

LOVE, SERVE, REMEMBER GOD

An Interview with Mirabai Bush

In 1970, Mirabai Bush met her guru, Neem Karoli Baba (Maharajji). His inspiration and emphasis on seva (service) led her to co-found, in 1996, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. CCMS' mission is to bring contemplative practice into mainstream institutional life—corporations, law schools, professional organizations and universities—as well as social justice activism. She reflects on her work and her experiences with Maharajji in this interview.

IYM: How did meeting your guru, Neem Karoli Baba, influence the direction of your life?

MB: He utterly changed my life. I was with Maharajji from 1970 to 1972. He died in 1973. My Yoga since then has been trying to understand more deeply what he taught us. He didn't talk a lot. He wasn't a philosopher. He taught us in short sentences, like, "Always tell the truth and you'll never be afraid." These are *koans* you can work on for the rest of your life—and it's kept me busy ever since.

Daniel Goleman, also a Maharajji devotee and author of *Emotional Intelligence*, recently has been writing about "mirror neurons." We change each other just by being in each other's presence. I always knew you could change someone's mood or their mind, but what this research is now showing is that we literally change the cellular structure of each others' brains. That is what it felt like to be with Maharajji. When I was with him, I felt like he knew me completely and that he loved me exactly as I was. Everyone wants this unconditional love, because it opens up the heart and allows us a great sense of spaciousness and possibility. To be loved this way changed what I thought was possible in this world.

We would meditate and do Yoga in the mornings and then we would spend the day with him; mainly we just sat with him, ate the sweets he gave us, and sometimes we would sing *kirtan*. I began to feel like my heart was growing bigger. If he encouraged us to do anything, he would say, "Love everyone, serve everyone and remember God." This is what I've been working on—especially the service part. When I first began spiritual practice, I had a more narrow idea of what spiritual practice was. It took time to understand that serving other human beings was as deep a practice as meditation and Yoga, especially when done in combination with them.

IYM: You seem to have truly taken this teaching to heart and you were instrumental in founding Seva Foundation.

MB: Yes, well we began to realize that service to others is key. Many of us in Seva had met in India where we were on a mission to discover the meaning of life. Larry Brilliant (now head of Skoll Urgent Threats Fund) and his wife, Girija, were also part of the World Health Organization's successful smallpox eradication team. After their work ended, they convened a conference of friends and colleagues to consider how to serve next. They gathered together an eclectic mix of health professionals and cultural

activists—including Ram Dass and myself, Wavy Gravy and others and we decided to start an international public health organization with the goal of eliminating blindness in Nepal. That was how Seva was born.

When we began, we thought we were going to encourage kitchen gardens so people could get more vitamin A. Instead, almost all the blind people in Nepal had cataracts and needed surgery. We had to train a core of doctors and ophthalmic assistants to run eye camps in villages that took two days to reach on foot; they often did the surgeries by flashlight. Seva partners have now done two million cataract operations in Asia. This started because we were willing to do what needed to be done.

IYM: Later, you founded the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society and asked yourself if this group was "as risk taking, as funny and as deep" as Seva.

MB: If you are going to form an organization committed to innovation and a more just, compassionate, reflective and sustainable society, you can't do things the way they have been done, since that's what got us where we are. You have to find people who enjoy taking risks, because inevitably when you take risks, some things don't work out. You need people with good resilience.

I knew it would take the kind of dedication we had in founding Seva for the Center to be successful. Our current work may not seem as risky as doing cataract operations in the Nepali hills, but going into universities, legal centers and corporations to find roots for the contemplative was extremely risky in its own way.

Humor has to do with being able to hold two contradictory things in the mind at the same time. At Seva, one of our founding board members was Wavy Gravy, who is (among other things) a professional clown. Whenever anyone would say the word "serious" in our discussions he would get out the Groucho Marx glasses with the big nose and eyebrows, and that person would have to wear those glasses for the rest of the discussion. Our work *was* serious, but we didn't want to get stopped by that.

I knew many people were introducing "contemplation light" into businesses and other places. I do think it is important that people learn to be a little less stressed, a little calmer and happier. But I didn't think that this is what the Center should be doing. I really thought we

should be introducing the subject with depth and integrity, reaching toward wisdom and compassion. I wanted to work with people who saw the fundamental, radical change that these practices can make in individuals and in institutions. I wanted contemplative values to inform decisions, policies and behavior.

IYM: What are some of the Center's programs?

MB: In 1996 we started the Contemplative Practice Fellowship Program. Through the Fetzer Institute, we have provided 10 grants a year for professors to develop courses that include contemplative practice. Each year, we bring fellows together to support each other. These meetings led us to think about how we could reach more people, and we began the annual week-long summer session at Smith College.

The participants practice meditation together and experience contemplative arts, music, poetry readings, Yoga and dance. We also discuss the science of meditation. New scientific research links meditation to enhanced cognition, memory, attention and increased emotional intelligence—all of which positively affect students' success in courses. This incredible new research has been really helpful in encouraging administrators to allow professors to embrace contemplative practices in the classroom.

When we started this program no one on the board could think of anyone teaching in higher education who would be willing to do this. To our surprise, 120 applications were submitted that first year, in disciplines from architecture to poetry, and just about every one of them was creative, rigorous. As word got out, interest spread. Now there are 140 fellows in more than 100 colleges and universities, in disciplines from biology to media studies to law. Fellows understand contemplative teaching as a complement to traditional methods, not a replacement, and as an approach to teaching, not a set of prescriptions.

We also started the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE) to connect scholars who are interested in contemplative teaching, learning and knowing. In higher education we hold the hope that these practices will cultivate the capacity for insight, wisdom and compassion.

IYM: Do you see professors integrating body-based contemplative practices into education?

MB: Yes. Yoga is the most common, but people have used Tai Chi, walking the labyrinth and other forms of meditative movement. Americans seem more open to movement practices—movement is sometimes less challenging for students than sitting in meditation.

What is radical about the work of these educators is that they are combining Yoga, meditation and other contemplative practices with traditional coursework. In



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the beginning, educators were adding on contemplative practices—maybe sitting in silence or doing a few Yoga postures first and then teaching the class. Now practices are an integral part of the coursework, and they are really changing how students are learning.

For example, when a professor of philosophy at the University of Alberta asked her students to do warrior II pose, the students discovered they were reaching their limbs forward; it was very hard for them to stay stable and centered. The students then talked about how this had to do with their relation to time; their minds were projecting forward into the future. She did not have to tell her students “our minds are always projecting into the future”—they understood through their embodied experience.

IYM: Have professors faced opposition to the inclusion of contemplative practices?

MB: There has been some resistance, or skepticism, from other faculty, but much less than we expected. And the new research is helping skeptics understand the value of the practices. The academy is based on and grounded in critical thinking and the scientific method. Contemplative practices do not replace critical thinking; they complement critical thinking. While contemplative practices are a part of all major religious and spiritual traditions, they also have a place in intellectual and ethical inquiry, including secular educational environments, and, at the moment, they are thriving there.

*Mirabai Bush is co-author with Ram Dass of *Compassion in Action: Setting Out on the Path of Service*. For more information please visit: www.contemplativemind.org, www.acmhe.org and www.ramdass.org.*