

# Meditation at the United Nations

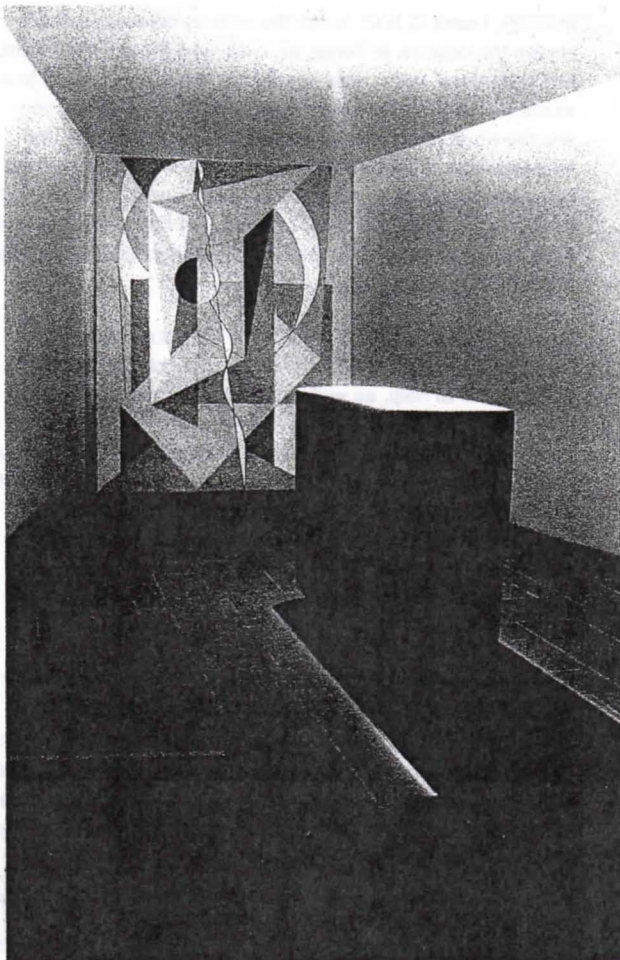
**Interest in mind-body approaches to wellbeing isn't limited to people with disease or disability. Are our lifestyles sustainable? Leading figures within the United Nations recognized early on the need for a holistic approach to wellbeing in the personal and professional aspects of life.**

"The holistic approach to solving problems in a world of interdependence has an equivalent in how we as human beings approach life and the world. Integrating different aspects, breaking down walls and recognizing the mind-expanding and dynamic effects of crossing borders in all respects is relevant both on a policy and a personal level," said **Jan Eliasson**, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations since June 2012, during his 2011 Dag Hammarskjöld Lecture, *Peace, Development and Human Rights - the Indispensable Connection*, delivered in Uppsala, Sweden to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dag Hammarskjöld's passing.

He described how Dag Hammarskjöld, second UN Secretary-General, "was a man of nature and a man of culture.... His professional life could not be divorced from his private life. In fact, many of his colleagues asked themselves, 'how did he find the time to be such a great Secretary-General while having such extensive and time-consuming encounters with nature and culture?' In my view, his immersion into these spheres, in fact helped make him such a towering leader.... Hammarskjöld was a committed hiker and had a deep attachment to the scenic mountain areas of northern Sweden. He once wrote: 'We all sometimes need stillness and perspective. We all have our means to find what we seek. I have come to most strongly miss the Swedish mountains which offer solitude and distance, not by flight from reality but by meeting a reality different from professional and daily life.' He was an ardent student of religious philosophers like Meister Eckhart, and Martin Buber, whose work *Ich und Du (I and Thou)* he was busy translating from German into Swedish at the time of his death.... When Hammarskjöld took the initiative to establish a Meditation room at the UN Headquarters, he decided to make it a room of stillness and simplicity with a big, solid iron ore structure in the half-lit room. Outside the room is a glass mosaic by Marc Chagall. Many thousands of people, including exhausted UN staff, have reflected, slowed down and found peace of mind in this magical room."

