

Back to Godhead Magazine

Volume 32, Number 05, 1998

Channeling: Extrasensory Deception?

by Suhotra Swami

"If the guides were not guides after all, who were they?"

—Hungry Ghosts, by Joe Fisher, p. 202

SETH, RAMTHA, Lazaris, Mashiyach, Ashtar,—the vaguely biblical-sounding names have the ring of "prophet" to them. Indeed, for millions the world over, these and other garrulous "channeled entities" are prophets who enjoy a command of mass-media access that would have left the sandal-shod Old Testament visionaries tongue-tied with astonishment. Alexander Blair-Ewart, publisher and editor of the Toronto esoteric magazine *Dimensions*, notes a bit ruefully that "in sensationalist fashion, journalists and cameramen zoomed in on crystals, channeling, and a confused and over-excited Hollywood actress" as the burgeoning New Age movement's instant celebrities.

Channeling is defined by Arthur Hastings of the California Institute of Transpersonal Psychology as "the process in which a person transmits messages from a presumed discarnate source external to his or her consciousness." The most widely researched kind of channeling phenomena is communication with the dead, which, as eerie as it may sound, seems to be on the increase. The University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Council recently found that forty-two percent of American adults believe they have made contact with the spirit of a departed person. Of these, seventy-eight percent said they saw, fifty percent heard, and eighteen percent talked with the deceased. Thirty percent of Americans who say they don't even believe in life after death still claim to have had contact with someone who has died. It is the surfeit, not the rarity, of channeling that puzzles investigators.

Acolytes of the New Age hail channeled entities to be "highly evolved beings," "spirit guides for all mankind," "angels," "*devas*," or even "God." There are precious few suggestions that they might be demonic. Since cameras and microphones won't penetrate the veil of oblivion that separates us from them, all we get to see are the subjects through whom the entities speak: housewives, schoolteachers, insurance salesmen, and similarly quite ordinary people.

Channeling is somewhat different from mediumship. Mediums are experienced clairvoyants who "fish" for discarnate entities. Channelers are initially psychic greenhorns who, unwittingly or even unwillingly, are taken over by the entities. The first contact can be most disconcerting. In 1963, thirty-four-year-old Jane Roberts of Elmira,

New York, was suddenly overwhelmed by what she called a "fantastic avalanche of radical new ideas burnt into my head with tremendous force, as if my skull were some sort of receiving station turned up to unbearable volume." The entity in this case was Seth, who turned out to be a prime catalyst of the emerging New Age. From the early 1970s until her death in 1984, Mrs. Roberts channeled a series of bestselling "Seth Books" that blazed the way to public acceptance of what in an earlier period would have been condemned as necromancy.

Even more shivery-quivery is the Australian channeler Shirley Bray's description of how a group of entities called "the Nine" contacted her: "I felt as if thin wires, like acupuncture needles, were being inserted into the base of my skull. It was uncomfortable so I stirred, moving my head from side to side. A voice firmly but gently said, 'be still, it will not be long.' "

But once the channeler overcomes the shock of such close encounters of the first kind, the relationship may prove to be profitable beyond his or her wildest dreams. Jach Pursel, who admits that he was frightened to tears the first time he channeled Lazaris, now runs a highly successful corporation called Concept: Synergy that markets Lazaris audio- and videotapes to five hundred metaphysical bookstores worldwide. The erstwhile ordinary housewife J. Z. Knight takes in more than \$200,000 per weekend for a channeling seminar featuring her guide Ramtha; she says he's earned her millions of dollars.

A glance at the teachings of the discarnate entities reveals an intriguing pattern. Here's a sample from Mashiyach (pronounced Moor-shark), channeled by Shirley Bray: "He who would find power must know that he extends from balance in Me, that I am he. He and thee and Me are ONE in light. ... Create ye a world within the knowing of Me within you. Look upon your creation and know it is the sum total of your thinking. Thinking is creating. Man has created his world." From a Krsna conscious standpoint, this is called Mayavada philosophy. Mayavada means "doctrine of illusion"—indeed, there's a chapter in Ms. Bray's book (*A Guide for the Spiritual Traveller*) that's entitled, "Life Is Just an Illusion."

When psychology professor Jon Klimo recounts the themes commonly expounded by channeled entities, he's giving us nothing more than a breakdown of the main tenets of Mayavada philosophy, to wit: we all have a higher self, which is ultimately One Self (called "All-That-Is" or "The Universal Mind"); this One Self is an impersonal, absolute God, perceivable only as light and achieved only through silent contemplation; the material world is an illusion, merely the dream of this God, and until we realize we are God, we are subject to that dream of our separate individual existences in the cycle of birth and death.

