

The Life and Teaching of Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov

The Mystery of Light

GEORG FEUERSTEIN, Ph.D.

PROSVETA

© 1998 by Georg Feuerstein, Integral Publishing, USA – ISBN 0-941255-51-4
A revised and expanded edition of *The Mystery of Light: The Life and Teaching of Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov* published by Passage Press, 1994 – ISBN 1-878423-14-2.
© 1992 Thérèse Boni.

© Copyright Prosveta S.A. 2012. All rights reserved for all countries. No part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, adapted, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, whether privately or otherwise, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, audio-visual or otherwise, without the prior permission of author and publishers (Law of March 1957 revised).

Prosveta S.A. – Z.A. Le Capitou – 83601 Fréjus CEDEX (France)
ISBN 978-2-8184-0026-5

PART II

THE TEACHING

CHAPTER
4
PHILOSOPHY AND THE MYSTERY
OF BEING HUMAN

THE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Who am I? Sooner or later we all ask ourselves this question, often at a time of crisis. But we don't have to wait until a moment of tragedy strikes to ponder the mystery of our own existence. Nor do we need to shelve this question until the onset of our inevitable midlife crisis or, if we should have managed to avoid it even then, until we must face death.

In fact, we cannot ask ourselves this question early enough in life because our answer, or the lack of one, defines our destiny. "Man's destiny," said Aïvanhov, "is written in the stereotypes he brings with him when he is born on this earth."¹ These stereotypes comprise our deep-seated intellectual presumptions about life, our attitudes, and our desires. These are our answers to life by which we constantly shape and live out our destiny.

If we want to change our destiny, we must change those stereotypes; we must change the mental pattern on which our present life is based. Destiny is a habit, and habits can be altered. This requires a tremendous expenditure of psychic energy. But this is precisely what spiritual practice is about: transforming the personality by transforming its stereotypes from destructive ideas to life-enhancing ones.

It is quite tragic that our civilization does not encourage us to be more reflective about our lives. Being philosophical today is equated with being morose. In times past, however, philosophy stood for what the word means: the love of wisdom (*sophia*). And wisdom was understood to be the ripe fruit of self-knowledge. Over the temple of Apollo at Delphi in ancient Greece were carved the immortal words *gnothi seauton*, "Know Thyself!" Many centuries later, the Latin writer Cicero repeated them in his own language, *nosce te*, and long before him the sages of India exclaimed in Sanskrit *atmanam viddhi*.

Who am I? This was the question that Sri Ramana Maharshi, the sage of Tiruvannamalai in South India, recommended to spiritual seekers. What he meant was: Who am I really? Who am I beyond the roles that I play in life, beyond the moods with which I tend to identify, beyond the ideas that I am inclined to defend?

This question implies another one: Why am I here? And this gives rise to a third question: Whither do I go? Finally, we must ask ourselves: What am I to do? The simplicity of these questions is inversely proportionate to the difficulty experienced in answering them. Yet, there are always answers, and some are more convincing than others.

Our answers to the Big Questions are only as good as our understanding of the questions. Every question already implies an answer. But we have to know how to dismantle the question to get at the best possible answer. If you want to know why your car has stopped working, you examine the parts familiar to you. If you still don't understand the problem, you consult a repair manual or call in a mechanic. However, unless you are willing to learn from the mechanic, you still will not know how to fix the same problem the next time it occurs.

But car problems are a crude analogy. When you suddenly develop strange palpitations of the heart, you can't open up your chest to see what is going on. Instead you seek out a qualified doctor, and possibly more than one. Similarly, in philosophical matters, we would be foolish not to make use of the very best advice available. We don't have to become converts to any belief system, which would be foolish anyway. But we must educate ourselves about the kind of sophisticated philosophical answers to the Big Questions that have been developed over many millennia.

The shocking truth is that our civilization is designed around ignoring the Big Questions, and so our education system leaves us philosophically illiterate. What is taught as philosophy in our colleges and universities is only a shadow of the real knowledge that is passed on in the initiatic traditions.

