



Richard M. Bucke
by Norman Reed

The thoughts people in the west usually conjure up when hearing words like meditation, yoga, higher consciousness, cosmic consciousness, or Kundalini energy, are of some ancient eastern mystic, a typical modern self-styled guru from the east or some bizarre eastern spiritual practice. It is unfortunate that many people in the western world, are not aware of or recognize that certain highly gifted poets and writers of the west have also introduced and explored concepts like higher consciousness and the existence of a divine evolutionary energy in man. One such individual who was a pioneer in the western science of the human mind was Dr. Richard Marurice Bucke, a Canadian who wrote a book called *Cosmic Consciousness* in 1901. Bucke stands as an excellent example of a scientific genius who had a deeply personal concept of human existence, God and the universe and expressed these to the world.

From a brief personal experience of illumination, Bucke was inspired to spend thirty years of his life writing a book which is a study of all those people Bucke felt had reached a state of cosmic consciousness (either permanently or temporarily) at some point in their lives. Among these people he included such individuals as Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Roger Bacon, Thoreau and Walt Whitman. Bucke considered cosmic consciousness to have both a spiritual and physical

source and that it was an evolutionary trait just beginning to appear in the race (i.e., during the last few thousand years).

It would seem strange to most North Americans that such a book would be the product of a western mind that had grown up in the pioneering spirit of a new society like the Canada of the 1800's. Bucke grew up in a society that, for the most part, had its spiritual basis in modern western religion, not a long history of mystical lore about things like cosmic consciousness such as one finds in the east. It would be reasonable to say that the North American society of the 1800's had little time for contemplative philosophy or scientific research and hence would not be expected to produce individuals with great spiritual insight. Bucke and the people he wrote about are truly an example that such knowledge about cosmic consciousness and the evolutionary energy in man is universal. It proves that such knowledge is not limited to the great spiritual masters of the past and present who inspired the world's major religions and who lived in societies possessing a long history of spiritual contemplation.

The story of Bucke's life is a story of a dynamic, energetic and highly gifted intellectual. His youth was marked by many of the characteristics that have been associated with those highly evolved individuals who are considered to be close to attaining higher consciousness. As a nine-year-old farm boy in London, Ontario, Canada in the 1840's, Bucke began involving his mind in thoughts of universal brotherhood and concepts of God.

"He never, even as a child accepted the doctrines of the Christian church; but as soon as he was old enough to dwell on such themes, conceived that Jesus was a man – great and good, no doubt, but a man – that no one would be condemned to everlasting pain; that if a conscious God existed he was the supreme master and meant well in the end to all...He was subject, at times, to a sort of ecstasy of curiosity and hope."¹

The period of his early life was marked by many remarkable and unique experiences which no doubt provided the correct environment that helped him develop his great understanding of the human experience. Bucke's parents came to Canada from England when he was only one year old. Bucke never attended school. His father taught him several languages and then he educated himself by reading from his father's library which consisted of several thousand volumes. At the age of seventeen he left the family farm and traveled south to the United States. For three years Bucke traveled through the country and earned his way by taking on many jobs. He traveled with settlers to the western prairies and then on to the western mountain range. On several occasions he was involved in situations where he lost everything but his life, and at the end of his three-year adventure he ran into tragedy. Bucke was the sole survivor of four men who were caught in the mountains in winter. By the time he reached a mining camp, both his feet were frozen; one was amputated and the other badly crippled. Thus at twenty-one Bucke became severely handicapped and was never free from pain for more than a few hours at a time for the remaining forty years of his life.

Though still a young man, Bucke had gained experience and an insight into the nature of life and his fellow man that few people gain in a lifetime. Despite his handicap Bucke proceeded to show himself a man of brilliant intellect, outstanding humanitarianism and later, divine inspiration. On returning to Canada, Bucke, in spite of his lack of formal education, applied and

was accepted for the McGill University Medical School in Montreal. Four years later, in 1862, he graduated at the top of his class. From McGill he proceeded to Europe for post-graduate work in England and France. It was during this period of time that Bucke developed an avid interest in reading poetry and books that he thought would enlighten him more about the basic questions related to man's place in the universe.

