

Interview with Bjørn Pettersen in the Norwegian Magazine VISION

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- What is “spirituality” to you?

In Norway and in all of the Western world we suffer from a great confusion of ideas about non-worldly values, much thanks to the newfangled foreign word ‘spiritualitet’ (spirituality), or the Norwegian ‘åndelighet’ (spirituality), which both mean exactly the same thing. ‘Spiritualitet’ or ‘åndelighet’ immediately makes us think about spirits or ghosts, i.e. something fully indefinable *outside ourselves*, and that is largely why there constantly pop up people who claim to be a medium for these spirits through so-called clairvoyance, channelizing, spiritualism, automatic writing, healing, etc. Unfortunately, many are lured to believe that these people are highly developed and that they impart eternal values, just because we lack adequate words and concepts for “eternal values” in Norwegian and other Western languages.

Usually I like to express myself briefly and in simple language, but here I shall have to become a little linguistic to emphasise a very important point. In the Indian *Sanskrit* – the language that is nearest to the root of all the Indo-European languages to which Norwegian belongs, we find the word ‘adhyatmika’, which stands for that which is ‘related to atman’. An ‘adhyatmic’ person is a truth seeker who is mainly turned towards, or focused on, ‘atman’. What is ‘atman’? Atman is not something outside yourself – it is yourself! Or more correctly, your Self, because it is impersonal – i.e. without ego – but it denotes your real nature or your innermost, true I. Luckily, ‘atman’ and several other central Sanskrit words like ‘brahman’, ‘karman’, ‘samsara’, ‘dharma’, ‘shanti’, ‘ahimsa’, ‘sadhu’, ‘sannyasin’, ‘yoga’, ‘samadhi’, etc., are increasingly established words and concepts in the Western world. None of these words have equivalents in any of the European languages, and that quite simply means that in this part of the world we never thought these thoughts. ‘Atman’ is usually translated as ‘soul’, which is the nearest we come to ‘atman’ in the West. But ‘soul – Seele – sjel’ doesn’t have any good etymology – it probably comes from Sanskrit ‘sarir’, which means physical body. And here, perhaps, we find the deep-rooted cause of our innate identification with our physical body? Another reason why ‘soul’ is not a good word is that it is used as a synonym for ‘mind’ and ‘spirit’ through all European literature from ancient Greece up to our modern times. For instance, by definition, ‘psychology’ is ‘science of the soul’ (Gr. ‘psychos’ = soul), but all that subject contains is about the mind only, as seen from the ‘adhyatmic’ point of view (in English it is ‘science of the mind’, but ‘mind’ and ‘soul’ are used arbitrarily to denote the same thing: sometimes ‘mind’ is used and other times ‘soul’ is used). And to add to this confusion comes ‘spirit’, which is just as indefinable as soul and mind. No wonder people are confused!

So “spirituality” to me is a word that I tend to avoid, but what lies behind it, I like to think, is ‘truth’, ‘love’, ‘immortality’, ‘universality’ and all the eternal human values which we are targeting and want as guides in our lives. This is then nothing outside ourselves, on the contrary, this is that which we – all of us – find in our innermost being. It is the feeling that there just has to be something eternal, absolute and constant, in spite of the fact that our sense experience incessantly tells us the opposite. It is the subconscious logic of opposites that if something is dynamic, there also has to be something static – that the one cannot be without the other or that they depend on each other. And then there is the reality that no one manages to imagine a non-existence, which is our usual misconception of death. So, this concerns absolute or eternal truths, in contrast to relative or changeable truths which contain everything pertaining to the human mind and all phenomena in

this world – including spirits, angels, gods, devas, extraterrestrials, aliens and other more or less discarnate identities.

Contact with spirits belongs, to a certain extent, to primitive people who live in harmony with virgin nature – it is absolutely meaningless for modern, urban people who have destroyed nature through egoism and inhuman greed! In any case, contact with spirits cannot answer our most searching questions about our self: “Who am I really?”, “From where have I come and unto where am I going?”, and “Why am I here?” These are universal human questions independent of time, place, culture or belief, and it is really impossible that anyone outside ourselves can answer these questions. Among humans this identity problem is universal and can only be solved by realizing our selves through that which is called Self-Realization. And that path is not outward, but only inward – beyond mind, personal identity and ego.

