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REPORT ON THE SUFI-YOGI DIALOGUE

DENA MERRIAM

From January 27th to 31st, 2010, Hindu and Muslim religious leaders from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan met to explore forming a spiritual alliance to ease tensions, counter extremism, and set a new tone for the region. Gathering thirty-five leaders from various traditions, the Sufi-Yogi Dialogue took place in a place famous for spiritual seers and sages, Rishikesh, on the banks of the sacred Ganges River in India. Organized by the Global Peace Initiative of Women, the Dialogue was facilitated by Dena Merriam, GPIW Founder and Convener, along with Swamini Pramananda, and hosted jointly with Swami Veda Bharati of the Swami Rama Sadhaka Grama.



During the course of the four days, leaders from the Sufi and Yogic traditions spoke in great depth about the common ground between them, and they expressed great interest in learning more about each other's practices and forming a new partnership for peace. The gathering was not a typical interfaith meeting as the leaders came together not only to talk about mutual tolerance and understanding, but to explore a much deeper engagement as well—to re-discover and strengthen their ancient shared spiritual roots as a means to meet the contemporary challenges of the region and begin to resolve present-day conflicts between the two great cultures of Hinduism and Islam.

The Sufis and Yogis in particular were chosen for this ground-breaking dialogue because they represent the mystical core of the Islamic and Hindu traditions. As such, they are especially suited to distilling the essence of unity, the direct experience of the Divine, at the heart of both religions, –and perhaps ultimately of all religious experience. Tapping into

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this inner source of unity, common to all spiritual paths at their innermost level, has the potential to guide us to outer unity in our crisis-torn world. Experiencing our true identity with the Divine can then serve as a fulcrum for global healing and harmony.

The Hindu leaders represented Yogic, Vedantic and Kashmiri Shaivite traditions from different parts of India, while the Sufi leaders represented orders in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as Kashmir in India. Through the course of the Dialogue, a meeting of hearts as well as minds occurred. In addition to exchanging views, the delegates sat together in meditation, silence and prayer, chanted slokas from the Vedas and recited from the Koran, sang Hindu bhajans and attended a stirring Sufi concert, sat in communion in a holy cave on the Ganges, and emerged with a much deeper sense of unity.

The gathering began with general discussions, formal at first, about the tenets of the two traditions, quoting from the respective scriptures, comparing and contrasting theological points. It was increasingly recognized that beneath the surface differences of language and symbolic expression the Sufi and Yogic traditions showed a great commonality in values, perspectives, and even many forms of practice. The shared historical roots of the two traditions were repeatedly alluded to, along with the fact that they have co-existed for centuries, especially in the Kashmiri region, not only in harmony but in active, fertile dialogic exchange.

Many common points between the Sufi and Yogic traditions were identified. On the spiritual level, both include a focus on interiority, direct mystical experience of communion with the Divine, identification with the Higher Self rather than the ego, and purification practices such as mantra, chanting, silence, fasting and prayer. Both traditions share a rich heritage of aesthetic expression of inner spiritual experience through art, music and poetry. On the social level, both traditions share an emphasis on the values of love, mercy, peace and the honoring of the Divine in all beings—even, and most especially, in the stranger.

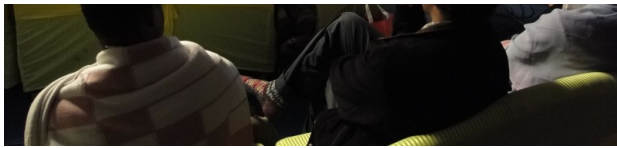
As the dialogue deepened in the days that followed, barriers melted away and the growing sense of kinship within the group became palpable. There was a marked shift from theoretical discussions to opening of the heart and a greater trust both in one another and the movement of Divine purpose guiding us. We experienced at a level deeper than words that the outer forms of expression pointed to a shared essence, a spiritual unity at the heart of all existence, cutting across all cultural and ideological boundaries.



In this way, both the unifying essence and its diverse forms were honoured. Bringing together Vedantic, Kashmiri Shaivite and Sufi perspectives clarified that while form, or the manifest world, may be said to be illusion in certain Hindu traditions, it is meant in the sense that the world is not as we perceive it, consisting of solid, separate objects. Rather, it is energy, flowing from a single source of pure consciousness, into many forms.

