

A transcript from the series Thinking Allowed, Conversations On the Leading Edge of Knowledge and Discovery, with Dr. Jeffrey Mishlove.
SPIRITUAL TRAINING with IRINA TWEEDIE

JEFFREY MISHLOVE, Ph.D.: Hello and welcome. With me today is Mrs. Irina Tweedie, the author of a marvelous book called Daughter of Fire, which is a diary of five intensive years of spiritual training in India with a Sufi master. Welcome, Mrs. Tweedie.

IRINA TWEEDIE: Thank you.

MISHLOVE: It's a pleasure to have you here. You know, in your book one gets the sense that perhaps thirty years or so ago, at the age of fifty, you would have had a hard time imagining what you've gone through and where you are today. You've really gone through a very profound type of transformation in this spiritual training.

TWEEDIE: The problem with the spiritual path is you know how you begin, but you never know how you end. It is like putting your foot in a wasp's nest. All sorts of things can happen to you, usually quite unexpected, and really one doesn't know where one will be finishing.

MISHLOVE: One of the things that you mention, in the very beginning of your training you made a reference to what the Sufis call the glance -- the look of your guru that affected you so profoundly, and in a way was unexpected, something you weren't anticipating. And at that moment, I suppose, you realized you were on the path, you were with that teacher.

TWEEDIE: According to the Sufi tradition, the moment the teacher looks at you for the first time, you are born again. That is the very important moment; this is the second birth, so the Sufis say. So really I am not very old as yet -- not eighty, but very, very much less. I was born in '61, on the second of October, when my teacher looked at me.

MISHLOVE: And one of the very first things that he told you, as part of your training, was to keep this diary, day by day, of the experience. And it's a marvelous document. It's quite a large book, and one of the things that you mention in the Introduction is that the lessons keep getting repeated, again and again, with different nuances, in different ways, until you finally arrive at an understanding, ultimately, of the process of letting go of your little self, to awaken to a larger sense of things.

TWEEDIE: This is quite right. You see, it is exactly like in school. The lessons are repeated and repeated again, so that the student should learn. And also each lesson triggers off a slightly different psychological reaction. A lot of repetition is needed. Also I would say spiritual life, any spiritual path, is exactly like a programming of the computer. Our mind, our brain, can be compared to a computer. It can be programmed to a certain path. So really, what is done is programming of the whole of the human being -- body, emotions, and mind -- to a certain way of thinking, to a certain way of realizing the potential within yourself. And also it leads to a complete change of values.

MISHLOVE: One of the aspects of your training involved dream interpretation. Your guru asked you to tell him your dreams on a regular basis.

TWEEDIE: Well, according to modern psychology, dream interpretation is of utmost importance. I personally feel that dream interpretation is the modern equivalent of the ancient Sufi teaching stories, that were very much used in the past. If you read Idries Shah, *The Wisdom of the Idiots*, the famous Mulla Nasrudin, it's always teaching stories. They are all teaching stories.

MISHLOVE: These stories are designed somehow to open something inside of us.

TWEEDIE: Yes, that's right. And dream interpretation is the modern way. You see, what happens when the human being comes before you -- there is a kind of communication, or rapport, on a different plane of thinking, a different space, if I may put it that way. So you contact the human being in a different space. Then the dream is interpreted, and the human being gets attention. Everybody loves attention. Then the interpretation itself gives satisfaction, because the dream has been interpreted, and is usually very meaningful. And the whole group which participates in it benefits from it, because they all learn -- learn how to interpret other people's dreams, and also their own dreams. So I think it's a very, very important function.

MISHLOVE: What really struck me the most about reading about your process -- and I think many, many people can identify with this -- was the doubts that you experienced -- not just doubts, but the process seemed to alternate between moments of great peace and great ecstasy,

and moments of the most profound inner torture, moments of great hatred, moments of agony, moments of pain.

TWEEDIE: I think it is natural. Don't we all experience lots of doubts, if we're faced with something absolutely unknown to us? And here I was alone, in a country which I didn't know, really in the hands of a man who would, I knew, do anything, absolutely anything, for the sake of training. It was a very frightening experience.

MISHLOVE: In the Christian tradition they refer to the dark night of the soul as being an essential part of the mystical path. You must have gone through something corresponding to that.

