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**JOANNA
MACY**

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Joanna Macy and I first met, quite unexpectedly, at a Passover seder at the home of a mutual friend. Jews and non-Jews alike had gathered for a socially conscious yet curiously traditional celebration of the joys of freedom and the agonies of bondage — a kind of rich cross-cultural gathering unique to the salons of Berkeley. The host of the evening — a well-known educator, radiant, graying, and clearly in love with his new wife a good dozen years his junior — orchestrated our little group as we each contributed what little store of Jewishness we had garnered over the years — a Hebrew

warm, unblinking eyes, as if to say, "Can you possibly realize how important this issue is?" Among her many "important" issues she numbers Central American politics, nuclear disarmament, Third World self-development, Gandhian nonviolence, a radical ecological perspective, and the growth of American Buddhism.

But as we imbibed our obligatory four cups of wine (for such is the Jewish custom), Joanna the crusader fell silent and Joanna the playful little girl emerged. No more talk — time for zany play as single-minded as the conversation was intense. By the end of the evening we were all dancing gaily

world, where for the first time the perpetuation of the species is far from assured, can we emerge into true personal power.

Macy has been socially and politically active throughout her adult life. A state department official and analyst in the early '50s and again in the early '60s — between stints she took time out to have and start raising three children — she received extensive exposure to the plight of developing nations during five years in the Peace Corps in India, Tunisia, and Nigeria. Long a student of religions as well, she majored in religion as an undergraduate at Wellesley College, where she gradu-

Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age

A Conversation with Joanna Macy

BY STEPHAN BODIAN

prayer here, an Eastern European melody there, a Hasidic tale, a personal reminiscence of seders past. And through it all ran the conversation — literate, well-informed, heartfelt, and mostly centering on the plight of the earth: the environment, the Third World, the nations under the shadow of nuclear annihilation.

I had already encountered Joanna's work through my involvement in the Buddhist community and the peace movement, and I latched onto this youthful, energetic 55-year-old as soon as we were introduced. At first I was struck by her enormous intensity — she takes long pauses before she speaks and looks at one squarely, with wide,

around the room, Joanna as madcap as the rest, wearing hand-made Mexican animal masks and grunting, braying, hugging, and singing, feeling like family and reluctant to part.

Later I thought, "How fitting to first meet this woman, whose principal concern is the interconnectedness of all beings, at a commemoration of our shared struggle with bondage, powerlessness, and despair." Indeed, her principal work — the work for which she is best known and which has inspired so many people in this country and in Europe — is called despair and empowerment work, for only by first experiencing our despair at the current unprecedented plight of our

ated Phi Beta Kappa. In 1978 she finished a doctoral dissertation at Syracuse University entitled "Interdependence: Mutual Causality in Early Buddhist Teachings and General Systems Theory" and seemed destined for a career as a university professor and researcher. But her growing involvement in the antinuclear issue and her encounter with a Sri Lankan self-help organization changed all that, bringing together her two great passions with an urgency that could not be ignored.

"Back and forth I went over the years between these two poles of life, the spiritual and the political," she recalls, "from meditating to public speaking,

from preparing testimony on nuclear waste to reading Sanskrit texts. With each passing year the distance between these two poles grew shorter; and when I found my way to the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka, the two paths seemed to converge."

Begun in 1958 by the young high school science teacher A. T. Ariyaratna as an experimental "holiday work camp" for his students, the Shramadana Sarvodaya movement spread rapidly to thousands of villages and is now a major social and political force throughout this island nation. (Its name literally means "giving of one's energy for the welfare of all.") The movement is inspired and informed by the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha — that life is suffering and that there is a cause of suffering, an end to suffering, and a path toward its elimination — and by Gandhi's emphasis on truth, nonviolence, and self-reliance. Sarvodaya calls on villagers to empower and revitalize themselves at a grass-roots level by sharing their resources (the basic Buddhist virtue of *dana*, giving) and improving their own standard of living, rather than relying on the government to identify and solve problems for them.

For Macy — who had already shifted the focus of her own political activity from nuclear power to nuclear weapons and had begun to see the potential of the nuclear threat for precipitating deep transformation — the contact with the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement was an inspiration. During a year spent in Sri Lanka on a Ford Foundation grant, she learned that people can be helped to experience their own truth.

