

# Swami Vandana Jyothi: Clergy in the New Age

By Dawn Fazende

From *DIRECTIONS* perspective the "New Age Movement" is about a radical redefinition of our relationship with God, the I AM presence. Many truthseekers reject conventional worship in an effort to achieve a direct connection to the Father/Mother. However, Swami Vandana Jyothi, a modern Hindu monk, has utilized a millenia-old tradition to accomplish deep personal transformation. This remarkable woman dedicates her time and effort into organization of the Shasta Center of Universal Peace. Her devotion to the Father pours forth in everything she does. Those who meet her become re-inspired on their own paths, whether Hindu or completely New Age. *DIRECTIONS* spoke with Swamiji at her Mount Shasta temple.

**Dawn:** Swamiji, You have reworked your entire life and found an intimate, personal connection with the creator through the help of ancient Hindu practices. How have you managed that?

**Swamiji:** The practice does not matter. Our Father doesn't care if you are Christian, Jewish, Independent, or Hindu, etc. He will respond to you no matter how you call to Him. Your call is what's important. I am devoted to God. Hinduism is one way I express that devotion. There are some practices of the other traditions which also are extremely devotional. I get fulfillment from them as well.

**Dawn:** How did you reach such a state of total involvement with God?

**Swamiji:** Life experiences and God's grace. I spent years in foster homes, ten of them between ages 6 and 16. I've been married three times ignorantly pursuing the illusion that other people could make me totally happy, and of course, none of them could. Finally, I gave up the illusion. I became "dis-illusioned" and turned to Father/Mother God. I stopped looking outside myself.

**Dawn:** What made you turn to God, as opposed to drugs or crime as others might have done?

**Swamiji:** I did turn to drugs! I smoked marijuana and cigarettes for years! First "enjoying" myself, and later lashing myself! God forgave me long before I forgave myself.

**Dawn:** So, apparently you did the pretty "normal" things?

**Swamiji:** Well, some of the "normal" things! I had karma with family life to work out, but when I was 18, through some blessing from God, I was given a copy of "Autobiography of a Yogi". While I was reading, I had the realization that I would meet my guru at age 33. I forgot that premonition as I underwent the attachments and consequences of living a "worldly" life.

Some extreme circumstance in my life at age 23 brought me to the contemplation of

suicide. The kids were in bed, I was alone. I laughed and learned that it took courage not to do it! I sat in my rocking chair and began spontaneously repeating a phrase over and over. Years later, I learned I had started then to operate the universal law of affirmation. I said, "I am my Father are One. My Father's peace is my peace." Over and over.

When I finally went to bed, I lay down and the phrase started to repeat itself spontaneously. Before completing it, God bloomed within my heart. My soul recognized Him and called out His name. The most sublime love filled me through and through. I experienced the word "thrill". For three days afterwards, I moved in a place of peace which was not of this world. That experience totally altered my life, as all true God-experience will.

**Dawn:** Have you had other life-altering God experiences?

**Swamiji:** Yes. When I met my guru.

**Dawn:** "Guru" has become something of a negative word to New Agers. What exactly is a guru?

**Swamiji:** A guru is a mapmaker. He or she is one who has been where you want to go and can point out the way. Though God is one, like a mountain, there are many paths leading to the top. A multitude of gurus exists because no one person can navigate all the paths. Neither can a person make a map for a path he hasn't traversed. Once a soul reaches enlightenment, out of compassion he returns to the realm of the world to help others enjoy what he enjoys. He keeps his mind on God and allows God to work through him. A guru becomes a transmitter of the Light. A disciple is one who receives it.

**Dawn:** How did you meet your guru?

**Swamiji:** A friend tried for two years to get me to meet her guru, Satguru Sant Keshavadas. I had been studying and felt the keenest loyalty to Paramahansa Yogananda. However, I became aware of the need to meet an embodied master.

I prayed sincerely to our Father to lead me to a true guru, one who could and would show me a way out of this bottomless crock of desires. I was fed up with the endless state of "not-knowing".

The next time Sant Keshavadas came into town, I went to meet him and was given a marvelous vision through my third eye, the Eye of Truth. Later I learned that what I saw was a reflection of my own inner Light.

**Dawn:** When did you decide to dedicate yourself to his mission full time?

**Swamiji:** In 1988. For two years, I had been driving from Grass Valley to Oakland every three or four days, and it was a grueling trek. Finally God came to me and told me, quite clearly, to leave my home and family to serve full time. I went back to Grass Valley and relayed this experience to my husband and children. Incredibly, I received

their full support and blessings. Days later, I packed my car with a few clothes and my computer and headed for the city. I served six years there before coming to Mt. Shasta.

**Dawn:** What is service to you?

**Swamiji:** For me, service means being available to serve God's creation in whatever way called. Dealing with people, counseling, and teaching are all a part of service. Leading bhajans, which is devotional singing of God's praises and pujas, or worship rituals, is another means of service.

**Dawn:** In your mind, what is required for a servant to be of the highest and best use?

**Swamiji:** Utter humility. True service is 100% egoless. This is something we can all attain, through personal practices or through humbling from God. All souls are created equal. We can simply ask, again and again, to be made an instrument of the Light. The good God will chisel His servants, though, to make them fit instruments.

**Dawn:** As an ex-Catholic, I have studiously avoided any form of traditional ritual worship. Yet, I have attended both bhajans and pujas conducted by you and have been quite moved by your willingness to share your passion for God. Is this sharing a form of service?

**Swamiji:** Absolutely. I can teach the science of religion to a person. But bhakti, devotion, cannot be taught. It must be caught. And it is extremely contagious! (laughs)

I am by nature a shy person. But my service requires that I get "emotionally naked" in front of a group of people. That is my sacrifice. If just one person "catches" bhakti from me, I consider the sacrifice worthwhile.

