Timeless Visions, Healing Voices

Conversations with Men & Women of the Spirit

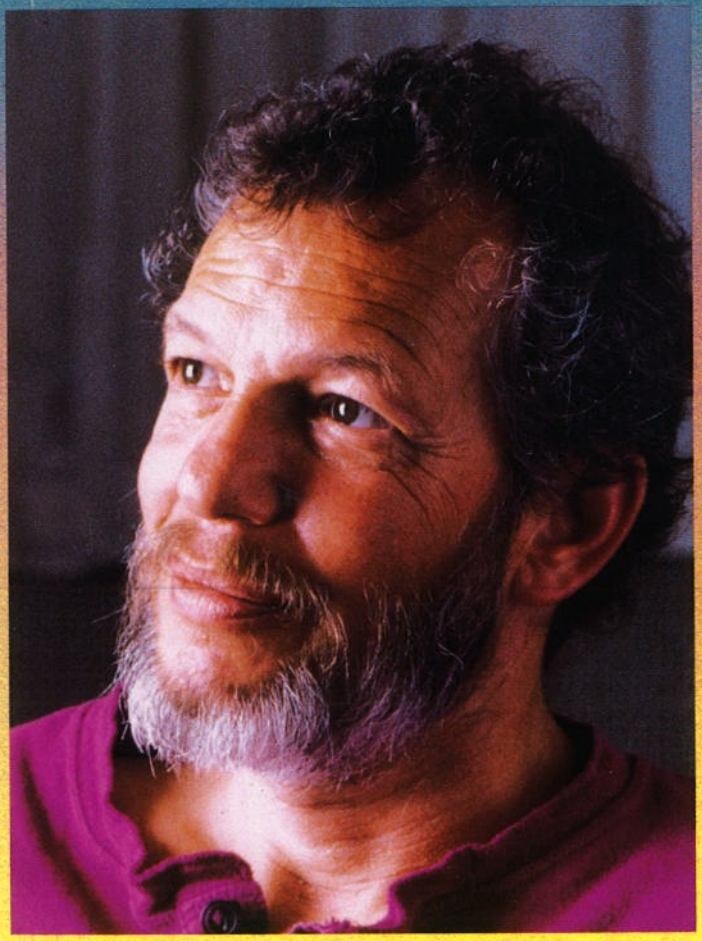

photo of Stephen Levine

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Foreword by Joan Borysenko

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Praise for Timeless Visions, Healing Voices

The range of interviews is superb, from deep ecology to consciousness and psychology... The seeds of healing from the separation that has afflicted us on every level—from the environment, to the family, to our own sense of worthiness, to the sacred—are present in these pages.

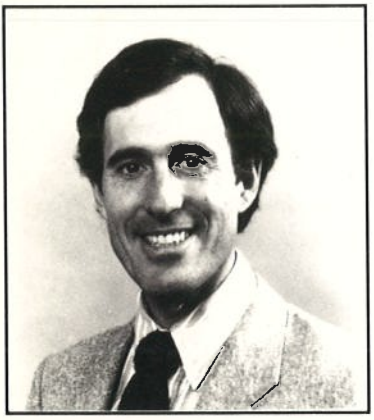
—from the Foreword by Joan Borysenko, Ph. D.

Each of these conversations contains valuable fragments of the new vision, the new myth, that is beginning to emerge in our time.

—Sam Keen

Most of the people interviewed responding to the planetary crisis propose that we adopt a radically different orientation—one that honors the sacred, encourages spiritual expression, emphasizes our interconnectedness, and values all life forms.

—from the Introduction by Stephan Bodian



Stephan Bodian has been editor of *Yoga Journal* since 1984. A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Columbia University, he did graduate work at Stanford and spent eleven years as a Zen Buddhist monk and meditation teacher. He has a private psychotherapy practice in San Raphael, California.

