

## **A Point of Light: Meeting the Brahma Kumaris**

Many Quakers are comfortable in the company of other faiths. Indeed, given our hesitation at imposing religious practice on even our own members, the foibles and peculiarities of others are, if anything, a constant source of interest and, sometimes, fascination.

Nevertheless, the first time that you visit Global Co-operation House in Wembley is an odd experience. Driving through rows of houses in north London, and turning into Pound Lane, a quiet, tree-lined road that runs alongside a large area of allotments, you come upon what, at first, appears to be a suburban office block. However, crossing the pavement and entering the building you find yourself standing in the reception area of what is clearly not an ordinary office. The walls are covered with murals painted in pinks, blues and lime green and the entire staff seem to be women dressed in white saris, some, because of the season, with the addition of a white cardigan. This is the London headquarters of the Brahma Kumaris.

Now you have to readjust the parameters of your expectations. On the one hand you appear to have left what we often call 'the real world'. Indeed, if you arrive on the half hour you are likely to hear the 'tannoy' announcing 'traffic control' – an instruction to stop whatever it is that you are doing and enter a brief period of silence and reflection, before resuming whatever it was that seemed so urgent at the time. On the other hand, it soon becomes clear that this is a place of administration and highly focused work, the centre of a large organisation. With their global headquarters on Mount Abu, Rajasthan in northern India, the Brahma Kumaris have 5,000 branches in over 80 countries. Indeed, they present themselves as a worldwide Spiritual University, and on Mt. Abu they have a lecture hall that can take 20,000 people, and the world's largest solar cooker with a capacity for 60,000 meals a day. What is more, if you spend some time browsing through the bookshop that stands at one side of the reception area, you will see that this is a group of people that is involved not only at the 'grassroots', with local inter-faith work and with courses and seminars but, most especially, is active globally, working with the United Nations and other governmental initiatives for education, peace and health care.

I have come to meet Dadi Janki, one of the three most senior women of the Brahma Kumaris (or BK, as they are known) and the person responsible for all of their work outside India. I am taken upstairs and along a corridor until I come to a door in front of which is a row of shoes,

neatly arranged. I take off my shoes, add them to the row, and go into a comfortable room set about with low armchairs and decorated with pictures that must represent aspects of the teachings of the BK. There are flowers on a table. After a short while, and accompanied by a number of her sisters, all clad in white, Dadi Janki comes into the room to greet me. She is small and elderly but at once I am aware of an inner energy and authority. Indeed, someone once described her as “a woman short in stature but taller than any woman I know”. Her eyes are especially bright and I am held by them.

She sits, her feet resting on a footstool. We sit, too, and the sisters adjust their saris and cardigans as if to make ready for a discussion of some importance. Although one of the sisters, acting as interpreter, introduces me to Dadi Janki in Hindi, I feel that she needs the translation less than one might at first suppose. And, as in other moments when I have met people who are truly holy – but this may be no more than my own paranoia – I now have an unnerving sense that she can see deep inside me, bringing into the light all of my frailties. There is no hiding place.

I had planned to ask all sorts of sensible questions but now, despite being drawn by Dadi Janki’s evident compassion and, indeed, courtesy, I find myself somewhat lost for words. This, however, is not a problem for within no time at all, and without prompting, she has begun to teach on the very matters that ‘speak to my condition’, each fragment spoken in Hindi and then translated for me. Often her words are brought to an end with an expression of the eyes and hands that says: “Isn’t that the way it is?”

This is no ordinary woman and at the end of our meeting, before I am plied with all sorts of sweetmeats and gifts, I am offered *drishti*. This is somewhat unsettling. I am invited to sit in silence (all right so far) and look directly into the eyes of Dadi Janki (not so easy – how often do we avoid eye contact). But not wishing to offend, and conscious that this is an important ‘gift’, I surrender. Her eyes are filled with deep compassion. They are a window into another world. And as each moment passes my initial reserve eases and I find myself resting in her gaze, allowing myself, as best as I can, to receive the blessing of God, trying not to be a barrier to that gift. This is the direct transmission of love from one soul to another. Later, and on reflection, I am sadly conscious of how difficult this was for me and how ‘clumsy’ I am in spirit.

Assigned to Sister Maureen as my guide, there have been many other good moments after this. Further visits to Pound Lane, taking part in a

number of discussions or ‘dialogues’ as the BK sometimes call them. There have been visits to the BK’s retreat house in Oxfordshire, with early morning meditation, teaching and excellent vegetarian food, which seems to involve mini-bus loads of Gujarati mothers and grandmothers, visiting the house and making delicious sweet biscuits and savouries. And, of course, there have been further teachings from Dadi Janki herself. All of this has been supplemented by some excellent books, tapes and CDs of teachings and meditations, including those of Sister Jayanti, the European Director of the BK. I would not say that I have become a member of the family but I certainly feel that I am a second cousin and a welcome and regular guest. As a Quaker, I am very happy to be so.