Reunited Lovers?

We'll return to these philosophical issues a little later on. It's clear that the entities have an agenda and, uncorporeal though they may be, the means to fulfill it. But who are

they? That's what a British-born investigative journalist named Joe Fisher wanted to find out—because, while gathering material in Toronto for a book on channeling, he fell in love with a channeled entity named Filipa.

Fisher, who's written two bestselling books (*The Case for Reincarnation* and *Life Between Life*), met Filipa in Toronto in the summer of 1984 through a channeler he calls Aviva in his book *Hungry Ghosts*. Aviva, an avowed Marxist, was forced to suspend her unbelief in the supernatural after she was taken over by an entity calling himself Russell Parnick, while being treated by hypnotherapy for myelocytic leukemia. The more she allowed Russell to use her body as a channel, the more her disease gradually subsided. As word got around Toronto's esoteric scene, Aviva's regular seances attracted followers, among them Joe Fisher.

There was no doubt in the minds of those in attendance that something very extraordinary happened to Aviva each time she was put into trance by her hypnotist. As Fisher describes it, "Her voice was barely recognizable. Gone was the high-pitched jocularity. ... Her enunciation was now unequivocally masculine; the English accent was unmistakable. This was an entirely different Aviva, strangely assertive and uncompromising. This was a voice which claimed to belong to Aviva's guide [Russell], a discarnate individual who had lived as a sheep farmer in Yorkshire during the last century." Russell in turn introduced other entities: Hanni, Willian, Mi-Lao, Sebotwan, Ernest, Sonji, Tuktu, Kinggalaa—and Filipa Gavrilos. They became the guides for the regulars attending the seances.

Through Aviva, Filipa spoke to Fisher with "Greek inflection lending charm to broken English. Her delivery was subdued, pensive and poignantly tender. ... Whatever the quality of her speech, Filipa always spoke to me like a lover for whom the fire still smouldered."

Filipa told Joe that they'd indeed been lovers in the 1700s, when they lived in Theros, a Greek village "five day's walk from the Black Sea." He had been Andreas Cherniak, a militiaman born of a Greek mother and a Slavic father. She was a small, fair-skinned, black-haired Mediterranean beauty. But their affair ended tragically when the village elders disapproved. Andreas/Joe was judged by the priest and banished from Theros. After her death at age fifty-three, Filipa's astral self withdrew into the nonphysical plane of existence (called *bardo* by the Tibetans: *bar*—"in between lives"; *do*—"island"). Joe was now in his fourth life cycle since Andreas.

Joe found Filipa's chronicle appealingly plausible. "Sitting on the floor of Aviva's living room, I found myself breathing the air of a bygone era, roaming parched valleys and ancient crypts. I imagined Filipa's dark eyes and long black tresses." Ten years before, he'd written his first novel on the Greek island of Siphnos and had been quickly captivated by the land and its culture. He had a natural fondness for small, dark-haired women. As a boy, he'd felt a strange fascination for the name Philippa. Now he knew why.

Joe longed to establish "guide contact" (direct mind-to-mind communication) with Filipa. To this end he took up daily meditation, never completely linking up to Filipa, but coming tantalizingly close. Once he had the insight of a dusty pathway winding to a stand of tall, spindly trees in the distance. Through Aviva, Filipa excitedly proclaimed that this was where they used to meet as lovers. Sometimes he'd get a loud buzzing in his ears. He'd then feel Filipa's presence strongly, and "a strange sense of contentment and reconciliation and a suspension of worldly anxiety" would settle around him for as long as the buzzing lasted. In March 1985, he had the fleeting vision of a young woman walking towards him wearing a long white garment. He knew this to be Filipa and wept out of joy and sadness, loss, and anguish. "My terrestrial love life was doomed," Fisher writes. "No woman of flesh and blood could hope to emulate Filipa's love and concern."

Joe became obsessed by his impossible love. "If Filipa could have assumed a physical body, I'm sure I would have married her. But she was only a voice, a voice that resonated with more love, compassion, and perspicacity than I had ever known. Within the space of a few months, she had demonstrated an acute awareness of my feelings and foibles, she knew the people in my life and their effect upon me, and she was even able to relate specific circumstances in which I had found myself, situations unknown to Aviva or anyone who attended [the seances]. 'I can see energies,' is how she explained her ability to know me inside out. 'I can see in your mind. If you make in your mind, I can see.' "

The more Joe Fisher loved Filipa, the more he hungered for tangible proof of her existence. Proof that Filipa was really who she said she was would further lend force to the book he was preparing to write. And proof would require a journey to Theros, the mountain village in the parched mountains of northeastern Greece, to find evidence of her earthly sojourn.