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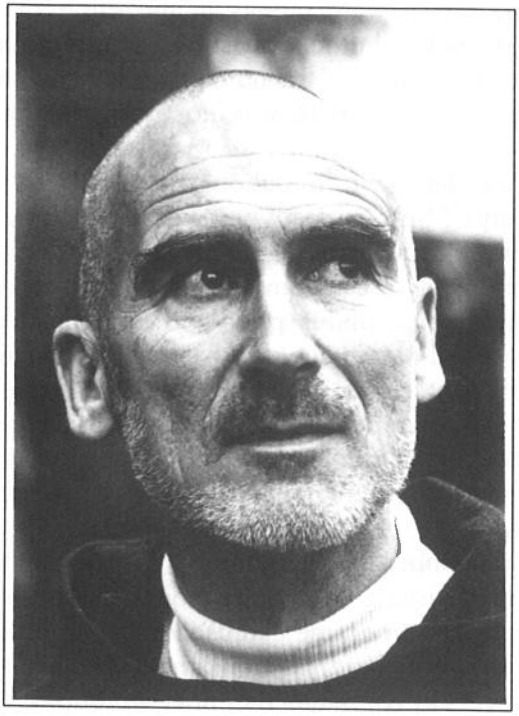

Brother David Steindl-Rast

Brother David Steindl-Rast is often considered Thomas Merton's successor as a builder of bridges between the Christian contemplative tradition and the meditative traditions of the East.

Born in Vienna in 1926 and raised a Catholic, Steindl-Rast witnessed, as a young man in postwar Austria, a flowering of interest in Eastern ways that was every bit as intense as America's in the 1970s. But "I was already rooted in one tradition," he explains, "which I found quite nourishing. I was mildly interested in what was going on, but I never read much about it."

In university he studied art, art history, anthropology, and psychology and graduated in 1952 with a doctorate in psychology from the University of Vienna. In 1953 he emigrated to the United States with vague visions of material success. "I had no intention of becoming a monk," he insists. However, after reading *The Rule of St. Benedict* (a classic guide to the monastic life), he visited Mount Savior Benedictine Monastery in upstate New York and knew within hours that he would stay. He has been a monk of Mount Savior ever since.

In the 1960s Steindl-Rast began encountering monks of other religious persuasions, including Buddhists and Hindus, and this prompted him to

question whether "these were monks in the same sense in which we were monks." His reading in the monastic literature of Asia surprised him because "some of the details of the training were so similar to our own—unaccountably so, because there was no external influence of one on the other."

In 1965 Steindl-Rast met the Buddhist monk Eido Tai Shimano of the Zen Studies Society of New York. "When we met, it was clear to both of us that despite all the cultural differences, we really spoke one language. Eido Roshi invited me to spend some time with him in New York."

With the permission of his prior—"a very forward-looking, open-minded man"—Steindl-Rast went on to spend a total of three years in residence at the Zen center in New York, practicing meditation and studying with such prominent masters as Soen Nakagawa and Hakuun Yasutani. He also spent a summer and a training period at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center with Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind.*

"I can still remember the first time I went to Tassajara," Steindl-Rast recalls. "I had been visiting a Trappist monastery the week before, and when I got to Tassajara I became confused as to whether I was now in a Christian monastery or a Buddhist monastery. They looked the same, the schedule was practically the same, the inner attitude—everything was the same. And it worked both ways. Ten minutes after I came, everybody took to me as if I had always been there."

Also at about this time, Steindl-Rast's prior took him to see Merton. "Merton was very interested in my practical exposure and experience, and I was very interested in his theoretical knowledge. He was never really exposed to the practice himself until he traveled to India, where he met a number of different teachers. His initial contact was entirely intellectual, whereas mine was primarily through practice."

Steindl-Rast's outreach has not been limited to the East-West ecumenical dialogue, however. During the several months each year when he is not in hermitage, he travels and teaches throughout the world, "trying," as he puts it, "to address myself to the great issues of our time"—among them world hunger and the threat of nuclear destruction—"which always have a spiritual side. . . . One of my great concerns is how we can get the message of peace to as many people as possible."

