

Chapter 1

Early Influences

I am asking my mother the question ‘who knew?’. She is unable to answer me satisfactorily. I am thinking of doctors and scientists and realize they don't know either. Then I see an image of an unusual person sitting in a cross-legged posture and realize they knew.

When exactly I had this dream I don't recall but it was at a very young age, perhaps six years old. Unfortunately I was too young to write it down, so now I can only rely on memory. Yet it is a memory that has remained with considerable clarity; dreams often have that kind of impact. How such a question would arise in a young mind is an interesting thought to ponder. It suggests that our ‘perennial search for meaning’ is very deeply rooted. Today I would probably identify the cross-legged person as a yogi but at that young age I doubt very much I had ever been introduced to the idea. Perhaps it was a memory, an archetypal figure, or a premonition of things to come in my life – all are not uncommon in dreams. Apparently everyone dreams but what significance do they have in our lives?

My own exploration of this question was closely tied with my personal search for meaning. Perhaps it had its roots in this early experience, yet dreams and their meanings played little part in my early years. I grew up in western Canada, in Calgary, Alberta in the 1950's, then a small conservative city expanding from its agricultural roots into the burgeoning oil business. My public-school education made no mention of dreams, and they played no part in my religious education other than a few historical references in the bible. When I was young our family had attended church with some regularity. My father enjoyed the singing. For my mother it was a family ritual and I liked going to

my grandmother's afterwards who always made milkshakes for us children.

Yet beyond the popular festivities of Christmas and Easter, the church never touched a spark in me, even to my young eyes it seemed largely a social custom. As I grew older it became a Sunday social obligation. I much preferred to be outdoors at our cabin in the country, as our family increasingly did over the years. The biblical symbolism had been presented as historical reference and the contradictions with the well-documented evolutionary models of my education required a level of non-critical belief that was unacceptable to me. What I had learned of the political history of the Church further eroded my already limited interest. I found it unconnected to my life and by the time I was a teenager I had essentially rejected theistic religion. In any case I found girls, my friends and immediate interests much more engaging and tangible.

I was fifteen when my father died suddenly from heart failure. It had been a weekday like any other, I went off to school, he to work. I never saw him again. We had been close friends, a relationship just starting to mature. In my mind his death was brought on largely by his work, financially tied to a management position in a Calgary office. Yet it was weekends and holidays at our family cabin that I best remember him. He was an avid fly fisherman and we spent many hours together exploring the rivers and streams along the foothills of the Alberta Rockies.

By the late 1960's I found myself part of a generation of young people on a restless, idealistic search for meaning. Though my family life had been very caring and supportive, I was in my late teens and trying to find my own ground. A few years earlier I had left university after completing the first year of the engineering program I had enrolled in. It seemed just another cog in the corporate social structure, and after my father's death it was a structure I highly questioned. Like my father, at heart a romantic dreamer, I had inherited his love of the

outdoors and was interested in a life with values beyond the models of material success that so permeated the largely urban culture of my upbringing.

I had started reading a number of books on yoga, Buddhism and eastern philosophy. What appealed to me about yoga, as I understood it, is that it was a personal quest and process of self-discovery. Although I was interested in what Buddhism and eastern philosophy had to offer, I was not looking for another religion or institution. Yoga was essentially a mystical path that sought wisdom and revelation through direct experience. I remember going to a talk at the University of British Columbia by Richard Alpert (Ram Das) who was recently back from India. I enjoyed his fresh perspectives and his book, *Be Here Now*, expressed something of the mood of the time. After my upbringing in Christianity with its overriding tones of sin and redemption, the traditions of the East held considerable appeal as they did to many of my generation. Combined with the impact of my father's early death and the questions this had raised for me, my thoughts turned again to some of life's inner questions.

Swami Sivananda Radha

In 1971 I met Swami Sivananda Radha at Yasodhara Ashram, the yoga and retreat center she had established in British Columbia. I was very fortunate to have met at an early point in my own search, a person of integrity and personal character. Hers was a remarkable story. In one of her early attempts at meditation, she had entered a visionary state in which she was visited by an Indian yogi who told her to 'come home to India'. The experience left a deep impression on her. It was several days later that she discovered a picture of the same yogi in a bookstore. The figure in her meditative experience had been Swami Sivananda, a yogi from the Rishikesh area of northern India. These events precipitated her visit to India in 1955-56

where he initiated her as a swami in the Saraswati order. She relates these experiences in her book *Radha: Diary of a Woman's Search*.⁽¹⁾

I admired her dedication and it was clear she had knowledge of yoga, she offered tools and practical experience. Rather than an exotic foreigner, she was an immigrant from Germany rebuilding a life that had been shattered by the war. The ochre robes of her yogic initiation she wore as the occasion required, but normally she was dressed in modern clothes and actively participated in the daily life of the ashram. She was in her sixties when I met her, I found her very approachable and we formed a warm relationship in those early years.

