

expanding the mind of yoga

ascent

spiritual leadership winter 1999

A close-up portrait of Tenzin Palmo, a Buddhist nun, with a serene expression. She is wearing a dark red robe over a red shirt. The background is a dark, textured surface.

tenzin palmo
and the building
of a buddhist
nunnery

lover and beloved
what is the way of zen?
swami radha on leadership

plus bks iyengar, hardeep dhaliwal, yogi bhajan,
and the results from our leadership survey

letter from india

vanessa reid

I'm sitting in an Internet not-quite-café—more like an Internet corner—in Ahmadabad, the old capital of the state of Gujarat, India. The city is polluted, dusty and hot, and the smell of dung and diesel hangs heavy in the monsoonless air. There are goats and camels, scooters, auto-rickshaws, cars, people, carts, bicycles all jostling for position on the barely paved main road. It's more like a highway, but the cows are on, not beside, the road, sleeping, eating, scarcely acknowledging the traffic, and nobody takes a second look, although they are careful not to touch the sacred beasts. “Holy Cow” takes on an entirely new significance in India.

I can hardly hear the street sounds because I'm reading a message from my mother, who writes from Toronto that my grandfather, Pere, has pneumonia. He is dying. “The Old Man's Friend,” as he calls it, has finally arrived. His lungs are slowly filling with liquid. But it was his wish to die this way—peacefully, quietly, with little pain. I have a cry, remembering his distinguished, ninety-four-year-old-face, and the dignity his Alzheimer's never managed to take away.

Before I left for India I went to visit him in his room at the Villa Marguerite in Ottawa. He was asleep and I didn't wake him because he would be confused and disoriented. Instead, I stroked his arm and told him that I was going to work in India, just like he and Nana had, forty years before. I looked around his room and soaked in the familiar pictures of Nana and Pere with Nehru, with Indira Gandhi and Louis St. Laurent, Lester Pearson. And, of course, the picture of Nana, Pere with his characteristic walking stick, my father, and his brother and sister, beaming, having scaled the Himalayas (or so the story goes). Soon my own

adventure in India would begin.

And now I feel the circularity of all this. As Pere passes away, I am in a place he loved passionately, where he and Nana had their most important memories, and where he felt he left an important mark. And he did. He also left an indelible mark on me. It seems somehow so appropriate that a family member be in India at this critical moment in our family history, and that it is the youngest granddaughter who is that person. India has changed, times have changed, and while Pere worked in diplomacy and for world peace, I hold the same ideals, but am working in terminologies of a different generation: gender, development and community mobilization.

My work placement here is with the Behavioural Science Centre (BSC), a non-governmental organization which works with Dalit communities. In India, Dalits are the poorest of the poor, having for centuries been discriminated against due to their position in the caste hierarchy, a system established as part of Hinduism. In fact, Dalits are outside the caste system, and so are con-



sidered and treated as “untouchable”; their rightful jobs include cleaning human excrement and sewage systems. This distinction now crosses Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities and is pervasive across India. I see how BSC’s work in supporting Dalit rights and community mobilizing is threatening to the strict and restrictive social and political hierarchies—the empowerment of one group means those with power and privilege have to give something up.

In the 1950s my grandparents were here in a newly independent India bursting with potential, and had wondered, like many at that time, what in fifty years time would India be like? In my short time here I’ve seen many of the contradictions that are India: incredible poverty and beauty; a “democratic” election in the world’s largest democracy; multiculturalism among fervent nationalism and caste-ism; and much more to come, no doubt.

I would love to talk to my grandfather about what I am learning here, as a woman, as a foreigner, and as someone whose work means being part of a process of change. What did he think of the horrors of the caste system, or was that even an issue in such a post-colonial India? His worldview was considered radical by many he worked with in the 1950s, and I think he would be

very moved and stimulated by the people with whom I am meeting and working—people who believe passionately in social justice and equality, who are challenging the systems and bearing the consequences, and who believe strongly in taking action for a better world. It’s our turn to think ahead fifty years and make sure we’ve done our part.

In some ways I feel very far away from home, from the support and love and memories that sharing a death brings to a family. But I have a sense that Pere will be coming to visit me very soon, and that we will go to the house in Delhi and have one last look around.

Together.

In India. ॐ

Vanessa is on an international development management fellowship (IDM) organized through the Aga Khan Foundation Canada, and funded by CIDA. The grassroots approach is based on the philosophy of educator Paolo Friere that real change occurs only through a process of “conscientization”—in other words, realizing your so-called place in society and taking action to change it.

the passing of a great teacher

Sri Eknath Easwaran, respected around the world as one of this century’s great spiritual teachers, passed away peacefully at 4:00 a.m. on October 26th, 1999, at his home in Tomales, California, in the loving presence of wife Christine and close friends.

In thousands of talks and two dozen books, Sri Easwaran has taught his eight-point-program to an audience that now extends around the world. Rather than travel and attract large crowds, he chose to remain in one place and teach small groups—a preference that was his hallmark as a teacher even in India. “I am still an educator,” he liked to say. “But formerly it was education for degrees; now it is education for living.”

Sri Easwaran’s reputation as an author and teacher rests largely on the practical appeal of his method of meditation, which enables ordinary people to translate



ideals into daily living within the context of any religious tradition.

He often quoted the words of Mahatma Gandhi, who influenced him deeply: “I have not the shadow of a doubt that every man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith.”

Sri Easwaran’s work will be carried on by his wife, Christine Easwaran, who has worked by his side for forty years, by the students he trained for thirty years, and by the organization he founded to ensure the continuity of his teachings, the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation.

All of us at *ascent* offer our heartfelt condolences. Sri Easwaran has touched our lives. He will be remembered.