In recent years Steindl-Rast has drastically reduced his lecturing to devote more time to what he calls his "avocation": the hermit's life. Still dedicated to his original monastic community of Mount Savior, he has established as home base the Immaculate Heart Hermitage in Big Sur, California, because, in his words, "the Camaldolese pattern of the community here holds great promise for the future of monastic life. In contrast to most other monks, whose one focus is community, Camaldolese monks

swing back and forth between three equally important focal points: hermit's life, outreach in service beyond the monastery, and, between these two, life in monastic community."

In addition to his previous works, *A Listening Heart* and *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, Steindl-Rast has coauthored a book with Fritjof Capra entitled *New Thinking on God and Nature* and is at work on another with American Zen teacher Robert Aitken. Recently he had the "privilege" of cofounding the first Buddhist-Christian center in his native Austria, and he has been a regular faculty member at the annual Christian-Buddhist meditation symposium at Naropa Institute in Colorado.

When I meet with Brother David at the San Francisco Zen Center, where he is a frequent guest, I'm surprised to find so much genuine humility in a man of such stature. Soft-spoken and slight of build, with deep-set, compassionate eyes, he seems constantly attentive ("listening," as he puts it) to the call of the present moment—a virtue cultivated during long years of contemplation. Yet his gentleness is tempered by an air of authority and conviction and a fullness of presence that customarily accompany a rich inner life.

This unique combination of qualities—gentleness and strength, humility and fervor—remind me of accomplished Buddhist monks I have known. Indeed, with firm roots in his own tradition and intensive training in Eastern practices, Steindl-Rast himself embodies the bridging of East and West that he has so eloquently espoused.

DAVID STEINDL-RAST

Seeking the Heart of Prayer

Tell me, Brother David, now that you've had the opportunity to explore the Eastern traditions, particularly Buddhism, what do you think Buddhism has to offer Christianity, particularly Catholicism?

Let me approach this question on several levels. On one level, I think religious traditions go through phases, through ups and downs, and Buddhism in this country right now is going through a very fervent phase. When you go to most Zen centers here, you find not so much a focus on theories or doctrines as a strong emphasis on practice.

Unfortunately, in Catholic monasteries right now we don't have that fervor of practice. Maybe it's not so much a matter of inner attitude as a matter of not really knowing what to do. In most monasteries there are a few people who practice Zen or yoga because it is how they can express their fervor. They feel, rightly or wrongly—and I think largely wrongly—that they cannot find similarly effective methods in our Christian monastic tradition.

So that is one area in which we can learn from Eastern ways. We can take over some methods that are universally applicable, such as Zen sitting, or hatha yoga, or pranayama.

But then, on a deeper level, there is a complementarity, in the Christian and Buddhists approaches, between word and silence. The whole Western religious tradition in centered on the word. Perhaps the key intuition of the biblical religions is that "God speaks." Therefore, everything that *is*, is "word," mythologically expressed by the fact that God spoke, and there it was. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light; God said, "Let there be animals," and there were all the animals; and so forth.

Then humans began, by speaking, to appropriate the word. Adam gives names to everything; he gives names to the animals and so has a handle on them. The key practice, the key virtue in this tradition, is trust and obedience to the spoken word. One listens lovingly, one opens one's ears and responds to the word. This is a wonderful realm of spirituality belonging to all human beings; everybody can understand it on some level.

But when you focus so much on the word, you tend to neglect the realm of silence. That is the complementarity that Buddhism brings,

because Buddhism is all about silence. Buddhism teaches us to throw ourselves forever and ever into that silence, and that in turn creates the horizon from which the word can be understood and seen. This is what Merton meant, I'm sure, when he said that he could not have understood the Christian tradition as he did except from the Buddhist perspective. This silence creates the background against which you can see the word.