"The leaders of the Sarvodaya movement trust the people and their ability to get in touch with their own inner knowing. They really believe that people already know something is terribly wrong with the world, and that they have the resources and the wisdom within themselves to do something about it. This same attitude distinguishes Interhelp [the organization that has grown up around despair and empowerment work] from other peace groups.

"I also learned from Sarvodaya the importance of listening," she continues, "to myself and others. And I adapted a number of their basic principles — like the four abodes of the Buddha: loving-kindness, equanimity, sympathetic joy, and compassion — to the spiritually based social change



PHOTO BY MICHAEL SALSER

work I was involved in here.”

This work clearly came to embody for Macy the interdependence she had merely studied in graduate school, and she finally relinquished her plans for an academic career to devote herself full-time to giving workshops and presentations on social and spiritual transformation and to serving as a consultant to other like-minded organizations. Now, through her work with Interhelp, she inspires thousands of creative individuals like herself in their efforts to devise innovative ways of moving and motivating people to trust their own inner knowing.

I met Joanna once more before our interview was to take place — again unexpectedly, and again at a celebration hosted by a mutual friend. This time we were celebrating not liberation but eros, at a showing of erotic poetry and slides. Lounging against a couch with several close friends, Joanna seemed perfectly comfortable here as well, laughing and joking and clearly enjoying herself.

Sitting in her kitchen over tea weeks later, we discussed what had happened that evening — how, after the presentation, people had analyzed and criticized and picked apart their experience out of their *fear* of the erotic. “And what does the erotic really mean?” she asked rhetorically, leaning forward in her chair. “Just last week I gave a presentation at a conference of theologians and psychologists. Wonderful people, but very much up in their heads, you know. And when my turn came, I led them in a totally experiential session that lasted two hours. It brought them down out of their heads and into their gut knowing. The next day a Jungian analyst who was there said with excitement, ‘The reason your presentation had such a powerful impact is that it introduced eros into our gathering. We all feel so impotent and paralyzed, as if we’re sleepwalking our way to destruction. Your work is like the kiss in the fairy tale that awakens the princess from the evil spell.’

“‘Eros,’ he continued, ‘is really our capacity to connect — with each other and with the source of life. Until we can experience that interconnectedness again, we’ll continue to be victimized by our own sense of powerlessness.’”

We paused there, realizing that, with the mention of interconnectedness, we had arrived at the keynote of our conversation together. The interview had already begun.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL SALSER

Joanna Macy with YJ editor Stephan Bodian

YOGA JOURNAL: Joanna, I see three main areas of involvement in your work: the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement, the antinuclear movement, and deep ecology. And what I see linking all three is your Buddhist practice, particularly the doctrine of *pratitya samutpada*, dependent co-arising. Perhaps we could start by talking about what “dependent co-arising” means and what it implies for a way of being in the world and relating to the problems of the world.

JOANNA MACY: You have a very keen eye. Yes, that doctrine is fundamental to my work. You see, to people engaged in Buddhist practice in the West, the idea of what we wake up *from* seems to be clearer than the idea of what we wake up *to*. We wake up from *greed, hatred, and delusion* (or ignorance, or the prison cell of ego, or the sufferings in which attachment embroils us). And when such practitioners consider the alternative — what we wake up *to* — what most readily comes to mind is *emptiness*, the absence of suffering, one’s true nature, which is vacant or featureless.

Yet the Buddhist teachings are very clear — particularly in this central teaching of *pratitya samutpada* — that we wake up to a fundamental realization of the radical interrelatedness, interdependence, and mutual reciprocal co-arising of all phenomena. It’s been very exciting for me to look both at the teachings of the ancient scriptures and at the testimony of modern Buddhist movements to learn more about interdependence and what it can actually mean for the quality of life. You see, you can begin to experience it right now; you don’t have to wait until you’re zapped by satori or until you have so many years clocked on the meditation cushion. Every moment can be an invitation to experience this interdependence.

It’s very exciting to be alive right now, when new discoveries in contemporary science give us so much grist for the Buddhist mill — whether we’re looking at the holographic model of the universe, the bootstrap theory in subatomic physics, or the findings of systems thinkers in the social sciences like psychology, political science, or economics.

