

1. International Association Peace Through Culture

Behind the International Association Peace Through Culture, which sponsors this World Congress of Spiritual Concord, there is the inspiration above all, of the great Russian Artist, Philosopher and Scientist, Nikolai K Roerich (1874-1947). Nikolai and his wife Elena came to India and made this their second homeland. They sought to blend the vast and rich Indian spiritual heritage, with the venerable and deep spirituality of the Russian Orthodox Church to which they belonged. They developed a new Yoga system which they called Agni Yoga.

They drank deep at the wells of Indian spirituality and Nikolai's paintings bear witness to this. They were also great humanitarians, with a global vision. The Roerichs in the 1930's floated the idea of "Peace Through Culture".

At that time, like today also, there were many clouds darkening the future of humanity. Hitler and Mussolini, and perhaps Emperor Hirohito of Japan were embodiments of the frightening Spectre of Fascism. The concentration camps of Germany, with their inhuman cruelty to humanity, had begun to come into operation. In the former Soviet Union, CPSU General Secretary Josef Stalin had successfully initiated a hell-like reign of State Terrorism and mutual espionage. No human being could trust another, not even his own wife or her own husband and children. People disappeared without trace. State agencies killed off their people without even giving them the benefit of trial and defence. Intellectuals and Creative artists were stifled and suppressed. Creativity itself was annihilated, to give place to a deadening conformism and a debilitating ideological brainwashing of the people and their leaders. Communism, supposedly the enemy of Fascism, was itself becoming Fascist. Both Western and Eastern Europe, as well as Japan, were giving rise to mammoth clouds of the darkness of Evil in the human sphere of existence.

It is in this context that the Roerichs floated the idea of "Peace Through Culture". By Culture, the Roerichs meant the whole way of life of a people undergirded by spiritual principles, including Religion. The European Enlightenment civilisation, in both its versions, i.e., Western Liberal-Democratic-Capitalist and Marxist Socialist, had banished religion from the public realm and confined it to the marginal realm of private choice. Religious leadership in the world was weak, then as now. So the Roerichs preferred the concept of Culture, more inclusive of the public realm than the by then narrow-minded organised religions of the world. The Roerichs wanted a Cultural and Spiritual United Nations, undergirding the political economy of the world's nations.

If the deeper and nobler spiritual traditions of all peoples could meet and learn from each other, a positive moral and spiritual force would be generated, and build new societies, more genuinely *dharmic*, more just and peaceful. This was the idea of the Roerichs, and it found a prompt and enthusiastic response from the noble souls of that time, like Rabindranath Tagore, Romain Rolland, and Albert Einstein.

Unfortunately the vicissitudes of history worked against the idea. World War Two broke out and the idea of Peace Through Culture was conveniently laid aside as humanity began to serve the dark and gory gods of War. The Second World War and the one hundred and sixty small wars made our world increasingly militarized; even trade was dominated by deals in inhuman weapons of destruction and mass murder. The situation continues even after the Cold War supposedly came to an end in 1989.

1989 was the year of rebirth of the idea of Peace Through Culture. The International Association Peace through Culture was formed in Moscow that year. The Writers Union of the USSR took a lead, along with other cultural and spiritual organisations of Europe, in forming the IAPTC. Valentin Sidorov, who was then President of the Soviet Writers Union, is still the President of IAPTC, striving with all his wisdom and strength to make the idea of Peace Through Culture work. Rajendra Awasthy,

the President of the Indian Chapter of IAPTC also is Secretary General of the Authors Guild of India and Editor of the Magazine Kadampini.

Svyatoslav Roerich, the son of Nikolai and Elena continued the tradition. He settled down in Bangalore, India, married the celebrated screen personality Devika Rani. Till the day of this death in January 1993 in Bangalore, Svyatoslav Roerich was Honorary Patron of the IAPTC. Hence in this Rishikesh Congress we dedicate an evening to the memory of Nikolai, Elena and Svyatoslav Roerich.

The IAPTC is a network of spiritual organisations in many lands, e.g. in Russia, Germany, Japan, South Africa, Austria, Italy, France, USA, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Poland, Nepal and India.