Then, of course, there is a third dimension, the dimension of action, of understanding. In the Eastern traditions you understand by acting, you don't understand by sitting back. To understand swimming, you have to jump into the water. I remember Swami Venkatesananda saying, "Yoga *is* understanding." In all the different branches of yoga, you do something, and in the doing you understand it from within. So we as Christians say, "Yes, our specialty is the word, but there is no word without silence, and there is no word or silence without understanding and doing." This forms a kind of trinitarian approach. Jesus is the Word, the Father is the silence out of which the Word comes, and the Holy Spirit is that spirit of understanding in which we act and labor and move and have our being. I've found this to be an approach that is not threatening to others and yet does justice to the Christian tradition.

What, on the other hand, do you feel Christianity might have to offer to Buddhism and Hinduism that might enrich those traditions?

I'm somewhat reluctant to blow my own horn, so to speak. But what I have heard Buddhists, even the Dalai Lama, say over and over again is that, at this present juncture in history, social consciousness, service, and compassionate action have been organized and developed more extensively by Christians. That would be one area in which we could find common ground and work together. Then of course there's the making explicit. If the "religions of the book" have the word as their specialty, it stands to reason that they would be able to speak most articulately about what's happening to all of us as a human family. Therefore, articulate books can be written about Buddhism and Hinduism by Christians.

Brother David, I've heard it said, "Since all paths lead to the same place anyway, choose the path that has heart for you." Do you agree that all paths lead to the same place?

It depends on what you mean by "paths." We tend to speak about where a path leads, but it helps to ask where a path starts. If it is a path with heart, it starts in the heart, in the human heart. I have never met any human being in all my travels—and I have traveled extensively, including time spent with Native American peoples, with Australian Aborigines, and with the Maoris in New Zealand—that gave me the slightest doubt that in our heart of hearts we are all one. Not just similar—one; there is only one human heart.

And that is where the path starts. It starts when we discover, in some

way or other, that deep sense of belonging. You could call it all-oneness or cosmic unity; my favorite word for it is "belonging." Most of us as children already have a lively sense of it. As adults we experience it sometimes in nature, or with other human beings. And this deep sense of belonging could actually be called "home." Home is where we start from, as T. S. Eliot says. "And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." So the end-point of the path is to get home again. This longing for belonging, this homing instinct of the heart, is the path within every path.

But when you ask if all paths lead to the same place, and then think of the manifestations of that longing, you have to be very careful. In all the traditions I am familiar with, the inner path leads to the same goal. But sometimes the outer path can distract you from this inner path. In the Christian tradition this one universal path with heart is to be found all the different denominations. But every denomination, my own certainly not excluded, also has aspects that would be detrimental to your ever reaching your goal. So I take a very cautious view of religions, including my own, because they have a built-in tendency to become irreligious. Our task, if we belong to a religion, is to make our particular religion religious, to transform it into the "path with heart." You can sit zazen or do all the things Catholics are supposed to do, and it won't get you anywhere, unless you do it with heart, unless you find that center were you're really at home. And then you're already there.

Studying other traditions can perhaps help revive in us a sense of that heart we're starting from.

Very much so, both in a negative way and in a positive way. After we've seen all the shortcomings of other religions, we can turn around and more easily see the shortcomings in our own. That's the negative approach. But if you're open-minded, you can also see in every tradition people who are dedicated and alive, great teachers who are very inspiring, and all of a sudden you have a much fuller calendar of saints than you had before. On All Saints Day, for instance, in our petitions in the monastery, all the great teachers from the Buddhist and Hindu traditions are being mentioned nowadays without anybody batting an eyelash. In fact, we've had the Buddha in our calendar since the sixth century, when John of Damascus picked up his story from monks wandering from Asia Minor. He's called St. Jehosephat, which is a transliteration of the Sanskrit *bodhisattva*, "enlightened being."

You've written, "The closer you come to the heart of your own tradition, the closer you come to the heart of other traditions." I wonder how you feel about young people who are brought up in the Christian tradition who then leave it to look elsewhere for guidance, for a path they can call their own. Do you feel that this is appropriate and that they will ultimately find what

they're looking for? Or do you feel that at some point they will have to come back and resolve their relationship with their own tradition?

