

Searching for Our True Identity

Interview with Ulla Sebastian by Betsy van der Lee

"Only where there is a blossom, can there be a fruit.
Surrender is the blossom.
Without that blossom, the knowledge cannot be harvested."
Sai Baba

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Ulla Sebastian, doctor of clinical psychology and psychopathology, writer, teacher, psychotherapist and trainer in Bioenergetic Analysis, spent six months in 1986 at Sai Baba's ashram in India. Based on this personal experience with Sai Baba, which she writes about in her book, *Erfahrungen mit Sai Baba in Indien* (Goldmann Taschenbuch, 1992) she discusses here some of the psychological aspects of the devotional path and what she perceives as their relevance today in the personal, metaphysical as well as community context.

Can you speak about the path of being a disciple and some of the psychology and pathology involved?

In the Eastern traditions there are basically two paths we can follow to liberate ourselves. There is the self-exploratory path of moving through our own force, or there is the path of devotion, of surrendering to a force which is separate or 'other' than us, to a guru, to 'God' or 'the universe'.

The self-exploratory path of moving through our own force includes practices such as Vipassana meditation, Zen, or Jñāna-Yoga. In these traditions we develop an inner 'witness' who observes, notices and becomes aware of our own inner processes, our thoughts and feelings, without judging or trying to manipulate them, simply reflecting them back to us, like a mirror. As we travel this road, we gradually expand and ultimately transcend the ego, the little self: as infants, we start off identifying with our body and then, as we mature and move to the next level, we learn to disidentify with the body and identify with the emotions; then we realise we are not our emotions and we begin to identify with the mind, we are able to think and develop concepts and even theories; as we continue to ask ourselves the question, "Who am I?" we realise that we are, again, more than our mind, we are a soul, and ultimately, we are spirit or atman, the Absolute or Cosmic Consciousness. So, we gradually build up and develop our consciousness and capacity on each level, identifying and then disidentifying

with each level, and as the ego expands, it transcends itself, becoming one with All. My impression is that this self-exploratory path appeals to those who are mind-oriented.

On the other hand, those whose basic approach to life is feeling-centred will find it easier to follow the path of devotion: to attach to somebody, to surrender to the force of a master, guru or avatar that then does the carrying forward. It's a different way of working, where we project our inner processes, our identity, needs and issues onto the guru, issues like, for example, wanting to be taken care of, given advice or wanting to have somebody tell you what's right or wrong. Effectively this 'other' becomes for us a 'good' father/mother figure. If the guru is pure, s/he will mirror our issues back, helping us to see and destroy the illusions of the ego and in this way help us to expand and move beyond the little ego. This is the other way of surrendering to the Absolute or Cosmic Consciousness because our guru is actually an embodiment of that Absolute spirit. The paths are different but the goal is ultimately the same.

In the guru-disciple relationship is there not a danger of creating a co-dependency which it is then hard to move beyond?

Yes, of course, especially if we have addictive tendencies, as many people in our Western culture do. Sai Baba would say that if you need to be addicted, addict yourself to God or to someone pure who doesn't have a personal investment in keeping you addicted, as, for instance, a partner might. If you're addicted to relationships, to alcohol or to God, the outcome will be different. God can carry you through and beyond your addiction. The danger and challenge of choosing a guru is that you don't always know what you're getting, it's not easy to find somebody who is pure. No matter what level of consciousness you or your guru is on, there are corresponding pathologies to deal with on each of the levels. Going to a guru in the east is no guarantee that you are dealing with someone pure, just as going to a psychotherapist in the west is no guarantee that you're dealing with a good therapist. This is made even more difficult by the fact that it is not possible to comprehend those levels of consciousness beyond the one we are on. So the best advice is to look for someone who is on the highest level, who is pure, like an avatar.

How would you define an avatar as opposed to a guru? Is there a difference?

Yes. For me, there is an important difference. There are those who ascend through the scale of growth in consciousness, undergoing a kind of apprenticeship where they practice the discipline of a particular tradition or religion. Then there are those who descend from the Absolute Consciousness, who already embody the universal wisdom. They incarnate at times of crisis to bring back the purity or essence of what is taught through the world religions in order to help humanity move beyond that crisis. These are the avatars. They don't belong to any religion; they belong to the essence, to the Absolute Spirit. Guru simply means, and can be applied to, anyone who is a 'teacher'. There are genuine teachers and less genuine teachers. A genuine teacher works through example; s/he is a demonstration of the values s/he teaches. In my experience, people who are really living what they say are rare.

If we can't evaluate someone beyond our own level of consciousness, how are we to know if somebody like Sai Baba is actually an avatar, or if somebody is pure?