Fortunately, when we muster the courage to confront the quaternary of Big Questions, we find that we are not entirely

on our own. Since ancient times there has been help for the philosophically awake in the form of the great spiritual or initiatic traditions. Indeed, these traditions purport to be an elaborate response to just those questions. Their answers are the most comprehensive and complete.

This is so for the simple reason that these traditions are the repository of the wisdom and knowledge of countless generations of sages who have peered deeply into the mystery of existence, who have plumbed the depths of the human psyche, and who have traveled the road of knowledge far beyond the ken of the ordinary person and even well beyond the vista of the sciences.

The sages are the true philosophers, for they have applied and tested their knowledge in daily life. They are not merely intellectuals considering matters in the abstract. Their understanding is superbly practical. Their knowledge is initiatic, not merely theoretical. Hence they are profoundly affected and changed by it. As Aïvanhov observed:

“You will never improve nor transform yourself by accumulating knowledge in your head. To be sure, this knowledge can broaden your mind and your point of view, but that is only on the surface; you will always be the same underneath: remarkable as far as general knowledge is concerned, a veritable one-man information bureau!

“But as far as character, virtues and qualities are concerned, nothing will be changed; you will be just as timorous, weak, sensual and wretched as ever. Whereas spiritual knowledge, the divine Science, obliges you to penetrate to the depths and climb to the heights, and it is not possible to be unchanged by it.”²

Aïvanhov was very critical of mere intellectual learning, and elsewhere he stated:

“If you prefer book-learning, go ahead. But you will wither away and neither love nor kindness will emanate from you. You will be nothing but a cold, dried-up intellectual who discusses, criticizes and dissects everything, but who is

incapable of escaping from his own inner disorder.”

“This is one of the greatest dangers for philosophy students. By the time they finish their studies, they are disoriented by the jumble of contradictory systems and ideas they have had to study. It is to be expected... for in philosophical studies you will find everything except true philosophy.”³

Aïvanhov was very outspoken about the demerits of conventional philosophy as taught in the academic curriculum and which is based on materialistic rather than spiritual principles. He spoke of it as “brutalizing” students and, we might add, the teachers themselves.⁴ Harsh as this criticism is, it appears to be valid in most teaching situations, and it also applies to subjects other than philosophy, as taught in colleges and universities.

In recent years, some sensitive academics have themselves boldly stepped forward to criticize the educational establishment for its lack of vision. Thus, a few years ago, the American social philosopher Allan Bloom caused a considerable stir with his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, which was even placed number one on the best-seller list.⁵

In this book, Bloom lamented the tragic fact that modern education has impoverished the souls of students. He also debunked the false openness enforced by the modern liberal school curriculum, which fosters not originality and goodness but, Bloom contended, mere conformism and the erroneous notion that values are relative and that we can simply pick and choose those which suit us best. Bloom stated:

“Liberal education flourished when it prepared the way for the discussion of a unified view of nature and man’s place in it, which the best minds debated on the highest level. It decayed when what lay beyond it were only specialties, the premises of which do not lead to any such vision.”⁶

Bloom proposed to remedy the situation by reintroducing classical studies into the curriculum. He wants students to feast on Plato and Shakespeare since their works allow them

to participate in what he calls “essential being” rather than indulging in their accidental lives. Bloom’s proposal has a certain appeal, yet it is too limited, for he does not even consider the great classics of cultures other than the Greeks and the Romans. He also does not appear to have any knowledge of the esoteric traditions, and so the question arises as to what degree a person’s classical studies would guide him or her to the kind of deep understanding that would lead to participation in “essential being.”