At the heart of the vision that holds this network together, is the understanding that, while governments may be secular or not, **the cultures** of all peoples are traditionally related to "supreme and divine law" and it is at this level that **contact** must be established between cultures. Humanity's relationship to God, to the Cosmos **and to the Universe** is of fundamental significance for Spiritual Concord.

The Alma Ata Congress

In 1992, the IAPTC organized an **International Congress "Towards Spiritual Concord"** in Alma Ata, Kazakhstan, under the **patronage** of President Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan. This was attended by a wide range of spiritual and religious as well as secular leaders from all parts of the world. It was this Congress that **gave the call** to convene a World Congress of Spiritual Concord.

2. The World Congress of Spiritual Concord

The call to hold the World Congress of Spiritual Concord in India came from the Alma Ata Congress. In Alma Ata we were convinced that the problems of our contemporary world for example, gross injustice which persists and pervades society and persons, the continuing threat of war and militarism which deepens our insecurity, the growing violence which often seems bizarre and mindless, the disruption and destruction of the planet's life-environment, all these problems are not of exclusively socio-economic origin. At the bottom of it all was a great spiritual malaise that has besieged humanity and made it sick and near-desperate. Even when we have the technical means, and some will, to solve some of these problems, or at least to improve the present lot of humanity, we fail to do so because of this spiritual illness to which humanity seems subject. Simply put, behind our inability to solve human problems, there stand the forces of darkness and evil, holding humanity in its vicious grip. Our global problem is, at base, spiritual. The solution to our problems also have to be therefore spiritual. The world has to be infused with new, positive, creative, benevolent spiritual energy.

It is the creation of such an ongoing wave of spiritual energy that we humbly seek to initiate here at Rishikesh, on the banks of the Holy Ganga, at the foothills of the lofty Himalayas. We can only begin the process here. The wave of positive, creative, spiritual energy must spread throughout the globe and eventually a great global wave of Spiritual Light should dispel the darkness of Evil. The process has to be carried to several points in a growing network of people all over the world, so that similar efforts will continue in many parts of the world, through this network of spiritually motivated people of all religions or of no named religion.

The simple principle is: *It is far better to light a lamp than to curse the darkness.*

We shall therefore engage in a minimum of discourse and discussion; and a maximum of prayer, meditation, and worship of the Transcendent Ground and Source of all Reality, and of our own existence. Analyses, seminars, lectures, and so on we will leave to others. We shall concentrate on praying and meditating together to create the first impulse of that spiritual energy wave.

Participants will not be asked to sacrifice or dilute their own religious convictions; we respect all spiritual and religious traditions; all are requested to participate heartily in the worship and meditation of other traditions.

3. What is Meditation?

Meditation begins where discussion and ratiocination stop. That is why we have planned so few lectures and discussion groups here. Thought and rationality are good and God-given. Yet Truth lies beyond the grasp of human reason and thought, beyond concept and image. We are not asked to suspend our reasoning faculties, but only to give them a little rest and go beyond them, to reflection, tranquillity of spirit, and to true meditation:

Meditation, rather than conceptuality and thought, is the true matrix of all human religious and spiritual experience. As long as humanity has existed, religion, with some form of meditation, has also existed. Often it was meditation of scripture passages, more devout than discursive.

In the ancient Christian monasteries of Europe, the basic routine was always the reading of the Sacred Page (*Pagina sacra*) in a gathering of monks; the reading was not to initiate discussion and ratiocination, but to lift up one's heart to God and to find rest in God, to draw upon the power and wisdom of God. *Meditare* was to dwell upon the Transcendent, to abide in the Truth, and to be nurtured by the Life-giving Truth. This was so well into the 8th century.

Around that time a transition occurred, which was the rise of scholasticism. Instead of using the reading of the *pagina sacra* as help for lifting up one's heart to God, there arose the desire to 'capture' the 'truth' of the passage through discursive analysis and rational discussion. The monastic community went on to list all the discussible questions (*questions disputatae*), formulate possible alternate formulations and theses, consider all the *pros* and *cons* of each formulation, and then come to a clear and indubitable statement of the truth. This was what medieval scholasticism called 'science' (*scientia*)—distilled propositional statements of truth formulated after a rigorous process of ratiocination, discussion and disputation. Analogous processes have occurred in all religious traditions in all parts of the world. It was this process that made religion everywhere dogmatic, oppressively domineering, and in the end desiccating and destructive of all genuine meaning and fulfillment for human beings.

