

## *The Crazy Wisdom Interviews*

Two Very Special Interviews on Reverence for Life and Relativity of Thinking —  
with Gurudev Chitrabhanu, the Worldwide Leader of the Jains,  
and Chetana Catherine Florida (1941-2003) of the Lighthouse Center

Catherine Florida, the Founder and Spiritual Leader of the Lighthouse Center in Whitmore Lake, died in early April after unsuccessful heart surgery at the Mayo Clinic. A gifted intuitive, mystic and spiritual teacher, she was deeply loved by Lighthouse Center members, a community of peaceful seekers on independent spiritual paths. Her spiritual teachings borrowed happily from many wisdom traditions. She was particularly drawn to, and a student of, Gurudev Chitrabhanu, a Jain sage who is the worldwide leader of more than ten million Jains. Chitrabhanu is the author of numerous books on the 6,000-year-old Jain philosophy, a tradition that emphasizes reverence for life, non-holding, and relativity of thinking.

What follows is the last public interview with Chetana Catherine Florida, and a rare American interview with Gurudev Chitrabhanu.

Photo by Linda Lawson



### The Interview with Chetana Catherine Florida

Interviewed by Bill Zirinsky

*I first heard about Chetana Catherine Florida almost 13 years ago, but had never met her until the spring of 2002. Debbie Szporluk was a sparkling young British mystic who became a much beloved manager of Crazy Wisdom in the early 90's, in our old store. She told us Chetana (which means Pure Awareness, Pure Consciousness) was someone to meet, the real thing — an exceptional clairvoyant, a woman of heart and kindness, a channel for higher energies, and the guiding force of a growing spiritual community.*

*Many of our customers through the years have been members of the Lighthouse Center, and I remained curious about Chetana, but she seemed to only rarely venture forth from Whitmore Lake to Ann Arbor. I never had the occasion to be at Crazy Wisdom when or if she visited, and I never had the occasion to speak to her. This was unusual for me, since over the years I've interacted with most of the leading spiritual lights of our region.*

*In the beginning of 2002, I wrote to Chetana requesting an interview. Soon thereafter, she called. From that very first call, it was impossible NOT to be drawn to her, and delighted by the softness of her voice, the sweetness of her persuasive powers, and a certain indescribable energy field around her.*

*Chetana kept putting off our interview, for various reasons, particularly because of poor health. I finally interviewed her at the Lighthouse Center in October of last year. She was enormously open and honest, gentle and playful, and down-to-earth. Clearly she was a woman who had lived through many challenges in her own personal life, a woman without pretense, without an intellectual veneer — very homespun, very motherly.*

*We had numerous conversations during the editing process, and I relished them. She interested herself in my children and wife, and my well being. She ended each*

*conversation with a lilting "Please say hello to Ruth for me." I was so struck by her generosity of spirit. Shortly before she left for the Mayo Clinic for her heart operation, we had a conversation about a section of the interview that she had crossed out, writing "too personal" in the margins. That section of the interview dealt with her first marriage, and the suicide of her first husband. I suggested to Chetana that this section was one of the most moving parts of the interview, it was part of her life story, and that it helped to explain how she evolved. I expected some resistance. Instead, she just said, "Yes, you're right. Let's keep it in."*

*Her funeral service on April 8<sup>th</sup> was attended by her family, many members of her vibrant community of seekers, and others. So many people got up to talk about the role Chetana had played in their lives. Near the end of the service, Gurudev Chitrabhanu, who had flown in from New York that morning, spoke of Chetana Catherine Florida as a being of light who had ascended to the ceiling of the universe. The consciousness in the room shifted, it became very still, and there was no doubt we were in the presence of the descent of Grace.*

*(Dr. Nancy Hanke, whose spiritual name is Nirmala, which means "pure, without pollution," sat in on the interview. She is a long-time member of the Lighthouse community.)*

**Bill Zirinsky:** Thank you for being willing to have me come in and do this interview.

**Chetana (Catherine Florida):** I'm very happy to have you here and I really enjoy reading the articles you have in your newspaper.

**Bill Zirinsky:** I have never been to the Lighthouse Center before. Is this the meditation room or what do you call this room that we're in?

**Chetana (Catherine Florida):** We call this room the sanctuary because so many people find sanctuary when they come here. We have our main classes here, our main meetings here, and our talks here. If I have a class, I have it in here. And also we do the first and third Friday meditations here for two and a half hours. And our Sunday candlelight that's open to everyone. And we also have the Sunday school in here.

**Bill Zirinsky:** I'd like to give our readers a sense of the background of the Lighthouse Center. I was fortunate enough through you to get to meet Chitrabhanu and in this same issue we have an interview with him. But why don't you tell us about the formation of the Lighthouse Center and its roots.

**Chetana (Catherine Florida):** I first started meditating around 30 years ago and I had no intentions of teaching. I had no intentions of doing readings. I actually went into meditation to more or less save myself, my emotional self. And so at a certain point after about five years of meditating, all of a sudden I started having very unusual experiences that people couldn't explain to me. So I started to go to classes on metaphysics, psychic awareness, past lives...

**BZ:** In this area? Were you living in the area?

**Chetana (Catherine Florida):** I was living in Livonia. In one class I went to, the teacher said to me, "You need to be teaching this, not taking it." I thought that was interesting because I thought I was learning from her. The next thing that happened is I did start teaching for *Do Something Different*...

**BZ:** *Do Something Different* it's called?

**Chetana (Catherine Florida):** It's a series of six classes taught by six different people having to do with metaphysics, called *Do Something Different*. It was right on the cutting edge of coming into the mainstream. Before that metaphysics was more or less hidden behind closed mental doors.

**BZ:** So how did you come to do these classes?

**Chetana (Catherine Florida):** Well, my daughter was working up at the Pump 'n' Pantry gas station in Whitmore Lake and this man came by and asked, "I'd like to put this flyer here. Can I do that?" and she said, "Well, what is it?" And it was about the *Do Something Different* classes. So she said to him, "Oh that's fine because my mother loves this stuff." And he said, "She does? Does she teach?" And she said, "Well no, but she could." And so she's the one who actually got me into *Do Something Different*. I taught *Do Something Different* at Monroe Community College, Oakland Community College, Marygrove College, Lansing Community College, and some of the high schools. When I went into Howell one night, the students said, "We

want you to do a six-week series of classes.” And I said, “Fine, if it gets approved.” And so I developed six classes and then from there they said, “Well we want another six classes.”

**BZ:** What were you teaching at that point? What were you talking about?

**Chetana (Catherine Florida):** I was teaching a six-week series on ESP development. I had to get something that was not too wild in its title, but something that would be accepted by the school board. Because Howell was very closed down at that time. They were a little bit wary of me.

**BZ:** Even then, 30 years ago, you were teaching an ESP development class.

**Chetana:** Yes.

**BZ:** So you must have recognized in yourself fairly quickly that you had some intuitive abilities?

**Chetana:** Yes. Which I believe everyone does. I don't believe in special gifts or special people. I believe that quality, that energy is within each one of us. And it depends on what we work on from lifetime to lifetime, what we're really going to show and/or do in a lifetime. So I was teaching other people to get in touch with their psychic ability. Then after I got through the 12 classes, I said, “No, that's enough. I don't want to teach anymore.” But all of a sudden I would have students show up at my house. I said, “What do you want from me now?”

**BZ:** People who had taken the classes?

**Chetana:** Yes, they would come and sit in my living room. Prachi was one of them. I said, “What do you want from me?” “We want to know everything you know. We want to pick your brain.” And I said, “No, I don't want to do that anymore. I have taught you one set of six classes and a second set of six classes, that's all.” But they would follow me different places. Until I said, “Okay. Let's start something. We'll have meetings.” So we started meeting. And they said, “Well, let's have a name for our place.” I said, “Okay, we'll call it the Lighthouse Center.”

**BZ:** How long after that first class of *Do Something Different* was it that you gave your community its name Lighthouse Center? Was it a year or three years or five years?

**Chetana:** Let's see, in 1978 I started teaching *Do Something Different* and by 1982 we were calling ourselves The Lighthouse Center. Then, in 1989, we incorporated as The Lighthouse Center, Inc.

**BZ:** So within a year or two of beginning teaching, students were coming to you wanting more from you.

**Chetana:** Yes.

**BZ:** Let's back up a little bit. What was your background before that? You're a mom and a grandmother?

**Chetana:** Right.

**BZ:** You have how many children?

**Chetana:** I have two children. I have one living in Wisconsin and two grandchildren there. And one living in Michigan with two grandchildren here. Also I worked at

**Chetana:** At Wayne State I was an administrative assistant in the office of Student Services in the College of Nursing.

**BZ:** Anyhow, essentially you began to teach and at that point 25 years ago, you had two kids and you were working, and this was a side occupation. Becoming an intuitive and beginning to teach was just happening in

have some kind of credentials when we went to the bank for a mortgage.

So one of our members, who was in real estate, said that a little church on East Shore Drive was going up for sale. So then we got this place and we've had it since 1995.

**BZ:** It seems like the community is at this point substantial. You have a lot of people in the community.

**Chetana:** We do, we have students and professors, doctors and lawyers, social workers and psychologists, affluent business people, housemaking people from all walks of life. And the interesting part about it is, a lot of people will have their thing that they like to come here for, so no one really realizes, I think, the number of people until they go to something really big like the Dimensions in Light Festival, or something that really brings a lot of people in at one time.

**BZ:** Does the Lighthouse Center now have 100 members or 200 members or...how do you judge who's a member and who's not a member?

**Chetana:** Well on the mailing list, we have about 600.

**BZ:** They come to a meeting, they attend a class, their child comes to the children's meditation class, they take a Reiki class, they come for the healings or...that kind of...

**Chetana:** Yes. Or else they come to Friday night intensive meditation, or one of the advanced meditation classes. Or sometimes they just keep in contact with me through readings. And the foundation of this whole group that makes it stay very tight together is to know that they can be in another part of the world, but they've all learned how to meditate. There's an understanding that meditation is the glue, the foundation, of the group. Because through the meditation, everyone finds their inner guru. And that's why we have the many different religious symbols. We say that this is not about religion, it's not about an -ism but actually about spirituality.

**BZ:** What are the six traditions, in addition to the cross, that are represented here in your sanctuary room?

**Chetana:** Over here we have Jainism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Muslim. And of course the cross represents the church that was here before and also the balance. So I see that as a balance between the -isms of the world, some of the -isms. And one of our Board Members, Aruna Olga Bachmann, is our artist and she made the symbols of the different religions for us.

**BZ:** I've been very struck in reading your newsletter at the inclusive quality. You're including different spiritual traditions and embracing them.

**Chetana:** Yes. We are. Because with that there's reverence for all of life and relativity of thinking. We work with *Ahimsa*, being nonviolent. This is one of the main beliefs of Jainism, which we learned from Gurudev Shree Chitrabhanu. We also believe that all religions are different pathways to God, or Godhood, and all religions have aspects of the Truth.

**BZ:** And I see here in this sanctuary room, in addition to the symbols that are up, you've got a picture of Jesus. You have Buddha. I don't know what tradition this white statue represents?

**Chetana:** That just came in from India. We're just back from India. He is called Mahavir and he's the 24<sup>th</sup> Tirtankara in Jainism, so he's the last enlightened teacher of Jainism right now.

**BZ:** I see. I was going to ask you whether any of these were Jain symbols?

**Chetana:** All the 24 Tirtankaras, or teachers they've had, all look the same because they believe that the God energy is uniquely the same. And so the only difference is you'll see a little stamp mark in front of the statue that will tell you which statue it is. Like Mahavir has a lion. And the one before him is called Parshwanath, and his symbol is the snake, for healing and wisdom.