Swami Radha was a self-disciplined, intuitive person with a remarkable grasp of symbolism. This proficiency was refined by the emphasis in the Eastern teachings on the inner symbolic meanings – the relevance of the symbolic forms to the transformation of our life. At the center of her own development and understanding was the highly symbolic, and frequently misunderstood, system of kundalini yoga. Interpreting and integrating the symbolism of the kundalini yoga system within a western context was a major part of her life work.⁽²⁾ She recognized that yoga had to be current and applicable in daily life, and was continually exploring bridges between the teachings of the East and the modern developments of the West.

Her work with dreams was an excellent example of this blending of East and West. She combined the dream yoga practices of the East with interpretative methods similar to those used in the Jungian dream work of modern psychology. Based on yogic practices of self-enquiry, she developed a number of self-development workshops – whether the inner symbolism was derived from dreams, artwork, or even music the approach was similar. The development of self-awareness through an understanding of personal symbolism was at the foundation of her approach to yoga. The techniques she developed, combined

with her personal charisma, attracted a wide range of individuals from many walks of life.

It was through her encouragement that I began to record my dreams and to explore their symbolism and meaning. She followed her dreams closely and it was a key practice among the many practices of yoga that she introduced me to during my residency at the ashram from 1971 to 1982. I began recording and working with my dreams shortly after my arrival there. Prior to this I had never recorded my dreams and for the most part had never remembered them.

Around the same time she introduced me to mantra practice and encouraged me to use it during the day and especially prior to sleep, eventually bringing the awareness of the mantra into dream and sleep. She also introduced a practice of visualizing the light, saying to use the visualization in the same manner as the mantra. These were the essential elements of the Eastern dream yoga practices, though she made no indication of this or their relation to the foundation practice of dreamwork. I continued the practices independently, and it was many years before I recognized their interconnectedness.

During my early years as a resident I joined an ongoing study group of ashram members that met weekly to work with our dreams following the methods outlined by Swami Radha. This was pivotal in my study of dreams. It is very difficult in the beginning to approach dreamwork without some assistance. The group structure opened up discussions and ideas that I doubt I would ever have explored on my own. It also gave me a depth of insight into both my own dream symbolism and the symbolism of others. Swami Radha provided only limited oral instruction on dreams yet it was a frequent topic of discussion and much was learned through listening and examples from various dreams. I often brought my dreams for her comments over the years, and she occasionally asked my comments on hers.

As early as 1969 Swami Radha had established a three-month, in-depth program of yoga and self-development that

started in January each year. At her encouragement I took the program in the winter of 1975. After I had completed this she started me in leading dream classes at the ashram. At first I was reluctant, doubting my own experience, but she insisted and so I led many classes in dreams until my departure from the ashram in 1982. As is a common experience, being placed in a leadership role was at least as much a learning experience for myself as it was for my class members. It forced me to clarify and organize my dream material into a presentable form. Also with the many participants each bringing their dreams, we explored a huge range of dream material and personal symbolism.

Herbert V. Guenther

The other person who had a significant influence on my dream yoga practice was the eminent Buddhist scholar Dr. Herbert Guenther. He and his wife Dr. Ilsa Guenther visited the ashram many times during the years of my residency. His influence was more indirect, primarily through his writing, but it was from Guenther that I would eventually learn the historical context and underlying philosophy to the practices.

One of the central themes of his writing is his effort to bridge Western and Eastern thought, a task for which he was well qualified. With the combination of his academic training in philosophy, and his long experience of Eastern culture – he lived and taught in India for over fifteen years – Dr. Guenther had a depth of perspective on Eastern philosophical thought, their practices and history that was a rare combination. He was a brilliant scholar and a major pioneer in bringing eastern philosophy to a western audience.

Being fluent in Sanskrit and Tibetan, as well as many other languages, he studied and translated many of the early texts with the guidance and assistance of the learned Lamas he came into contact with. He was in India at a time when he could still

access areas of traditional Tibetan Buddhist culture that remained in the border areas and made expeditions into Ladhak, traveled to Bhutan, and visited other areas for many years in the 1950's and early 1960's. He was initiated in the 'Brug-pa (Bhutanese) tradition of Mahayana Buddhism by his teacher Lama Dam-chos rin-chen.(3) His writings gave me a great appreciation for the clarity of the life-affirming, non-dualist perspectives of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy.

One of the translations Dr. Guenther undertook was *The Life and Teaching of Naropa*, first published by Oxford in 1963. Naropa was an Indian Buddhist yogi (1016-1100 AD) and a key figure in introducing Buddhist teachings to Tibet. This 12th century Tibetan manuscript provides an historical context, and his commentary the philosophical framework, for not only the dream yoga practices but also kundalini yoga and the light practices that were central to my own instruction.(4) He credits his teacher Lama Dam-chos rin-chen for guidance in translation and commentary. The 'Brug-pa tradition is closely related to the Tibetan Kargu tradition, and emphasizes Naropa's teaching in all its aspects. The line of thought that Naropa represents is named mantrayana or tantra, an aspect of Mahayana Buddhism.

