

# The Unknown Russian Mysticism



COLLAGE BY DAVID WELLS

## *Pagan Sorcery, Christian Yoga, and Other Esoteric Practices in the Former Soviet Union*

**L**ast year's enthusiastic media reports about various religious missions to Russia unknowingly supported a common view of that country as being wild and spiritually sterile. The truth is, however, that Russia has an old and rich spiritual tradition, and what we probably need is not the one-way traffic of religious missions but a fruitful spiritual exchange. Just as Russia needs education in the Western approach to spirituality, so will Americans be enriched by an acquaintance with authentic Russian mysticism.

### **PAGANISM AND SORCERY**

Today's Russian spirituality has two main roots. The first is ancient Slavic Paganism, including sorcery and the healing arts. This culture existed in what is now European Russia in the first centuries A.D. Its main feature was pantheism: earth, trees, rocks, and rivers were considered to be living, conscious beings. People spoke with these entities and related to them with love and respect. Prostrations to the earth were commonly practiced, since Mother Earth was believed to have transformative power, as is reflected in Russian folk tales.

Early Slavic culture was somewhat childlike, with a carnival atmosphere: there were many holidays with games and dances around trees. The Slavic tribes also had their own medicine men and women, who were known as wizards or sorcerers. (We are not speaking about Siberian shamanism, but healing arts that flourished in European Russia. Their closest parallel would be the druids of ancient Europe rather than Siberian shamans.)

In the tenth century, Russia was converted to Orthodox Christianity. Though the church was officially at odds with Paganism, it's interesting to note that in the everyday life of the Russian people these two traditions merged in a more or less friendly manner. For the next nine centuries, Russians would celebrate both Christian and

Pagan holidays, attend church and perform Pagan rituals, and decorate their houses with Pagan art together with Orthodox icons. Often they preferred to be healed by sorcerers rather than physicians, and in general they continued to be much more in tune with nature than any other European nation.

The esoteric practices of Slavic sorcery were kept alive up to our days, being passed from mouth to mouth through lineages of healers. Even today, in almost every remote village in Russia, one can find such sorcerers, some of whom are famous for miraculous cases of healing. Often when somebody suffering from a chronic illness has grown disappointed with conventional medicine, he or she will go off to some village to be healed by a wizard. Even Communist Party leaders, who had access to the best doctors and special hospitals, secretly visited some of those famous healers.

While Slavic sorcerers do use herbs and prayers, their most original practices involves refined techniques of using the energies of earth, forest, and rivers for healing and initiation. It is well-known, for example, that oaks and pines are energy-giving trees, so that if you experience fatigue or depression, you may embrace the tree or just sit leaning against the trunk and will eventually feel an influx of vigor and well-being. Aspens, on the other hand, are "energy-sucking" trees, and are used to drain fever or inflammation from the body.

We'd like to give a few examples of such methods, which we have studied with the successors of these ancient Slavic sorcerers. One of these has to do with establishing deep contact with trees as teachers. In this tradition the





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consciousness of the trees is considered to be as developed as that of humans, and, moreover, the vibrations of human energy fields are regarded as being closer to those of trees than of animals. Consequently people are encouraged to make friends among trees and look for a tree-teacher with enlightened consciousness.

To make such contact, you have to develop the ability to stop the traffic of thoughts at will and spread your attention all over the body so that you are aware of all bodily sensations simultaneously; you will then be able to detect changes in the energy environment through subtle alterations in bodily sensations. (This inner shift of attention is not an easy thing to do for Westerners, with our never-ending inner monologue. The intentional ability to let your awareness drop into your body, leaving the head absolutely empty, today usually requires diligent training.) Once you have become able to establish this state in yourself, walk through a forest or park with your eyes

relaxed and unfocused, looking nowhere in particular. The task is to detect a tree that you suddenly feel attracted to, just as in a human crowd you sometimes feel an immediate like or dislike for some stranger for no apparent reason.