TWEEDIE: Yes, but not quite at the beginning. The dark night of the soul is really the inner moments of utter dejection. Because what happens on the mystical path -- the meditation is easy; all is wonderful. We call God or That, the Beloved. The Beloved is near; meditation is easy. It's all wonderful. The next day I am alone. I can't find the Beloved. God doesn't exist. It is awful. We call it the yo-yo syndrome -- up and down, and up and down, and up and down, endlessly. And that provokes a kind of loneliness, and a kind of frustration, which St. John of the Cross calls the dark night of the soul. And as you can compare spiritual life to a spiral, the experiences repeat themselves in a higher and higher spiral, or rather higher and higher frequencies. The dark night of the soul gets deeper and deeper and deeper. I remember at the end I was practically suicidal. I wanted to commit suicide twice. I didn't, of course, because I wouldn't be here. He saved me from it, with very simple words. First he told me, "You are absolutely hopeless. You are nowhere. You will never reach spiritual life." He treated me so badly that I really thought I was wasting my time. And I knew I couldn't go back to London without having achieved at least a little bit. I wouldn't respect myself. So I said, "Well, I'll just go out of this world." I was in a terrible desperation, because the heat was 120 degrees in the shade, and he treated me in a terrible way. I had very little to eat, because I couldn't eat in this heat. I got thinner and thinner. I reached, I think it was less than eight stones, and this is very, very little -- I don't know how much it is in pounds. You know, the physical body at a certain time just reaches a kind of "ring pass not" -- I can't go further. I decided to throw myself from the bridge, at Kampur, the city where my teacher lived. He died in the meantime. It was on the Ganges; there was a big long bridge on the Ganges, and the Ganges is deep. So I thought, "Well, it won't hurt very much." And he seemed to know my thoughts, because suddenly he turned to me. He was sitting in the garden, and I was so

disgusted I didn't want to look at him. And he said, "Mrs. Tweedie, look at me." So I just looked at him. I sort of -- aahhh! He was full of blinding light. I sort of just looked, speechless. And he said, "Mrs. Tweedie, look at me. Do you think I would waste my powers if you really were hopeless?" And perhaps half a day before he had told me that I was utterly hopeless.

MISHLOVE: He seemed to be doing these things, as you say, to stop your mind -- to get you outside of your intellect by throwing curve balls at you, so to speak, by always behaving in inconsistent ways.

TWEEDIE: That's probably correct. You see, they say -- it is in all the scriptures, in the Hindu Upanishads, everywhere it is said, and also in Christianity -- it is the mind which is the greatest obstacle on the spiritual path, the constant automatic thinking of the mind, constantly churning memories and desires and thoughts of the future and so on and so forth. And this mind has to be stilled somehow, in order that spiritual experiences can come through. So while deep down, the mind is thrown into confusion, I could rather compare it -- you know, the law of nature is everywhere. It's "As above, so below" -- on the spiritual plane, and also in this life. It is the pendulum going backward and forward. It's one of the laws of nature; it's going this way and then going back. So it is kept artificially between the desperation and the nearness.

MISHLOVE: It's as if the further away, the more desperate you got; then the more desire you developed to finally break through.

TWEEDIE: Correct. Absolutely, you put it just right. And not only the teacher does it, but your state of mind is like that. It is as if the Great Beloved, or God, does the same thing to you. You can pray, and then you can't, and you're desperate. Actually the idea is, when the mind is completely desperate, at one moment it sort of stops in the middle, utterly helpless. And it is in this moment that so-called illumination can come.

MISHLOVE: Moments of great clarity.

TWEEDIE: Moments of great clarity, yes. You can call it illumination in the Christian sense, or great clarity. You put it very beautifully. Thank you.

MISHLOVE: Your teacher referred to two different paths, or two different methods of attaining enlightenment -- one through meditation, and

another one which I guess has to do with the title of the fire in your book -- the idea of burning away the dross of the spirit or the soul. That was the more direct, the intense path, which is the one that you were on.

TWEEDIE: Yes. The one is called in Sanskrit the path of tyaga, which is the shortcut, so to say. And the other one is the path of dhyana, which is what we practice in London. This is rather a slower path, but it's not so painful. In the path of tyaga you have to give up everything -- all the worldly possessions, which I had to do. And you have to give yourself away in utter surrender. But here is an interesting point. He did emphasize again and again, you have to surrender to the guru. One doesn't surrender to the guru, not really -- apparently to the guru, but it's not. One surrenders to the light within oneself, the light of the soul -- that part in us which belongs to eternity.

MISHLOVE: You mentioned that when you looked at your guru, when you were contemplating suicide, you saw this radiance from him.

TWEEDIE: Yes.

