early 30s had studied advaita texts including the advaita teachings in the Bhagavad Gita, wherein Lord Krishna famously promised that Divine Reality supports all who sincerely surrender to this Reality, and I heard

Maharaj explicitly mention the eminent advaitin Hindu Varkari sages Jnaneshvar, Eknath and Tukaram in this context. It's also public record that Maharaj never allowed any ashrams or centers to be built for himself and followers. He never allowed money to be mixed with spirituality.

Like all genuine sages, Sri Nisargadatta was a *giver*, not a *taker*. He did not want anyone's money. He did not treat people as clients, as consumers of "his service." He did not sell any "methods" or "techniques." Not like any real sage, he truly loved persons from inside their being as their true Self. So he did not view people as fundamentally needy or lacking, such as needing to have their kundalini energy raised or needing to "become a liberated *jnani*," for he always saw everyone in light of their Ultimate Identity the single Absolute Reality which is YOUR REALITY HERE and NOW, before the mind can even think about it. Anyone who reads anything of the dozen book-compilations of his talks and dialogues (only one, *I Am That*, was published during his lifetime) will quickly realize that Maharaj was *always* talking of letting go or transcending the sense of limited identity or individuality and "receding back" into one's Real, Original Self-Nature as Absolute Awareness which is prior even to the manifest universal play of Consciousness, not to mention entirely prior to the limited personal consciousness. Such being the case, how could he take a stand as an individual wanting to be financially supported by other individuals?

For Maharaj there was fundamentally always only this One, single Absolute Awareness. On the manifest, pragmatic, relative level, his teaching was that persons (the one universal Divine

Consciousness playfully masquerading as each and every individual viewpoint or personal consciousness) are to be selflessly committed to loving-kindness, charitable generosity, and helpful work on behalf of family and society. From some remarks I heard while in his presence and what other students of the Maharaj related to me, I gather that Maharaj wanted people to be frugal and intelligent about money, not squander it, and have funds be available to serve the truly needy in their communities. Maharaj would berate those who perpetuate or participate in the game of charging money for spiritual activities.

Once I brought to him a few little boxes of the incense-brand that he usually had burning in his little upstairs Dharma-space / shrine-room and he would *not* take them. It was only with persistence from *moi* that finally he accepted the incense as a small token of my immense gratitude to this dear man who sacrificed so much for us. (He was continuing to teach, lead bhajans, etc. while his body was in the throes of very painful throat cancer.) Had I dared to offer him money, I strongly surmise that, in his inimitable "roaring tiger" mode unleashed on occasion, he would have shouted me out of the room! Quite a blessed contrast to tragically greedy, self-indulgent folks like Rajneesh, Mahesh Yogi, and many others at that time and in the years since then, who, as former disciples of these gurus have revealed, were doing everything they could to amass hordes of paying disciples and incessantly find ways to come up with more expensive courses, workshops, initiations and so forth to fill the greedy gurus' private coffers and create ever-more extravagantly luxurious surroundings.

Whereas Sri Nisargadatta's perfect Freedom only wanted us free in our intrinsic Freedom. That's all he ever wanted of anyone. By the way, that's the same spirit that characterizes our advaita satsangs here in Santa Barbara.

How do you see this? Is a conditional prepaid donation an acceptable western version of eastern dana? For example, what is the difference with a "voluntary donation" or with charging a conditional prepaid donation? I ask this because some will ask for a "prepaid donation" by PayPal of \$125 per hour. However without the "donation" being prepaid, there appears to be no atma vichara/ God realization or satsang instruction because you can't schedule an appointment without prepaying. Please see example below.

Private Satsang Appointments with [Spiritual Teacher] - So-and-So is available for in-person, phone or Skype appointments. To make an appointment, please pre-pay by credit card by clicking the PayPal donation button below. PayPal will notify us of your payment. After payment, please click EMAIL to notify us when you wish to schedule your appointment. If you require paying by check, please click EMAIL to request the mailing address. We accept personal checks drawn on a US bank or money orders in USD. Please mail two weeks prior to your appointment. When you click the "Make a Donation" button, you will be asked to enter the amount of the donation. One Hour Session \$125 - Prepaid (If you are registered for an upcoming Weekend Satsang Retreat, the donation is \$75.00). Three One hour Sessions at \$115 or \$345 Total - Prepaid.

Timothy Conway: John, such persons are taking the modern era's therapist-client transaction model and using it to contaminate the traditional, authentic teacher-student relationship, which is all about the teacher's loving empathy with the student and noble generosity toward the student, who is nondually regarded as OneSelf, i.e., a form of the Formless Self, a personification of the Supra-personal Reality.

Our genuine sagely wisdom traditions would describe such commercializing activity as exploitative selfish greed based in ignorant delusion or contracted fear. Unfortunately, such persons are enmeshed in a dream-web of karma and "karmuppance" consequences.

Well as Jesus might say, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." And did not Jesus also have something to say about the "birds of the air and the lilies of the field" and how God will take care of each and every one if only we trust and have faith in this Divine Source-Self, the I Am that AM?

May all such "teachers" of the ilk you've quoted here be fully free in our innate Freedom, consciously awake as our Unborn Awakeness. May they and all beings happily live from our intrinsic, natural Divinity: the pristine, Void-like Spirit which is also gloriously Full as Awareness-Isness-Aliveness and therefore completely content, whole and holy.