Once you feel this intuitive attraction to a particular tree, slowly begin to approach it, becoming even more relaxed, alert, and aware of bodily sensations. At a certain distance from the tree you will feel contact with its consciousness. (It's difficult to describe it in words, but contact does take place.) Then, if you feel that the tree allows it, you might come closer and embrace it or stand with your back against its trunk. Once you've made friends with the tree, it can effectively help you in times of emotional imbalance. Trees have a very serene, silent consciousness, so that you can approach your tree, ask for help, surrender to it, and eventually feel your anxiety being washed away by its soft, tranquil energy.

After centuries of using these methods, it was discovered not only that consciousness differs among different tree species, but that each tree has its own personality. In the presence of one, you might feel your heart center opening with warm love, while another will activate your lower energy centers, and yet another might have a warrior spirit. And just as there are fully realized beings among humans, so do some trees embody enlightened consciousness. They are usually — but not necessarily — very old trees. In their presence it's possible to have a spontaneous mystical experience or deep insight into your problems, and actually that's how these tree-teachers are recognized. Since realized human masters are not available for everybody at any time, to find such a tree is very good luck.

Another practice, which is paralleled in American Indian spirituality, has to do with the intentional use of "power spots" for healing and spiritual illumination. Certain places on the earth have specific influences on the consciousness and energy system of the body. Such spots are located in a manner similar to the one described for approaching trees, with one difference: the attention is not only spread all over the body but also opened beneath you like an umbrella, scanning the surface of the earth as you walk.

Power spots vary widely in their types of influence. Some purify the whole energy field, while others only open particular channels or centers. In these cases one may experience corresponding emotions, such as love and joy from the heart, or stability and serene power from the lower centers. Sometimes power spots will induce nonordinary states of consciousness or catalyze spontaneous mystical experiences. Certain contemporary esoteric schools in Russia intentionally use power spots to produce desirable meditative states. Places activating the lower centers are especially sought out, since they facilitate work with kundalini energy.

### "CHRISTIAN YOGA"

The second source of Russian spirituality is Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Within Orthodoxy there is a mystical tradition called hesychasm, whose name comes from the Greek word *hesychia*, meaning "inner silence." There are quite a number of good books in English on hesychasm, though this tradition, sometimes called "Christian yoga," is still surprisingly little known in the West.

Hesychasm originated with the famous Desert Fathers, who lived in Egypt in the first four centuries after Christ. Most of those who are known from their written works, such as St. Makarios the Great or Evagrius the Solitary, belong to the fourth and fifth centuries or later. Greek monks studied with these Egyptian hermits, and for the next ten centuries Greece became the center of the hesychast tradition, producing such renowned adepts as St. Simeon the New Theologian and Gregory Palamas, who contributed to the "psychosomatic method" of the Prayer of the Heart.

In the eighteenth century, monks on the Holy Mountain of Athos in Greece published the *Philokalia*, the famous collection of texts used as guides for contemplation and written by spiritual masters of the fourth through

fifteenth centuries. (The first three volumes of the *Philokalia* have been translated into English.) The *Philokalia* itself is hard for many to read, so we recommend the book entitled *The Way of a Pilgrim*, a translation of the anonymous nineteenth-century Russian spiritual classic. Beautiful in its childlike simplicity, it describes both the method and the stages of progress in the Prayer of the Heart.

After the fall of the Byzantine Empire to the Turks in 1453, Russia became the center of the Orthodox world. For the past five centuries it has been Russia that has kept hesychasm alive, even during the communist regime. Hesychast adepts in Russia adopted different lifestyles, becoming monks, hermits in the woods, wandering pilgrims, or "fools for Christ's sake." (This tradition of "holy madness" or "crazy wisdom" was particularly characteristic of Russia.) Famous hesychast saints who dwelled in the woods included Sergei of Radonezh, who lived in the fourteenth century, and Seraphim of Sarov, who lived in the nineteenth. Monastic hesychasm also grew well on Russian soil.