The Brahma Kumaris was founded in the 1930s by a remarkable man, now referred to as Brahma Baba. In Hindu philosophy, Brahma means ‘the creator’ but for the BK, and in this context, it means ‘an instrument for renewal’ and Baba means Father. Brahma Kumaris means ‘daughters of Brahma’. Brahma Baba had been a successful diamond merchant in Calcutta but in the last part of his life he received and then passed on to his students a series of revelations about the nature of the world and our place in it and about our relationship both to God and to each other. A great many of his students were young women and, indeed, the organization has always been run by women. Some, like Dadi Janki, were there at its beginning and have dedicated the whole of their lives to its work.

The basic teaching of the Brahma Kumaris is Raja or Sovereign Yoga, the highest form of yoga that is expressed both in meditation and in a way of life in which the self is surrendered to God. The teaching is at one and the same time simple, direct and profound. Like Quakerism, it is based upon a doctrine and practice of love, with a belief in the intrinsic spirituality and goodness of each one of us. Indeed, again perhaps like us Quakers, the BK recognize that the global change that they work for can only arise from the changes that each one of us makes in our own lives.

However, there are aspects of the teaching that are especially of a BK ‘flavour’. For example, although we may see and, indeed, experience, ourselves in bodily form, each one of us is, in essence, said to be soul – not to have a soul but to be soul: “I am soul”, is a much-used mantra in BK meditations. Visualised as a point of light held in the forehead, in the position of the ‘third eye’, we can bring our soul being to rest in the light that is God. This light can be regarded as a point of light that is both eternal and without dimension. It is both a point and an ocean of light.

By the regular practice of surrendering ourselves to this light, mirroring the Christian notion of “Thy will be done”, the BK teach that we both open ourselves to divine service and find the guidance and confidence to be ‘a good servant’. Dadi Janki is crystal clear on these matters and will often say something like: “Well, what is the difficulty? It’s clear isn’t it? Just do it”. I am struck by certain similarities with the teachings of George Fox: turning to the Light, dwelling in the Light. But in the teaching of the Brahma Kumaris there is no judgement, just a way of being.

Another particular characteristic that might seem ‘difficult’ to Quakers is the notion of a cycle of history that starts with a Golden Age and then moves through a Silver and a Copper Age before coming to the darkest of all times, the Iron Age, the time in which we now live, the Kali Yuga. The Golden and Silver ages were a time of perfection, a time of paradise not dissimilar to the notion of the Garden of Eden before the Fall, although, as time past, purity and power of spirit began to decline. To begin with this decline was only very slight but, as we entered the Copper Age, there was a further and more marked decline. As a consequence, happiness was lost and a spiritual search began. Thus it was that teachers such as Abraham, Buddha, Christ and Mohammad appeared. As each age has passed we have moved further and further from God. Indeed, we now reside at the lowest and darkest point of the cycle, the time of the Iron Age in which, with the growth of materialism, there is greater suffering, and loss of holiness. Nevertheless, it is thought that this time, barbaric and violent as it is, is the eventide before a new Golden Age. Indeed, this is called the Confluence Age – and it is thought, therefore, that this is a particularly important time to be making preparation by developing greater spirituality and nearness to God. Is this urgent ‘turning to God’ what is meant in the Orthodox Christian notion of *metanoia*? There are certainly parallels in this and other traditions of oncoming catastrophe and turmoil followed by a ‘new dawn’, although this is not much discussed, I think, in Quaker circles.

I have to say that I do not find myself drawn to these matters and am rather influenced by the Buddha’s advice that such speculation is unlikely to lead to enlightenment. In any event, and despite the evident degradation and disorder of the present time, I wonder whether such cycles are less a description of history and more a description of the moment-to-moment fluctuations of the spirit, the rise and fall of the experience of the divine each day and throughout our lives.

Perhaps for me, as a Quaker, the principal lesson of the Brahma Kumaris is their faith and their directness and commitment to a spiritual life, a lived experience that comes from a disciplined and constant practice that draws them towards God and sustains them in the presence of God. In this there is the enquiry of the mind but there is, most especially, a wisdom of the heart, something that arises from an inner intelligence of feeling and inspiration. When you are in its presence it is powerful and compelling.

By way of greeting and departure, the Brahma Kumaris say, “Om Shanti”, which means, “I am a peaceful soul”. It is a reminder of a way of being. Om Shanti.

David Cadman, 2005

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