The science of Yoga in India, for instance, was invented to demonstrate systematically how it is possible to turn your awareness from outward facing to inward and thereby unite your individual with your universal, helped by your body and mind only, and nothing else! It is a fantastic tool for man which doesn't demand any creed, dogma, culture or belonging, but requires only sincerity, self discipline and persistence, because it needs to be practiced regularly. The two first steps in yoga, *yama* and *niyama*, demonstrate clearly this turnabout from the outer towards the inner. And then it is important to understand that the five first steps in what is called the eightfold “classical yoga”, are meant only as preparations for the mind – for concentration of the mind and meditation, which constitute steps six and seven. Here in the West, yoga is, unfortunately, understood mostly as a form of gymnastics because those who teach it, mainly concentrate on step three, *asana*, and step four, *pranayama*, respectively the physical postures and breathing exercises. The inordinate focus on these two steps has led to the teaching of hundreds of physical postures and breathing exercises mostly suited for the therapeutic treatment of illnesses. Originally, the third step, *asana*, was only meant for finding the right sitting posture, in which you could sit comfortably for a long time without any physical distraction and without the soles of your feet touching the ground. And the fourth step, *pranayama*, was meant only for balancing your breath so as to create the optimal conditions for the further steps, to withdraw all the senses, *pratyahara*, and thereafter to concentrate the mind, *dharana*, so that continuous observation of the mind, *dhyana*, became possible. Yoga is designed in such a way that all these seven steps are interdependent and that they are followed strictly step by step. The eighth and last step is the very result of the seven others and is called “samadhi”. It cannot be explained, but in that “state” the human being is in reality free from his mind and “spiritually” speaking has become immortal, or Self-Realized.

This realization of the Self or “homecoming to one's source”, is a completeness or fulfilment of life, which in reality is the only duty we have as humans in this life. Only after seeing through the mind and neutralising the ego, can we live freely and unconcerned, and really enjoy this ever-wondrous life, in love and wisdom.

- **Recently you published the book ”Universell religion – Essensiell religionsforståelse” (“Universal Religion – Essential Understanding of Religion”), which was announced in the previous edition of “Visjon” (“Vision”). What was it that set off the writing process in you?**

One winter, many years ago, I was engaged as a guest lecturer in the so-called “foreign religions” at the upper secondary school in Tynset, and I became horrified and upset as to how unimaginably bad was the textbook the students used. There Christianity was favoured and all the other religions

almost ridiculed. Especially, I can remember it was said about Hinduism that it could be summed up by the three K's (in Norwegian): "Ku, kaste og karma" (cow, caste and karma)! It was just unbelievable that not just one but altogether three collaborating authors could present anything that absurd to the students, and that on top of that the government had approved it as a textbook. To me it was like an insult to a majority of the world's population, and it felt just too bad that innocent and enquiring young adults should have to digest anything like that. Therefore I immediately sat down to write the manuscript. I feel it is important that we receive adequate knowledge as to how our fellow humans on this planet Earth think and live their daily lives, and non-proselytizing religious knowledge is a very important contribution, because most people profess to one religion or another. In Norway we are mostly ignorant about other people's religions, and surely this is also the case in all other countries of the world, too. This kind of knowledge is particularly important for peace and coexistence, because of the fact that most people don't have any spiritual or universal understanding which elevates them above the confines of religion. Yet, the religions are often just exactly the gateway to such quest and understanding.

- **In your book, amongst other things, you describe the various world religions' common feature. What is the main essence of the religions, as you see it?**

All the great world religions point out the existence of that abstract thing which we neutrally may call "The One Eternal Absolute", which is called God, Allah, Brahman and Nirvana in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, respectively. Different names and forms, but there is no essential difference in the reality behind these concepts – they all are various expressions of precisely the same truth. The differences are due to the fact that they originated in different cultures, places and times. But to know that truth, or this "one eternal absolute", we must learn to know ourselves through self discipline, purity of mind and humanity. This is in short the message of all the great world religions.

Another reason that there is no essential difference is that it is the same identity that has manifested in various ways at intervals down through the ages, whenever it became necessary again to bring the people back to the source when they had gone astray.

It is always necessary to go to the core of any religion in order to understand it, i.e. to the very source, to the so-called founder of a religion. Everything else becomes in comparison peripheral and insignificant. It is meaningless only to study the framework or the outer conditions, such as rituals and sacraments. Then one gets confused! Unfortunately it seems that religious historians have an awkward tendency to do just this.