As we have had the chance to study hesychast practices with monks in northern Russian monasteries, we'd like to review these methods here briefly. Hesychasm includes three main practices: wakefulness or mindfulness, *hesychia*, and the Prayer of the Heart. The specifics of the Eastern Christian method of mindfulness are revealed in the names it was given: "sobriety," "guarding the mind," "unseen warfare." As practitioners had the goal of purification from all negative emotions and thoughts (known as "demons"), they were supposed to be aware of their inner state in the midst of any activity. Once a negative thought or emotion is noticed, it is actively driven out rather than just being observed, as in Buddhist meditation. Consequently the goal of mindfulness in hesychasm is to detect rising negativity as soon as possible so as to expel it immediately from the mind. Wakefulness goes hand by hand with *hesychia* — inner stillness and peacefulness. As one adept wrote, "The lake of your soul must be absolutely serene; only then God can be reflected in it."

Mindfulness and stillness build a foundation for the Prayer of the Heart, which begins with continuous recitation of either the whole phrase "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me" or often just the name of Jesus. There are special techniques and dynamics for different states of consciousness as practice progresses. It's necessary, for example, to shift the concentration from the head to the heart, steadily focusing on the center of the chest. It's also advisable to coordinate the prayer with the breath, for example, saying "Lord Jesus Christ" as you breathe in and "have mercy on me" as you breathe out. (Or say "Jesus" with the inhalation and "mercy" with the exhalation, or simply "Jesus" with the exhalation.) But these technical aspects are not enough; of crucial importance are the subtle emotions of love, devotion, gratitude, and joy that constitute the essence of prayer.

During the first stage, which is called "vocal prayer," the adept unceasingly calls aloud upon the name of Jesus. The second stage is called the "voiceless prayer of the

mind." In this stage the practitioner is supposed to carry on this interior prayer at all times, during every task, while remaining constantly focused on the heart. In the third stage, called the "prayer of recollection," the internal prayer continues on its own, without conscious effort, even during sleep. In the fourth stage, called the "Prayer of the Heart," the self-activating prayer passes of its own accord from the head to the heart. This stage is characterized by continuous and increasing feelings of love, warmth, compassion, and silent joy.

The fifth and final stage is called the "prayer of illumination and union," where the adept is lost in light, rapture, and ecstasy. The descriptions of this stage bear a remarkable resemblance to those of *samadhi* in Hindu yoga. It's interesting to note, however, that while adepts of kundalini yoga experience *samadhi* in the crown chakra, hesychasts enter the same state through the heart center. The heart opens and expands with intense love and bliss, and the adept is flooded and impregnated with the "uncreated light" of the Holy Spirit.

This uncreated light has been seen not only by practitioners but by those who visit them. Here is the testimony of Nicholas Motovilov, an educated nineteenth-century gentleman who visited St. Seraphim of Sarov: "I looked at his face. . . . Imagine in the center of the sun, in the dazzling brilliance of his midday rays, the face of the man who talks to you. You see the movement of his lips, you hear his voice, yet you do not even see yourself or his figure, but only a blinding light spreading several yards around." Motovilov also relates that he felt indescribable peace, sweetness, and joy in St. Seraphim's presence.

Besides the stages of progress in the Prayer of the Heart, it's possible to define more general developmental stages in hesychasm. The first stage begins with *metanoia* —the conscious decision to dedicate one's life to communion with God. This commitment implies initial and then periodic revision of one's life as well as a rejection of everything that is not necessary for this goal. In the next stage of purification (sometimes called *apatheia*), the practitioner, using the tool of self-awareness in "unseen warfare," gradually eradicates passions, negative emotions and thoughts, and worldly attachments. The sign of the "purified" adept is stable *hesychia* — inner silence and peace in any circumstance.

**T**he third stage is illumination, the experience of Divine Light, also described above as a final stage in the Prayer of the Heart. The hesychastic developmental model goes beyond that, however, and describes nondual states of consciousness. The ultimate stage of union with God, called *theosis* (becoming God), is described only through negation, since it is totally incomprehensible to the human intellect. Saints have used such expressions as "glorious nothingness" or "luminous darkness" in an attempt to give a hint of such a state.