This is a difficult question - one that I frequently get asked and one that I struggled with quite a bit while I was in Sai Baba's ashram because I realised that I would have to be an avatar myself in order truly to recognise one. As a person on the self-exploratory path I prefer rely on experience rather than belief and I decided that I could use the same criteria I would use to

find a good therapist, which I describe in my book "Wege zum Leben". So I asked myself: Are this person's teachings in accordance with the ancient wisdom, with the essence of what is taught by all the world religions, saints or spiritual masters? Is he living what he teaches? And, for me on a personal level: Can I trust his purity and integrity? Does he have any personal investment in being an adored figure? Will he abuse my trust or will he respond to it with integrity?

Are you saying, then, that these are the essential qualities to look for in a guru?

These were certainly essential qualities for me. Deep in our hearts we often feel a call, like an inner knowing or memory, to a specific person, or a specific discipline. Finding a teacher is a very personal affair. An Eastern saying says: "When the pupil is ready, the master will appear." I believe that before deciding to work with a teacher, we need to spend time watching how s/he behaves in his/her daily life and ask ourselves: How does s/he treat and relate to others? If s/he is the object of devotion for many thousands of people, does s/he succumb to the fascination of power or is s/he able to remain detached? Personally I have found it important to use and trust my sceptical mind and judgment, contrary to the popular New Age saying, which is to 'Just follow your heart'. Clear observation and a good sense of judgment are crucial if we don't want to get lost choosing a teacher from the broad New Age market. It's unhealthy simply to rely on the experience of others. Ultimately, we need to decide for ourselves what's right or wrong for us. We also need to acknowledge that 'bad' experiences help to sharpen our judgement.

What differences or similarities do you see between spiritual growth work in the East and West today?

The Western approach is mainly psychotherapeutic, while the Eastern approach is meditational. They differ with regard to the levels of consciousness which each sets out to address. Ken Wilber, Jack Engler and Daniel Brown give a good summary of this in their book entitled Transformations of Consciousness. If we consider human development as a continuous process of growth, then the Western psychoanalytic/psychotherapeutic approach has provided us with a lot of knowledge about human development, from the symbiotic bond of infancy to the point of individual selfhood. To use Wilber's terminology, Western psychotherapy basically explores the pre-personal and personal realms: the pre-personal levels (1, 2 and 3), where we are still part of the energy field of the mother and father (age 0-6) and the personal levels (4, 5 and 6), where we develop our mental capacities and realise our separateness or individuality (age 6 onwards); and the Eastern meditational tradition addresses the transpersonal realm: the level of the psyche (7), the soul (8), the spirit (9) and the Absolute Consciousness (10), the basis of all existence.

The two approaches are, in fact, complementary; both are necessary. Psychotherapy helps us to change patterns in our lives which are learnt during childhood and which can adversely affect our physical, emotional and mental wellbeing as adults; it also helps us to build up the ego (we can only transcend what we have). We can work with psychotherapy all our life, but it won't bring us any closer to liberation from our identification with objects outside of the self. Meditation, on the other hand, helps us to detach from and disidentify with the different levels. It can help us to feel more comfortable with our neuroses, or even avoid them, but it won't heal our neuroses. So both tools have their own value, they both serve in different ways.

Can we combine both, and if so, how would you do that?

While I was in India, I met a man called B S Goel, who wrote an interesting book called *Psychoanalysis and Meditation* which I worked on translating into German during my first 15 months here as a member of the Foundation. The book turned out to be an excellent self-guide, combining both Eastern and Western approaches to witnessing the inner process. Inspired by this work, I now basically use the meditative approach to become aware of my inner process and then use the psychoanalytic approach to resolve any problems. The techniques Goel proposes are simple and can be used by anybody, but I imagine that they would appeal, and be of most value to those on the self-exploratory rather than devotional path.

Although you yourself profess to follow the self-exploratory path, you spent half a year with Sai Baba in his ashram in India and wrote a book about your experiences there. Looking back how has working with Sai Baba been significant for you on your own path?

At the time when I left for India in 1986, I wouldn't have known that there was any difference between the self-exploratory and devotional paths. For that matter, I wasn't even aware that I was actually on a spiritual path! I had a professorship in psychopathology and was teaching, doing research, and training people in Bioenergetic analysis; I had a private psychotherapeutic practice and had written a few books about how we construct and experience reality and how specific outlooks on life can be linked with specific dis-eases we develop. So, my background and approach were very scientific, and as far as my career went, I was very successful.

However, what didn't work for me in my life were my relationships, particularly with men. Ironically, I had written a book (*Die Heimliche Gleichung*) about the deeper structures within us which prevent men and women from coming together as equals, but somehow I didn't seem able to apply that knowledge to my own life. So, I figured, something was fundamentally wrong and I had to find out what it was. I had explored everything on the psychotherapeutic market and hadn't found a solution, so I had concluded that I was searching in the wrong place and had to start looking elsewhere. 'Elsewhere' turned out to be Sai Baba.