More recently, psychologist Ron Miller offered a far more radical critique of the Western education system in his book *What Are Schools For?* Miller favors a holistic approach to education and life:

“A basic premise of holistic education is the belief that our lives have a meaning and purpose greater than the mechanistic laws described by science, and greater than the “consensus consciousness” of any one culture. This transcendent purpose is a creative, self-guiding energy which we ought not attempt to suppress.”⁷

Miller’s model of education is expressly founded in spiritual principles, and it is one of the promising and encouraging manifestations of the “new paradigm” that is trying to emerge not only within education and the sciences but within our Western civilization as a whole.

For Miller, holistic education emphasizes not merely the ingestion of a select number of “Great Books” or the learning of a few “basic skills” but life experience. This is another important point his model has in common with the esoteric traditions. Initiatic knowledge is always lived knowledge, or knowledge acquired through and translated into personal experience. As Aïvanhov explained in vivid terms:

“By living your knowledge, by tasting it, by verifying it, by practicing it until you feel it becoming your own blood, your own quintessence, this knowledge becomes truly yours, and no one, nor anything, can ever take it away from

you.”⁸

It is through the fire test of lived knowledge that we grow and mature and, one day, become philosophers. Aïvanhov was such a philosopher-sage. He once said about himself: “Ever since I was very young, I wanted to adapt, to conform, to shape myself along the line of a better philosophy than my own, the philosophy of the Initiates.”⁹

He labored hard to gain access to that philosophy and to make it his own. The way he acquired it was not only by carefully listening to the teachings of the great adepts but also through acute self-inspection. As he put it: “All my life I have been studying myself, measuring, learning my limitations, for food, for sleep, for everything.”¹⁰

Hence Aïvanhov was able to say in a factual tone of voice: “Everything I believe, everything I hope for, everything I do is founded on knowledge.”¹¹ And: “I swim in the great truths I have discovered.”¹²

TRUE PHILOSOPHY

In order to gain knowledge of anything we must first combine with it. The more we combine with it, the greater our access to knowledge will be. This is one of the key insights of the spiritual traditions. As Aïvanhov put it: “Knowing is achieved by penetration: something penetrates or enters into us and becomes a part of us.”¹³ The truth that knowledge is participatory is being rediscovered by modern philosophers.

This fact has become most obvious in understanding the processes involved at the level of subatomic physics. Thus, the German physicist and philosopher Werner Heisenberg formulated the famous principle of uncertainty, which states that we cannot accurately determine both the momentum and the position of a particle. If our reading of the particle’s momentum is accurate, its position cannot be accurately known, and vice versa.

This finding has led some thoughtful philosophers and scientists to call into question the scientific ideal of objectivity

on which the entire enterprise of conventional science is based. In doing so they have, fortunately, opened the doors to a more humane understanding of the world, the purpose of science, and the social responsibility of scientists.

The new science is also far more open to nonrational modes of cognition, such as intuition, and this bodes well for a more integral worldview, which also gives due weight to the spiritual traditions with their emphasis on wisdom and transcendental realization.

Wisdom is participatory knowledge of the first order. As Aïvanhov put it in a nutshell:

“True Initiatic knowledge is to fuse, to become one in an act of love, as the Bible tells us that ‘Adam knew Eve,’ or ‘Abraham knew Sarah.’”¹⁴

Thus, in the final analysis, true knowledge depends on complete identification with the object. More than that, it depends on complete identification with the ultimate Object, or Reality. Hence the sacred injunction “Know thyself” has a much deeper significance. It refers to self-knowledge not merely in the sense of knowledge of one’s habits, preferences, or moods, but as Self-realization.

This is in fact implied in the ancient Sanskrit phrase *atmanam viddhi* cited earlier. The *atman* refers both to the personal self, or the ego-personality, and to the transpersonal Self. For self-knowledge to be complete, it must reach beyond the patterns of the personality. Aïvanhov made this very clear:

“To know oneself does not mean to know one’s character with all its faults and failings, nor to know the limitations of human nature. If it went no further than that even children could understand and know themselves.