Not only did Fisher set out to unearth Filipa's past life, he wanted to verify the last incarnations of Englishmen Russell Parnick, William "Harry" Maddox, and William Alfred "Ernest" Scott. Two, Harry and Ernest, said that they'd died in this century, Harry in WW I and Ernest in WW II. These claims could be easily crosschecked by a look at British military records. Russell, Aviva's guide, had given ample dates and place names from his life in the Yorkshire dales for Joe to trace.

But as Joe Fisher would find out after two trips to Europe, from the start the four entities had been clearly and deliberately lying, though they'd managed to string him along by clever use of half-truths, ambiguity, and obfuscation. Filipa's lies turned out to be the most blatant and most crushing for Joe personally. She'd repeatedly claimed to have journeyed by foot from Theros to Alexandroupoli. But Alexandroupoli, which Fisher presumed to be an ancient site of Alexander the Great, turned out to have been founded only in 1920. It got its name from King Alexandros, who visited it in 1919. For a seventy-year period before that, it had been known as Dedeagats and been a settlement of Turkish merchants; prior to 1850, the place had no history at all. Thus Filipa, deceased in 1771, remembered a city that was not then built. She called it by a name she could not have known and told of ships in a harbor she could not have seen. A professor of Greek language found many other discrepancies in her memories of life in eighteenth-century

Greece. There was no trace of a town called Theros. And no Greek could understand Filipa's tape-recorded utterances of her putative native tongue.

"Their knowledge is impressive, their insight remarkable, their charismatic hold on their followers undeniable," writes Fisher of these four and other channeled entities he investigated. Moreover, the voices' ostensible link to a higher and greater state of being seems to place them above suspicion in the minds of those who prize their counsel. Yet surely it is important—essential, even—to establish, if possible, the nature of the beast that is shuffling through the pipeline created by the trance state. Who are these entities really?

"The answer to that question is as unwelcome as it is unavoidable ... the evidence left me in little doubt that earthbound spirits or 'hungry ghosts' have wormed their way into that juicy apple of spiritual regeneration known as The New Age."

But is it logical to suspect all channeled entities because of the mischief of a few? Can't we hope that there are some genuine guides out in the ether somewhere?

Joe Fisher tried to keep this hope alive even after being cheated by Filipa. He visited renowned channeler George Chapman at his home in the Welsh village of Tre'ddol. Chapman's special distinction is that his guide, Dr. William Lang, has been authenticated beyond reasonable doubt as the spirit of a distinguished Middlesex ophthalmologist who died in 1937. Despite their initial disbelief, surviving members of the good doctor's family have testified that the entity speaking through the entranced George Chapman can be none other than Dr. Lang himself. Medical professionals have confirmed the entity's thorough familiarity with the diagnosis and treatment of eye diseases—even as they watched, Lang through Chapman has healed hundreds of patients.

But Fisher came away unsatisfied from his session with Dr. Lang. "I felt much the same in the company of the charming and deferential Dr. Lang as I did while conversing with the spirits whose claims remained unsubstantiated. I couldn't put my finger on it, but something was wrong. While seeming to cooperate fully, Dr. Lang was fudging. He told me nothing new, nothing incisive. And when I raised the question of charlatan spirits who crave physical sensation, the discarnate surgeon avoided the topic completely. ... Comparing him with other, blatantly suspect entities, I was haunted by one of Lt. Col. Arthur Powell's observations in *The Astral Body*. He wrote that it was impossible to distinguish truth from falsehood in communications from the next world 'since the resources of the astral plane can be used to delude persons on the physical plane to such an extent that no reliance can be placed even on what seems the most convincing proof.' "

Hungry Ghosts

"Hungry ghost," the term Fisher uses for the entities who speak through channelers, is a translation of the Sanskrit word *preta*. According to the *Preta Khanda* section of the *Garuda Purana*, an ancient book of Vedic wisdom, a *preta* is a human being deprived of a gross physical body because of sinfulness. His soul is trapped, earthbound, within the

subtle body (composed of mind, intelligence and *ahankara*, or false sense of identity). As with any ordinary human, the *preta's* mind is agitated by the urges of lust, but he lacks physical senses with which to satisfy his desires.

Milton, in *Comus*, captures the pathos of "shadows" (ghosts) clinging to this world even past the point of death.

Such are those thick and gloomy shadows damp
Oft seen in charnel vaults and sepulchres,
Lingering, and sitting by a new-made grave
As loath to leave the body it lov'd,
And linked itself by carnal sensuality
To a degenerate and degraded state.

