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# GreenSpirit *magazine*

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## GreenSpirit

Volume 15:1 £3.50

### Living on the *Edge*

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# Walking a Razor's Edge

STEPHEN WOLLASTON (aka Santoshan)



**S**harp like a razor's edge is the path...  
– KATHA UPANISHAD

While staying on a much needed retreat at a convent in Oxford, I sat in its beautiful and expansive garden on a bright and warm summer's day at a particularly low point in my life. I was contemplating why some close friends and colleagues I had known for a while, and with whom I had shared some of my deepest thoughts, concerns and feelings about spirituality had begun to treat me as troublesome. They had also started to give me a particularly rough time by challenging new areas I was looking at and some had begun to create worse problems. Were their actions justified I wondered. Were they right and was I to blame for what was happening? Was I just becoming awkward? Well, yes, in some ways I was, as I was questioning a bit too deeply for them and was to their way of thinking, turning their beliefs upside-down. And for some, even the closest of much-loved friends, this can be seen as being just a bit too much to handle and can push buttons that trigger negative reactions.

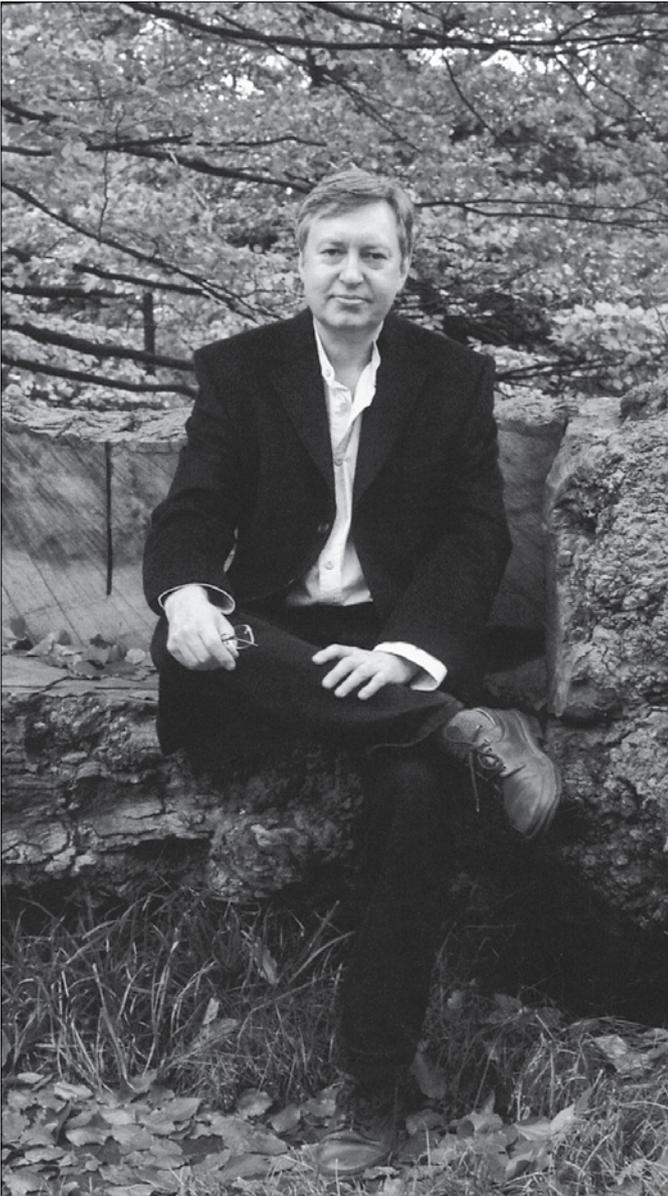
Shortly before this time I had started to reappraise the value of numerous teachings and practices, as I, like others, realized that much of the world's great religious teachings were predominantly human centred, as though Nature and the rest of the world didn't matter! At first I felt lost and didn't know where to go from this point. Times such this are by no means rare and are in many ways inevitable when we start to discover fresher paths that are better suited to our evolving nature, spirituality and understanding. Consider how questioning accepted beliefs in any tradition can easily lead to conflict with others who are not prepared to embrace different perspectives, and how this may lead to losing regular support networks of friends and communities with whom we have up to that moment shared common beliefs. This is what can happen when we move from one

level of understanding to another. The American integral philosopher, Ken Wilber, has highlighted how there is often a point of spiritual turmoil when we progress from one stage of growth to another. It is easy to understand why. Not only because of what has been mentioned, but also because we are entering unfamiliar territory and are out of our safety zones.