**Dawn:** Your pujas are powerful. Your bhajans are transcendent. Is bhajan your main form of worship?

**Swamiji:** Yes. Pujas are mystical rituals. They are purification ceremonies for calling forth the Light and creating communion with God. Bhajans are prayers. In devotional bhajan, God is at the beck and call of His devotees. Both are equally powerful, but many people relate to the songs, the bhajan, more easily.

**Dawn:** How important is devotion?

**Swamiji:** There are three main disciplines for achieving knowledge of God. The intellectually bent are led to union with God through thoughtful inquiry into the nature of the Self. The activity-oriented person is led to union through service to God's creation. Those who are emotional by nature achieve union through devotion.

It's important to understand that the wise become devoted servants. Servants attain both love and wisdom. Lovers of God become wise servants. Devotion leads to a very personal relationship with God. It is in sharing this relationship that the mystics bring forth truths to assist humanity.

**Dawn:** Are these the truths from which most of the world's religions have been formed?

**Swamiji:** Yes. However, many of those mystical truths have been distorted. What often happens is the charisma of a saint is so powerful that a personality cult forms around him or her.

A saint or prophet is sent by God to clarify His eternal truth. Whenever in the world cycle darkness or evil or unrighteousness—call it what you will—is on the rise, God in His mercy sends sages and mystics to straighten things out, to get humanity back on track. The problem comes when well-meaning disciples or devotees expand on the original teachings or misinterpret them.

**Dawn:** How do we address this dilemma?

**Swamiji:** We must return to the original teachings and rediscover their true meaning. It will help when people begin to remember there is only one God. At the core of all these so-called different religions, there is only one Truth.

**Dawn:** Where do we begin?

**Swamiji:** With an examination of ourselves, first of all. We need to eradicate fanaticism in our own dealings—even on the mental plane—with people of other beliefs

and traditions. Then we might see and appreciate the inherent beauty in these other traditions.

**Dawn:** I understand that you are currently developing a facility to encourage this process. Tell me about it.

**Swamiji:** Many people in Mt. Shasta and elsewhere have come together to assist in the creation of a pilgrimage, conference and retreat facility which will include temples of the world's religions along with places for independent worship. We're also setting aside acreage to build a hospice dedicated to conscious dying. It will be named the Shasta Center of Universal Peace, or The Shasta CUP.

**Dawn:** What is the purpose of bringing these groups together?

**Swamiji:** The CUP is about world service. A lot of problems in the world today are caused by knee-jerk reactions to other people's ideas about God. Even words such as "devotee" and "religion" and "New Age" can create tempests in our minds which cause us to focus on perceived differences between us. Our aim is to provide a place for groups of various persuasions to come together and experience their underlying unity. Today a person of another tradition might not feel

comfortable or welcome in, for example, a Muslim temple. He might be shy about asking questions or fear making a "mistake" in proper etiquette.

We want to dispel that shyness by encouraging exploration. The priests, ministers, rabbis and other practitioners who will conduct services at these temples will welcome the opportunity to share information.

**Dawn:** You don't mean proselytizing, do you? You're not talking about attempts to convert people, are you?

**Swamiji:** No, no! We just want to help people understand one another's faith on a core level. Look how much war and destruction has been caused in the name of "religion". That was because we did not understand how alike we all are. Everyone craves love. God is Love itself and the various religions and paths have evolved over time to answer the diverse needs of diverse populations. The bottom line, however, is expressive of a fundamental reality: though Names are many, the Truth is One.

When the peoples of the planet really get that we have a common paternity, that we truly are brothers and sisters, world peace will be closer at hand. That is our goal.

## BIOSKETCH

Sw. Vandana Jyothi

During August of 1994, in Kashi Benares, India, on Hinduism's holiest day of Lord Shiva, Sw. Vandana Jyothi took vows of renunciation and became a monk of the Jyothi order. Shortly thereafter, her guru instructed her to look for property on which to install a 16' murti (statue) of Lord Vishwajyothi Vittala, whose name means "the Light of the World". He also informed her that she would return to the United States and receive many visions relating to her future.

Sw. Vandana immediately began to see a universal pilgrimage center, to which multitudes of people came to experience the love of God. She saw beautiful, authentic temples dedicated to many different religious traditions and gardens where pilgrims stopped to reflect on their blessings. Though the visions did not indicate where this center was to be built, circumstances conspired to reveal that, too.

An old acquaintance, when informed of the tasks given her, asked if she had ever been to Mt. Shasta? Her negative response prompted an invitation to camp at Upper Squaw meadow on the mountain. A quick acceptance, a whirlwind visit and the knowledge was given: Mt. Shasta was the place to realize Swamiji's vision. A short time later, she was led to the future site of the "Shasta Center of Universal Peace" (Shasta CUP). Prompted by powerful mystical experiences on the property, she relocated to Mt. Shasta in November of 1994, one month after her initial visit to the mountain.

As a full-time member of Mt. Shasta's community, she discussed her visions with an eclectic group of locals who have become enthusiastic about the possibilities for personal, national and international unity inherent in a center which honors diverse practices of worship. With reverence, gratitude and a sense of divine duty, this group has embarked upon the Shasta CUP project.

Sw. Vandana and the Shasta CUP organizers joyfully invite the leaders as well as the laymen and women of all the paths to join together at this time, in this place, to accomplish the resounding mandate of Spirit . . . to express Its unity in diversity. Spirit is convening the people, skill, energy—and even the symbols!—to accomplish this heartfelt and sincere expression of its own Glory. To aid in this task, the group is humbly but boldly seeking sponsors and benefactors—individuals, organizations and religions—to make tax deductible contributions to the [Shasta Center of Universal Peace](#).