“In this phrase, ‘Know thyself!’ what is the ‘self’? Our limbs? Our brains? Our thoughts and feelings? No, it is none of that. The Self we must know is a part of God, a spark, an immortal spirit, something indescribable but real which exists on a far higher level. To find and unite with

this Self, human beings must reach up to greater heights. They will know themselves only when they know that indestructible, omniscient, all-powerful being, the higher Self which is a tiny part of God himself.”¹⁵

True philosophy, then, is about Reality in its full depth and breadth. It is about wisdom and Self-realization. This is why Aïvanhov calls it initiatic, since it does not depend on book knowledge, which can be acquired from without. Initiation, as he understood it, is to vibrate in unison with the Spirit, or Self.¹⁶ Once we are attuned to the spiritual dimension, all our experiences and knowledge are anchored in the core of Being. We think, feel, intend, and act differently.

True philosophy is what he called the “philosophy of the Spirit.”¹⁷ He also spoke of this as the “new philosophy,” noting, however, that it was as ancient as humanity itself, even though it was known only to “those exceptional beings who understood the true nature of purity, love and sanctity.”¹⁸ In other words, initiatic philosophy has been until recent times the prerogative of a small number of highly evolved beings who guarded their esoteric knowledge well, initiating into the mysteries only those duly qualified, and then only after submitting them to careful trials and tests.

Today, initiatic philosophy is freely available to anyone who cares to consider its premises and adopt its attendant disciplines. No special initiatory ordeal is necessary, though spiritual life itself is as much a test as it has ever been. Those on the path are always taxed. Acquiring the “new” philosophy is not like donning a new coat. We must absorb it into our bones. We must live it, breathe it, think it, speak it, act it, and grow with it.

Continuing to grow as a human being is one of the signs of true philosophy. If our philosophy curtails our growth, we must jettison it and look for a more accommodating temple of ideas in which we can worship. The great value of initiatic philosophy lies in that it puts no limit on our human potential but constantly encourages us to move on, to shed outgrown skins, and to raise our gaze to higher possibilities.

EVOLUTION AND THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

Who am I? Another way of putting this question is: What is the nature of humanness? That is to say, what makes us uniquely human? In posing these questions we desire to know our purpose on earth, the meaning of life. Even those who never consciously pose this question have an answer for it. This is so because the way we live our lives is itself an answer to the Big Questions.

In our postmodern society, the answer expressed in the form of people's lives is often sadly banal. Judging from the lifestyle and general demeanor of so many men and women, they define their meaning in gross physical terms. Aïvanhov put it quite bluntly thus:

“Most people behave as though their only reason for being on earth is to eat and drink and have a good time or, alternatively, depending upon their point of view, to suffer and be thoroughly unhappy. The truth is that they are here in order to work at one great common venture... but they do not know it.”¹⁹

Such people live in a state of blatant denial. While they fill their days with tasks and, if they can, with much pleasurable activity, they are often suffering from depression. The syndrome is known as Quiet Desperation. When they finally consult their doctor or therapist, the cause of their depression invariably turns out to involve a felt sense of meaninglessness. More than half a century ago, the great Swiss psychiatrist C. G. Jung observed:

“We are living undeniably in a period of the greatest restlessness, nervous tension, confusion and disorientation of outlook. Among my patients from many countries, all of them educated persons, there is a considerable number who came to see me, not because they were suffering from a neurosis, but because they could find no meaning in life or were torturing themselves with questions which neither present-day philosophy nor religion could answer.”²⁰

Jung's observation has meantime become a statistical certainty. More importantly, though, Jung also remarked with characteristic sagacity:

“Man is never helped in his suffering by what he thinks for himself, but only by revelations of a wisdom greater than his own. It is this which lifts him out of his distress.”²¹

This is a very insightful comment, on which we can expand as follows. If we agree that there are degrees of wisdom, it obviously pays to go straight to the source of the greatest wisdom because our existential suffering cannot be overcome through half-baked knowledge. Hence we find that, after years of therapy, some people's thirst for deeper meaning is still not quenched. They then become spiritual seekers, eagerly drinking from the cool, refreshing fountain of the perennial wisdom.