What are your thoughts on the selling of retreats?

Timothy Conway: It's one of the strong hooks to keep people trailing after teachers and giving them money. It's become quite a lucrative business for a lot of these guys and gals.

And it's easy to see how it works: these teachers all strongly emphasize an "experience of the Presence" or "Sacred Presence" a heightened sense of relaxing and flowing in the Here-Now, free of stress and agitation, a deeply positive feeling of emotional uplift and clear meditative mind, and a sense of "Oneness" with fellow beings in social situations.

Yet what they call "the Presence" is just a temporary experiential state. Such states come and go. For instance, people aren't consciously experiencing "the Presence" in deep dreamless sleep and, no matter how many retreats they've done over the years, they usually aren't experiencing "the Presence" during the more intensely busy times of day such as while involved in the most demanding forms of work, driving in heavy commuter traffic, meetings with the boss, and during the more challenging periods of time with family members (which, as so many people notoriously report, can bring up a lot of people's so-called "psychological material").

But as Ramana Maharshi would say, "What's the good of a "spiritual state" or "experience of Divine presence" that comes and goes in a transitory, changeable way?

For the true sages, far more important than the experience of "the Presence" or "trying to maintain the feeling of the Presence," is what we might term "awakening to the Absence," the open, infinite, empty/full, changeless Absolute Reality, the pristine Host Awareness which is never an experiential state or an attainment or a "maintenance job" for the personal consciousness. Rather, this Absolute Awareness or Reality is always our changeless Source Nature, right HERE, closer than the mind, regardless of

the pleasures or pains arising in the personal dream of phenomenal experience.

When a person goes on retreat, they get to have a lovely spiritual vacation, dwell on/in the sense of sacred Presence, and, of course, in classic “stimulus-response” conditioning well-known to Behavioral Psychology, this sense of the Presence gets strongly connected or associated with the physical proximity of the teacher-facilitator of the retreat. The teacher is viewed as somehow being a major reason for or of cause of a person’s enjoyable experience of the Presence.

So when people leave the retreat and get back to their so-called “hum-drum” lives, filled with challenges, stresses, conflicts, etc., it’s easy for them to recall the lovely time on retreat and think, “I need much more of that, I felt so *spiritual* then and so *unspiritual* now.”

A true sage would point such a person right back to the transcendent Reality which is ALWAYS OUR TRUTH, the Reality which is immanently right HERE-NOW appearing as the miracle of moment-by-moment arising phenomena, whether sitting at a computer, working at the job, driving in traffic, doing household chores alongside one’s spouse or planning the family budget, paying taxes, or whatever. For YOU (in YOUR REAL NATURE) are always the formless, stateless Reality spontaneously hosting the cosmic play of forms, states, etc.

That’s why the sages encourage practitioners not to get stuck in the dichotomy of 1) feeling and thinking that one is “spiritual” while on retreat or visiting temples and ashrams, and then 2) feeling/thinking that one is “unspiritual” while so-called ordinary

life is unfolding along with the play of reactive emotions and busy mental activities. In other words, authentic sages help collapse or erase that big gap between periods of meditation and non-meditation, between peaceful relaxation time and challenging work time, between time in nature and time in busy urban-suburban environments. True sages help people to realize our Real Identity before/beyond any “special states” of the body-mind-ego. And thereby, flourishing as and coming from True Self, the personal consciousness is Grace-fully empowered to function well regardless of circumstances, whether in the midst of ordinary life or in any special state (e.g., sitting in an ashram in India, swimming in Hawaii, enjoying a Mediterranean cruise, or having psychic experiences of heaven worlds and deity figures). It’s all the same “One Taste” (*eka rasa*), the One Vibration of phenomenal existence. And one’s Original Nature is always PRIOR to the vibrational play of existence.

In short, then: a real sage doesn’t lure you into thinking you need special states provided by the teacher, especially the groovy kind experienced on retreat in peaceful surroundings.

A number of the teachers holding these fee-based retreats will, of course, verbally be teaching some of what I’ve shared above, namely, that we are the Changeless Reality regardless of what is momentarily arising in the dream-realm of changes. But these teachings are belied or contradicted by the fact that the teachers continue to hold these relatively expensive retreats wherein people get strongly conditioned to feel that dichotomy between “feeling the Presence during retreat time” and losing that Presence when not on retreat,” and to crave the former over the latter.

I do think it can be quite helpful for stressed-out persons to occasionally take “time out” for a “retreat/advance” and then sensitively witness the structures of personal consciousness and explore states of deeply focused, mindful and/or concentrated attention, self-inquiry, letting go all worldly concerns, etc. But I think the way some of these teachers are luring and even “addicting” people to the feeling of a “special state” several times a year is a big trap.

I’m hearing of many persons doing three, four, five or more retreats a year, year after year, and yet they still report feeling incomplete, “not there yet, unable to maintain the Presence.”

As I’ve suggested earlier, the idea that spirituality is about “maintaining the Presence” is a big lie, but a deception that these retreat-leading teachers won’t reveal, because then they wouldn’t be able to exploit people into paying money for their retreats, along with purchasing all those CDs, DVDs, and books on how to “find and maintain the Presence.”

What a racket! Ah well.. All beings shall surely, eventually awaken to their timeless Awakeness as the One Self.

<https://www.enlightened-spirituality.org/>