**BZ:** As you look at it now, were there experiences you had before you formally became a teacher, in which you were already manifesting teachings, manifesting intuition, manifesting psychic ability?

Photo by Betsy Thorne



addition to your other life responsibilities and challenges.

**Chetana:** Exactly. My husband was out of the picture, because he had committed suicide when we were both 29. We found each other in high school, we married, and then he committed suicide. That's what triggered me into going into meditation. I was trying to find meaning in life.

**BZ:** You were left as a widow with two kids when you were very young.

**Chetana:** Yes. And I grew up in a household filled with women, so I didn't know how a family was supposed to work. The family that I married into was like a *Leave it to Beaver* family, where everything seemed perfect. Everyone acted perfectly, but all the emotional turmoil that they had to hold back came out at 29 for my husband.

**BZ:** In reading the Lighthouse Center's newsletter, *The Beacon*, you write beautifully about your life, your mother,

your aunt and uncle, and other personal themes. If you'd be willing, I'd like to come back to what you've just been talking about later in the interview. Would you continue to trace the evolution of the Lighthouse Center?

**Chetana:** Yes. After we started meeting together, our numbers started to grow. One difficulty we had was in

locating a permanent room. I found a room in a friend's house, but then we grew much too big. And then we located above the firehouse in Whitmore Lake. We stayed there for several years, but then they said it was not safe any longer. So then we moved again. By that time we were tired of moving. Within two months, we found a house to rent on Five Mile. We stayed there for three years; to prove that we could keep up the rent payment, so we would

**BZ:** Are you afraid of dying?

**Chetana:** No. I'm not. At one time I would have said yes. But, no, because I understand that it's just a letting go of the body. And I understand that whatever I've accomplished is going to go on. So it's letting go and getting into another body.

**BZ:** Are you still attached to living at this point?

**Chetana:** Attached to living at this point? You know, some days I am. And some days I'm not, to be truthful... I think the students would be very worried about me if they knew I was ready to leave at any moment. But I want to be as truthful as I can, so yes and no...

Wayne State University for about 19½ years. The last 10 years at Wayne. I was teaching classes and doing consultations. And that was driving from here to Wayne State, so it was 100 miles a day just to go straight there. If I taught downriver, if I taught up in Southfield, then I would add that on to my driving time.

**BZ:** What were you doing at Wayne State?

**Chetana:** Yes. When I was a child I would say things and it would be true in my mind and true for me, and then my friends would call me sometimes a liar. And I'd say, "Why are they calling me a liar?" But what happened is the action hadn't taken place yet. And so later on, it might have been a half-year or eight months, it would take place. And then I didn't know how to explain it that I saw that, that I knew that. But then some of them would remember; some of them would forget. But that's what I would talk about. I knew enough of what was important.

And the interesting part about it is I knew nothing about Chitrabhanu. I went to a lecture in Olivet, Michigan, the Spiritual Frontier Fellowship, and there was a student called Mitra, which means Friend of the Universe, who was teaching there. I sat and I listened and I just felt my heart open up to everything he was saying about the chakras,



Photo by Ruth Schekter

everything he was saying about energy. So I more or less knew. "Where did you learn this?" "How do you know this?" "Who taught you this?" And so he started telling me about Chitrabhanu from New York City. I asked him, "How do you talk to him?" "How do you get to see him?" And he said, "Well, you can see him sometime. In fact, Easter he will be there in Detroit. Go see him." So I did.

**BZ:** And this was already after your community had begun to develop?

**Chetana:** Yes.

**BZ:** You were already having regular meetings and teachings... Had you already rented the house, or was this before the rental of the house?

**Chetana:** Before. And what happened is after I'd heard of him it assimilated very quickly within me, all this information. Chitrabhanu just said, "This is because you've had the experience in another lifetime." He said, "You knew. It rang true to you. So you were able to teach it without needing me, without knowing the book or anything." I had been teaching about the chakras before I met Chitrabhanu. And then the book came out later, *Psychology of Enlightenment*. And so then we had a book to work from.

**BZ:** So your finding and meeting Chitrabhanu both explains some of your own teaching and also gives you a whole foundation for your teaching?

**Chetana:** Definitely. It gave me a language for what I was doing, more language. Because I would do it through the intuitive sense that something was right. I would have the lay language of a western mind, a western tongue. I needed the other language of the East to combine with the West. I learned how to teach meditation through studying the mind of the western person. In India, a guru would say, "Meditate, chant, do this, do that," and the Indian people would just do what the guru said. Eastern Indians will do this, but westerners ask why.

**BZ:** We ask why.

**Chetana:** Yes. Why. And then we say, "Why do thoughts come up?", "Why does my mind wander?", "Why do I

itch?", "Why do I scratch?", "Why do I sneeze?" "And you call that meditation." So in my lecture which is very informational, I do one hour of the whys. So everyone can understand how meditation works. And by the time we have the experiential part, everyone is totally relaxed and they don't fight the process. There is a meditation of concentration. There is a meditation of free flow. There are many types of meditation, but I've found this to be the easiest to work with. And this is working with where you are at and letting you go where you need to go and that big question of why. Especially in this community - in university and college communities, they definitely want to know why they're going to do something. I would like to tell you a little funny story. Nancy Hanke, known as Nirmala, who is an M.D., takes one of those classes and so does Jeff, who is also a professor at The University of Michigan, with two Ph.D.'s, they were in the same class together, sitting opposite. And so I was explaining...

**BZ:** This is like a mantra meditation class or...

**Chetana:** Uh-huh. And so I was explaining the visualization that goes with this mantra. So Jeff says to me, "Well, I don't like that color. I want to do this color." And Nirmala sits over on the other side and says, "Yes, yes, yes." And everyone is impressed because she's a M.D. and he's a double Ph.D. So they're impressed with this. I looked and Jeff and I said, "Well, that's fine and dandy but this system is over 5000 years old and has been proven to work." He looked at me and said, "Well, I think I'll try it that way." And she says I convinced her also. I knew it was true, but I had to have the language and the understanding of how old it was to give to the people who are challenging it also.

**BZ:** Let's follow the path a little bit more. Your community had become one that had some people coming to this house that you had rented...

**Chetana:** Yes.

**BZ:** ...and at that point, were you maybe having 10 or 20 students, or had it already by the time that you had rented the house there were already 50 or 60 people coming through or... I'm a little quantitative because I think that's part of telling the story of how, which is an amazing story really, of how does a spiritual community really start from nothing? This isn't that you're a Baptist minister. You started your own spiritual community, as you said, by just teaching a few people and then it grew to a few more people. That's why I'm asking some quantitative questions.

**Chetana:** Well, I'm a double Cancer... you understand astrology?

**BZ:** A bit.

**Chetana:** And so that's the mothering quality. So what happened here is I began to mother the classes a lot, but they didn't understand. And so they became attached to their own particular group. So what I started doing is teaching these select groups of people from 10 to 20 students, four nights a week. Because, again, this group didn't want to relate to that group because that group didn't have what this group has. And so I did that as long as I could, but I could not do that anymore. It was just too much. So then I had to revise things so people could start to come together.

**BZ:** And at what point did... was it way back in the late '70s or did it take a while for students to say, "This isn't just a person who is teaching a class, but this is somebody I'd like to have as my teacher"?

**Chetana:** Well, when I started teaching in 1978. I was meditating before then, but I did start in 1978. I think at that point in time is when all of a sudden it started, with those three people that kept coming around. They were like spiritually stalking me. I was teasing them. I said, "You're spiritually stalking me (all laugh). Go. Find someone. I don't want to teach." But again they didn't. And so from there it just became larger. And now, of course, I really love it and enjoy it.

**BZ:** You stopped resisting after a while?

**Chetana:** Yes (laughs). I did. And also I think Chitrabhanu has noticed, since he's with me quite a bit. He says, "Chetana, you have to get so you touch more people at one time, rather than your mothering different groups." And so then all of a sudden there started to be a change. And some people, of course, still wanted the mother. So some people then would refuse to go to classes unless they could see me. The students now are a lot stronger without so much dependence, so I like that too. The people who need more time with me, then I see them sometimes once a week, or twice a month.

**BZ:** So part of what the community is, is people not only coming to classes and meditations, but also coming to you

privately?

**Chetana:** And they do this because, again, all the information's the same, but how it affects that person at the time of receiving the information can trigger a certain level of lessons or challenges that they don't even know that might be within them. Sometimes they do. It's that coming to the surface. They say, "What do I do with this?" "How do I work with this?" "How do I work with forgiving this" or "How do I work with being able to let this go?" So even

And I have said over and over that you do not ride on the coattails of a teacher or a guru. You become strong enough to be your own guru.

though it's in class, I have to talk to everyone in class, but then I can individualize through a one-on-one session and say, "You need to do this or you need to do that." And I have said over and over that you do not ride on the coattails of a teacher or a guru. You become strong enough to be your own guru. And I believe that. I don't believe that anyone can take away "your sins," that anyone can take away your karma. That's something that you have created and you must take responsibility for removing. So some people who look for someone to take care of them at a higher level are not attracted to taking responsibility for their lives.

**BZ:** It doesn't sound like you require people who are going to become part of the community to become Jain. It sounds like the Jain tradition is an inspiration for you, and therefore for many people in the community, but it doesn't seem as if members of the Lighthouse community give up their Christianity or their Judaism or their Buddhist orientation?

**Chetana:** Yes, and that's why I have embraced Jainism. There is a difference between a philosophy and actually a strict religion. So there is a Jain religion, but most of us accept the philosophical part of it. The philosophical part believes in the concept of *Ahimsa*, which is the belief in nonviolence. So you try all day long not to create any violence through your thoughts, your words, or your actions to any living being. It sounds easy. It sounds really easy in the beginning, but the more you get into it, the more you realize how easily our violence can come in. We're monitoring ourselves a lot. That's one of the philosophical statements we embrace.

Another one is relativity of thinking. Hearing everyone without judgment and not trying to convince, coerce, or get anyone to think the way you think. Because, again, this is why we're here. We're at the highest level of evolution being human, and by being human we have to experience many different things. So the experiences we choose at a given time are what we need to experience.

And the other concept that works with *Ahimsa* is reverence for all of life. So it's a very beautiful, peaceful solution. If everyone had a Jain philosophy in the world, there wouldn't be any wars. There wouldn't need to be any wars because there would be an acceptance of so many things and so many people and the differences among them.

**BZ:** I see those concepts being written about repeatedly in *The Beacon*.

**Chetana:** I've really learned this through the years of teaching — that when I said something once, I assumed it was heard. And then I realized that even sometimes after 15 times explaining something, that some person still had missed it. So whenever I write something, I try to include that idea in very different ways, until all those who are reading it in the newsletter will eventually see what I'm saying. So it's very interesting to understand the mind and how it can block, not because the person wants to block something, but because it's a karma called "vision obscuring karma", when you cannot see. And that's the person to whom you say, "Don't you see? Don't you see?" And they don't see. It's called vision obscuring karma.

**BZ:** Don't we all have some vision obscuring karma? (All laugh)

**Chetana:** Yes, we do. This is why we're still human and we are not totally evolved yet. But there are levels of vision obscuring karma. And when you realize maybe you're working here and someone's working here, you should not get angry with this person because they don't understand

## The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Chetana Catherine Florida (continued)

what you're saying. They might get angry with you because they don't understand what you're saying, but that's because of where they're at. They don't have a vision or their vision is blocked at that time.