What indeed is the meaning of life? I remember, when I was in my early twenties, putting this question to an old man whom I considered wise. His simple answer, which had me puzzled for many years, was: The meaning of life is to put one foot in front of the other. At first I thought he was teasing me, but he smiled at me gently and I knew he was not being flippant. His answer was something of a riddle, a *koan*, for me. It annoyed me because I knew that hidden within it was a nugget of wisdom that stubbornly eluded me.

In retrospect, I feel it was an excellent response, which skillfully thwarted my youthful impatient need to sort everything into neat intellectual categories. It was a deliberately obscure answer because the old man had used a simple everyday activity as a metaphor for the sweeping process of life itself.

Life is, above all, movement. But it is not random movement, as we witness it for instance in the Brownian motion of particles in water. Rather, life is a highly organized form of movement, an essential aspect of which is growing differentiation, or unfolding. We call this evolution. As Aïvanhov expressed it succinctly: “The whole meaning of life is evolution, the transformation of matter.”²² He explained:

“Everything that exists has to evolve: even minerals. The evolution of the mineral world is, no doubt, imperceptible but it is none the less real. A hidden force in the mineral world is constantly striving to bring to light all its potential, inherent qualities and virtues. Precious stones and metals are the most advanced mineral forms and they emanate something which can be beneficial to men. Plants evolve also and the more advanced they are, the greater the curative, nutritional and beneficial properties of their flowers and fruit. And the same is true of animals and human beings, and even of the solar system.

“Evolution is the law of life. Evolution, that is, meaning growth and development to the point of perfection.”²³

Aïvanhov’s understanding of evolution clearly goes beyond the textbook conception of it. Scientific evolutionary theory does not admit of perfection. Instead it sees a never-ending process of trial and error in which life forms engage in a fierce struggle for survival, being ruthlessly replaced by those that are better adapted to environmental conditions. Alas, the scientific vision is inadequate, as a growing number of scientists realize.

Darwin appears to have been wrong. Nature is not an inchoate process devoid of purpose in which every individual and species selfishly fights for supremacy. Rather, it is suffused with a remarkable intelligence, and everywhere cooperative behavior rather than blind conflict is predominant. Robert Augros and George Stanciu, the authors of *The New Biology*, summarized their investigations into the new orientation within the biological disciplines as follows:

“The new biology is born of a new sense of nature. Conventional opinion holds that ‘the wisdom of nature is a sentimental notion’ or worse yet, that nature incorporates an antiwisdom. Darwin exclaims, ‘What a book a devil’s chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horribly cruel works of nature!’

“But the nature we have discovered... is a model for both engineer and artist. Her attributes of simplicity, economy, beauty, purpose, and harmony make her a model

for ethics and politics. This rediscovery of nature's wisdom calls for a new biology."²⁴

Struck by the order and directedness of the known universe, cosmologists have articulated what is called the Anthropic Principle. This principle recognizes that our cosmos, which some fifteen billion years ago emerged from an unimaginably dense energy soup, seems from the outset to have been designed for intelligent life to arise. As philosopher Henryk Skolimowski noted, to call this directedness "anthropic" is misleading, and he proposed the name Biotic Principle instead.²⁵ This leaves it open whether *Homo sapiens* is in fact the highest life form to emerge in the universe. After all, there could very well be intelligent life among the trillions of stars that has far surpassed humanity in knowledge, wisdom, and compassion.