- **In our times we are becoming increasingly secular, but perhaps also more in search of meaningfulness of life. Why is it like that?**

There are seven principles of life which are human needs and which all humans need. The three most fundamental needs are food, clothes and shelter, and then there is need of health, education and security. When these needs and necessities are met, there is still another principle to be satisfied and that is the aim of it all – that which brings the fulfilment and perfection of life, namely "spirituality" or the knowledge about Atman. There is no spirituality without naturalness and humanity – sacrifice, truth and love. A spiritual person is known practically for his or her will to

self-sacrifice, not for psychic powers, figments of imagination or self hypnosis. A naturally self-sacrificing person sacrifices exactly because he or she has truth and unconditional love.

Therefore we see that the search for meaningfulness of life – for truth or perfection – is a fundamental human need and a principle of life which, since it is an essential part of us – actually the very driving force of life and development – we quite simply cannot avoid. This motivation drives forward the whole evolution of the Cosmos!

- What is “consciousness” to you?

In a way everybody knows what consciousness is. But who can describe or explain it!? All are familiar with what we call ‘consciousness’ because it is through this that we experience life. But how well can we say that we know it? Throughout life, every single day, all people experience three different levels of consciousness in three completely different states of mind. We are totally unconscious in what is called deep, dreamless sleep and nobody has any recollection whatsoever from this state; thereafter we experience sub-consciousness in that which is called dream state; and then finally we experience consciousness in what is called the waking state of mind. It is this waking state that as a rule we stay in most of our active hours during day and night, and it is in this state that we have body consciousness and are aware of the three dimensional world around us. Therefore it is also this state which is usually defined as ‘life’.

When we sleep, we have no idea about this “awake”, three dimensional world or that we have a physical body at all. In deep, dreamless sleep our mind is inactive, so it is exactly like coma, but it is this that we call our “causal body”. While in the sub-conscious dream state our mind has become active and to a greater or lesser extent, we experience that which we call the astral world, where time, space and the laws of physics no longer rule. We feel that we live only in the waking state and we think that that reality is more real than the two other states. But when we do experience unconsciousness and sub-consciousness those are then our only reality and we know nothing else.

If we assume that the human being consists of three dimensions – spiritual, mental and material – the spiritual is represented by that which we call the causal body; the mental by that which we call the astral body; and the material by that which we know as our physical body. In the causal body lie our identity, our ego and that which forms the basis of our active mind. As this state is fully unconscious, and we don’t have any experience of it during the two to two and a half hours of it during sleep every night, we can understand that this spiritual dimension in the human being represents a problem. All need deep, dreamless sleep regularly to live, so it is completely vital for us, but on the other hand it sustains our ignorance about ourselves. It is that paradox which lies at the root of mankind’s only real problem, namely our chronic identity crisis. We don’t know who we really are, from where we have come, unto where we are going and why we are here! Therefore the yogis evoke what we may call ‘conscious sleep’, which we normally know as ‘meditation’. I often like to call meditation ‘conscious sleep’ because the body and mind behave in exactly the same way as during sleep, but yet you know that you are fully conscious and are not sleeping – that you are a passive witness to all the three levels and dimensions of consciousness in you. Through abiding practise leading gradually to full absorption in this, both the active and the inactive mind are transcended fully and become *passive*, and then what has been called “super consciousness” is experienced. That is the reality we are in during what we earlier have mentioned as Self-Realization.

When we wake up in the morning from dream sleep, we understand that the state we have just experienced was *only a dream* and we take it to be less real than our waking state. But in exactly the same manner this well-known, familiar waking state becomes like a distant, surreal dream in comparison to the reality we “perceive” or “experience” in super consciousness! All of the Cosmos disappears! In no way can it be described, because all words, all language, all understanding and all thought are based on the experiences from this three dimensional world with an active mind as medium.

But it is important to understand that this is no mere technical exercise, as one may be thinking after reading traditional hatha-yoga literature from North-India. Nothing is possible without a pure mind, which only comes by naturalness, humanity, truth, love and sacrifice. And then a good and experienced friend and mentor – in physical body is necessary.

After Self-Realization absolutely everything is experienced as consciousness, with or without form in various modes – dynamic or static – there is no longer any difference of anything, only an infiniteness of variety and expression. Consciousness as ‘consciousness’ is in any case one and the same thing and is also called atman! And it is always there – reflected in each and every one of us as our “True I” – which never sleeps or wakes! Seek it out, find it, realize it! It is not complicated or difficult, but really very easy and natural – because it is the nearest of the near always!