**BZ:** What you've been talking about has reminded me of the issue of how often students in a spiritual community project onto their teachers. You must have to work with that day-in-and-day-out.

**Chetana:** (Laughs.) Yes, a lot of times I am the bad mother, I'm placed in a bad mother situation. After we gain understanding of their projected anger, there's friendliness. But of course when somebody's going through that, it's very, very difficult. And so they have to back away and then sometimes I'll see them a few years later, five years later. But what you must understand is everyone is working on his or her blocks within his or her nervous system. You might talk to that person one night and feel totally comfortable. Next time you might approach them and they're in a bad mood. Something has surfaced up and they're working on something. So we all must have, again, the understanding that everyone is working on something. That really helps people. Because, again, so many people are trying to get healed and whole, and that's why they're working with this kind of spirituality. And so you're moving a lot of energy all the time. Everyone is really continuously learning and growing, and that's what I really get excited about. Because I remember someone in psychic recall, from when I first met them 20 years ago and how much they've grown in those 20 years.

**BZ:** And does a new person who comes in the door for one of the meditations, or one of the classes or healing nights that take place here, does that new person feel welcome?

**Chetana:** Oh, yes. From what I've heard, most people feel welcomed. The energy here is so loving. So many people have not been caressed by energy fields. And they've been very much caressed by this energy field, spiritually caressed.

**BZ:** You've created a sanctuary that is very comfortable. As I look around, unlike many other sanctuaries, you have 15 different couches. This is a very caressing kind of environment for people to come in. There is also an energy in the space that is palpable.

**Chetana:** Yes, when they first come in, this is, again, one of the things that they experience and are attracted to. And then you start working on something. It's like seeing the end product when you first come in, in a way, seeing where you could be. And all of a sudden it's like seeing a house: now I have to push the dirt away, build the foundation, and work, work, work. But it's a beautiful house. So that's what happens here. So the attraction of coming here, "Oh yes, I want to learn to meditate, I want to do this," but then all of a sudden the work starts.

**BZ:** That's an interesting formulation. Someone comes in here and experiences the end product, which is the culmination of all of the energy that you and your community have been bringing into this space for many years, and all the work that you have all done. Someone coming in for the first time may experience the energy, but then may have a lot of work to do day in and day out, week in and week out, to partake of that.

**Chetana:** Once they make that commitment for personal growth and take the responsibility for the personal growth, then they begin to work. This work is experienced as a purification process. In this process, all negative thoughts, words and actions are purified through daily meditations and loving and are then released. Gurudev says that meditators only experience 10% of their karmas. This is likened in India to a pinprick (10%) instead of an axe cut.

**BZ:** You're saying people must be careful to be compassionate when faced with other people's misfortunes, as opposed to just being dismissive, or blaming it on the other person's "bad karma".

**Chetana:** One of the important challenges for all of us is not to judge another's karma, and not to take joy in the suffering of others so if someone's having a hard time, it is not for you to judge. Yes. And I've seen too much of that in people, saying, "that's their karma, so they must deal with it." But if you were the one that was suffering

with the karma, you would need help too. So you have to always look at things with compassion, great compassion.

**BZ:** I would think that people would really enjoy having you talk about karma. There's a lot to be said, there's a lot of juice in that conversation.

**Chetana:** Oh yes, they love it. We start talking in class about karma, about this, about that. The students have a greater understanding, because you lose so much understanding about life when you just focus on the one life. Because if you focus on the one life, it's really hard to understand and justify how "one God" would give one family a genius child and one family a retarded child. Why would one God do that? But if there were many lifetimes to any situation, and you can say, OK, this person has chosen to go this way because they want to learn something, or this is a consequence of something else that's coming in, but from that, there's going to be something else coming in. That makes it more reasonable in my understanding.

really work on, which I haven't seen in other eastern traditions, is that all of us must take responsibility and have great love and compassion. Not, "someone else fix me," but that everyone takes responsibility for her own thoughts, words and actions, for her own purification process. And also we must be a voice for the voiceless, the animals that don't have a voice, some people don't have a voice, children, old people.

**BZ:** Is the notion of karma in that tradition a literal notion, that one might have lived before on this earth, or one might have lived before on some other planet in some other galaxy?

**Chetana:** Oh yes, I believe there are many other solar systems.

**BZ:** And is there a sense that the human mind can't know much of this, because of the limitations of the mind?

**Chetana:** This is where meditation is able to get rid of what I call mental blocks, mental conditions. We can't see what's pure.

Through meditation, the block goes and all of the sudden you're able to see the purity, the wholeness. But if you have had twenty lifetimes of not working for that, you're going to have twenty levels of blocks before you see that purity, that wholeness. This is pure God energy, and you've had twenty (or 200 or 2,000) lifetimes to have it encrusted with conditions. So some people who aren't likable to other people have so many conditions, they have so many conditions that people cannot see the light within that

person. For a person who had been working on themselves all of the time, and everyone loves them, other people are able to sense that light. I don't mean visually be able to see as an aura, just sense it.

**BZ:** I was fascinated by something in one of the issues of *The Beacon*, in which you referred to there having been 3200 meditations that year at the Lighthouse Center, and those meditations affected 1,600,000 people. How do you come up with the number? I was just fascinated with your quantifying, in a sense, how much one's meditations affect people on a regional, national and worldwide basis. People often talk about how you can affect world peace if you spread the energy out, and it seemed that's where you were going with that idea.

**Chetana:** Nirmala always figures out our numbers.

**Nirmala** (Nancy Hanke): This calculation was developed by another meditation group. You take the number of people who are meditating, and you square that number and you multiply by 100. So if five people were meditating, you would be affecting 2,500. So when we have a twenty-four hour meditation for world peace, for example, and people are coming here throughout the twenty-four hours, we roughly estimate how many people there are throughout that time, and so the last time we did that, we affected 44,100 people.

**BZ:** I see. So that makes sense to me. If one thinks about bringing non-violence, or bringing peacefulness, or bringing compassion, to one's daily life, we can touch many other people's lives. Even if we just touch, or connect with, five people a day, we are touching individually 1,825 people a year (365 days times 5 people per day) in a positive way. So it's easy to see the numbers multiply outwards, which is really what you were talking about.

**Chetana:** Exactly, and when you meditate, the numbers get even bigger. And talking about numbers, a lot of people say, well, what can I do? I don't have money, I can't travel. How can I change the world? You have to really understand the power of one thought. If the power of one thought goes out into the universe, it attracts or magne-

Photo by Linda Lawson



Members of the Lighthouse community in their sanctuary

Maybe not with someone else, but with mine, it does.

**BZ:** We have two seriously disabled children. My nine-year-old boy is profoundly deaf, he's in a wheelchair, and he's fed by a gastrostomy tube. And he's profoundly delayed, which as far as I'm concerned is just the politically correct phrase for retarded. And we consider him such a gift in our lives. And he's this gem of a boy with red hair, with a smile that lights up the world. And, yeah, it's more challenging to be the parents of two children with significant disabilities, but what a great spiritual opportunity for Ruth and for myself.

**Chetana:** Yes. And you're seeing it in such an enlightened way. You are really seeing it and embracing it in a loving, enlightened way. Not many people can do that. They would like to, but they can't. It's a great difficulty. But the children are feeling the love, and you are feeling the love and the joy. It's so much for all of you.

**BZ:** We're lucky that we get to get to take care of these two kids. Our children *give us so much*.

**Chetana:** And there's also another connection of karma that you might like to know: it's the children that we have now, they have been our parents in another lifetime, so they have had you in their life and have given you much love. So from that lifetime of love, when they come back, you are able to feel that love for them, they're able to feel that love for you. So it's just so beautiful and compassionate. And we need situations like this because this is a teaching situation. How beautiful it is when you see this love! From the parents, and from the children to the parents. So we teach whatever we do, wherever we go, whatever we say, we're all teachers.

**BZ:** So, are the beliefs about karma out of the Jain tradition, or out of your own knowledge? Or out of a synthesis of a variety of traditions?

**Chetana:** Yes, it is a synthesis. I've always thought that the Jains had the most complete understanding of karma, from all of my different studies

**BZ:** It's all spelled out in the Jain tradition.

**Chetana:** Yes. Very much so. And the main thing that they

tizes like thoughts to it. Because like attracts like. And so you get like thoughts magnetizing from all over the world. Then, all of the sudden, pretty soon, you have organizations like Feed the Hungry, or Habitat for Humanity, because that one thought sailed out there and the other thoughts joined in. So that is the power of one thought. Because like Chitrabhanu says, meditation works. And then, if you send thoughts out from that purified state after you get through meditation, which many times I do, I send out some kind of vibration that's that much more purified, that much stronger of a thought. So that's why I tell people, when you do your spiritual homework, do it after you meditate, because you're in your purest state of mind, before it starts getting cluttered up with things.

We're at the highest level of evolution being human, and by being human we have to experience many different things. So the experiences we choose at a given time are what we need to experience.

Affirmations are much more powerful, and visualizations are much more powerful than you ever thought, when done after your meditation.

**BZ:** Yes. I've seen you writing, again in the newsletter, about people's illnesses and about healing.

**Chetana:** We have really had a great foundation of healing in the Center. So from the meditations we have also worked with hands-on healing. And some people have thought that we're just all Reiki therapists, so I had to really get it clear to people that healing comes in many forms, not just Reiki. However, most of us are Reiki healers. We have healing every Sunday with candlelight, and the energy goes and disperses and sometimes balances out minds, emotions, physical body and all. And so many healings have happened. And we also do distance healing work, and that's our healing board up there, with many, many pictures and names.

**BZ:** You have pictures of hundreds of people.

**Chetana:** Yes. And so many people have received a healing either to live life in a healthier way, or to transcend. And some people don't understand that when a person transcends, they still transcend with a beautiful healing light energy.

**BZ:** Yes, you wrote about that in one of the newsletters. Healing doesn't mean that you necessarily get well.

**Chetana:** In this physical body.

**BZ:** In this physical body.

**Chetana:** Exactly. A man maybe about fifty years old might be in a wheelchair, or take, for example, Christopher Reeve. We know he had the accident, we know he's in a wheelchair. He's probably one of the most healed, loving human beings, in terms of everything that he has done. Because he has not turned bitter through this consequence, but what has he done? He's put money to research, he's being very positive, he helps, and even though he's a great actor, and he did many wonderful things, this is the best thing he's done in his life for everyone.

**BZ:** Yes, you're right. There's no bitterness that comes across.

**Chetana:** Not at all. And the love of the wife who cares for him and the children, and this man is just amazing, just look at this man!

**Nirmala** (Nancy Hanke): It's defied medical science, too, because he's doing things that they didn't think he would be able to do.

**BZ:** Yes, I've read that he recently has been able to move a finger or something like that.

**Chetana:** And that was a heavy karma. We have to admit that. Look what this man did. This tells us how evolved he was. A lot of times people come into the world with something to work through. They're very evolved individuals. A new soul entering the earth could not choose a lifetime. They have to be evolved to a certain point, to be able to come into that life with some kind of difficulty, some kind of challenge. Like your children are very evolved to come back to this life with this challenge.

**BZ:** I strongly believe that about my son. As to my daughter, she's such a hilarious four-year-old, I forget about any underlying wisdom she might possess. With Sam, awareness of the depth of his consciousness is inescapable.