YJ: Many of the findings of modern science and social science, then, corroborate the teachings of the Buddha on interdependence, discovered through meditative states thousands of years ago.

JM: Yes. In fact, I wrote my doctoral dissertation on *pratitya samutpada* and systems theory. Of course, modern systems thinkers are so conditioned, mentally and emotionally, by a several-thousand-year-old view of reality as composed of discrete, independent substances that we bring those old ways of seeing right into systems theory unless we have a corrective like Buddhist practice. This is where the teachings of Buddha can actually help bring out both the existential and the moral and ethical import of the systems view.

YJ: Regarding the moral and ethical implications of the systems view, you have written that the “dynamics of mutual causality . . . would suggest that certain moral values are woven into the fabric of life, intrinsic to its harmony and continuity. These dynamics present, in other words, a reality so structured as to require, for our conscious participation in it, that we live in certain ways.” How do you see the connection between dependent co-arising and active involvement in the world?

JM: Many Buddhist scholars in the West — at least 10 years ago, when I was doing my doctoral dissertation — saw dependent

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co-arising, the Buddha's teaching on causality, as a stumbling block to understanding Buddhist ethics because we have been conditioned to understand moral imperatives as something that must come from an absolute, like commands from on high, either from a deity or from some unchanging essence. But in Buddhism it is actually from the very relativity of dependent co-arising that the Buddhist moral imperative springs, because every action, every word, every thought, every gesture, has reverberations for others and is in some way influenced by everything that is impinging upon it. This reciprocal interaction is so fundamental that we find ourselves co-creating the moment continually.

YJ: There's a tremendous responsibility in that.

JM: Yes, responsibility *and* freedom, because in every moment we can choose to have a fresh impact. This is the distinctive feature of the Buddhist teachings of karma: You are conditioned in what you are thinking and doing, but always, in every instant, you can choose.

Recently in my workshops I have been using the following story as a unifying theme to link together everything we want to talk about today: the nuclear issue, deep ecology, and Buddhism. It is based on the Shambhala prophesy found in Tibetan

Buddhism, about the very difficult, apocalyptic time we are about to go through. Of course, such prophesies exist in other religions as well — the Hindus, the Hopis certainly Revelations in the New Testament, and so forth.

Among Tibetans this prophesy is given a number of different interpretations. One version sees the prophesy as playing itself out quite literally on the physical plane: The king of Shambhala will come, and all the weapons of destruction will be automatically dismantled. At the other extreme, the journey predicted is entirely internal, to be played out in the psyche only, with little relation to political and social developments.

A third interpretation — the one I find particularly meaningful — was taught to me by my revered friend Choegyal Rinpoche, a Tibetan Lama living in India. According to this version, we are now entering a time of extreme danger in which two great powers — called the Lalös, the barbarians — are locked in mutual hostility. One is in the center of the Eurasian land mass, the other is in the West, and they have, for all their enmity, a great deal in common, including the fact that they have both developed and are manufacturing and deploying weapons of unfathomable death and devastation.

So the future of the planet is in question. And it is at this time that the kingdom of Shambhala begins to emerge. This king-

dom is hard to detect because it is not a geopolitical entity; it exists in the hearts and minds of the "Shambhala warriors." For that matter, you can't even tell a Shambhala warrior by looking at her or him — they wear no insignias, badges, or uniforms; they carry no banners; they have no barricades on which to climb or behind which to rest or regroup, no turf to call their own. Ever and always they do their work on the terrain of the Lalös themselves.

Then there comes a time, which we are approaching, when physical and moral courage is required of these Shambhala warriors, for they must go right into the centers and corridors of power, into the very citadels and pockets where these weapons (in the broadest sense of the term) are kept, to dismantle them. Now is the time that the Shambhala warriors must train for this work. And how do they train? They train in the use of two weapons: compassion (*karuna*) and insight (*prajna*) into the interrelatedness of all reality.

This story, and this call or summons to us, unites the branches of the work I've been engaged in. In our "despair and empowerment" workshops this story has had a powerful impact on people from all walks of life, whether or not they have any understanding of or interest in Buddhism.