At the same time, it is also clear that our species has not yet actualized its full potential. In fact, when we truly understand the present-day global crisis, we realize that our species is confronted with the challenge of voluntarily stepping up its own evolution. We are called upon to become what social scientist Duane Elgin calls a mature species civilization.²⁶ Writer John White has given this new humanity the name *Homo noeticus*. He said, "I see *Homo noeticus* as the next stage of human evolution precisely as Cro-Magnon superseded Neanderthal."²⁷ White added:

"The full emergence of *Homo noeticus* is probably several thousand years away... But the forerunners of *Homo noeticus* are here now, in increasing numbers, making their presence felt, crowding *Homo sapiens*, creating their own niche in the eco-psychosystem and pointing out to him his own potential to change consciousness and thereby evolve, directing his own evolution and accelerating the process."²⁸

PERSONALITY AND INDIVIDUALITY

The new concept of biological evolution comes much closer to the traditional understanding of the significance and purpose

of human life. Our existence is not a matter of blind chance but one of purposive growth. This includes growing into new levels of awareness, which extend our perception from the purely physical realm to nonphysical realms. This expansion of our awareness and sensibilities redefines the reality in which we live.

An expanded awareness has long been at the heart of the esoteric traditions of the world. It was the privileged domain of the religious specialist—the shaman, magus, saint, and sage. However, for the first time in human history, this expanded awareness can become the common property of all human beings. In fact, perceptive observers of the contemporary crisis argue that this is the only way in which we will be able to survive as a species. But for this to come true, we as individuals must make a sustained effort to change ourselves.

The change required of us is quite simply one of making our lives conform to the highest possible ideals. As Äïvanhov explained:

“A man’s ideal determines all the rest, for it is an active agent in his life and produces specific results, digging deep into his being and cleansing and organizing all the disparate elements into a harmonious whole. Every aspect of a person’s life is arranged, fashioned, modelled and formed in accordance with his ideal. If, rather than being very elevated and noble, it is prosaic and materialistic, then all the rest of his life, all his thoughts, acts and emotions will conform to it...”²⁹

Äïvanhov regarded ideals as living entities that supply us with life force, though we must consciously relate to and cultivate them. Obviously, only high ideals have the power to aid our growth as human beings and especially to promote our spiritual evolution. “A high ideal is the only thing that can fill every void in man,” he said.³⁰ To discover the highest ideals known to our species, we must consider the sacred traditions. It is in them that we find the most profound guidance to our evolutionary destiny.

The Mystery of Light

The Mystery of Light is the first book-length account of the life and teaching of the Bulgarian-born spiritual adept Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov (1900-1986), who was one of the twentieth century's greatest luminaries of Western spirituality. He was a disciple of the saintly Peter Deunov (Beinsa Douno), modern Bulgaria's most remarkable spiritual figure. In 1937, at the behest of his teacher, Aïvanhov moved to France where he taught the timeless secrets of a universal gnosticism for nearly a half century. This book holds great appeal for seekers both within and outside established spiritual traditions.

Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D., is an internationally renowned Yoga researcher and historian of religion with thirty books to his credit, including the award-winning *The Shambhala Encyclopedia of Yoga* and the best-selling *Living Yoga*. He is also the founder-director of the Yoga Research Center and editor of *Yoga World* newsletter.

'In Georg Feuerstein's wonderful presentation of a contemporary Master, I was deeply moved by Aïvanhov's bodhisattvic simplicity, veracity, and good humor, and Feuerstein's self-effacing clarifications where needed, that make this book a treasure trove for anyone open to the great wisdom traditions.'

— **Frederick Franck**, M.D., author of *The Zen of Seeing* and *My Days with Albert Schweitzer*

'The Mystery of Light is a vibrant narrative of Aïvanhov's remarkable life and is sure to touch many of its readers at the "true depth" that was part of Aïvanhov's prescription for living.'

— **Stanley Krippner**, Ph.D, professor of psychology, Saybrook Institute, author of *Personal Mythology*

'This book has a wide historical and cultural perspective and panorama on which Aïvanhov's message is masterfully painted.'

— **David Frawley**, O.M.D., writing in *Yoga Journal*

ISBN 978-2-8184-0026-5



9 782818 400265

www.prosveta.com

e-mail: international@prosveta.com