'Spiritual crisis', 'dark night of the soul experiences', 'shadow work', 'the via negativa', whatever terms we wish to use for what may on the surface *appear* to be low points in our spiritual growth can, as many now know, be positive experiences that lead to inner healing, renewal, transformation, rebirth and awakening to more mature, inclusive, compassionate and essential dimensions of mystical life. Interestingly, the quotation used at the beginning of this article first mentions how we should, "Seek the guidance of an illumined teacher...". However, spiritual crisis is often encountered at times when we are forced to stand alone – times when we have to draw upon our own inner strength, wisdom and courage in order to be brave enough to question and reassess our teachers, the projections placed upon us, the communities we belong to, where their focus lies, and any imposed authority of others – no matter what position they may hold or how great a teacher they may be thought to be.

The Buddha succinctly taught, "Be a light unto thy self". But here is the razor's edge, as we can easily be wrong in our perceptions. How do we know it's not a simple case of us resisting a route that others are saying we should take and what we actually need to do is simply settle down and go back to how things were? Well, for a start, there is no going back. "We cannot step into the same stream twice", Greek philosopher Heraclitus pithily pointed out. In the last century the work of Carl Jung and Roberto Assagioli into shadow work, and Stanislav and Christina Grof's book *The Stormy Search for the Self* showed that having knowledgeable and understanding therapeutic support can greatly help in creatively going through episodes of spiritual crisis and becoming more whole.

However, working through negatives is not solely the realm of *personal* growth, but also about traditions' and organisations' denial of the shadow. Classic cases of gurus, priests, teachers, organisations and communities becoming spiritually unhealthy, betraying and deeply wounding others and trying to censor forward looking pioneers of mystical life, such as Matthew Fox and Teilhard de Chardin, are all too prominent and often happen because of fears of losing power



and an inability to grow and accept diversity, embrace new truths and different practices that are helpful and address the problems of crucial issues. There are also problems when movements start to become too cosy, less radical and out of touch with contemporary life, as anyone seeking to bring in wider perspectives will be seen as upsetting the status quo. We only have to look at the lives of various mystics to see how they invariably ran into trouble.

Coming back to the beginning of this article, as I sat in the garden that day, I started to read chapters of Matthew Fox's *Original Blessing* and found passages that struck deep chords that supplied me with reassurance in my direction. Synchronicity even played a part when I looked for an organisation that shared the ethos of the book and came across GreenSpirit and people of like minds who were prepared to view their beliefs from broader and more inclusive contemporary perspectives and work wholesomely through difficulties. I haven't looked back. 'But what about those close friends and colleagues you mentioned?' you might ask. Well, some have come to accept and understand the new paths I have taken, while sadly others had to be left behind.\*

**Stephen is a graphic designer (GreenSpirit magazine), musician, teacher and author, who studied world religions at King's College London and writes under the name Santoshan, which was given to him by an English swami. In the mid to late 70s he was a member of one of London's first punk rock bands, The Wasps. His book *Spirituality Unveiled: Awakening to Creative Life* (Earth Books paperback, 2011) was released in 2020 as a mid-price eBook, and is available on various websites such as Smashwords.com, Barnes & Noble, and Amazon.**



## Dark Nights of the Green Soul

From Darkness to New Horizons

**Edited by Ian Mowll and Santoshan (Stephen Wollaston)**

\* The above article, which has since been revised and expanded, is included as a chapter in *Dark Nights of the Green Soul: From Darkness to New Horizons* (released in 2017 and expanded with additional chapters in 2020), which is the eighth title in the GreenSpirit Book Series, a low-cost printed and eBook series. Available as a free Smashwords eBook for members of GreenSpirit.

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