The training in the first weapon — *mahakaruna*, or compassion — is very important because it frees us from psychic numbing and from the fear of experiencing

our own deep responses to the perils of this time. That is, opening ourselves to what is happening to our world — reading a newspaper, switching on the news, letting it in, whether it be world hunger, conflict, war, deforestation, the poisoning of the seas, the nuclear arms race itself — triggers in us an anguish for our planet. At the beginning, when I started in this direction five years ago, I called this response “despair.” That’s not really accurate, because despair suggests to people a lack of hope, and what I’m talking about is an anguish that co-exists with hope. You can be hopeful that we can avert nuclear war and still feel tremendous sorrow and anger and guilt and fear about what’s happening in our world right now. The term *compassion* seems more appropriate here, because it literally means “to feel with, to suffer with.” Everyone is capable of compassion, and yet everyone tends to avoid it because it’s uncomfortable. And the avoidance produces psychic numbing — resistance to experiencing our pain for the world and other beings.

YJ: In some way, then, the psychic numbing that we’re experiencing, particularly at this time, is long standing, something that the Buddha was aware of when he said that people need to cultivate compassion. Pre-

Joanna Macy leading a workshop at Hardscrabble Hill, Maine



PHOTO BY TOWA GREEN

cisely that psychic numbing actually prevents us from experiencing our compassion.

JM: You see, the First Noble Truth of Buddhism is *dukkha*, suffering, and you have to be able to experience suffering if you're going to progress along the path and find the hope and deliverance of the Third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering. This is true in every religious path, but it's particularly dramatic in Buddhism, because right away you are confronted by that First Noble Truth. Until you can let suffering in, you can't take the next step; you're paralyzed. And it's this paralysis in our time that we break through in doing our compassion work.

The terror that keeps us paralyzed, keeps us subservient and passive, is not our *fear* of the weapons but our *fear of experiencing* our fear of the weapons. We are afraid of our own deepest responses. We are afraid to look over the edge of the precipice because we don't want to know. Those of us who have done organizing around the arms issue find that it triggers a tremendous amount of resistance. In fact, each one of us has this resistance. There's resistance in me too — I find it hard even to believe that nuclear weapons exist. In a way, it's too ghastly to take seriously.

After all, we've had millennia of civilization — cathedrals, temples, symphonies, Einstein, Mozart, Jesus, the Buddha. And that we should have come to the point where we are deploying weapons that can blow up the world and are aiming them at other agglomerations of human beings — that is something I find hard to credit. What we need to do to bring us to life, to wake us up, in this situation is to allow ourselves to experience the anguish that's just beneath the surface. We don't have to reach for it, we don't have to invent it, we don't have to cultivate it. All we need to do is to lower our defenses — and breathing

helps a great deal, as in certain forms of meditation — and give ourselves permission to take it in. Most of the time we don't allow ourselves to take in the bad news because we think we have to have a solution first. And that freezes us.

YJ: So we don't have to have a remedy first before we can face these feelings.

JM: No we *can't*. The trouble is, we put the cart before the horse and don't let ourselves experience the situation unless we have a foolproof solution.

YJ: This way of looking at things seems to offer a link between spiritual practice and social involvement. Because spiritual practice is also about grieving, about dropping down into our deepest feelings, the feelings that we're most afraid of experiencing, and allowing them to arise, accepting them, embracing them, making friends with them, and then using them to energize us to move forward in our lives.

JM: This is a time in our society when we urgently need such practices, perhaps more than ever before. We need compassion, for each other and for ourselves, because we're the first generation to have lost the certainty that there will be a future.

YJ: That's an inestimable loss.

JM: Yes, and it affects all of us. It's a great unifier, because it's experienced as much in the Pentagon as in the peace movement. It's as much of a loss for Caspar Weinberger as for Helen Caldicott or for you or me.

YJ: Would you say that Caspar Weinberger, for example, with all his inner defenses, is experiencing the despair that each one of us is experiencing but is unable to contact that feeling?

JM: That's my assumption. I've worked with about 12,000 people, and I haven't met anybody who, at some point, at some level, doesn't feel some pain for the world, regardless of what policies he or she may advocate for dealing with the world situa-

tion. No one can deny that our future is in danger, even if they think the chances of that danger are relatively small. You see, every generation throughout recorded history has lived with the assumption that other generations would follow and that the work of their hands, their heads, and their hearts, would be carried on by their children and their children's children. That assumption gave meaning and a sense of continuity to their lives. Failures, sufferings, even personal deaths, were ever encompassed by that vaster assurance of continuity.