Russian literature and philosophy were greatly influenced by Christian mysticism, as can be clearly seen in the works of such giants as Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The protagonists of their novels are passionately seeking Truth; in the overwhelming intensity of

this search they go through much suffering to finally break through to love and light. In so doing, they reflect a genuine feature of the Russian soul: if somebody begins to seek meaning, you may be sure that it will be an intense, passionate, and often dramatic search. Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky also depicted holy men, such as Platon Karatayev in *War and Peace* and Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Zosima is described as a typical hesychast *starets* (elder), and it is known that Dostoyevsky himself had such a spiritual father.

There was also a whole garland of original religious philosophers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Vladimir Soloviev, Nikolai Berdyaev, Nikolai Fyodorov, and Pavel Florensky. A review of their vast works goes beyond the goal of this essay; oversimplifying, we might say that in an attempt to blend traditional Christian ethics with Western humanist ideas, they developed the metaphysics of Love. As mystical experience is difficult to express in ordinary language, many of these philosophers were also remarkable poets. Soloviev, Dmitri Merezhkovsky, Andrei Biely, Alexander Blok, Maximilian Voloshin, and others left poems of an often unearthly beauty, where the presence of God breathes in every line.

## THE SPIRITUAL UNDERGROUND

The communist revolution of 1917 and the regime that followed it gave a devastating blow to Russian spiritual life. Aggressive atheism became the official state policy. Churches and monasteries were closed by the hundreds, and beautiful temples were used for warehouses and factories; many priests, abbots, and monks were falsely accused of being "enemies of Soviet power" and persecuted. In the first years after the revolution, many of the nobility and intelligentsia who were involved in mystical groups escaped to the West. The twentieth-century Western spiritual scene was enriched by a number of charismatic figures who came with this wave of emigration: G.I. Gurdjieff and his disciple P.D. Ouspensky; Nicholas Roerich, the artist and spiritual teacher; and religious philosophers such as Berdyaev and Boris Mouravieff.

As the communist regime became more and more oppressive — becoming under Stalin one of the bloodiest dictatorships in history — there emerged a very peculiar phenomenon that remains almost unknown to the West: the twentieth-century Russian spiritual underground. Usually Westerners associate the idea of a Soviet underground with political opposition and fighters for human rights, but there was also a whole network of secret spiritual groups.

Communist Party leaders and the KGB were aware, of course, that spiritual seekers are the most difficult subjects to brainwash. That's why members and especially leaders of mystical groups were severely persecuted. Many grassroots spiritual teachers were fated to spend years in jail and Siberian concentration camps. Starting in the '60s, another favorite tool of persecution was involuntary placement in mental hospitals. Fraudulently diagnosed as being dangerous to others, seekers of transcendence were kept in locked units for months and years, receiving injections of antipsychotic drugs. The fact that people continued to

practice mysticism under such conditions proves that the urge for transcendence is natural and cannot be suppressed by society.

The persecution of spiritual schools may seem to contradict the well-known fact that the Soviets conducted official research in paranormal phenomena and extrasensory perception. However, if we look closer, this only confirms the truth spoken of by many spiritual masters: *siddhis* (supernatural powers) are not the proof of proximity to God or enlightenment and should be disregarded by the serious seeker. Indeed paranormal abilities without ethics and a commitment to spiritual growth may be turned to evil. Hence the KGB could sponsor research on ESP while at the same time persecuting people with higher goals.

During the Soviet period, mystical literature was published underground in *samizdat*. Most of the treasures of spiritual literature were known to Russian adepts; some books had been preserved from before the revolution, while contemporary books smuggled into the country were translated and spread underground. Many spiritual teach-

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ers printed their books and manuals, which also circulated underground. Besides manuals on mystical technologies, there were books like those of V. Marchenko. Writing under the pseudonym “#20,” he developed a series of categories of esoteric psychology. His work could be a significant contribution to modern transpersonal psychology if it were better known.

As we have already mentioned, many Russian hesychast adepts preferred the lifestyle of hermits in the woods or wandering pilgrims rather than serving as institutionalized monks. It is no wonder, then, that with the onset of communist oppression, they simply disappeared into the vast forests of Russia and Siberia, living alone or in small wilderness communities hundreds of miles from civilization, occasionally to be discovered by fur hunters or geologists. And who knows how many holy men still dwell in the woods, ignorant of recent changes?

