



inspiring individuals

Vimala Thakar was an Indian spiritual master who inspired many with her life and her teachings. She passed away in March this year but her spirit and lessons live on. Anne-Marie Rogers looks back at her life and all she gave.



'The most enlightened woman in the world' is quite an epithet. But when you look at the life and teachings of Vimala Thakar, you can see why it fits. This Indian social and spiritual activist devoted her life to helping people bring about inner and outer revolution. We can no longer go to visit her home in Mt Abu, Rajasthan, as so many did – she died on 11 March 2009 – but she has left behind a score of books full of her teachings to inspire us.

The daughter of a middle class Hindu Brahmin, Vimala's spiritual life blossomed early. The five year old Vimala found meditation to be 'joy and bliss' and by the age of 12 she'd completed a 72-hour meditation marathon. Throughout her teens she visited ashrams and studied the scriptures. Following a Masters degree in Philosophy at Nagpur, she went on a 75 day retreat, staying alone in a cave in the Himalayas. Meditating for 16 hours a day, she survived by sipping water from the Ganges River and eating wild fruits and berries. This experience resulted in new powers, likened to clairvoyance.

She then joined Vinoba Bhave's Land Gift Movement which redistributed land from the wealthy to the landless poor. Bhave, Gandhi's spiritual successor, continued Gandhi's mission and vision of a new social order. For eight years she walked all across India with Vinoba Bhave, rising before dawn every day to walk 6 to 10 miles. He instilled in her Gandhi's passion for, as she described it, "a radical change in the very structure of human society as well as a radical revolution in the very substance of the human mind."

In 1960, aged 37, Thakar met the legendary Indian teacher J. Krishnamurti. Their conversations led her to leave the Land Gift Movement and the sphere of social action to take up her role as a spiritual teacher. Thakar spent the next two decades travelling and teaching in more than twenty countries. Although she remained interested in political, environmental, and social developments, her teaching was focused on the inner revolution of the spirit.

In 1979, however, Thakar returned to social action and stayed in India for three years working on education for villagers.

She was soon off travelling again, with her teachings now marrying her passion for both inner and outer revolution. She continued to travel extensively until her later years when she received visitors at home.

When Californian meditation teacher Jack Kornfield asked her why she returned to development work and to helping the hungry and homeless, she replied, "Sir, I am a lover of life, and as a lover of life, I cannot keep out of any activity of life. If people are hungry for food, my response is to help feed them. If people are hungry for truth, my response is to help them discover it. I make no distinction between serving people who are starving and have no dignity in their physical lives and serving people who are fearful and closed and have no dignity in their mental lives. I love all life."

Her experiences on the frontline of social action and decades of teaching meditation gave Vimala a new understanding of the importance in reconciling our inner and outer worlds:

"In this era, to become a spiritual inquirer without social consciousness is a luxury that we can ill afford, and to be a social activist without a scientific understanding of the inner workings of the mind is the worst folly... Life cannot be divided into spiritual and material, individual and collective.... And each passionate being who dares to explore beyond the fragmentary and superficial into the mystery of totality helps all humanity perceive what it is to be fully human. Revolution, total revolution, implies experimenting with the impossible. And when an individual takes a step in the direction of the new, the impossible, the whole human race travels through that individual."

As mentioned, she wrote a number of books during her lifetime which all pass on a deeply spiritual message. Her eloquence and ability to reach out to people from all backgrounds makes them an interesting and worthwhile addition to anyone's reading list. 'Blossoms of Friendship' and 'Totality in Essence' are just two of her titles which come highly recommended.

For Vimala, that journey is over but anyone seeking to journey down new, challenging paths will find inspiration in her life and words.

Vimala Thakar, born 15 April 1923 - passed away on 11 March 2009.