It's precisely that assurance that we've suddenly lost. Robert Lifton calls that the "broken connection" and talks about it as a sense of radical biological severance that affects every relationship at some subliminal level. But among kids now it isn't all that subliminal — they *talk* about their sense of futurelessness; it affects their ability to make long-term commitments and long-term relationships

YJ: The Greeks had two words for life — one was *bios*, and the other was *zoe*. *Bios* was individual life, and *zoe* was that continuity, that ongoing eternal stream stretching from beginningless past to endless future. One could rely on that continuum underlying everything.

JM: That's a very helpful distinction. What we fear now is much more than personal death; it's the death of *zoe*. And we have hardly any words or images for the anguish we feel over this.

YJ: How do you work with people around their despair, to cut through their psychic numbing?

JM: Usually the work is more effective in groups, because of the energy that's released. It's important for people to see that what they're experiencing is not private but is very widespread. A simple way to begin is to give people the opportunity to acknowledge and express the feelings they carry around with them about what is happening to their world. In order to do that, those feelings have to be validated as a normal, natural, human response — indeed, as a measure of one's humanity. The assumption of any people growing up in this culture, which is so focused on optimism, is that "I must be crazy to feel this distress."

For example, I often begin with a breathing exercise, an adaptation of the *bodhi-citta* meditation, which is an ancient practice designed to enhance the capacity to experience compassion. I just talk people through it — perhaps with some music to relax their defenses against their awareness of suffering. Focusing on the breath, we experience how the stream of air passing through their bodies connects us with the living, breathing web of life. Letting images of the world's pain arise in our minds, we breathe them through on that stream and visualize them passing through the heart. For the moment we are asked to do nothing more. The permission simply to register this pain — without having to



PHOTO BY MICHAEL SALSER

produce a foolproof solution to the arms race, without having to win an argument — opens profound levels of knowing and caring. At the close of the practice, people share some of the images that have come up for them, often with great emotion.

Frequently I'll move away from words and work with music, imaging, colors, and drawing to elicit the feelings. Because talk can be a great way to avoid our experience. As people allow themselves to experience, a catharsis comes, in which a great deal of energy is released — energy that was devoted to the repression of those emotions. Hilarity may emerge as well, including dancing and laughing and eruptions of joyousness — probably because of the sense of bonding with others and the release of feelings long withheld.

YJ: That's important to hear. I think people often wonder, "If I allow those feelings to come up, won't they overwhelm me? Won't they be more than I can handle?"

JM: Precisely. That's where working with the breath and where dependent co-arising and systems theory are central. They allow us to say with confidence, "If I have these feelings, I'm not going to shatter into a thousand pieces." It is only when we hold our pain for the world at arm's length that it solidifies, and we're stuck with it.

Through shared pain also comes a sense of connectedness, and — through this connectedness — laughter, affection, and celebration. When we allow ourselves to experience our compassion, which is grief with the grief of others, we get to experience the other side, too, which is joy in the joy of others and power in the power of others. So we always do some work redefining power, looking at how what we've just experienced flies in the face of the patriarchal notions of power — power over, power as domination, power from the top down.

YJ: That's why you call your work despair and personal power.

JM: Right.

YJ: The other side of getting in touch with your despair is empowerment.

JM: The very process of moving through to the despair gets us in touch with the interconnectedness that is the source of true power.

I often use the metaphor of the neural net. I ask, "What is the power of a nerve cell?" Is it, "I win, you lose"? Is its power enhanced by the weakening of the nerve cell next door? Can it be equated with invulnerability, with erecting defenses?

You see, I know, given what I have to do and what we all have to do to heal the world, that I don't have enough love, or courage, or intelligence, or compassion, or endurance, to do it on my own. But I don't need to. Because if we're all interpenetrating and interexisting, then I can draw on your intelligence and your courage and your endurance. I learn to view your strengths as so much money in the bank, which gives me a tremendous sense of buoyancy in doing the work.

So the pain of the world and the power to heal it come from the same source, turn on the same pivot or hinge, which is our deep ecology — our interconnectedness.

YJ: What about the second weapon, *prajna*, or wisdom?