This Source, whether we call it Allah, Brahman, God or the Divine

This sounds like it was a fantastic event! As a devotee of...



Mother, is to be realized, honoured and served in all its forms. Here the interconnection between spiritual unity and social transformation came to the fore, the much-needed alliance between spiritual practice and action in the world. It was clearly affirmed that, especially in these critical times, contemplation

needs to be accompanied by action. Action, as one delegate said, is a way of expressing Divinity; it is included in the prime definition of Being, and cannot be denied at any stage. The dialogue started to centre around the need for practical steps to bring the power of the collective spiritual wisdom we were gathering from our traditions into effective action for peace and planetary healing so crucial at this time.

This remained a central theme for the rest of the Dialogue, as ideas were generated and exchanged for further networking and collective action in the region. There was an eagerness to disseminate and start to put into practical action the powerful sense of spiritual unity tapped in the gathering. Plans were set in motion to support each other in local and regional initiatives to resolve conflict and restore peace, through education, media, and a continued deepening of interspiritual dialogue, unifying the energies not only of the different spiritual traditions but also the power of spirituality itself with initiatives for social transformation.

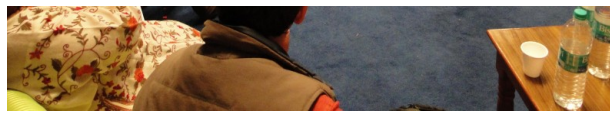
A turning point in the dialogue took place with the visit to Swami Veda Bharati's ashram on Friday afternoon. The elegant circular arrangement of the seats, suggestive of our equality in the Divine, in the midst of the large meditation hall resonant with the vibration of many years of collective meditation, set a tone of sacredness, receptivity and inspiration. Swami Veda's heartfelt welcome, his deep understanding, love and affinity for the Sufi tradition, and the life-long desire he spoke of for spiritual unity among the traditions, was profoundly moving for all present. The Sufi delegates, and particularly Said Ahmad Shah, an Afghan Sheikh, melted to Swami Veda, and the two immediately fell into each other's arms, with a deep sense of reunion and a vow to stay connected in the future.

The discussion that followed on the role of Shakti, the Divine Feminine, in spiritual unity and global transformation, was also profoundly insightful and stirring. It was recognized that the Divine Feminine has both an evolutionary and an eternal aspect, both critically needed at this time to bring the mystical core of unity at the heart of the traditions into the healing of the collective consciousness and the planet.

In her interconnective, evolutionary and transformative capacity, the energy of the Divine Feminine can begin to heal the split between spirit and matter, the transcendent and the immanent—between the Divine and all its forms—which has been the root of so much divisiveness on our planet. Turning the evolutionary spiral, she unifies the polarities of spirit and matter through her energy, and through the same energy has the potential to reconcile warring factions, healing the rifts between cultures, nations and religions, between man and woman, and between humanity and nature.



The Divine Feminine is the mediator between all forms, the peacemaker, that which melts all barriers, revealing the essential unity of all existence. In her eternal aspect, as all-embracing Consciousness, She is the space out of which all is born, in which all lives and to which all returns, waiting for us, with open arms, to remember that we were never separate. Women have a large role to play in bringing in this consciousness, along with men who recognize its critical importance and welcome the feminine values of reconciliation and unity into the higher structures of spirituality and society.



This feminine energy was clearly present throughout the conference, weaving a seamless unity. The mystical paths in particular, such as Sufism and Yoga, form a natural alliance with the feminine, since both are about the melting of boundaries, a direct union between the immanent and the Divine. This natural affinity is particularly fertile at this time, when the healing of divisions is so deeply called for.

The awakening of this energy of unity was beautifully exemplified on the group's last morning together, at the Vashishta Cave. The cave, on the shore of the Ganges, where the great sage Vashishta meditated for many years, is sacred to the Hindus. The Sufi leaders entered to the sound of Hindu priests outside chanting the Ramayana. Once inside, the Sufi leaders were awestruck by the cave's powerful energy, and one felt an electric current suddenly surge up his spine. (In Hinduism, this energy of awakening is said to be the Goddess Kundalini.) The Sufis then fell spontaneously into a Zikr, chanting and swaying in their style of prayer, blending with the rhythms of the Ramayana outside. It was a moment of great exhilaration as the two groups wove together in a chorus of communion with the Divine, symbolizing the joining of the two streams in the deeper experience of Oneness that underlies all forms of religious expression, indeed of all creation.