**Chetana:** And there was a movie out called "Mask" with Cher.

**BZ:** I remember seeing it.

**Chetana:** This boy comes in and he has facial distortions. He went in to school for his education and he himself had so much love and taught love by loving all. This was a very evolved soul. To still have love. Lots of folks take very hard parts and work through them, and help so many people around them. So some people say, "Oh, that's their karma," because of the consequences. But also, the consequence is something another human being doesn't always understand. Because it might be a consequence that they want to live through something to help someone else understand something.

**BZ:** Which is a great contribution, a positive contribution.

**Chetana:** Yes. An inspiration.

**BZ:** You in your own life, I've read in the newsletter, have shared memories of your family facing challenges. You wrote about your Aunt Ginger and your Uncle Dave, about them either suffering or experiencing mental illness.

**Chetana:** My mother's sister. She was a paranoid schizophrenic. And my uncle has been in a hospital since he was twenty. He was in a war, and he saw killing or he did kill, I'm not too sure, because I block some of that out. But he's been in a hospital for over fifty years.

**BZ:** Is this your mother's brother?

**Chetana:** Yes. So they didn't have children. They never got married. My grandmother had two other children: one burned up in a fire, and one burned up with a high fever. So those were my other two aunts.

**BZ:** So your mother was the one to have a child... Going back to what you were talking about with your aunt and uncle. That's interesting. So what do you make of the fact that your grandmother had five children, and really only one of them went on to have a life.

**Chetana:** But she didn't. My mother was really, what would you say, clinically depressed. She was very, very depressed. But of course they didn't talk about depression like they do now, when I was growing up. But a lot of times she would come home from work and just stay in bed a lot. And my grandmother was the one who came over from Europe. She's the one who did the cooking; she's the one who did the cleaning; she's the one who would paint the room, at eighty years old. My Aunt would complain about paint smell. In fact she was mother for all of us, as well as my grandmother.

**BZ:** Where had she come from?

**Chetana:** The Ukraine.

**BZ:** Was your maiden name Florida?

**Chetana:** No no. My maiden name was Holland. My mother married someone who was English, Irish, and a little

From what I've heard, most people feel welcomed. The energy here is so loving. So many people have not been caressed by energy fields. And they've been very much caressed by *this* energy field, spiritually caressed.

bit Scottish. And then I'm Ukrainian on my mother's side. And so what happened was I was a Holland, I was a country, then I got married and became a state! (Laughing). And I don't take my current husband's name now, for a couple of reasons. I worked with the numerology and Florida has a higher vibration, especially with Chetana. And the other thing is everyone began to know me as Florida. And my children had Florida as their surname.

**BZ:** You clearly made a choice in writing in *The Beacon* about your aunt, and about her dying, and about your uncle. Tell me why you chose to share that?

**Chetana:** I think that the more I can share about myself without hurting the situation of the person, the better. I feel that if I can tell people about these different situations, they don't put me on a mental pedestal. Like, "she had this kind of life so she can meditate," "she has this kind of life so she can psychically develop." I want them to know that I had so much in my life. And that didn't stop me. Nothing

has to stop you if you put your mind to it, and that's why I do share so much.

A lot of people watch you, especially at the meditations, and they say, "My God, you tell a lot about yourself," and we have this chart for the nervous system that I work with on the board, and I say this is how stress accumulates with you. You get stressed when you are born, you get stressed when your mother carries you in her body, whatever she's thinking goes into your nervous system, and just on and on, so that I have them join in with me. And I say, "How many times did you move?" I moved 21 times in 21 years. So each time I moved that was a great deal of stress on me.

**BZ:** You did? Wow.

**Chetana:** And I say, "How many people went through a divorce?" and they raise their hand, and I say write that down. "How many people were molested?" and they raise their hand and write that down. So by the time you get through with this chart, it's amazing. You say, "My God, look at what I" - not just me, but "I" the individual - "have lived through. You carry this with you every day."

**BZ:** Look at what my nervous system has absorbed. Just the skeletal questions you ask people.

**Chetana:** Right. And if you were sick, or if you had car accidents or anything. And so then they really understand what they're carrying. And I say, this is why a lot of people are depressed or they become anti-social, because they're carrying so much that they cannot handle life anymore as they grow older. But once you start meditating once a day, you stop that accumulation of stress, you start dropping it off. Twice a day, you begin to clean house backwards, removing stresses from the past.

**BZ:** That's a wonderful teaching.

**Chetana:** It makes sense. And this is what Nirmala said; she really enjoyed having, as far as being a psychiatrist, this tool to give to her patients.

**BZ:** Which tool to give to her patients?

**Nirmala** (Nancy Hanke): Meditation.

**BZ:** The tool of meditation?

**Nirmala** (Nancy Hanke): Absolutely. If you are meditating, it's like you're doing therapy on yourself everyday. And not only are you doing that, but also your real therapist is, again, that "inner guru," the Divine within you that is guiding your meditation, guiding your life. So it's very, very powerful.

**Chetana:** And then, of course she works with anything that comes up, that they're questioning.

**BZ:** And actually, deeper things come up, if you're meditating. You're going to be able to surface more during therapy sessions, because you're going more deeply.

**Chetana:** Yes. Absolutely.

**BZ:** I had guessed that you were sharing yourself so as to have people not put you too much on a pedestal. So that they could see what challenges you have faced in your life, so that they could see the ordinariness of your life's difficulties and sadnesses and illnesses. And it struck me as very open. To me that's an indication that your community is very open, because you're being open with who you really are.

**Chetana:** And that's exactly the way to do that. I want people to really feel comfortable. Some people come in, and they've been, for instance, sexually abused, and they're very ashamed, and I say I've been sexually abused. And they say, "You have?!" And they say, "OK, she's working with it," or "It doesn't bother her." So they want that healing. So every possibility - not every possibility, but many of the possibilities of life, I've experienced, and that's what I can share. Because it's so interesting to watch people where I was at, and I felt not worthy, and I felt ashamed sometimes. And after I released or relieved that, I can go back and I see, but I

don't have the emotion anymore. So you don't forget what you've learned, you just don't have an emotional imprint on you to stop you.

**Nirmala** (Nancy Hanke): And the fact that she's so open allows everyone else to be more open, so it goes down from her. And keeps everyone open.

**Chetana:** And I've heard many people tell me this, which I hadn't even thought about this, but they say, "your group," - well number one, it's not my group, but "our group," - "there's not a lot of big egos." And I say, "what are you talking about?" And they say, "Well, many groups that we've gone to, we've felt big egos. Everyone has been trying to be better than someone else is. That's why we enjoy this group. There's no one on a big ego trip here."

**BZ:** In spiritual communities, there's often a certain amount of spiritual clique-ishness.

**Chetana:** Yes. That's what used to happen when I had

## The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Chetana Catherine Florida (continued)

those little classes. So they would “clique” with one another! (All laugh) But they didn’t do it because of ego; it’s just that they start to know each other so much, and share their lives so much that they felt comfortable with each other. Still, that wasn’t good for new people coming in.

**BZ:** And are your children part of the community?

**Chetana:** My daughter-in-law, she is so much part of the community. My son told her, “You need to meditate.” He doesn’t meditate, but she needs to meditate! (All laugh) So she did meditate, and she’s been meditating. And my daughter, in Wisconsin, is now back to meditation. She gave it up for many years. She didn’t want to touch it. Now she says, “Let me have a mantra, Mom.”

**BZ:** Do either of your children ever have a hard time at all having to share you with such a large community of people who also feel mothered by you?

**Chetana:** I try to keep the worlds separate for them, because I know that I have come into this lifetime being a mother, but they have also contracted with me to be open. For the holidays, I don’t like to see anyone not have a place to go, so if you don’t have someplace to go, come over to my house. And so they’re used to things like that with me. For many, I have had an open door policy, for the most part.

**BZ:** Just on the human level, I would think that it takes a lot of capacity, energetic capacity, to mother such a large community of people, to tend to, to nurture, to be kind to, to have time for, to listen to.

**Chetana:** It is. It does take a lot. I don’t think if I had - I don’t think everyone could do this, but I don’t think I could do a lot of things that other people can do. This is something I’ve been good at. Sometimes when you’re good at something, you can overdo it.

**BZ:** Yes, I know that. (All laugh)

**Chetana:** And then you start eroding yourself, your physical self. And a lot of times I did burn the candle at both ends for too long. So now I have the consequence of really watching my health for a while.

**BZ:** Last year you told me you had had some heart problems, or perhaps I read it in *The Beacon*.

**Chetana:** Actually, I was born with it. But it wasn’t found out until 1995. They said, “You had this when you were born.” And I knew I had had scarlet fever. And I had an irregular heartbeat when I was born.

**BZ:** I remember learning when I was young that in my parent’s day, before antibiotics, if you got strep throat, you could get scarlet fever which could cause heart damage.

**Chetana:** Yes, and that’s why when my mother was in California with my father, and my grandmother was taking care of me, and she was scared to death I would die of a fever like her child did. And she called my mother and said, “Come home. She is dying.” And she did come home, and I don’t know what they gave me, but it pulled me through that time, which was in my first year of life. And I’ve ignored that part of my life, like it would go away. So that became part of my karma, not to ignore things about myself, because it becomes a big consequence later on. So if you ignore needing sleep, if you ignore needing this or this, it will always come in later.

One of the important challenges for all of us is not to judge another’s karma, and not to take joy in the suffering of others so if someone’s having a hard time, it is not for you to judge. And I’ve seen too much of that in people, saying, “that’s their karma, so they must deal with it.” But if you were the one that was suffering with the karma, you would need help too. So you have to always look at things with compassion, great compassion.

**BZ:** So you’ve had health challenges that you’ve had to face up to.

**Chetana:** Yes, yes.

**BZ:** And are you *the* teacher in the community?

**Chetana:** Well, there are two views on that. I really try to say that we’re all teachers to one another. We always learn from one another. So when someone shows you something you like about yourself, that is a teacher showing you something. If they show you something you don’t like, they’re your teachers also. Same thing. So I really try to get that statement out there. But I guess if you were to ask someone, they would say I was the main teacher at the Lighthouse.

I like to think of myself as being a guiding light, rather than a teacher. Because I want them to know it’s all within them. So I keep going back and referencing that point. I think all people need some kind of guidance. I’ve heard recently someone talking - perhaps on television - they said, “You don’t need anyone but yourself.” And I’m thinking, that’s true, but it’s only partial truth in my mind, because you need guidance. You need guidance so that you know how to access your inner self. That’s another thing I’ve

really admired about Chitrabhanu, because as he’s been a guiding light to me and to so many others, he’s equal - I think I’ve told you this - he’s equal to the pope of the Catholic church. His position is that in the Jain community. And he has always been a guiding light.

**BZ:** Do your students come to you seeking an experience of shaktipat?

**Chetana:** Yes. Many do. Many already understand Shakti. And Shaktipat. But Shakti is like a catalyst and acts like a catalyst that helps that person through their challenge or their lesson at that time. And some people say that Shakti is to take away your karma, but my understanding and my reference is that it helps the person. So we give hugs at the end of a candlelight, and I just give a Reiki hug or a healing hug. That is for the purpose of everyone sharing the Shakti. And so people get in touch with their own Shakti.

Everything has always been geared to the person understanding just how full of being they are, the fullness of the being, rather than projecting onto someone else, someplace else. That’s been one of my primary thoughts or missions about teaching. So everyone can come into their own fullness, rather than say, “OK, because of you, or because of this or that...” but to understand it’s all from within. You have to keep nurturing it, feeding it, and watering it.