MISHLOVE: And you refer often in your book to the fact that many times he would just have you come to his house, and you would sit, and he would be asleep. But he would be working on the inner planes -- doing things, affecting your soul in ways you couldn't even know.

TWEEDIE: That's correct. Most things on the path of the mystics are not known to the mind. We go through -- you can go through, anyone can go through, if you are on the mystical path -- the most wonderful experiences. The mind knows very little about it. And he said one day to us, "What you can understand with the mind is not a high state. The less you understand the better." Now that, for us Europeans, especially for those people who live in academic circles, was absolute nonsense. The more you understand, the better it is. It is not so on the spiritual path.

MISHLOVE: Well, there does seem to be a paradox here, because for people who are trying to find a spiritual teacher -- and you refer yourself to the many false gurus there are -- one needs this little tool we have, whatever intellect or ways of discerning or discriminating, to find a good one.

TWEEDIE: Well, I don't know what to say to that. Do you mean to recognize which one is a good one and which one is a bad one?

MISHLOVE: Well, at least initially, isn't that important?

TWEEDIE: It is terribly important, but there is no guiding line. You know, I feel that even a dead guru can teach you something. Everything can teach one in life. Everything. Life is the greatest guru itself, and is the greatest miracle. So I really don't know how to answer to that. I recognized my teacher, but I think this is a question of destiny, or karma, like they say in Sanskrit. If it is your destiny to recognize your teacher, and it is a real teacher, then you will. If it is your destiny to fall into the hands of a pseudo guru, as you just mentioned, well, that's it. But the intention is that one should learn in one's life whatever one can learn. That is actually the desire of the soul coming into incarnation -- to learn a certain lesson. The personality doesn't know what lesson one intends to learn -- what one is intended for it to learn -- I must correct myself. Well, I think I am an incorrigible optimist. I'm glad. I believe that everything is full of good.

MISHLOVE: You seem to be saying, then, that rather than try and use our intellect to discriminate -- which is really a way of separating ourselves from whatever life has to bring us -- I gather your message is more to drink deeply of the cup of life, to live intensely. And so if it's the wrong guru, maybe you can go through it quicker.

TWEEDIE: That's right. You just put it beautifully. This is quite correct. You got the essence of that. Perhaps you are a Sufi in another life.

MISHLOVE: Well, perhaps I am and don't know it.

TWEEDIE: Oh, many people are, and they don't know it. Maybe one day you will know.

MISHLOVE: I was very impressed in your autobiography that you really started on this path when you were into what we would normally say a little bit past middle age, in your fifties. And yet you were willing to give up what is so important to people at that phase of life, your security. You gave up all of your financial security. You became totally devoted to this guru, even though he seemed to do things that were insulting and contradictory to you. It took a certain -- I can only call it a burning desire to get at truth, regardless of the consequences, regardless of the pain.

TWEEDIE: I wanted to realize the truth. I wanted to know the truth. And somehow, somewhere, I knew that this man can help me. That's all I

needed. You see, I'm Aries. Arieses put everything on one card. They're gamblers. So I gambled. And that's why when I thought that I didn't get anywhere, I wanted even to commit suicide. But somehow I'm still here.

MISHLOVE: You know, if I may say so, you have such a serene quality, and such a beautiful face. I wonder, is it fair to say that that intense period, that yo-yo phase, as you describe it, you went through for five years with your teacher --

TWEEDIE: Oh no, for fifteen.

MISHLOVE: For fifteen? Did you at some point reach a phase where things have stabilized, where you began to enjoy the fruits?

TWEEDIE: Well, I hope it has stabilized now. There is no doubt. You see, when you have direct knowledge, it's not even a belief, it's conviction. You know. Now, how can there be doubt? In the states of deep meditation, which I would like to call superhuman state -- I don't like the word samadhi, there's been so much abuse -- there, you find yourself on the plane of consciousness where you really know. There is no me in the knowledge, like in the level of the language I have to learn, which would represent duality. There, I am the knowledge. I know. It's a plane of absolute light, of absolute omnipotence, absolute divinity, absolute everything. But the fantastic and the most disconcerting thing is, you won't find God there. There will be you, in infinity, and nothing else. Now, that for the mind is double Dutch. One has to experience it to understand it, because, you see, there are no words to express it. This is the problem of the mystic. For instance, I have to lecture, which I very often do. My greatest frustration is that the best and the loveliest things which one experiences, one cannot even express it. People should get it themselves. But for this it takes years.