JM: Choegyal Rinpoche, the Tibetan teacher who told me the Shambhala prophecy, also stressed that each of the two weapons is necessary; one without the other is insufficient. Compassion by itself risks becoming sentimentality and can be hard to bear, can even breed divisiveness. That's why we need the other — insight into the interexistence of all phenomena. But that insight by itself is also inadequate; it becomes too abstract and cold and needs the "passion" of compassion. And the compassion, the suffering, makes the second weapon experientially real to people. People can really believe in their pain.

As we allow ourselves, in the workshops, to experience our anguish for the world, our grief over the death of *zoe*, or our suffering now with our fellow beings, there comes a time when I point out, "Please note the extent to which this pain that you're sharing, these concerns, expand beyond your concerns for your own separate ego, your individual needs and wants. That says something very important about who and what you are." If they go into that pain, participants find that it's rooted in caring, and that caring comes from our interconnectedness. And so we open to the fact that we suffer with our world because we belong to it, like cells in a larger body.

YJ: And that is the birth of *prajna*.

JM: Right. And you can *believe* it. It's no longer some noble, Olympian notion. It becomes a living reality. Deep ecology seems to be a wonderful way to talk about our interexistence, our dependent co-arising. The main metaphors we use are body metaphors — we are awakening to our co-participation in the larger body.

YJ: You've talked about deep ecology several times in our discussion. Can you explain how it differs from regular environmentalism?

JM: Deep ecology encompasses all aspects of life and does not measure the dangers or the actions we must take in terms of what they mean for our species alone. A lot of environmental actions and concerns arise around, and are justified in terms of, how they affect our well-being as *homo sapiens*. "We must stop polluting our rivers because we'll get cancer," or "We must stop cutting down the tropical rainforest because it will change the climate for us." The perspective of deep ecology posits a very basic shift in identification — identifying beyond the individual and his or her separate needs to the planet itself, to all life. It recognizes — on a level that makes me suspect that most deep ecologists have had a mystical experience at some point in their journey — that all life forms interweave to create a biosphere that is a living organism, a single mind. The British scientist Lovelock

has called this organism Gaia, one of the names of the earth goddess in classical mythology. According to Lovelock the regulation of salt in the seas, the regulation of oxygen in the air, and countless other phenomena can only be explained if we consider earth a living being. And people are ready to experience this. They see it as an escape from the constrictions of separate selfhood, as a kind of coming home.

You see, the watershed came when we were able to see our planet from the outside. Those photographs from the moon allowed us to see ourselves as this exquisite silver-blue jewel dangling in space, so fragile, so lovely, so seemingly alive. We began then to fall in love with our planet.

Sometimes in our workshops I pass around a large ball of our earth that people can hold, and I invite them to talk to it, to address it as "You," either silently or out loud. This gives them the opportunity to tell their planet how much they care about her, how much they need her, and how they feel about what's happening to her now. People find this very natural, and very moving as well.

YJ: I have one last question, Joanna. In light of the issues you've raised, how do you see religious life evolving in the future?

JM: Judging from my experience in workshops, I think more forms will arise outside of the churches, places where people can create rituals, can teach each other, can do religious practices. And I am haunted by the suspicion that there will be new centers of nonsectarian religious life that will have some relation to the need — even if we dismantle every weapon tomorrow — to protect our radioactive reactors and sites for the next several hundred thousand years.

YJ: Why will they need to be protected?

JM: To save us from genetic mutations and cancer epidemics of fearful proportions. Those radioactive piles and the wastes and tailings will have to be guarded from looting, misuse, and negligence for the next quarter of a million years. I believe that the task will require such rigor and fidelity that it could only be a religious vocation. I foresee a form of lay monastic life arising around those sites. And I predict that people will make pilgrimages there, to remember that we almost ended the human story, and that we can still destroy our world. The "re-membering" will be a spiritual, a religious act.

YJ: You are envisioning a complete transformation of the materials of potential destruction into a source of religious inspiration. That's a remarkably hopeful vision.

JM: Yes. There's no reason why we can't wake up and allow that to happen. Certainly no technical reason. But I don't think it will be cheap. Given our blindness and our resistance, we won't get there without a lot of suffering. But I believe we'll make it. □

Stephan Bodian is the editor of Yoga Journal.