**BZ:** That’s empowering. That seeing, that nourishing.

**Chetana:** And there is in that a kind of empowerment and then they can go out and help others empower themselves. It’s only when you take away a person’s power that you get the lower energies of fear, insecurity, and unsurety. And when a person is working under that kind of energy, they can’t evolve, because they’re too afraid. But if you

get them to feel empowered, they can work through the issue, and then they can help others also. So many of the students, after a while, begin to help others understand where they’re at, from their experience.

**BZ:** To help others understand where the other person is at?

**Chetana:** Right. From their experience.

**Nirmala** (Nancy Hanke): Many people will bring students or friends into the introductory meditation lecture after they’ve been meditating for a while because it helps them so much. They want to share, they want them to see what the meditation will do, so they bring them.

**BZ:** Will you talk about forgiveness?

**Chetana:** Forgiveness is absolutely essential in order to

release any kind of block or condition that keeps you from growing. Someone cannot grow into a loving being, even if there is one thing that they hate, because they have been hurt by this. Some people say, “I love the whole world, but I’m so mad at my brother,” or “my father,” or “my mother.” That person can elevate some, but not where they think they’re elevated to.

So forgiveness is definitely necessary in order to grow. And people say, “Why is it I need to do this?” and they think it’s a rule, and “Why is it I need to do that?” and they



Photo by Ruth Schekter

say, “How can I forgive this person for the rape?”, “How can I forgive my father for molesting me?” I say, first of all, you must take the action and the person, and separate them. Because if the action is very violent, you do not have to be in agreement with the action, but you must be forgiving of that parent, because that parent is in a state of ignorance, spiritual ignorance, when they commit that action.

And from the spiritual unawareness, it is a mental illness that happens. And with that mental illness, you can make a reason and rationale, this person can, why they can do all of this, then this person gets the action and then they suffer, but the true suffering is of the person being molested. What happens is that it can destroy all of their years, all of their life, because they can not forgive, and it affects their marriage, it affects their children. Why, because of not being able to forgive the person, not the action. You can dislike the action, separate from the person. I’m not saying it’s easy, but it has to be done to free you from the past. One thing that can help this process of forgiveness is using Sanskrit mantras. Sanskrit is the language of the soul and has a much higher vibration than the English language. The English language is considered a flat vibration; it doesn’t resonate with anything higher than Earth.

So then this is how I explain forgiveness. You have to realize that person is not spiritually aware, and that person has a mental illness. And so when the healing starts through meditation, you can see that and you can gravitate to that forgiveness more in the heart, not just lip service anymore, but in the heart.

**BZ:** You wrote in the last issue of *The Beacon* about miracles. Can you talk about miracles in everyday life?

**Chetana:** Okay. I think the greatest miracle you can become aware of is how you really create your life, because we feel that life is just tossed on us. But when you realize that everything that you’re doing is really creating your life, that’s the greatest miracle. Now other miracles...

There are also miracles of healing - they happen in two ways: in one, the shakti comes through a person, but the person who receives it must also be ready to receive it to have it happen, so that’s why a lot of times hands-on-healers will say “oh, you’re healed” and at that time there will be such a belief that they would be momentarily healed—a week later they will fall ill again. A true miracle of healing means that there are two parties involved, one has an opening to send the Shakti and one has an opening to receive it, and then miracles happen.

So I like to think of the healing process of the two people being involved. I’m just a healer sending healing energy, otherwise it won’t last. So one time we had a man, everyone loved him, he was a sweet man, and his name was

Rahoul, and I knew that he was not going to make it with the healing in his body, and so I did a preparation article in *The Beacon*. I wrote that we have to understand that any energy you send does not go to waste, the healing energy goes to where it needs to go, either it will bring healing on the mental, emotional, physical or environmental level. Sometimes, we get an attachment to what we want to happen, and it doesn't happen that way, and we think we've failed. But sometimes that healing energy is meant to help that person in their transcendence going on to another life.

And so all the healers who work with us remember that, so that allows us to feel that we haven't failed. In Rahoul's case, it was time for him to transcend. And even one woman said to me that she was glad I wrote that in *The Beacon* "because I was so attached to his living." But he went with all that healing energy, which tells you that in the next lifetime, he'll have the healing energy with him and will not have the cancer.

**BZ:** In terms of people talking about creating their own reality, that's easily misinterpreted, so that if one experiences failures or one faces illnesses or misfortune, one can look at those things and think "I have tried to create my own reality and I've failed." But really students come to you and ask for you to help them to understand the distinctions.

**Chetana:** You're absolutely right. Many of the books that are out there have some good parts to them, but they can confuse people and let people down. So having your own reality, you still have to work with consequences from the past. So when I want to create this reality of going to college and becoming a doctor, I might have had the consequence of having to take care of family, I might have had the consequence of not having good health. We have to understand that in creating that reality one doesn't erase consequence, but the consequence must be included in creating your own reality.

So what happens is that people run into adversity and say, "see I tried, I had my goal out there, and I worked towards it,".... when you do that, you are going to change a whole energy field, but it doesn't mean you can change the path that you've already created, that's created by you, that will come into play with your new desires. So when they understand that, they say, "okay, now I will work it." A much fuller understanding. Some of the books make it sound very easy, which I wish it was. But you must include the past in creating the future.

**BZ:** Changing one's life isn't easy at all.

**Chetana:** No, it's a work of art every day, and some days the artist doesn't feel like painting as much, or some days she's tired.

**BZ:** Do you think most of the people in your community are in it for the long term?

So there is a Jain religion, but most of us accept the philosophical part of it. The philosophical part believes in the concept of *Ahimsa*, which is the belief in nonviolence. So you try all day long not to create any violence through your thoughts, your words, or your actions to any living being. It sounds easy. It sounds really easy in the beginning, but the more you get into it, the more you realize how easily our violent part can come in.

**Chetana:** Yes, I think there are some people who come out of curiosity; some people get "shakti guru" hits, where they feel good because they got a hug from this guru, and they want that high. But that high only can be with you as to where you are at, and then it will go down. And so it comes down to the point that you have to work on yourself, and that's when a lot of people, sometimes, who aren't ready to work on themselves, leave. But again for many reasons, and good consequences for us all, we have gravitated together to really work on ourselves.

**BZ:** Something which strikes me about your community, as I get to observe from a distance the variety of spiritual communities in Ann Arbor, is that your community is so self-created. Essentially, I was struck by an article in one of the issues of *The Beacon*, that you began talking about members of the community getting sick and dying, and that

the community needs to provide for those members, if they don't have a loved one or spouse, and if that person or group of individuals would like to be buried or situated near other people so that they're not alone, that they ought to come and talk to you about that, and I know that one element of many religious communities — Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Muslim — is that a priest or a rabbi or imam will help families during major rites of passage (births, marriages, deaths), and communities will provide for the burials of their own members. So that note in the Lighthouse's newsletter, *The Beacon*, said to me that your community, which began without any of the traditional foundations...that your community has organically grown over the past 24 years so that it is really the spiritual home for all of the people who are members, which means

So some people who aren't likable to other people have so many conditions, they have so many conditions that people cannot see the light within that person. For a person who had been working on themselves all of the time, and everyone loves them, other people are able to sense that light. I don't mean visually be able to see as an aura, just sense it.

including the rites of passage. And you are all, you and your community, are learning as you do it, you're building it yourselves, doing it every step of the way. There are not many sanctuaries you can go to where you can see the symbols of seven different spiritual traditions. The sanctuary sends the message "we welcome you all, we want the wisdom from each of your traditions." I'm struck by the creativity, the originality that you and Nirmala and Prachi and all the others in your community are bringing to bear. It's not as easy when it's self-created.

**Chetana:** Yes, you are right. A lot of people who come here don't really understand how this place comes together, this is like a miracle, because you are right, there is no one who backs us, so everything that we generate has come from the group, and that's because they've found something here that they really like, they really understand, they're really growing with.

**BZ:** Are you afraid of dying?

**Chetana:** No. I'm not. At one time I would have said yes. But, no, because I understand that it's just a letting go of the body. And I understand that whatever I've accomplished is going to go on. So it's letting go and getting into another body.

**BZ:** Are you still attached to living at this point?

**Chetana:** Attached to living at this point? You know, some days I am. And some days I'm not, to be truthful. Some days I think I have to get this, and this, and this, done, or I want to get this in order, or this. And then the next day I think everything is going on without me. So I go back and forth. And I think the students would be very worried about me if they knew I was ready to leave at any moment. But I want to be as truthful as I can, so yes and no. Not the fear, but what I feel I can do in an incarnation, because the more you can get done in an incarnation the next incarnation will be less to do as far as being evolved.

**BZ:** There's less to do in terms of being evolved?

**Chetana:** As long as you're evolving in an upward spiral. If I live until I'm 90, I could have 30 more years that I could evolve and help. That 30 more years would touch many more lives, so when I went into the next lifetime I could then begin at that point. So that's why I would choose to hold onto life.

**BZ:** Are you enjoying your life?

**Chetana:** Now, yes. And there are, of course, days of frustration. But they don't stay. They come. They go, like clouds. Before, I used to live under a cloud. Before I started meditating. I used to have this cloud I felt was following me around. But now I enjoy the simple things in life.

**BZ:** Like what?

**Chetana:** Like just getting together and talking. I especially treasure the times I have with Gurudev. Talking about the possibilities of the Light. I'm delighted when I see the changes that happen as a person grows up spiritually. I love going to the Lighthouse and being with the students. Being a mother was difficult for me, because I was a teenage mother. Now I really enjoy being a grandmother, and being around the Lighthouse children, and all children. I enjoy learning how to celebrate each day as it is. I love to look at the leaves, or hold the leaves, or see the colors change. I like to see the first snowfall. Seasons are such a joy to me, and the wildlife. I love to watch the wildlife from my kitchen window - the birds, the squirrels, the feral cats,

and I make sure they have food. Simple things. Before, when I was growing up, it was shopping, because that was the thing. There's only so much time in the day, and you really begin to look at where you want to place your time. And when you don't have a direction, you can take time and waste time.

**BZ:** When you were a child, you lived in many different places. Looking back on that now, what was the gift of that?

**Chetana:** The gift of that was that I was always the new kid on the block, so I had to learn how to get along with people, in every area I was in. Because Detroit was a melting pot...I lived in a Hispanic neighborhood, I lived in an Afro-American neighborhood. I lived in a Polish neighborhood. I lived in a Southern neighborhood. And I

had to learn how to fit in. So that was a blessing. When I came out here, I didn't have the variety, and that was strange for a while, but when different people started being attracted to this community, I was able to be open with a very full heart and people watched that, and I saw them watching that, because

maybe they'd just been in white communities, and so they didn't have the exposure. So that was the big blessing, exposure to people. And seeing that people basically had the same drives in life, the same fears and insecurities. No matter how rich or how poor they were. Because at one point I had gone to four different high schools...I lived in St. Claire Shores during a recession time, and my mother and her husband lost their house and we had to move back to the east side of Detroit, which was like New York's blackboard jungle, and boy, that was really a change. But I learned to adjust...

**BZ:** That was a fall...

**Chetana:** That was.

**BZ:** At a time when a teenage girl might be very status conscious...

**Chetana:** And that is where I met my first husband... I had been to so many schools, and my thinking at that time was not contracted. Through the years, I have come to understand the strangeness of my husband's contracted thinking. He was contracted with his family, with his religious background, what you should or shouldn't do, or what you could or couldn't do. When he became an MP and then went into police work, it blew all of his cognitive structures that were ever built up in his mind, and that's what threw him over the edge.

**BZ:** Why did it blow all of his cognitive structures?

**Chetana:** Because he had to work with prostitution, and dope...

**BZ:** He had to deal with a variety of things...

**Chetana:** All of a sudden, he did something that was not exactly right, and he couldn't handle it. Most people would have gone into counseling and handled it. He couldn't, because it broke that cognitive structure of perfectionism. So it was sad.