The one thing we will always have to find, of course, is our own center; not some teaching out there, but our own innermost heart. If the tradition in which you were brought up hasn't helped you find that, then I feel very good about your looking for it somewhere else because I have hopes that your search will be successful.

But I also feel sad when I look at how much my own religion has given me, and how much it could give to other people, and I realize that something seems to be lacking there, in the educational institutions or in the family. I can't quite put my finger on it. So young people frequently have to leave and go browsing, and this makes me sad. But I am happy when I see that these young people at least have guts and interest and religious spunk enough to look for it somewhere else.

As for the child who has gone through Catholic schools and has had Catholic parents and whose parents are not distressed because he or she all of a sudden puts on Buddhist robes or goes to India or whatever, my only concern at this point is for the parents. I always try to tell them, "Rejoice with your child, because this child, has, under a different cover, under a different label, found what is so important to *you*." I try to broaden their minds a little. I have no doubt at all that these young people, if they continue on the path they have chosen, will find what we call "Christ." Because I know you can find it in all the different traditions. Very frequently, of course, it happens that people who come from a Christian background spend many years practicing Zen, for instance, or yoga, and eventually, through this practice—not in spite of it, but through it—rediscover their Christian background.

But by this I don't mean to imply that I'm a nominalist. I don't say "It's all the same." The paths are very, very different. The more you study them, the more you realize that they are far more different than we had originally thought. On the surface there is a certain similarity, and deep down there is a oneness. But between those two poles they are as different as they can possibly be. And that's good, because there is something for everybody.

Religions are like human beings, it seems. On the surface we're very much the same—we have two eyes, a nose, a mouth—and deep down we have the same heart. But our personalities are quite different.

That's exactly the parallel. Therefore different human beings have to follow different paths to find that oneness which we really all have—with other human beings, with animals, with plants, with the whole cosmos. To arrive there is bliss, the path of heart.

The word "contemplative" is often used to describe monks in the Benedictine order, the order of which you're a part. What is contemplation, as you practice it, and how does it differ from meditation, in the Eastern

sense? I'm particularly interested in the word "contemplation" and how that differs from "meditation."

In literature you will find the words "meditation" and "contemplation" used in different ways. In the Christian tradition, meditation emphasizes more *your* doing; you take a passage and you meditation it, which means that you think about it on a deeper level, perhaps, or you move it lovingly around in your heart, or you repeat the mantra, or whatever. Then comes a higher stage called "contemplation," where you are no longer in control of the process. Instead, you open yourself, you drop the word or passage or the image you've been dealing with, and you're just *there.* And this does something to you. Not when we speak more broadly of monastic life as the "contemplative life," we mean a life-style in which people give priority to meditation and contemplation, to prayer, to spiritual practices. These are roughly the definitions most people would agree to in everyday parlance.

To do justice to your excellent question, however, one would have to go much deeper and ask what the term *contemplatio* originally meant. This Latin term expresses one of the most primordial religious attitudes we can trace, an attitude based on the idea that the higher things set the pattern for order in the lower things. The *templum,* which we now call "temple," was originally not a building but a measured-out area in the sky, and the sky, with all its planets and stars, was the symbol for cosmic order. The Roman priests and augurs consulted the heavens, the temple, took the order they found there, and projected it onto the chaos of daily living.

In my opinion, this idea of contemplation is really the predominant one. It implies that every human being has a contemplative tendency, a contemplative life, which is that aspect of your inner life by which you seek meaning. Corresponding to the higher things would be meaning; corresponding to the lower things would be daily life, purpose, purposeful action. To put meaning into your purpose—that is how I understand "contemplation;" to raise up your eyes and look at that which gives meaning to your life, at the higher, unchangeable things, and to try to put your life in order.

From this perspective you can understand that monastic life is not called contemplative simply because monks have a little more time to meditate or pray. The real reason is that monks in all the different monastic traditions—being extremely sensitive to the chaos in the world—step back a little and say, "Let's build now within this chaotic world a little island of order." That is the monastery—not the buildings, particularly, but a place where time and space are put in order. Schedules are marked by gongs and bells and clappers and drums. Certain things are done in certain places and not in others; you take off your shoes and put them in a certain place; you dress in a certain way; and so forth.