- **What is your relation to Baral and the University of Peace?**

It is a work which is going on continually, and it is the same identity who worked before, who works now and who will be working in the future.

Baral, or Swami Sri Ananda Acharya, put forward the idea of the University of Peace in two of his books, initially in 1919, but it was an idea he had had already since his childhood in India and it is also an oral tradition among yogis and sannyasins of the Himalayas. In 1921 he told his Norwegian disciple Einar Beer that the University of Peace would come “in a hundred years’ time”. Baral spent the rest of his life on Mt.Tron in Norway to prepare the ground for the University of Peace, spiritually speaking, and kept all these values alive through a very dark time in our history with depression and two terrible world wars. During the last world war he defied the Germans’ blackout command and let an oil lamp burn incessantly in the window of the first floor of his ‘seter’ (summer mountain farm) at Tronsvangen throughout the war. Down in the village of Alvdal, in the darkness of winter, that burning lamp looked like a star in the sky at night, so the villagers named it “The Baral Star”. A small, outer example of the great, inner work he did. Once his good friend, the villager Embret Mellesmo, asked him why he was sitting up all those nights at Tronsvangen? He answered: “Embret, first I have to think a thought, then it will be possible for others to think it.”

A good ten years after Baral had left his body Bjørn Pettersen was born. He came from Tronvik by the eastern side of the Oslo Fiord to Mt.Tron in the Eastern Valley (Østerdalen) some twenty-one years later. Here I lived for the first four years together with Einar Beer, who passed away in 1982, aged 95, and thereafter for seven years alone in Beer’s cabin “Shantibu”. During this seven year period I had no income, no savings nor any money. I just lived day by day from hand to mouth, more or less isolated from the outside world and only concentrated on my quest for truth. I never worried if I had anything to eat, because my thinking was that when I was in my mother’s womb I got everything I needed and never had to worry about anything, and now I was in the universal mother’s womb, so she had to care for me the same way. And she has always done that! But most important was that during that time I experienced all of that which will be the content of the

University of Peace – everything was tested, experienced and realized, while at the same time I received inspiration and proper guidance from my good friend and teacher in India, Swami Paramananda. When he came to Norway in 1989-90 and stayed with me at Shantibu for a whole year, he revitalized the idea of the University of Peace and was the inspiration for a concrete project. This was started in 1993 by the founding of The Mt.Tron University of Peace Foundation, and in 1995, during Paramananda's third visit to Norway, the very first "Art of Life" course was held at Savalen in the municipality of Tynset. Even without any publicity people came from all over the country to attend that weekend course, and it was followed up with more courses at Shantibu during Paramananda's last visit to Norway in 1998. Participants from as many as ten nations participated in these courses. Late in 1999 Paramananda left his body but he is just as alive to me today as he has always been. Presence in a physical body or not is no longer a factor after the end of the apprenticeship.

After The Mt.Tron University of Peace Foundation was established and our planning started, we had to wait for more than ten years for the municipality of Alvdal to start their planning, on which we fully depended. It took four years for them to finish their work, and after that we had to start our own regulation work, which took two years. The regulation plan was sanctioned in 2012, and after that we were kept busy with the buying and renovation of the old hotel Tronsvangen Seter at Tronsvangen in Alvdal, as an interim step on the way up to the so-called "Peace Plateau" at 1300 metres on Mt.Tron where we thus have regulated for the University of Peace.

- Why is the vision of a university of peace at Mt.Tron important in your view?

The vision itself is no longer that important – it has been brought to life through my *sadhana*, my quest for truth, even if this project does not depend on my person in any way. But now, it is the demanding, material manifestation of it that needs to be realized, and here all have to contribute the best they can. Because the University of Peace is for the people, for the general public – we who work with it on a daily basis do not need it, we are not doing this for ourselves. Therefore it is important that people understand the concept of the University of Peace:

First and foremost, this will not be a business undertaking where the overall running is managed by capitalistic interests and the demand for profit like almost everything else in our society which only reflects human greed at the expense of others. All who wish for the University of Peace have to offer something from themselves – they have to give without expecting anything in return – and those participating in courses have to pay the actual cost. Those who have more subsidise those who have less, so that all available means are shared, and all those who want to participate will have this opportunity.