**BZ:** What was the gift of being left in your 20's with your husband committing suicide and your having to raise two kids?

**Chetana:** The gift was that it opened up all the doors that I had closed. The doors I closed down to be the good wife. To be the wife who would take care of the family, take care of him, and wait for him to say what he wanted. It was a new situation. All the barriers. All the doors. All the walls are down. *Now, what do you want to do?*

**BZ:** Is your current husband part of this community?

**Chetana:** He does some maintenance and helps out, and is on the periphery of the community.

**BZ:** What's the good and bad of that? Here you are, deeply involved in this spiritual community, and your husband is mostly uninvolved, though he helps in some ways.

**Chetana:** He doesn't meditate or attend classes, but he knows many of the people in the community. He is very used to people coming in and out of our house. He'll help if people need help, sometimes he'll chauffeur the kids in the community, or fix things, and this is how he'll help the community.

**BZ:** How many years have you been married?

**Chetana:** Since 1981. My first mother-in-law has said how much he has changed by being around me. Sometimes you don't see the changes when you're around someone daily, unless they share with you. He's allowing that yin energy, that softer energy, to come out, because he came in from a very gruff yang energy, the macho man energy.

**BZ:** I'm married to a very gentle woman who has a very

even attitude about people. We've been together for almost 17 years, and I might not have said this even three or four years ago, but I think it's slowly rubbing off on me. I'm a New Yorker, argumentative.

**Chetana:** Well, I know you've changed, because I usually know you New Yorkers just like that! Some people ask me, why are New Yorkers different? And I say, you have to live with all these other New Yorkers, and in order to be heard, they have to be loud.

**BZ:** You recently came back from India? How was this most recent trip?

**Chetana:** It was wonderful. I was taking it a bit more easily. I went to a Vegetarian Conference there, and I was awarded an International Award for Non-Violence and Vegetarianism.

**BZ:** By a Jain organization?

**Chetana:** By a vegetarian organization. It was very hot in the place where we were, 105°, and I stayed in the hotel. The people from our community, who had never been to India, they went and looked around. I had been there before, so I went to the conference and avoided the heat.

**BZ:** A number of people from the community went with you?

**Chetana:** Twelve.

**BZ:** Do you and members of your community go to India fairly often?

**Chetana:** I've been there six times. For some people, once is enough. It's such a shock to the nervous system. Other people like it, so they have returned two, three or four times.

**BZ:** What city or towns do you go to?

**Chetana:** In the past, and this time, we've been to New Delhi, and Bombay, Agra, Udaipur, Mt. Abu, Ranakpur and Palitana where that big mountain is, called Mount Shatrunjaya. You climb to the top and there are 800 temples on the top, one of the most beautiful visions I have ever seen. The monks and the nuns will try to make 100 trips up during a lifetime, because it represents different stages of enlightenment.

**BZ:** Where does Chitrabhanu live?

**Chetana:** Bombay for six months of the year, and New York City for the other six. He also goes off into another little place where he stays for a while and rests. He is in his 80's, but he's very much of a role model for energy and going places.

**BZ:** I notice that many of the people have been given spiritual names. Tell me about that.

**Chetana:** Everyone has two names, one name is for the spiritual part of yourself, for your divine self, for the part of yourself which represents the soul, and the other name is your given name on Earth. If we get into the right situation, if the right consequence is there, we will meet someone who will identify that soul's name for us. So Chitrabhanu identifies the soul's name and gives it to us, and that name allows us to work on what we need to work on, as well as helping us achieve that. Like Nirmala means "pure, without pollution" and so she works on the levels of purification and releasing anything which is not pure in her. And Chetana means "pure awareness or pure consciousness". So anything that stands in the way of my vision is being worked through and let go. So every name has meaning.

**BZ:** After someone is in the community, they will also be given a soul name?

**Chetana:** Sometimes gurus will come over to the U.S. and hand out names like candy. The candy is very sweet. You enjoy it. Then the candy goes away and the sweetness goes away. So when Chitrabhanu gives a name, he wants people to understand what it's for, what you're striving for, and the experience of meditation, and where you're going. So it's a commitment.

**BZ:** Thank you very much for doing this interview! I had heard your name for many years, and so I am very pleased to have finally met you. You exude warmth and kindness.

**Chetana:** And I was interested in meeting you. I had heard a lot about you over the years. I see how you put your ideas out there, by developing this newspaper. You're really building a beautiful community around you, at Crazy Wisdom, and getting people interested in one another. You're bridging so much.

**BZ:** We do try, to be eclectic. We try to be appealing to the alternative spiritual communities, and not to favor one, but to serve them all. That has been our mission. It's very important for us at the store to remember that everyone who is coming in to Crazy Wisdom has a soul's purpose for coming in, whether he or she knows it or not. That was what was originally presented to me as the store's purpose, as an energy spot in the region, and we try to maintain that. I fail, and so do we all fail, but we keep trying.

**Chetana:** It's part of being human. We learn where we fail. If I learn where I fail, if you learn, we have been successful.

###

## Gurudev Chitrabhanu is the guiding force for ten million Jains in India and around the world. In this interview, he explains who Jains are, and what they believe in.

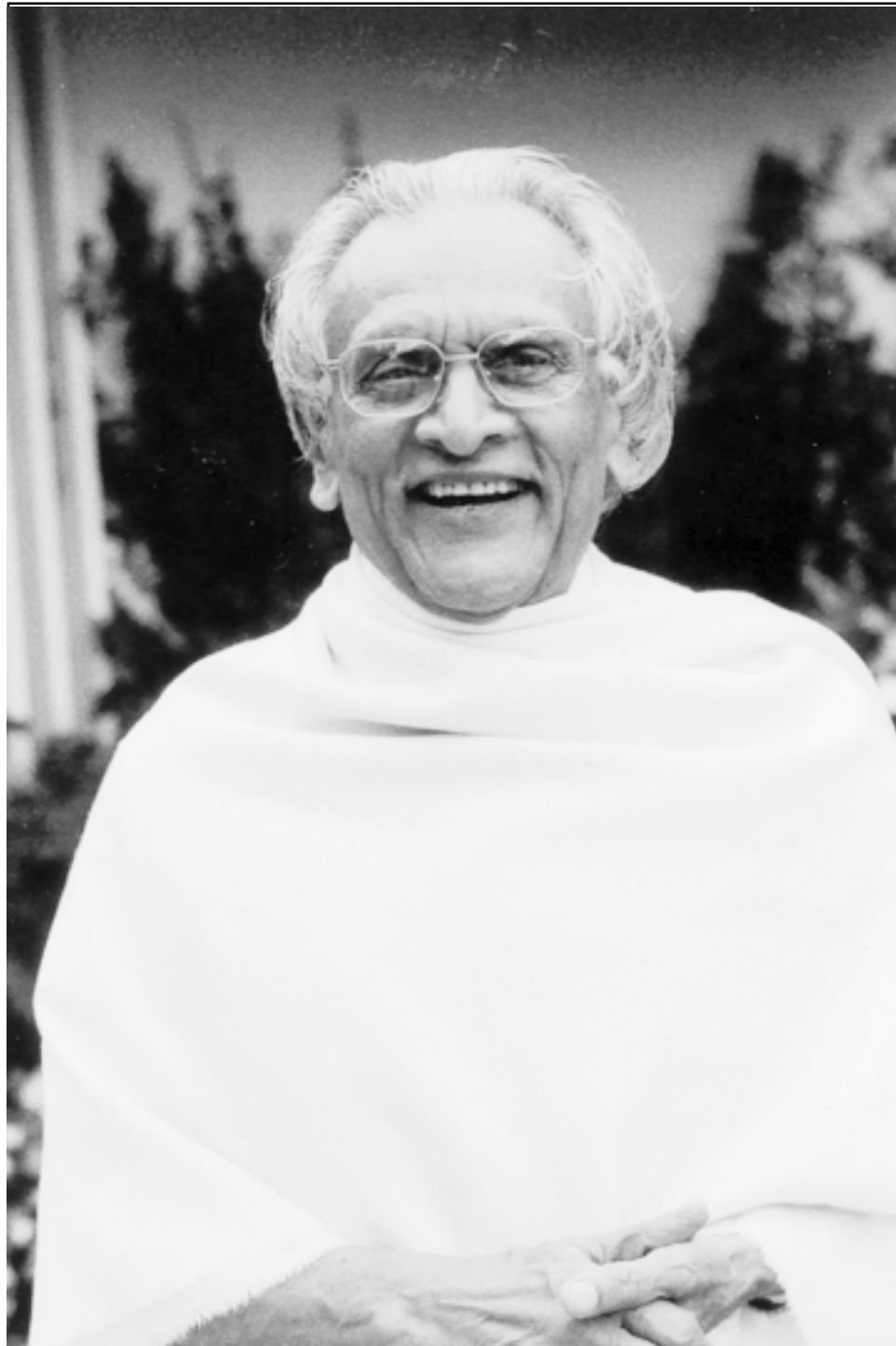


Photo by Linda Lawson  
arranged this interview with Chitrabhanu, because she felt that our readers might find it interesting to learn about the Jain philosophy, which had deeply influenced her own spiritual beliefs. I met with Chitrabhanu at the home of a Jain family from India living in suburban Detroit, in the spring of 2002. He is a handsome, white-haired man of about 80 years of age. His command of English is excellent. He was wearing white Indian robes, and he was cordial and engaged.

**Bill Zirinsky:** Would you please explain the Jain Spiritual Path?

**Chitrabhanuji:** First of all, one has to know what is Jain Dharma. In the Eastern tradition, Dharma is the meaningful word for religion. Dharma means nature. Dharma means duty. And the third meaning of Dharma is that which holds you when you are about to fall down. When somebody is about to fall, at that time if he practices, his Dharma holds him. So Jain Dharma in a nutshell is Ahimsa - Reverence for Life.

Albert Schweitzer coined these three words: 'Reverence for Life' - in communication with Gandhi and Jains. He found these words in tradition and practice. In English, you can use religion. Respect the

### The Interview with Gurudev Chitrabhanu

Interviewed by Bill Zirinsky

Like the Dalai Lama, but less well known, the great Jain sage Gurudev Chitrabhanu is one of Asia's "roving spiritual ambassadors". He is dedicated to the principles of non-violence towards all living beings, non-attachment, and the relativity of thinking. He divides his time between his home in India, and being in the United States. The Jains have been in the United States for only three decades, and Chitrabhanu has been instrumental in bringing the Jain philosophy to the West.

According to the author Michael Tobias, Chitrabhanu "walked all over India as a Jain monk, but later renounced monkhood." He married and fathered two sons. According to Tobias, Chitrabhanu "is the living, breathing culmination of thousands of years of Jain tradition... People everywhere are amazed by the Jains. And with stunning reason. Because throughout all of this daily agitation and with hope eternal, which is the human world, the Jain approach to problem solving and to kindness is there, an open book for all to read. In the application of ethics, at the center of the contemporary Jain renaissance is Gurudev Chitrabhanu, traveling the world to meet with people and help them arrive at choices which exert the most good."

Chetana Catherine Florida of the Lighthouse Center

life. Life is very sacred. This sacredness, first you have to see in yourself. You have to respect yourself. And once you get the glimpse of your sacredness through practice, through meditation, through reading, through being in company of teachers or in the company of the good, you feel clean, you feel pure. You feel sure, you feel healing. That is the first step to enlightenment. In that moment, you are very alive. You breathe the divine. You are convinced that life is uncreated, non-created. It was; it is; and it will be.