Having no bodies of their own, *pretas* hunger for vicarious pleasures through the bodies of humans, much like decrepit lechers who seek gratification through pornographic movies. Hungry ghosts seem benign because they are genuinely attentive to the physical health of their subjects—witness Aviva's remarkable turnaround in her fight with cancer when Russell arrived. But as Joe Fisher states, "Their eagerness to communicate, their concern for the medium's health and strength, their preoccupation with life after death and reincarnation and the occasional admission that they missed the pleasures of incarnate life, all suggested humans who no longer had physical bodies yet longed to live and breathe once more." Seth, who called himself an "energy essence personality," sometimes requested his host Jane Roberts to drink beer or wine for his gratification. Joe Fisher tells of two entities who seemed to want sex through their subjects. He recalls the mental exhaustion, emotional turmoil, and muddled thinking that plagued him during his time with Filipa—symptoms hinting of psychic vampirism.

The *Garuda Purana* states that in cases of *preta*-possession (*preta-dosa*), "mysterious events do often occur ... many are the signs of ghosts." Dr. John Nevius, who studied possession extensively in China during the last century, wrote, "The most striking characteristic ... is that the subject evidences another personality, and the normal personality for the time being is partially or wholly dormant. The new personality presents traits of character utterly different from those which really belong to the subject in his normal state. ... Many persons while 'demon-possessed' give evidence of knowledge which cannot be accounted for in ordinary ways. ... They sometimes converse in foreign languages of which in their normal states they are entirely ignorant." And Emanuel Swedenborg, the famous eighteenth-century clairvoyant, warned, "When spirits begin to speak with man, he must beware lest he believe in anything; for they say almost anything; things are fabricated of them, and they lie. ..."

Pretas hover in homes where Vedic principles are not observed and haunt people who are unclean and unregulated. By these standards, practically the whole population of the Western world is open to *preta-dosa*, New Agers included. And what better way is there for a hungry ghost to seduce starry-eyed New Agers than with pap "we're all one" philosophy? Joe Fisher takes point-blank aim at the whole fraud. "When all is said and

done, there is no shortcut to Nirvana. But in this narcissistic age of instant gratification and swift solution, the great deception of channeling is that we may glide effortlessly back to the Godhead. All we have to do is pay our money, take our seats and dream on as loving discarnates lead us to enlightenment. Why, the Big E. is just around the corner and anyway—didn't you know?—we are God."

Many bogus gurus have succeeded in the West the same way. In fact, in the late 1970s a world-famous Mayavada yoga society was almost shaken apart when a Sankhrit-quoting *preta* who claimed to be the group's deceased founder began speaking through a senior staff member. Though at last exposed, the spook held sway over fifty people who deserted the organization rather than give up their belief that the great yogi had returned to them.

Cheaters and Cheated

The way back to Godhead is not the way of *preta-dosa*. Krsna declares in *Bhagavad-gita*, *bhutani yanti bhutejya*: "Those who worship ghosts and spirits will take birth among such beings." By the chanting of the holy name of Krsna, the evil influence of ghosts and sinful life is destroyed at once (*bhutebhyo' mhobhya eva ca sarvany etani bhagavan-nama-rupanukirtanat prayantu sanksayam sadyo*, from the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 6.8.27-28). But as Srila Prabhupada used to say, "This world is a place of cheaters and cheated." People's spiritual aspirations are channeled by their stubborn resistance to the holy name of Krsna into the most inauspicious realms of consciousness. Their welcoming of hungry ghosts as spiritual guides is indicative of their desperate devotion to lowly habits and fallacious ideas.

The desire to understand the real self beyond the body and to link our consciousness with the Supreme is an exalted aspiration, indeed the only goal of human existence. But successful completion of this goal requires that we be purified of lust, which impels us to the sinful activities of meat-eating, illicit sex, intoxication, and gambling—activities that according to the *Garuda Purana* are very attractive to ghosts. Purification need not be troublesome, however. Krsna is the Supreme Pure, our dearest friend and indwelling guide, and He has made Himself available to the fallen souls of this dark age, Kali-yuga, by the simple process of chanting *hari-nama*, His holy name. We should obtain the holy name only from those devotees whose attentive hearing and chanting of transcendental sound has carried them beyond the grip of material desire.

For all their seductive cant, the hungry ghosts and bogus gurus are dead wrong. We are not God, and our individual existence is not a figment of cosmic imagination. Life is not an illusion. There is a purpose to everything, and it is realized when we recover our eternal link to the Supreme Person and His pure devotees.

Suhotra Swami is ISKCON's governing body commissioner for several European countries.