Guenther clearly holds Naropa in high regard, asserting that he occupies a unique position in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. To this day his life is held up as an example to anyone who aspires after spiritual values. Naropa marks the beginning of a new era of Buddhist thought in Tibet, while at the same time he is the culmination of a long tradition. None of his contemporaries or successors in India compare with him in depth of experience.(5) Accordingly I focused my attention on the traditions Guenther's work had introduced me to and took a keen interest in understanding more about their context and history.

The practices Swami Radha had given me had originated with the Indian yogis, but she had little training in the underlying philosophy. One incident that highlighted this situation was the forward Dr. Guenther contributed to Swami Radha's first major

book *Kundalini Yoga for the West*. He praises her presentation of the kundalini system and practices, but is critical of her presentation of the underlying philosophy. For myself this was an incentive to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of what he was saying. It was a process of reflection over many years. His position was that the underlying philosophy of yoga was non-dualist and that the theistic and dualist influences that had crept into it, particularly in India, were misleading.(6)

Given the focus of his work, Dr. Guenther clearly recognized that the Buddhist traditions, particularly the Buddhist tantrics, had maintained the non-dualist view with great clarity. In contrast to my own experience where I gradually assimilated the philosophy through many years of study and reflection, the underlying philosophy to practice is taught first in Buddhism, and a separate teacher often teaches it. This approach promotes clarity in motivation and application, so I will present here a summary to provide a starting point. Dream yoga practice then becomes a vehicle to a deeper understanding. For those interested in further reading, Ani Tenzin Palmo, a Buddhist nun also of the Tibetan Kargu lineage, presents a lucid summation in her book, *Reflections on a Mountain Lake*.(7)

Philosophy and Practice

Three stages or aspects are recognized on the Buddhist path – view, meditation and action. View is the underlying philosophy and provides the foundation and motivation for practice. Action is our practice, our application in daily life. And meditation, in this respect, is the process of reflection and clarification that takes place between philosophy and practice – these must be in accord and balanced.

View is essentially the way we look at things. It is interesting that it is placed first. This is because our underlying philosophy influences everything we do. It directs our motivations, our choices and attitudes. Expressed in symbolic

terms this is our mythology. Even if I cannot articulate my philosophy it is nevertheless an active force that shapes my life. Accordingly a clear understanding is considered extremely important, as it is the foundation.

The view that underlies dream yoga practice is non-dualist philosophy. In comparison, Christianity is essentially a dualist philosophy with its mythology of the fall, and the dualist split of God and man, soul and body, heaven and hell. Non-dualism, instead, emphasizes an underlying unity. In Buddhism this is called our primordial or Buddha nature. It is what we are and have always been. It is ever-present. The analogy that is often used is that of a mirror or glass that is obscured by dirt, as we clear away the dirt our original nature shines through. It is important to understand that we already have everything we need, it is a matter of uncovering it.

The essential nature of our primordial awareness is said to be clarity and emptiness. Clarity has the qualities of wisdom and compassion, and is visualized as luminosity. We are consciousness. The light practice used in dream yoga, which I introduce in chapter four, is a tool used to support this view.

Emptiness is to be without form, or more accurately without the division of subject and object. This is called non-dual awareness. It is the experience of unity and the recognition that all life is interconnected.

Our philosophy has a profound effect on the attitudes and values we bring to life. Whereas dualism approaches life as a quest for redemption, moral purification and a better hereafter or heaven – in non-dualism life is approached as inherently sacred embracing an underlying unity, and the attitude to life's energies is one of transformation and refinement. Heaven and hell are understood as subjective states, a product primarily of our attitude. The mythologically ordered symbols of our various religious and cultural traditions are seen not as objectifications and historical facts, but as potent and vitalizing inner images.

Life is approached as a supreme opportunity and a challenge, whose metaphor is the hero's journey.

Life is interaction. Our experience in space-time is commonly defined in terms of subject and object. 'I' am here and the 'things' I perceive are out there. My response tends to be governed by either fear or desire. The texts use the analogy of our waking life being frozen and that it is necessary to 'unfreeze' this state. Dream yoga is a tool used to help thaw our subject-object fixation. The first step is to look into the subjective influences in my perception. A study of dreams, and the symbolism in dream content, is of great value in this process. At the same time it makes us increasingly aware of our spontaneous ability to generate symbols and metaphors that inform ourselves – resolving inner conflicts and developing creative potentials. With this in mind, we start with the foundation practice of dream work, while concurrently establishing the eastern dream yoga practices that I introduce in chapter four.