Jain Dharma helps you to experience your real nature of indestructibility; this is something that is indestructible. This truth will dawn upon you. It unfolds gently, peacefully. Until then you go on practicing, meditating, cleansing. All these things are for the climax, the moment of self-realization. Once we have this clarity and conviction, from that moment on our thinking, our speech, our actions, our motives, all change. Then we don't think in a negative way or putting down other people or criticizing. We don't use the bad words because the insight will not allow us to select the wrong things; it enlightens us to see the right things. We will not do something wrong which will hurt others; we will not be tattling on others because we realize that in order to be angry at somebody, I have to be imbalanced in myself.

Unless I become imbalanced, I cannot raise my voice, I cannot go to that emotion which changes my face, my words, my expression. So I will not be angry at somebody's mistake and I won't think this person committed sin. Why should I make another mistake in order to





Photo by Linda Lawson

(From left to right) Nirmala Nancy Hanke, Chetana Catherine Florida, Gurudev Chitraghanu and Chitraghanu's wife, Pramodaji Chitrabhanu

correct the first mistake? We will refrain from criticism, and ultimately we will change that emotion into compassion, and be calm and loving, and tell the same thing in a different tone and different language. "What benefit did you get out of it? Think about it! Who will benefit from it?" Our approach will help another person to think that what he had done was right or wrong. In this way, the first whole thing starts with reverence for life. Then that gradually permeates in our heart or in our activities. But it is a gradual process. To transform his or her total behavior is not anything which is done overnight.

What peaceful change makes the person aware?

*Dharma*. *Dharma* holds you back when you are about to fall. You are about to speak something violently; you are about to act callously. *Dharma* will alert us. We will act in awareness. We act, but our action is in the light of awareness; reaction is in emotion. React. Interact. So action is not permanent. Action is the beautiful expression of the spirit. It comes from awareness. If mankind or the nation or society becomes aware of the sense of being, then the person or society or nation will be on a different dimension of expression. And that is missing now.

**Bill Zirinsky:** The Jain tradition, as it fits in, is it completely separate from Hinduism and Buddhism, or is it an offshoot?

**Chitrabhanuji:** Jain *Dharma* is unique in itself. There is no comparison. The teacher teaches that every thing is unique. We don't compare even two snowflakes with each other. The well-known scholar Dr. Radhakrishnan wrote many books. One of the books very much accepted in the universities is *The Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, written by Dr. Radhakrishnan and Dr. Moore. In this book, in the chapter on Jainism, is written that Jainism is the oldest because the names of the Jain teachers Rishabha, Arishtnemi, and Bharat are in the Riga Veda. The scholars are showing that Vedas are 4,000 B. C. Mahaveer was 599 BC.

*Aparigraha* means non-holding.  
*Parigraha* means holding, so  
*aparigraha* is the Jain practice.

**Bill Zirinsky:** So the Jain tradition goes back 6,000 years?

**Chitrabhanuji:** Yes, you are right; it is more than 6,000 years ago. Hinduism was represented by Dr. Radhakrishnan in the world. He himself wrote that Jainism is the oldest before Hinduism because the names of Rishabha and Arishtnemi are in the Riga Veda. This book you can get from Princeton University, which has printed this book.

**BZ:** How many Jains are there in India today?

**Chitrabhanuji:** There are two or three opinions. When the census comes about counting, they ask, "What is your religion?" They don't specify the Jains because in order to stay in the society, they identify themselves as Hindu. So Jains identify as Hindu. But when it comes to religious practice, they say they are Jain. In that sense, there are ten million. The last time they took the census, it was ten million. But when they all inquire, then they say there are twenty million.

**BZ:** Why don't Jain monks come to the West?

**Chitrabhanuji:** Jain monks are very, very pure. They don't

**BZ:** How many Jains are there in India today?

**Chitrabhanu:** There are two or three opinions. When the census comes about counting, they ask, "What is your religion?" They don't specify the Jains because in order to stay in the society, they identify themselves as Hindu. So Jains identify as Hindu. But when it comes to religious practice, they say they are Jain. In that sense, there are ten million. The last time they took the census, it was ten million. But when they all inquire, then they say there are twenty million.

touch money; they don't have any possessions. They walk on foot. They don't harness or harass any animal for conveyance. They stay in the monastery. They do not cross the ocean.

**BZ:** Are Jains in India in one geographical area or all over the country?

**Chitrabhanuji:** There are three pockets: One is Gujarat, another is Rajasthan, and the third is Maharashtra, or a little bit south. There is where you will see concentrated Jains. Then in Bengal, in Punjab, there you will find somewhere about five thousand families, somewhere twenty thousand families. But these are the three main pockets.

**BZ:** There's a community of Jains in Detroit and Ann Arbor. There must be Jains in other pockets around the world today.

**Chitrabhanuji:** Yes, you will meet Jains everywhere. They are adventurous. Some of them are the people who originally were farmers. And then, after that, when the farming became the center of exportation - how to engage the cheap labor - then Jains shifted and became traders, and traders selected big cities. So from villages, gradually they came to Bombay and other cities, and then from there they started to go to South Africa and East Africa. Mombasa, Nairobi. And then they started going to England. From England, the educated class came to America. A few came to Germany, and a few families went to Paris, to Switzerland, to Singapore.

**BZ:** Were they a successful trading class?

**Chitrabhanuji:** Yes, they are successful people. Why? Because of *Ahimsa* and being free from vices.

**BZ:** Hard working and no alcohol?

**Chitrabhanuji:** Yes, no alcohol, no gambling, no womanizing, no promiscuity. And on top of all is the practice of reverence for life. They implement *Ahimsa* in everyday life and even in business. If they want to buy a sofa, it must not be of leather. They would not buy a mink coat. So in this way, the craze for the shopping became less. And it is very interesting to know that the teaching of Mahaveer says that if you want to practice reverence for life, you have to have two things: One is a mental commitment to *Ahimsa*: you don't want to kill anything. And the second thing is to minimize violence because in certain ways there is violence involved even if you eat food. The food also has a life. You can't live without some violence, but you can minimize it. So the whole essence is minimize. Don't do unnecessary things, and try, try your best to minimize. And to minimize you need two things: One is a certain living style. You don't go holding money. If you have money, use it to help the needy, to do good things. It can be a good investment. So instead of putting money in stocks or bonds, mostly you will see the Jains have a good home. And many people say to me, "These Jains have beautiful houses! You are not using all your money for the stocks and other things." They put money on the house so they will have comfort. And at the same time, those who are building, the laborers get money. So the money is disseminated. And they make it their bread and butter, and you get a comfortable place. And in that way, you get a family society, the way you have a good home, a good lifestyle. In this way, the word Mahaveer uses is *aparigraha*. *Aparigraha* means non-holding. *Parigraha* means holding, so *aparigraha* is the Jain practice.

**BZ:** It sounds like the Buddhist concept of non-attachment.

**Chitrabhanuji:** Yes, in reality there are two opinions about this also. When Buddha, Siddhartha, saw an old businessman's funeral, he was shocked. Is this going to happen to me? It made him think about the meaningless of life. One day they were going out and Siddhartha saw an old man with disease and another time he glanced at some people carrying a dead body. He asked his servant, and he said that one person was sick and another old man died. He added that it happens to everybody, no exception. Siddhartha again was shocked, because he had not had

even a glimpse of this reality. To know the truth and to bring an end to the cycle of birth and death, he left his place and went to Maghad. There Mahaveer was teaching the path of liberation. Siddhartha practiced it for seven years. But austerity and moral strict behavior was too much for the gentle soul. He left it and founded a Middle Path in Buddhism. So you see that Jains and Buddhists are closely connected.

**BZ:** You are the worldwide leader of the Jains. How did your life path take you there?

**Chitrabhanuji:** This teaching, I lived for 28 years. I studied all the scriptures. I saw two things: One, that this teaching is as limited as is the lamp which is burning, but it is in a small place. And second, because of the chimney, which is not transparent, the light does not shine out. So this tradition is very good, but now the light of *ahimsa* is going out. Particularly so, when I read that some people were making fun of the Jain teaching of *Ahimsa*, and particularly Dr. Zimmer who wrote a very elaborate book on Indian philosophy.

**BZ:** Are you from a Hindu or Jain family?

**Chitrabhanuji:** Jain family.

**BZ:** Prominent? Monks with many years of spiritual teaching?

**Chitrabhanuji:** The Jain family doesn't have that kind of tradition. Anybody who is inspired can become a monk; it is not that some families have a tradition of following one after another. That is not it. Jain is anybody who is inspired and says I want to renounce and become a monk or to want to practice *Ahimsa*. A monk's life is very

The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Gurudev Chitrabhanu (continued)

disciplined: the person cannot go out; he cannot keep money; he has to go on walking, he cannot stay in one place longer than five days in a town or two days in a small village. Staying put for four months during monsoons and walking barefooted the remaining eight months. A very disciplined life!

**BZ:** Your first 28 years, you spent some time exploring various schools of philosophy and religion.

**Chitrabhanuji:** Yes, I studied many schools of thought, because I wanted to know the truth. I had to know all these things to determine the essence of teaching. I even left home because I lost my mother when I was four, lost my sister when I was 12, and I lost my friend who was studying in college with me when I was 19. Seeing these departures, I thought, "Where do people go? I have to know what is this. How can I know?" This led me to a journey to experience transformation. I met many spiritual seekers and teachers.

Ultimately, I found a master and his advanced disciple, Acharya Anand Sagarji and Acharya Chandra Sagarji, who directed me to myself, teaching: 'Dive deep and keep vigil. Be silent and experience peace. Watch movements of your breath and observe the dweller living inside. Study original scriptures and feel the aliveness of your existence. Meditate and get in touch with light in every cell of your body. This will harmonize all your Senses, Mind and Spirit in the Unity of Trinity.'

What Acharya Anand Sagar Suriji spoke, touched me deeply. I practiced it with reverence and commitment. Through teaching I perceived many insights. Of these, one or two sparks are in every religion. I saw the movement of life in the cycle of birth and death. I saw the procession of the past passing in front of the third eye, and innumerable souls touched the invisible in me. It was the moment of ecstasy. It was celebration. In the burst of joy all my sorrow evaporated. It was culmination of enfoldment.

**BZ:** What inspired you to come to the West, leaving such an honorable position?

**Chitrabhanuji:** First of all, I had a vision: I have unfinished

**BZ:** You are the worldwide leader of the Jains. How did your path take you there?

**Chitrabhanu:** This teaching, I lived for 28 years. I studied all the scriptures. I saw two things: One, that this teaching is as limited as is the lamp which is burning, but it is in a small place. And second, because of the chimney, which is not transparent, the light does not shine out. So this tradition is very good, but now the light of *ahimsa* is going out.

connections with many, many souls. Without fulfilling these relations, I cannot be liberated. Second: I felt the West needs *Ahimsa*. Without this they would create their own self-destruction. Most of them have perfection of Means, but they have confusion about what their Goals should be. Third: In the West some prominent scholars such as Dr. Zimmer have given very distorted and wrong information to readers about Jainism. Even many of them are not clear about Jain Dharma and Buddhism.

Besides this, from childhood I dreamt of studying at Harvard University. In 1970, to my joy I got an invitation from the Temple of Understanding to represent Jainism in the Second Spiritual Summit Conference in Geneva. It was an answer to my long cherished vision. I accepted it with enthusiasm. Geneva Conference was a success. The message of *Ahimsa*, *Anekantavad* and *Aparigraha* was received with standing ovation. The Dean of Harvard welcomed it with appreciation.