The term “spiritual underground” refers principally, however, to the secret network of mystical groups that operated in the cities, usually disguised as health or tourist clubs. Though the two main spiritual traditions we have already described — Paganism and hesychasm — undoubtedly influenced these groups, because of the political situation there was very often no direct connection in terms of lineage. Sometimes an ordinary Soviet citizen would undergo spontaneous spiritual awakening and begin to

teach. Since the country was closed to any spiritual importations from outside, these teachers and their methods were quite original and sometimes even bizarre.

## **SCHOOLS AND MOVEMENTS**

It's possible to classify the underground spiritual schools into three main categories: schools focusing on work with and through the physical body; schools focusing on work with energy; and schools of integral development aiming at higher states of consciousness. We can provide first-hand information based on personal acquaintance either with leaders or participants of some of these groups; of course we do not pretend to know all the groups that operated underground in a country the size of Russia.

One of the first groups working mainly through the physical body was the school of Porphyry Ivanov, a Russian peasant who underwent a spontaneous mystical experience in the 1930s. Ivanov's personal history was quite dramatic. Tall, powerful, with long white hair and beard, he looked like a saint and athlete combined. Being unbelievably healthy, he roamed half-naked all year round, wearing only shorts even during the severe frosts of Russian winters.

During World War II, Ivanov's village was occupied by the Nazis, who decided to test his holiness. They cut a hole in the ice and forcibly kept him naked in the freezing water for almost four hours, then they drove him around on a motorcycle for two hours. Ivanov not only survived but didn't even get sick. “God held me,” he said later. After the war he was involuntarily placed into a mental hospital by Soviet authorities who were alarmed by his growing popularity. In the hospital he was forcibly given large doses of antipsychotic drugs, but he was able to counteract them with his willpower. After six months of this turmoil, being driven to exhaustion, he was discharged. He recovered very quickly by walking barefoot on the earth. After his death in the 1980s, Ivanov's wife continued his teachings, and groups of his followers exist both in European Russia and in Siberia.

**I**n Ivanov's view, which was both theistic and pantheistic, every being by right of birth has a certain place in the sacred order of the universe, and one cannot be happy without taking one's proper place in this order. Ivanov's disciples cultivate positive emotional states such as joy and lovingkindness towards every living being. Every morning his “babies,” as he referred to his pupils, reestablish contact with the energies of nature around them. Walking barefoot upon Mother Earth, they perform special breathing exercises resembling yogic *pranayama*, and then pour ice-cold water over their naked bodies. They refuse to have unnecessary belongings, greet everybody they meet with the words “Be healthy!”, abstain from intoxicants, and fast periodically to cleanse the energy of the body. Optimistic, vigorous, and somewhat rigid, Ivanov's disciples can be recognized by an experienced eye.

One of the most popular practices followed by this movement is ice-water bathing, an exotic method of self-discipline that originated with Slavic Paganism. Ivanov

taught special techniques of concentration for entering the cold water without stress or tension. Relaxation and a joyful state of mind are also considered to be major preconditions for useful contact with the healing energy of ice water. This practice is thought to open "inner heat," much like Tibetan *tumo* yoga. It also changes the body's metabolism, stimulates the immune system, and even catalyzes certain personality changes.

The inner part of Ivanov's teaching is connected with mystical Christianity. According to some Russian Orthodox saints, Christ-consciousness dwells in nature. Consequently, merging with nature means merging with Christ. Hence Ivanov's disciples like to bathe in lakes and rivers on the night of the Baptism of Christ (January 17/18), because, according to their belief, the Holy Spirit enters the water on this occasion.

**A**nother large school oriented toward the body was formed around Yan Kotlyarov, a former engineer from Moscow. Its main spiritual practice is meditative running. The "runner's high," a very pleasant state, is known to many. Kotlyarov's school attempts to turn this experience into a state of deep absorption using certain rules of organizing the runners as well as special meditative techniques. The number of people in the group varies from four to twenty or more. Training starts with relaxing unnecessary muscle tensions, joining the energy of the group, and creating a positive emotional field through special guided imagery. The teacher usually runs behind the group, conducting the meditation. Further meditations include working with the energy centers of the body and contact with the energies of nature for "recharging" the runners. The physical effects of this practice are really extraordinary: even elderly people with no previous training enjoy participating. For experienced meditators it may be a remarkable alternative to sitting meditation.