MISHLOVE: And the purpose of the teaching is not so much to instruct people about it, because there are many books, but it's to lead people to it.

TWEEDIE: Yes. And to uncover that truth within -- to undress the inner truth, to take away the covering, the veils, like it is said in Sanskrit.

MISHLOVE: And the methods of your teacher, which would seem so unorthodox, I think, in Western circles -- these were effective methods for you.

TWEEDIE: Well, I'm not so sure it's unorthodox. You see, the training in the ancient monasteries was exactly the same. The novice had to be the last and the least and the shabbiest dog, had to serve all the other monks or nuns or whatever it was. And in the time of Socrates, for three years you were not allowed to ask. You were a listener; later you were allowed to ask. All these doubts, imagine, in the heart of a human being, and you're not allowed to ask a question. Because spiritual life is so different, so foreign to our way of thinking, that you must be full of doubts.

MISHLOVE: I suppose especially to Americans, since we are the ones who cultivate rugged individuality so much. Everyone is an individual; that's what we prize above all else, I suppose.

TWEEDIE: I think it was the same in England. It was the same for me, you know. I was brought up in Vienna. I think we in the West live on the level of the mind. And the Sufi says, "Take a hammer and hammer your head into the heart and think in the heart." That's what they say. I remember Carl Jung in one of his writings says that he went to see some red Indians here in America, and one of the great chiefs told him -- I forgot the name of the chief, never mind -- the great chief told him, "You in Europe, you think you are thinking here. We are thinking here." [Points to head and heart, respectively.] And so it's the same with the Sufis. And the great truths -- Plato said, "The great truths can never be apprehended with the mind, only with the heart." This is Plato, one of the great medieval mystics and sages -- not only a mystic, he's a great sage; great writings that he left behind.

MISHLOVE: So what you're saying -- and I presume practicing as well, since you live in London, you have students there -- is that this method of instruction is a viable method for Westerners.

TWEEDIE: I think absolutely. But not for everybody. You see, our teacher used to say, "We are never intended to be many. We always will be the few." Why? Who wants to get rid of the self? You know, the *sine qua non*, the most important thing on the spiritual path, is really to get rid of the ego. But you see, here again we're saying something which is very deceptive. You don't get rid of anything. But it is the me, the I, which separates me from you -- that is the only evil, say the Sufi. There is no such thing as you and me. It is only absolute oneness. That's why the Sufis and all the sages call this world an illusion. But the ego, that is not

killed, it is not transcended, it is not -- how shall I say? It's not . . . destroyed. Let's use simple words.

MISHLOVE: It's still there, but you must have a different attitude towards it.

TWEEDIE: Yes, you have to control it. It is not the master. The master is something else, which is the soul. And what we are trying to do is to reach this level of the soul -- the light within you and me and everybody else. That's Sufism. And it is not easy.

MISHLOVE: Well, it seems like such a special path, in a way. I mean, most people don't have this sense, this yearning, to arrive at the level that you do.

TWEEDIE: Well, I don't know. If the human being has got the longing, this tremendous longing which is the famine inside of love, they will do anything. It may be this path will be for someone. You see, love, like everything else in the world, has a positive and negative aspect. Nothing says that negative is bad, but in the sense of electricity, the positive and the negative pole. I find all the mystical states, and also our physical body, and the yogic states, can be compared to electricity. One can give a lecture using only the jargon of electrical technicians, and it will be understood. The human being is a very magnetic, very electrical thing. Everything within us works on this level, really. And one can get a short circuit when one gets mad.

MISHLOVE: I see. Well, in a sense I suppose you can have a magnet, which is very powerful, because all of the molecules are aligned in one direction, when the desire is strong. But I guess in many of us, when we live in our world, we call it a pluralistic society. We're pulled in this direction and in that direction -- a little bit of spirituality Sunday mornings, and then we go to work, and then we have the family, and then we have our recreation. So we don't have the same burning desire.

TWEEDIE: Then the spiritual life must wait -- perhaps the next life, or the next after, or not at all. We have free will. You see, spiritual life is just -- it's a subject, it's a specialized subject like, say, archaeology, or medicine.

MISHLOVE: Well, Mrs. Irina Tweedie, you are certainly a master of that subject, and it's been a pleasure to have you with me.

TWEEDIE: Thank you.

MISHLOVE: Thank you very much.

TWEEDIE: Thank you very much.

END

[Index of Transcripts](#) [Top of this Web Page](#) [Intuition Network Home Page](#) [Thinking Allowed Productions Home Page](#)