Meditation is a seeking to go beyond this distortion of religion and spirituality. The conceptual approach led to divisions and disputes in every religion. Meditation seeks not to give up the conceptual, but to go beyond it.

Dhyana, (Chinese *Ch'an*, Japanese *zen*) is an ancient Asian idea. Earliest Indus valley artefacts bear witness to meditative practices and postures as early as the 3rd millennium BCE. Though the Yoga system is the best known, meditation is pre-Vedic in India, common to the Brahmanic, Buddhist and Jaina traditions.

Patanjali defines Yoga itself as "cessation of the modifications of the mind". When the perpetual modifications of thought and desire and feeling are quieted, the human consciousness reflects the original, *Purusa* or Primordial Person who is not an agent or an enjoyer, but totally itself, not thinking or desiring anything outside of itself, fully at peace.

In the Yoga system, the mind or *citta* is the repository of root impressions of past deeds, whether in this life or in previous incarnations. These root impressions, called *samskaras*, stored in various layers of the *citta* produce binding proclivities, tastes and desires, called *vasanas* in order to reveal the Primordial Purusha and thus attain *moksha* or liberation from the cycle of births and rebirths.

Patanjali's technique of meditation involves a process with eight *angas* or limbs. One-pointed concentration of the *citta*, absolute moral and ethical abstinence and purity, comfortable postures or

asanas (not essential, but things go better if the spine is correctly aligned, and the body is in a posture that can be held unchanged for a long time without getting tired), breath control or *pranayama* (states of breathing have corresponding states of consciousness), the withdrawal of the senses from their objects (*pratyahara*), *dharana* or creating a continuous or uninterrupted current of consciousness resembling smoothly flowing oil (*tailadhara*), *Dhana* or total absorption of consciousness in itself,—all these are different aspects of attaining the final state of *Samadhi* or transcendent awareness of one's own identity as *Purusha*. Not all meditation systems are as complicated as that of Patanjali.

Usually one conceives of two aspects as essential to mediation, the control of passions, desires, thoughts and conceptualisations, through a disciplined life being the first aspect. The second is gaining insight and enlightenment.

In Buddhism too we see a similar pattern: *samata* and *vipassana* or tranquility and higher vision. By mindfulness and attention and a disciplined life, one trains oneself to see the transience and worthlessness of the objects of desire and thought. That is *samata*. *Vipassana* (Sanskrit *vipashyana*) is the second stage when the grace from above bestows the insightful, transcendent higher vision which leads to nirvana (*pali nibbana*), or cessation of all agitation and activity.

In Islam, at least in its classical aspect, there is no concept of meditation. But the tradition developed something equivalent: *dhikr* or the practice of the presence of Allah. The concept is Quranic; the word and its derivatives occur some 270 times in the Holy Quran. Yet orthodox Muslims refrain from making it central; the fear originates in the fact that the Sufis made it central and brought in Oriental practices of meditation to promote the special forms of Sufi *dhikr*. Orthodox Muslims consider *salat* or obligatory hours of daily prayer (*namaz*) more important. The Sufis developed many rituals for private and group *dhikr*, which are not acceptable to Orthodox Muslims. The *Mawlawiya* group of Sufis, more commonly known as “whirling dervishes”, practice ecstatic music and dance as the best way to induce a state of mind in which the presence of Allah is more intimately experienced. But *dhikr* itself, the constant remembering of the name of Allah, the Gracious and Merciful, should not be so unacceptable to even most Orthodox Muslims. *Dhikr* is the Muslim form of meditation or *Dhyan*.

Here at Rishikesh we will experience a dozen different forms of meditation. We will seek to understand and empathise with the experience of meditation in other traditions. The over-all purpose is to meditate together, to draw near as a community to the Transcendent, and to invoke His belesed Light and Grace upon a sorrowful and grieving humanity, threatened by the forces of Evil and groping for Light, yearning for spiritual empowerment for the whole of humanity in unity and concord.