Then comes the most essential point that the centre of attention and learning is the human being, not phenomena or information, or knowledge in itself. The basis of the University of Peace is that the human being already has everything it needs from birth – by its own body and mind – and that everything lies latent there for one's fulfilment as a human. Therefore we do not need any textbooks or lectures, and the university will not be a university in the common sense with curriculum, diplomas and degrees. Rather it will be a "humaniversity" where, in a favourable environment, a few simple and stimulating impulses will be given for self development.

The activities of the University of Peace will happen in two different departments concurrently: Individual and collective. In the individual department a three-step Art of Life course will take place. The first step we call "to learn the language of the body". That will be a kind of ecology

class about how to survive in the world, with focus on lifestyle, food habits, breath, movement, etc. We learn to know our own physical body through practical exercises, what kind of food we can digest, etc. The next step will be a silence class which we call “to read the mind”. Instead of reading so many books, newspapers and literature which only reflect others’ minds, we shall, in a safe and harmonic environment, read our own mind and gain insight into our own psychology. There will be only mental relaxation, mental concentration and mental observation. The third and last step will be a philosophical class where we will shed light on all the universal human questions, which all have to ask themselves once or more in life: “Who am I really, what lies behind my name and all the artificial identities which society and myself have given me?”, etc. We shall illuminate man’s most fundamental and existential questions, and this step we call “to know Thyself”. The point is that through learning to know one’s own body and mind one can know the Self, and really, there is no other way of doing this. We are not saying that people will be Self-Realized in the course of three weeks or of three months at the Art of Life course, but they will have gained an important template or insight to follow for themselves further in life after the end of the course. This Art of Life course will be the very nucleus of activities at the University of Peace and peace work at absolute grass-roots level: There will be no outer peace without inner peace.

In the collective department many kinds of activities of a cultural, scientific and social nature will take place, with conferences, seminars, theatre, film, exhibitions, festivals, etc., in the spirit of the University of Peace with the human being at its centre. Much in the same manner as Bellona (an independent not for profit Norwegian Foundation concerned with the environment) guards nature and environment as their spokesperson, so will the University of Peace draw attention to current questions about human dignity, human rights, human possibilities, ethics, responsibility, science, sustainability, etc. It may also be the exponent of what we may call “peace and harmony research”, in contrast to traditional peace and conflict research, which mostly focuses on war and political diplomacy. And finally, the University of Peace, with its unique location and atmosphere, may serve as host for international summit meetings for peace and reconciliation on a political level. But the University of Peace itself will be completely non-political and non-religious, without any ideology or any affiliation. It will never be an institution only for those especially interested, but absolutely for people at large, regardless of their background or affiliation. And it will be suitable for everybody of all ages between 8 and 80 years.

Further, nothing will be taught or happen in the University of Peace which cannot be checked scientifically or which cannot stand the light of science. Everything will be natural and follow nature. As a building, preferably it will function nearly as a living organism, which belongs to the local environment and landscape and which demands a minimum of maintenance, where architecture and function are practical and harmonic, and with energy from a variety of alternative, renewable sources. Throughout the year the level of activity will be decided by the cycle of the local seasons, so that the maximum activity level will be during the light summer months, and the minimum level during the dark winter months, while the months of spring and autumn will see a more balanced level of activity.

By being wide-ranging and inclusive, and by concentrating entirely on the purely universally human factors – which are the same for all and which all may recognise – both by content and by expression the University of Peace will be something that most people will be able to identify with. And thus the University of Peace will give some hope to the world.

- **Where does the further path lead?**

Just now, the most concrete evidence we have of this project and work is Tronsvangen Seter at Tronsvangen in Alvdal (Norway). There we have already started small scale activities which we are thinking of for the University of Peace, while at the same time we have a concrete and practical platform to make the project on Mt.Tron known to the world and, where, in addition, we are gathering necessary experience for the great things that gradually are going to take place higher up on the mountain. The Mt.Tron University of Peace is like a huge elephant where gestation, birth, growth and lifespan happen over a long, long time. While, in contrast, other institutions in society are like small mice where breathing rate, heartbeat and lifespan are like only a few blinks of an eye. The foundation which is made now shall be to last for the next thousand years. First, a global conflict will take place in the world, which is soon going to happen, but after that a world government will be established with empathic and philanthropic people who are able to think and feel for all, that introduces a thousand years with spiritual – in the adhyatmic sense – culture in the world.

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