Bucke returned to Canada in 1864 and started a private practice in Sarnia. Bucke's actions and achievements in his professional career were outstanding and indeed pointed to a man of genius with a deep understanding of the need to love one's fellow man. Bucke came to believe that there was a great need for scientific help in the field of mental medicine and felt strongly that new attitudes were necessary in treating the mentally ill and of the urgent need for more knowledge in this area. After some years of private practice, he was appointed superintendent of the largest mental hospital in Ontario in the city of London. Bucke immediately began to put to work his humane ideas in the treatment of the mentally ill, very rare and revolutionary ideas in the year 1877. Bucke established three tremendous innovations in the London Asylum which were met with great opposition from his more conservative colleagues:

1. He was the first in America to adopt the system of absolute non-restraint in the treatment of the insane. He removed shackles; the doors of the cells were opened and he eliminated all forms of restraint because restraint, he said, caused the need for restraint.
2. He was the first to employ gynecological surgery in the treatment of insane women.
3. He discarded entirely the use of beer, wine or alcohol in any form at the asylum and gave the patients work to do as therapy. He also gave the patients music, sports and garden parties to which outsiders were also invited.

Bucke's achievements in these areas show that he was man who understood that the law of love is as effective in dealing with the mentally ill as with the rest of humanity.

What was the source of these revolutionary ideas Bucke had developed and put into practice in the humane treatment of the insane? It began with the vast appetite for literary culture Bucke had developed as a child and continued after he had settled into his small town practice as a physician. Despite the exacting and time-consuming demands of his profession, he demonstrated great mental energy, resolution, and intellectual ability in keeping up with the great writers of his time who were concerning themselves with thoughts about the human experience. Among the works he studied deeply were those of Buckle, Darwin, Tyndall, Comte, Francis Bacon, Shelley, Tennyson and Shakespeare. He regarded Shakespeare's works, for example as:

*"Probably the noblest expression of genius in any language, while his sonnets, to my mind, reach a spiritual level as high as has ever been attained by man – as high as that attained by St. John or by the author of the 'Divine Law,' the Bhagavad Gita."*²

This indicates that not only was Bucke an exacting, gifted scientist, but he was also a spiritual mystic, a combination characteristic of a highly evolved individual.

The development of Bucke's mental evolution was climaxed by one event in his life that was to guide him directly into starting what he himself considered his most important life work – the writing of his book *Cosmic Consciousness*. In 1867 Bucke heard for the first time some verses of Walt Whitman and from this point onward Bucke was largely influenced by Whitman's personality and his writings.

The event which changed Bucke's life occurred during the early spring of 1872, while he was in England. Bucke passed through a brief experience of illumination which is described as follows:

*"He and two friends had spent the evening reading Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Browning, and especially Whitman. They parted at midnight and he had a long drive in a hansom. His mind, deeply under the influence of the ideas, images and emotions called up by the reading and talk of the evening, was calm and peaceful. He was in a state of quiet, almost passive enjoyment. All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around as it were by a flame-coloured cloud. For an instant he thought of fire, some sudden conflagration in the great city; the next he knew the light was within himself. Directly afterwards came upon him a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness, accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning flash of the Brahmic splendour which has ever since lightened his life, upon his heart fell one drop of Brahmic Bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an aftertaste of heaven."*³

For Bucke, all that had gone on in his life to this point contributed to his attaining a state of mental and physical preparation that allowed him for one brief moment to experience cosmic or higher consciousness. Notice the reference to the fact that his mind had been dwelling on the writings of a number of authors. After his own experience, Bucke recognized the fact that some of them had had one or more experiences of cosmic consciousness. It is only natural then that a deep study and contemplation of the literary expression of these men would go a long way in preparing Bucke's mind for understanding the knowledge provided by his own experience of illumination.