Yet another body-oriented school is centered around water birth. Started by Igor Charkovsky, these groups focus on spiritual work with couples. They introduce the idea of conscious conception, teach parents how to contact the baby during pregnancy, and show them how to give birth into water to reduce trauma. Every summer some women from Charkovsky's school give birth in the Black Sea; dolphins have been reported to come and support mothers in labor. During infancy, special exercises and meditations are practiced with the child to foster healthy physical and spiritual growth.

"Old souls" are believed to be born through Charkovsky's methods, and some parents say their water-born children display paranormal abilities. Research conducted by enthusiasts shows accelerated physical and intellectual development in children who entered the world through this approach. The Soviet authorities resisted these practices in a peculiar way: they refused to give birth certificates to babies born outside of official institutions and accused mothers of baby theft.

Energy-oriented groups focus on developing paranormal and healing abilities and the power to "see" energy, along with prophetic capacities, clairvoyance, and

sometimes just personal power. One could say that those groups are caught in a spiritual dead end by emphasizing supernatural powers instead of higher goals such as liberation or communion with God. At the same time it's interesting to note their high efficiency of training and well-developed "energy technology."

Some schools in this category focus on healing, like the famous Order of Russian Wizards, others on dowsing and geomancy, like the school started by N. Sochevanov. Y. Martynov and V. Polyakov, former engineers from St. Petersburg, taught students how to see human energy fields and sense them with their hands. They developed "energy diagnostics," including maps of the aura under different pathological conditions and the means for correcting and healing them. Their books, published underground, reveal a scientifically precise and systematic approach to energy phenomena.

Some groups in this category are really funny. For example, the school of Averianov (known under the pseudonym "Var Avera") in Moscow is concerned with the purity of the astral plane and practices "astral karate" to keep away evil sorcerers and entities. These activities, of course, were not taken seriously in mystical circles. The group was nicknamed "the Astral Police," while the guru himself received the title of "Astral Colonel."

An interesting and somewhat strange training was developed by a Siberian engineer named Boris Zolotov. Approaching energy as a form of information, Zolotov worked with the effects of energy resonance in his group. He taught disciples to feel energy fields, tune in with them, and manipulate them as if from "inside." His psychological work was intended to erase limiting or weakening subconscious patterns. The development of personal power in this school was unrestricted by ethical rules, and participants followed their own understanding of good and evil. As a result, some members misused their supernatural powers, which eventually led to psychotic breakdowns.

After observing many such cases in Russia, we would like to stress that there is no doubt that mental disorder is a real danger for anyone who focuses on developing paranormal abilities without having a higher mystical goal and observing certain ethical principles. This also applies to seeking contact with UFOs and communicating with spirits and other entities.

**T**he third category consists of serious spiritual schools with a goal of integral mystical development and higher states of consciousness. They usually have a developed system of ethics, philosophy, and meditative technology and also have an advanced adept as the founder and head of the school. Many spiritual leaders of this type were highly educated scientists before they dedicated their lives to teaching spirituality. For some reason, St. Petersburg University was the "nest" from which several spiritual teachers emerged. This university still has a laboratory studying paranormal phenomena, which was originally started by Prof. P. Vasilyev, one of Gurdjieff's disciples who stayed in Russia.

The oldest school among those pursuing integral de-

velopment follows the teachings of Nicholas Roerich, who together with his wife Helena developed Agni Yoga. Though Roerich and his wife left Russia after the revolution, people in Russia have continued to practice his methods on their own using the Roerichs' books. Roerich is also remembered for undertaking several expeditions in the Himalayas to look for the fabled holy land of Shambhala. Analogous legends exist in Russia: it is said that hidden in the Altai mountains of Siberia is a place called Belovodye (literally, "the place of white waters"), where holy men live and miracles happen. Roerich's followers sometimes spend whole summers in the Altai Mountains; so far they have not found Belovodye, but they have reported a lot of unusual phenomena that take place there.