This external way of ordering time and space is very important to

monastic life, but all the achieved monks will tell you that it is really not of ultimate importance. The decisive thing is that you put your life in order; *that* is contemplative life. The monastery is like a controlled environment or laboratory for this particular pursuit. St. Benedict calls it a "workshop for the divine life."

What about the relationship between contemplation and social action? Most people think that the one precludes the other, whereas I sense that you have combined them in your life.

Given the understanding of contemplation that I just shared with you, it becomes obvious that the two belong together, because where do you draw the line in transforming the world?

So both social action and contemplation attempt to put the world in order.

That's right, attempt to bring order into life. The monastery draws a line and erects a fence, but only in order to set up a model or a focal point or a workshop whose influence radiates out.

In practice, however, it isn't that easy. For one thing, the pursuits are obviously quite different, more now than in former times. In the Middle Ages you could run a school or hospital right in the middle of the monastery itself. Nowadays, a school or hospital has become something so totally different in its demands from a monastery that it is almost impossible to hold these two dimensions together. Life has become highly specialized, the demands are quite divergent, and our energies are limited. You might well think, "Life is too short to become a really good monk who stays in the monastery all the time." And that is true. But since life also demands both activities from me, I find myself trying to respond to the demands of life, and I end up not doing either one so very well. I have great compassion for others who make different choices, because I see how difficult it is for me. Right now, in fact, I'm cutting down on the time I spend traveling, saying no to three out of four invitations to speak, just because I feel it is more and more important for me to stay in the monastery. I need to weigh whether I can do more, at this point, by writing than by going out and meeting a relatively small group of people.

So the two are compatible in your eyes; in fact, contemplation seems to imply social action. Yet our time and energy are limited.

They're not just compatible; they are two aspects of the same reality. But to put the two together is very difficult. One solution is to go back and forth between these two poles. Sometimes you totally immerse yourself in the vision, to the exclusion of all action, as far as possible. At other times you totally immerse yourself in action, translating the vision into action. For example, you go out and work with the Catholic Workers for a month at a time, then you come back into the monastery and go into hermitage.

Of course, individuals operate on different wave-lengths. Some may go back and forth in rapid succession. Others may do it on a long-term

basis, spending a year in a secluded hermitage somewhere in a cave, then immersing themselves in the city for a year or two. Any many will say, "My center of gravity is not in the monastery; it is outside, in my family, in the world, in the society in which I live. But I need the monastery to counterbalance that." Such people may need to spend a week in a monastery every year, in order to find a sense of vision and give meaning to their lives.

Brother David, you titled your most recent book Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer. *I wonder what you mean my that? How is gratefulness in fact the heart of prayer?*

In the sense in which I'm using it here, prayer is not just saying prayers; it is the activity of religion. "Religion" is one of those strange nouns that has no verb. You can't say, "I'm religioning." I think the word "praying" is the closest equivalent.

At the heart of religion, as I mentioned earlier, is a sense of belonging. And at the heart of gratefulness, in its deepest sense—as when you say "thank you" and really mean it—is an expression of belonging. When you say "thank you." you are really saying, "We belong together." That is why some people find it so difficult to say "thank you"—because they don't want to be obliged. But in a healthy society that's exactly what you want, mutual obligations. Everybody is obliged to everybody else; we all belong together. One way in which we in our culture express that sense of belonging is by saying "thank you."

But behind that custom stands the vast phenomenon of gratefulness, which is an attitude toward life that we can cultivate. We can be alert in each moment to the gift that life is. If we can cultivate that attitude, we're right at the heart of religious living. And that is true prayer: a deep awareness of our limitless belonging—to self, to others, to the universe, to God, to ultimate reality. In fact, the most basic, most universally satisfying definition of God that I can find is "the one to whom we belong." God is the reference point for our deepest sense of belonging. And gratefulness is the joyful living out of that belonging. Every moment can spark that joyfulness in us.