Another theme that recurred through the dialogue was the possibility of working for outer transformation through the collective energy fields in which we are all connected. It is said that when people of deep spiritual devotion join together in prayer or directed intention, powerful vibrations are generated which can flow into manifestation, via the subtle energy fields through which spirit and matter, inner and outer, are interconnected, and influence events on the outer plane. In addition to taking practical outer action for transformation, many delegates expressed the desire to continue to work together on the inner planes, even at a distance, through such group prayer and intention, directing peace and healing to specific areas of conflict in the world, regionally and globally.

In sum, from the start of the gathering, there was a growing realization of our collective spiritual power. When any two groups are aligned in harmony with the One Divine will, whatever their external forms, they can, at a deeper level, act as one, and co-create with the One in its processes of manifestation. In this way, two groups can work in concert, not only with no dispute over their differing forms, but in the sacred recognition that both are emanations of the same Divine One. And because this connection flows both ways – from the Divine One to its forms, and back from its forms to the Divine – the more deeply aligned we are in this Oneness, the more powerfully we can bring its harmony into expression in our world.

In this way the diverse forms become increasingly transparent to their underlying Oneness, in dynamic, responsive,

transformative intercommunication with their own Source. The One is the eternal, the forms the evolving aspect, of the Divine, working in dynamic communion to manifest their unity throughout the myriad levels of creation.

At the end of the meeting, the delegates expressed a longing for a deepening and on-going exchange, acknowledging the thread of unity, historical and spiritual, connecting all in the region. There was consensus that a common culture ran through the region joining India, Pakistan and Afghanistan and the participants committed to reviving their shared traditional roots and moving forward with a deeper understanding of the spiritual unity so necessary for resolving regional conflicts. Those present were strongly moved by their experience together and the new sense of kinship that had developed.

A follow-up to the Sufi-Yogi Dialogue is already being planned for April in Pakistan, and possibly in Afghanistan later this year. In addition, specific initiatives are being set in motion for different areas in the region. Inspired by the visit to Swami Veda's ashram, one of the Pakistani leaders, Sufi Rehman Muiyahadeen and a small group, are planning to set up a Sufi practice center in Lahore. In Kashmir, a Hindu-Muslim youth summit is being organized for later this spring by Ms. Ashima Kaul, a Kashmiri Pandit, Dr. Aslam Sahib, a Sufi, and Swamini Pramananda of the Hindu Vedantic tradition.

As our time together drew to a close, few wanted to leave the warm friendships, the momentum of inspiration and spiritual bonds that had been formed. But all agreed that this was just the beginning, with much work to be done together in the future. This first Sufi-Yogi Dialogue is a prologue for what is to come, breaking ground, sowing seeds, and establishing a network of relationships throughout the region through which the spirit of unity tapped here can continue to deepen and grow.



Dena Merriam is the founder and convener of the [Global Peace Initiative of Women](#). Dena has worked to engage women in peace-building activities in conflict and post-conflict regions around the world. She has also organized major international interfaith events and has worked to build a global network of contemplative leaders and practitioners who share the experience of unity at the heart of all the religious traditions. Dena holds a master's degree from Columbia University and has served on the advisory boards of the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, The Interfaith Center of New York, the Manitou Foundation, and the All

India Movement for Seva. Additionally, she is an advisor to the board of Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association.

[Read more about Dena Merriam](#)

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Thank you Dena for your account of the gathering of many masters of meditation and prayer. Many of us, who are on the outskirts of those teachers, involved with our prayer communities are feeling the need for more such gatherings in order to continue the propagation of our destiny as helpers for the healing of our worlds conflict. Sending that message individually and collectively will further our mission.

— Sh'mal Ellenberg on March 30, 2010

Hello Dena,

Strictly speaking, you deserve big thumps and kudos for your initiative of the noble cause. No one can deny it, but....being pragmatic and a senior man, a lot more is required for this exceedingly late stage cancer. It is not to discourage you and you mustn't let yourself be on any account distracted. We work from two angles.

God bless

— Dr. O. P. Sudrania on July 11, 2010

This sounds like it was a fantastic event! As a devotee of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and as someone who is very fond of many Sufi lineages as well, it warms my heart to know that these kinds of events and dialogues have been taking place.

— ned on January 22, 2011

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