Among other leaders in the category of integral development are A. Grigoryev, who taught a system similar to Raja Yoga and was imprisoned for it as recently as 1987; E. Perepelitzin, who tried to integrate mystical Christianity with Tantra Yoga; P. Garmayev, the founder of a Christian-oriented "moral psychology"; and others.

Another school, with which we have personal experience, was initially called the School for Psycho-Self-Regulation, and was started in the early '80s by Vladimir Antonov and his wife Galina Vaver (today it is chiefly known under Antonov's name). Antonov had worked as a psychophysicologist and Vaver as a biologist in the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. After having spontaneous mystical openings, they began to discuss their experiences with colleagues and as a result were fired for "religious propaganda." Though they both held doctorates, Antonov and his wife had to resort to working at odd jobs.

Traveling around the Soviet Union, Antonov and Vaver engaged in a serious experiential study of different spiritual practices that secretly survived in the multinational U.S.S.R. Besides the Russian traditions already described, these included the secret Sufi orders in the Asian republics, Zoroastrian cults in the Caucasus, and Tibetan-Mongolian Buddhism, the religion of the Buryat republic in southeastern Siberia. Their goal was to borrow the most effective transformative methods from different mystical traditions and create a balanced training that provide a shortcut in spiritual development.

Antonov and Vaver founded their school in St. Petersburg based on the results of their researches. The philosophy of the school is theistic: God is seen as Creator, unfolding himself as a multidimensional Universe. The training has the goal of merging the individual consciousness with the ocean of consciousness of God. The teachings are grounded on the assumption that spiritual growth must be a development of the Love, Wisdom, and Power. The training is organized according to certain developmental principles, which were discovered to be basic to every spiritual tradition:

1. Observing an ethical code based on the *Bhagavad Gita*, the New Testament, and the *Tao Te Ching*;
2. Developing concentration;
3. Purification of the energy centers and channels;

4. Refinement of the energy and psyche from the gross to the subtle;
5. Achieving states of absorption or samadhi;
6. "Crystallization" or stabilization of higher states of consciousness.

By 1990, when spiritual schools began to move above ground as a result of *perestroika*, the school offered three basic courses for beginners, plus a full training for teachers organized according to Gurdjieff's "law of octaves" and consisting of three "octaves" with seven courses each. The school also has summer retreats, hikes, and expeditions to power spots in Russia, such as the Altai or Hibiny mountains. There are courses in sacred art, chi gong, and the martial arts. Some teachers developed programs for children, adolescents, and specialists in different professions. The number of students and graduates has grown to over 5000, and the school has opened branches in Siberia, Estonia, Ukraine, Poland, and Czechoslovakia.

The spectrum of methods used in this school is amazingly wide, including practices from classical yoga, tai chi, Tantra Yoga, Taoism, Slavic Pagan sorcery, hesychasm, Gurdjieff's teaching, the school of Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov, Sufi movements, and others. The founders of the school, being gifted mystics, were able to plug into different traditions and combine culturally different but essentially compatible psychosomatic methods.

If their methodology for the beginning and intermediate stages of training was brilliant, the founders' view of higher states of consciousness was not, in our opinion, accurate. This caused disagreements among the senior teachers of the school, including the authors of this essay. Nonetheless many people have benefited from the school's basic courses, reporting improved health, increased emotional stability, and an overcoming of the existential loss of meaning that is so common in an atheistic society.

**A**fter the recent changes in the political situation of Russia, mystical schools have come into the open, while spiritual traditions are being imported from India and the West. Russian spiritual life is a curious scene now. There is much opening and integration, and much confusion too. Russia's geographical position between West and East has created a sort of crucible in which different spiritual traditions have naturally merged. Like much of the rest of the world, the spiritual life of Russia is increasingly characterized by the spread of esoteric teachings that were previously specific to individual cultures. Given this fact, we think that schools of integral development of the kind we have mentioned here may be one possible way of pursuing spirituality in the future. ■

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