I decided to 'follow my heart', take the risk of going to his ashram and experience that path for myself. Going to the ashram was not an easy decision, and being there was even worse. Devotion has never been my path and yet I could recognise that there was a part in me that longed very deeply for something. At that time I thought I was longing for a partner. Later I realised, to quote the book, that "underlying the longing for the man is the longing for the mother, who is our first object of love ... Underlying the longing for the mother is the yearning for the divine mother which attaches itself to the earthly mother who is the first object we encounter in flesh and blood."

I was hearing a small voice which I learned to recognise as the voice of my soul. In the book I call this by its Hindu name, Shivatma. But there was also Ahamkara, the ego identified with all the outer social objects, and Buddhi, the psychoanalytically trained witness. These three aspects continually observed and commented on what went on, and often they were in conflict with each other. Shivatman, my inner soul, had a strong longing to bond in love with Sai Baba. Ahamkara, my scientific mind, found that idea ridiculous. But I had enough

psychoanalytic knowledge to understand that parts of me were highly developed while others were not, they were underdeveloped.

It took me many more years after my time at the ashram to understand that these discrepancies were the result of experiences of sexual abuse in my childhood that I had 'forgotten'. Intuitively rather than consciously, I knew it was important for me to open my heart again, to find and express the love that I carried within me but which I had hidden behind a protective wall. So I was, in effect, searching for a pure being who would respond to that love without abusing it. It was a risky undertaking for me at the time, especially as I was not conscious of the underlying cause of my scepticism and mistrust.

On an emotional level, I had to work through my inner doubts and questions about how safe it would be for me to surrender to Sai Baba. On a mind level I began to understand that the ego needs to surrender in order to free the path for the soul to shine through. It seemed to be a new type of surrender, but I couldn't quite grasp it. One day when I was struggling yet again with the question of bonding or not bonding I found a quote of Sai Baba's on the wall, which said: "Only where there is a blossom, can there be a fruit. Surrender is the blossom. Without that blossom the knowledge cannot be harvested." Then I understood that, no matter what path we choose, ultimately we need to surrender the ego and even the witness in order to become One with the Source. As long as we are identified with the ego and later the witness, we will experience separation, duality, a subject-object relationship.

Could you have experienced this surrender through simply working with your own force, through practising Vipassana or Zen or Tao?

If you ask me this as a personal question, I would say, "No". There was a part of me that was still fused with the mother in a symbiotic bond, which longed to re-create that kind of bond with an 'other' and had me trapped into creating painful and frustrating relationships particularly with men. A developmental principle is that you can't let go of something that you don't have. So, in order to free myself from that bond, I needed first of all to re-create it with someone who would not be attached to keeping me in 'chains' in the way that human partners often do. That may sound paradoxical, and it is, but my specific challenge, and I believe it is the challenge of many other men and women in our culture, was to crack that paradox. I needed to bond with an outer figure, in my case with Sai Baba, in order to liberate myself from that type of addictive bonding. Once liberated from this, I would be free to experience a deeper inner connection with life.

Surrender in this context meant 'trust'. This issue can be worked through with a good therapist as well. It's a form of post-maturation we need to do in order to develop parts of ourselves that have been arrested because of traumatic events. Until I met Sai Baba I hadn't been able to find a therapist who seemed clear, pure and evolved enough to mirror that for me. Sai Baba's gift to me beyond that post-maturation process was to open that part in me which is the seat of the soul, what the Sufis call the 'Heart of the Heart' and the Rosicrucians call the 'Rose of the Heart'.

If someone has none of these immature personality configurations to work through, then they won't need the experience of surrendering to an outer figure. They would be able to follow the self-exploratory path, moving and growing through the levels of consciousness as described earlier. Ultimately, they would have to surrender the little self to the big Self even on that path. But it's a different level of surrender which does not involve a guru or master but

involves the Source, 'letting go' into the Absolute. Historically, there are saints and spiritual masters who have done that, like Buddha.

The difficulty for most of us is that surrender in our subjective experience means death and we identify death as something final, as the end of physical existence. So we do everything we can to prevent that surrender, which means we become our worst enemy in hindering ourselves from reaching the goal. But in fact if we look at human development, we realise that death is a continually occurring and normal part of the developmental process: as we move from one level to another we have to let go of the identifications we have created on each level, material identifications with money, house, cars; emotional attachments to partners, children, friends; mental attachments to ideas and concepts; psychic attachments to visions, channelling, readings; And I am sure there are attachments on the subtle and causal levels that we ultimately need to dissolve and transcend.