**Chetana** (Catherine Florida): But the irony about it is that we didn't know even to look for Jainism. We knew about Hinduism, Buddhism, but there was no information about Jainism. Now we are blessed. You brought the message of Jain *Dharma - Ahimsa*.

**BZ:** Did a teacher tell you to bring Jainism to the West or you decided to do it?

**Chitrabhanuji:** Nobody told me, it was just an inspiration from the compassionate heart. Jains don't believe in conversion. If one is convinced that the principle of *Ahimsa* and the sacredness for life are good, then one starts practicing them in daily life. It is simply, 'Walk your talk.' *Ahimsa* means you

don't hurt anybody; so nobody hurts you. Why are Jains exempted from drafting in war in U.S.A. since 1971? Simply because we have brought about awareness that the Jains are incapable of killing human beings because they cannot even kill a chicken or a goat. To kill a human being, one has to be immune to killing. Jains serve the wounded, moved by compassion. They serve the sick and the injured back to health.

Mahaveer says, 'Killing is killing irrespective of cast, country or religion.' The concept of war killing is the result of ego and greed, camouflaged in blind beliefs and fanatic religious backgrounds.

It was an inspiration to bring the blessings of *Ahimsa* to this great nation. The service of *Ahimsa* commenced on the floor of Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of October 1971, thanks to the Third Spiritual Summit Conference that invited me to speak on *Ahimsa* and *Anekantvad*. Since then millions of people have become aware of and are practicing *Ahimsa* and making their lives a blessing to themselves, to Mother Earth, to the Animal Kingdom.

Now there are 61 Jain Centers in America and Canada. In every major city there are centers and societies under JAINA – the umbrella organization of Jain Associations in North America. The mother of all these centers is Jain Meditation International Center in New York City. People from all walks of life come to meditate and lead a compassionate life. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Parsis, Catholics, Protestants – all lead a life which is a blessing to themselves and to Mother Earth. No religion – only follow *Dharma*, the Nature of the Self.

One of Chetana's friends, Mitra, used to come to the Meditation Center. He died in *Samadhi*, celebrated departure. Before he died, he called his friend Chetana and me. Mitra said, "My time has come. I have been ill for two years and I feel that now I don't have much time to write. But I am very happy. All the illnesses have been to cleanse myself, and I have no regret. The illness made me humble, think and accept it all. I have washed out all karmas, by being in *Ahimsa* and peaceful meditation. I have celebrated my journey." But the way he spoke, it was very touching. He continued, "I am at peace, and I want to say thanks to you and goodbye. I am reciting silently the mantra you gave, *Namo Arihantam, Namu Siddhanam*."

After 45 minutes, his caretaker friends called to tell me that Mitra left the world with pleasant peace. This connection brought Chetana to the teaching of reverence of life, and I went on coming to her study group to teach. It gradually started from a drop and has become an ocean.

From the beginning, dear Chetana, you were a seeker and you had a quest. That quest helped you to come to me, and that evolved from inside. There are many people who have a quest, but the steadiness to stay with the teaching and prioritize it in one's life is the main thing. You held on to the truth, so gradually this Center has become a Lighthouse. This Center is open for all without any kind of biases or restrictions. It is open to anybody who comes and practices *Ahimsa* and respect for life.

You will be interested to know that when the Twin

Anybody who is inspired can become a monk; it is not that some families have a tradition of following one after another. That is not it. Jain is anybody who is inspired and says I want to renounce and become a monk or to want to practice *Ahimsa*. A monk's life is very disciplined: the person cannot go out; he cannot keep money; he has to go on walking, he cannot stay in one place longer than five days in a town or two days in a small village. Staying put for four months during monsoons and walking barefooted the remaining eight months. A very disciplined life!

Towers at the World Trade Center were blown up, it was shocking to see thousands of people streaming out of billowing clouds. Also, 240 were blown up in the Pentagon building. And the Pentagon was the world protector! When we see such a thing, we wonder what is the human security against violence? Against what man can create? Because man's power is so limited, man is not able to see beyond. The violence and destruction touched me, so we

arranged and organized a very large gathering to discuss in detail how to understand what happened, and then held a prayer meeting.

This Lighthouse Center is a spiritual center, which has brought many people together. Nirmala, Prachi, Adinath, Dr. Ajit, Jyoti, Namratah, and many other people who are

Photograph by Terry Abrams, ©2000



contributing time, effort and much energy without any selfish motive. They just give, give, and give. This is the best investment to become educated, become aware of others' pain, become aware of children's life, by this process. Gradually we change.

The children are like blossoming flowers. They love nature. They love animals. Yet the same beautiful flower can, without compassion, become violent and hateful. In this center, the children are coming for initiation. I see how kind and loving they are to animals and to their school-mates. They are beautiful flowers. It is very touching. Nirmala's daughter is so beautiful; she is like a blossoming flower. Yesterday, Adinath came with his loving children, and then Nirali came with her three children. Three daughters. So beautiful! These are the children who will be a blessing for this world. We need people who have this inside beauty.

**BZ:** After you came to the U.S., did the Jain monks back in India start to accept what you were doing?

**Chitrabhanuji:** Many, many, even sadhus, appreciate the revolution. Many of them appreciate the way the teaching did marvelous things to bring together 80,000 Jains and non-Jains here in America, 30,000 in Africa. Fifty to 60,000

in London, and in Germany, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore, Malaysia, and in various countries. This teaching of Mahaveer and *Ahimsa* are now everywhere in the world.

**BZ:** So they appreciate you for that?

**Chitrabhanuji:** Yes. They respect and they say, "You did it and it is fine, but we can't go." Moreover, they have a language barrier and to practice pure *Ahimsa* here, as a muni, is difficult.

**Chetana** (Catherine Florida): I think the really marvelous happening is to realize that we have only had Jainism in the United States for 31 years. People are looking for more peaceful ways on how to love and let live, and we were not getting it through our traditions. I keep telling you, Gurudev, I feel so fortunate to have all of this teaching from you. Also, I feel very fortunate to see and be part of the history that's being made right now in the United States with the Jain communities. The temples in India are, of course, very, very old and very beautiful. Now the Jains are coming here, and they're making a statement with Ahimsa, and Reverence for all Life, and also with building beautiful temples. And then, Gurudev, you come and inspire all of us and everything changes to a higher plane of awareness.

**BZ:** It seems like your community has blossomed over the years; it's more and more of a dynamic community?

**Chetana** (Catherine Florida): Yes, through the foundation of

*Ahimsa* refers not only to refraining from visible acts of violence, but also from thoughts of hurting any living being and from speech intended to harm or upset others.

meditation, and since I met Gurudev, we have been blessed with the Jain teachings.

**Chitrabhanuji:** But it is, for what is happening in the Lighthouse Center, very ecumenical and open; it is open to goodness. People from all walks of life can come in without any inhibition, with any particular limitation or dogma. And everybody is the same at the Center – equally. I see black people, white people, all people; everybody comes. And it should be that way. There should not be any separation.

**BZ:** What is the expression *Anekantavada*?

**Chitrabhanuji:** Not in one direction. *Anekant* means many directions. It also means not one angle, but many angles. It means that reality is multifaceted and its perception changes depending on the time, place, nature and state of the viewer. What is true from one point of view can be open to question from another. Such an

approach encourages Jains to think in the most critical ways possible, to seek truth from different perspectives and to truly respect all religions.

The philosophy is multi-dimensional. It is not only one way; it has many ways. Mahaveer says that to be a practitioner of non-violence, *Ahimsa*, you have to have *Anekantavada*. *Anekantavada* is complimentary to *Ahimsa*, and *Aparigraha* is also complimentary to *Ahimsa*. When you don't accumulate too much, then you are balanced; you don't harass

others; you don't invade other countries. You are satisfied with what you are, and you do not go on accumulating. *Aparigraha* means no grabbing, money or wealth.

The teaching of Jainism is called *Ahimsa* and the Law of Karma. *Ahimsa* refers not only to refraining from visible acts of violence, but also from thoughts of hurting any living being and from speech intended to harm or upset others. Law of Karma means whatever you are, not because of somebody's grace, somebody's

punishment but because of what you have sown, then you are reaping. No one comes in between to intervene or interfere; it is you who have a choice. You can make it or mar it. Everything you do has ultimately a consequence. Everything has a consequence. If you know the consequence, you do what is helpful and not harmful. You have a choice, and having the choice, you make the choice. And then you become the consequence of the choice. These are the basic four principles of Jain teaching: *anekantavada*, *aparigraha*, *ahimsa*, law of *karma*.

**Chetana** (Catherine Florida): What I really appreciate about this teaching is that it takes away the fear aspect that is an underlying concept in many churches. In Western thinking it's like, "Oh my God, if I do something bad, God's going to be mad at me and will punish me." However, when you have the realization from the East that what you do has consequences, then you begin to take responsibility for your actions. You do not think about being punished by God, instead you experience the consequences of your actions – good or bad. Jainism doesn't teach that we are sinners, just that we all experience karma – the consequences of our actions. Action and response, action and reaction, action and interaction. We don't make God responsible for us; we're responsible for ourselves, for our own actions. What we sow, that we reap.

Too many times, we have seen many that have lived a good life, and then they become sick, and we ask, "Why did God give them cancer?" Whereas another person may have shot someone or sold drugs, and nothing bad seems to happen to this person. So some think, where is the justice in God's decision making? Gaining the understanding that God did NOT give a good person cancer or let a violent person go free, but that we all experience the consequences of our actions, sooner or later, helps us to be responsible for ourselves. Instead of blaming God, we learn to admit to, and learn from, our mistakes, and ask for forgiveness of others and ourselves.

At the Lighthouse Center, we also say to keep your own religion, keep what you want to believe. Meditation will support all healthy beliefs, so if you are Catholic, it will make you a better Catholic, if you are a Jew, it will make you a better Jew. At the Center, all people from all religions, races and creeds can come together to learn, through the foundation of meditation. We do embrace the Jain philosophy of Ahimsa (non-violence), vegetarianism, reverence for all life, and relativity of thinking, and anyone coming to the Center is free to accept these beliefs or not. The mixture of people is rewarding for everyone. The Lighthouse Center is called a center for spiritual development, no matter what your religious belief is.

**BZ:** There seems to be an eclecticism to what you're doing, and what things are going on, classes on Psychology, Philosophy, Seven Centers Awakening, Psychology of Enlightenment, etc.

**Chitrabhanuji:** Yes, because people need support from many angles. And that is why yesterday I used one word: triangle. Triangle means, "Try all angles!" The philosophy of triangle! When you have a triangle in your life, you don't use only one angle; you try various angles!

**Chetana** (Catherine Florida): By experiencing the truth within yourself, you might begin with one truth, and as you peel back the layers of self, you discover your true self, who you really are.

###

**Books by  
GURUDEV CHITRABHANU**

**Now Available Through  
Crazy Wisdom Bookstore**

Realize What You Are: The Dynamics of Jain Meditation - Edited by Leonard M. Marks \$10.00

The Psychology of Enlightenment: Meditations on the Seven Energy Centers - Edited by Lyssa Miller \$10.00

Twelve Facets of Reality: The Jain Path to Freedom - Edited by Clare Rosenfield \$10.00

The Philosophy of Soul and Matter Edited by Clare Rosenfield \$5.00

Ten Days Journey Into The Self Edited by Elizabeth Cattell \$4.00

The Miracle Is You Edited by Richard Kleifgen \$2.00