*"Among other things, he did not come to believe; he SAW and KNEW that the cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence, that the soul of man is immortal, that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love, and that the happiness of every one is in the long run absolutely certain. He claims that he learned more within the few seconds during which the illumination lasted than in previous months or even years of study, and that he learned much that no study could ever have taught."*⁴

Besides Bucke's outstanding achievements in his scientific profession that followed his experience, it is obvious from his writings that his attitudes about life, man and the universe became the classic characteristics of someone who was highly evolved or had actually experienced cosmic consciousness. One could consider Bucke's written works after his experience to be expressions of divine knowledge. He no longer feared, death and always talked

of the unity of man, nature and the universe. Bucke expresses the idea that knowledge came from a source beyond the intellect. In Bucke this divine energy produced a scientific genius who expressed a deep inner feeling for the presence of a higher intelligence in the universe.

After his brief illumination Bucke developed a single-minded life goal – to write about one particular aspect of universal truth. He set out to indicate to man that the attainment of cosmic consciousness is, in fact, the evolutionary goal of the entire race. Bucke's efforts are mainly summarized in his book *Cosmic Consciousness, A Study of the Evolution of the Human Mind*, a work that took him thirty years to complete. It is obvious from what has already been described that Bucke also possessed other characteristics normally associated with a divinely inspired genius. He had a great concern for the welfare of people, and he at no point in his life gave any consideration to the distorted concepts of spirituality that have been passed down through the last few thousand years by the numerous religious dogmas. The effect of men like Walt Whitman on Bucke, who like himself had experienced cosmic consciousness, was enormous. He wrote these words concerning an interview between himself and Whitman in 1894:

"A sort of spiritual intoxication set in which did not reach its culmination for some weeks, and which, after continuing some months, very gradually, in the course of the next few years faded out. It is certain that the hours spent that day with the poet (Whitman) was the turning point of my life. The upshot of it all was the placing of my spiritual existence on a higher plane."

Bucke felt that evolution will always go on and that one of its products, cosmic consciousness, has been called many names, some of which have not always been recognized or understood (e.g., Jesus called the new condition the "Kingdom of God" or the "Kingdom of Heaven"). Bucke also recognized that the faculty of cosmic consciousness is normally acquired when the specimen of the race is at full maturity and that over the last few thousand years the frequency of individuals experiencing cosmic consciousness has been increasing. Bucke pointed out that these individuals have been recognized in the past and will be recognized in the future.

"...the great majority of civilized men and women in all countries today bow down before teachers who possessed the cosmic sense. And not only does the world at large look up with reverence to these men, but perhaps it would be nothing more than the simple truth to say that all uninspired teachers derive the lessons which they transmit directly or indirectly from the few who have been illumined...the man who has had the Cosmic Sense for even a few moments only will probably never again descend to the spiritual level of the merely self conscious man, but twenty, thirty or forty years afterwards he will still feel within him the purifying, strengthening and exalting effect of that divine illumination, and many of those about him will recognize that his spiritual stature is above that of the average man."

Bucke mentions the fact that often people who have the experience at first think they are going insane, but points out that if this were true, then the highest religions of the world would be based on delusion. Bucke also understood that those with cosmic consciousness are not

infallible because on their own higher plane they are relatively like children who begin to explore self-consciousness when they first reach it in early life.

Bucke is indeed an excellent example of an individual who, for at least one brief moment, experienced cosmic consciousness and then proceeded to display the characteristics of a person who has had an overwhelming insight into the workings of the universe. Even before his experience, Bucke demonstrated a brilliant intellect, a highly moral nature and an amazing physical and mental endurance, all of which are characteristics of those close to attaining the next evolutionary jump in consciousness. Bucke recognized others who had had such an experience and further recognized a need for a highly moral nature and love of one's fellow man as part of the mode of life required for correct evolutionary development. This Bucke expresses best in his own words:

"Hate and fear are dying out. The argument is that their total extinction is justified. Faith and love are increasing. Infinite faith and love are justified...the highest moral nature is nearest in accord with the truth of things. This then is the end, the conclusion of the whole matter: Love all things – not because it is your duty to do so, but because all things are worthy of your love. Hate nothing. Fear nothing. Have absolute faith. Who so will do this is wise; he is more than wise – he is happy."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. James A. Coyne, *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Section 2, p. 159 (1906).
2. Richard M. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness*.
3. Coyne, *supra*.
4. *Ibid*.