After your stay with Sai Baba you came to Findhorn. How was the experience of coming to this Community after being in the ashram?

Towards the end of my stay with Sai Baba he raised the Kindling, the sexual or life energy within me. The rise of this powerful energy can bring about a whole variety of physical, emotional and mental pathologies on, what Ken Wilber refers to as, the seventh level of his developmental scale. In the Eastern tradition this energy is known to help clear up deep-rooted patterns which can't be reached through psychotherapeutic techniques.

I suffered from some physical symptoms and battled with some addictive attachments, particularly towards one man. The major crisis I experienced, however, was the phenomenon known as 'the dark night of the soul'. All the wisdom and knowledge I had just written about in my book about my stay with Sai Baba vanished. I didn't even understand my own book any more and it took me several years to emerge again. So the Foundation provided me with a loving, caring, and supportive framework within which I could live through the experience, despite the fact that nobody here at the time really understood what I was going through.

Coming out of that experience I realised that there are some fallacies in the New Age movement and its communities that are important to look at. One of the main fallacies is the way in which the pre-personal and trans-personal stages of development often get confused. Another is that, depending on the level of consciousness you are working on, words will carry a different meaning, which can add to the confusion by giving further credence to the fallacy. For instance, on the pre-personal level 'oneness' means an undifferentiated symbiotic bond with the mother; but on the trans-personal level 'oneness' means a conscious return to the Source, which requires individuation and differentiation. Another example is that people come to me asking if they should work on annihilating their ego. Their question is: Will we then reach enlightenment? Those who ask this question usually have a weak ego that needs restructuring. So, if they work towards disintegration, the probable result is ego destruction or psychosis, not ego transcendence or enlightenment.

Can you explain more about the 'pre/trans fallacy' and how you see this affecting our Community?

The 'pre/trans fallacy' is a term coined by Ken Wilber to describe the mixing up of the lower and higher levels of consciousness. A few months ago I described the implications of sexual abuse (see One Earth 13) where one possible outcome is that the physio-psychological development becomes interrupted or arrested at a pre-personal level; while at the same time

the psychic (a trans-personal) level can become highly developed. This was true in my own life, as I mentioned before.

For a community the question is how to work with those discrepancies, particularly if, as I believe is the case here in the Foundation, it tends to draw people with this problem. Normally the problem can be addressed to and taken care of by a guru. But in the case of a community like the Findhorn Foundation which supports diversity of spiritual paths and for this reason doesn't have a guru structure, a different solution to this problem needs to be found. One solution, which is not uncommon here, is that individuals go out and find their own guru outside of the Foundation.

Peter Caddy, one of the founders of the community, solved the problem by having a group meditation structure that was obligatory. In my view, that is a wise strategy to adopt, and necessary when working with people who, as yet, are unable to maintain the discipline of doing a spiritual practice on their own.

These group meditations functioned as a holding place which could absorb the usual confusions, projections and transferences that get played out on the pre-personal level. A collective bonding structure such as this effectively replaces the mirror function normally provided by the guru.

When Peter left in 1979, people stopped attending these meditations because this structure had been forced upon them. Because of the way in which the leadership at the time dealt with emotional issues, the structure had also actually prevented personal confusions from being cleared, with the result that these became repressed and developed a shadow existence which then needed to surface in order to be worked through. This was the time when different psychotherapeutic techniques became part of the Community, and the focus shifted from group meditation and 'work as love in action' towards individual inner processing. But, in my view, it went to the other extreme. Now it seems as if we are reaching another turning point where the meditational path can return to the community, but now on a higher level of consciousness.

Following a meditational or self-exploratory path on your own requires an understanding of and ability to maintain a regular discipline. It requires that people and/or the community as a collective organism reach a level of individuation and differentiation where the practicing of a discipline happens on a voluntary basis and where all the individual uniqueness and differences are held in the shared context of a common vision and a practical group bonding.

Where are we as a community in that process?

I think we are at a point of transition, moving from a more symbiotically organised community towards a village concept. The village concept requires differentiation and individuation of the parts and at the same time it needs to create some sort of group bonding structure on a spiritual level to bind the individual parts together into a shared frame.

Moving into differentiation and individuation requires us to develop the capacities of the mind. These include the ability to work with concepts, develop theories, reflect upon own processes and, from an educational point of view, move from the level of learning through example as little children do, to the level of teaching and learning through mental understanding. In this area we are also at a point of transition, where we are in the process of moving from a tribally structured passing on of rites and rituals type of learning to one which

is more systematically oriented. I believe that the Foundation is at a point where it needs to reflect upon its own roots and developments, understand the challenges it has had to face in its own growth process, look at the solutions it has come up with and now make all that knowledge and experience available to the world.

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