Dag Hammarskjöld's legacy was furthered by his successor, Secretary-General U Thant. In her 2010 article for *Cross Currents*, "Sri Chinmoy's Work at the United Nations, Spirituality and the Power of Silence," **Kusumita P. Pedersen** describes how U Thant invited Sri Chinmoy (1931-2007) to lead meditations at the United Nations. Observing that "while many admittedly take a more skeptical view, there are some who see the United Nations as an archetype of human oneness and an embodiment of the hope for peace, in the conviction that the United Nations is not just an outer, political entity but something more," Pedersen recalls that "in 1949, a rule was put in place to open and close each year's General Assembly session by observing 'one minute of silence dedicated to prayer or meditation.'" (Rule 62 of the Rules of Procedure of the General Assembly.)

Noting that "U Thant, (who) succeeded Dag Hammarskjöld as Secretary-General in 1961 after Hammarskjöld died in a plane crash outside the then Northern Rhodesian town of Ndola... was a devout Buddhist from Myanmar and a lifelong and daily practitioner of meditation," she further described the nature and purpose of the meditations he invited Sri Chinmoy to hold: "Sri Chinmoy led regular meditations for peace at UN headquarters for thirty-seven years, (with) United Nations staff members, delegates, journalists accredited to the UN, and representatives of NGOs.... One of the most compelling features of those meetings was their silence. The deep stillness might include a musical interlude, but there would be almost no speaking.... Such a practice provides insight and skill for effectiveness, patience and strength to endure, and above all the widest and deepest view of what one is trying to do and for what reasons. Sri Chinmoy stresses that meditation is not for one's own individual benefit alone and quotes Hammarskjöld's saying, 'No peace which is not peace for all.'" (Sri Chinmoy, *The Garland of Nation-Souls: Complete Talks at the United Nations*; Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Communications, 1995)



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**Pragati Pascale**, Chief of the Development Section at the United Nations Department of Public Information, and UN staff member since 1978, traces her commitment to the UN's objectives back to her interest in meditation and the encouragement of her teacher, Sri Chinmoy:

"I started meditating for health reasons when I was a freshman in college because I was getting sick from the stress of academic life and was in search of balance. Gradually, I became more interested in yoga and meditation, and when I was about 20 years old, I became a student of meditation teacher, Sri Chinmoy. He believed deeply in the United Nations as an instrument of world peace and the evolution of human consciousness and had been conducting meditations for staff and delegates since 1970. Growing up in New York, I—like most Americans—knew very little about the UN, so the thought of joining the UN would probably never have crossed my mind, but Sri Chinmoy encouraged his students to pursue a UN career and inspired me to begin what has been a great journey.

The UN is a very unique place, and it takes a while to get oriented. I started off working for the UN Yearbook and was happy to have a less responsible job outwardly, so I could focus more on my meditation and inner life. As I had come to the UN less for career reasons, than to serve the UN's higher goals, I saw the UN from that point of view and didn't find the politics or bureaucracy so daunting because I wasn't politically focused. Even when I started doing professional level communications work and became more aware of and involved in the politics surrounding communications, I still brought with me my belief in the UN's higher purpose and drew upon the strength of my spiritual life as a source of guidance.

I recall an experience many years ago when, while sitting at my desk, I noticed a file cabinet with a stamp that said 'Property of the United Nations.' Something flashed in my mind and I asked myself: 'What is the United Nations?' I had a kind of inner vision of a little boy in Africa saying, 'I am the United Nations, you're working for me.' It reminded me that, even though we see many imperfections politically and in the outer institution, the inner essence of the UN is profoundly significant. Being independently motivated helps to keep up one's morale and bring some inspiration to the table.

During my most stressful assignments—such as recently, when I was the Spokesperson for the Rio +20 Conference on Sustainable Development, or previously, as Spokesperson for the President of the General Assembly—having to deal with the media and have answers ready on the spot, I have found it helpful to meditate. I start every workday by meditating for a minute or so and praying to be an instrument for the UN's important endeavors, before sitting down at my computer. We have a meditation group that meets weekly at the UN, and I've also been teaching meditation at lunch for staff and the UN community, as a service, free of charge. It can be done in a very secular way to reduce stress and tap into one's inner wisdom. Many people have a sense that there is a source of peace inside, if they can take some time for themselves and quiet the mind. Over the years, colleagues, delegates, and friends among UN system staff have been inspired by the idea that meditation can be a foundation for serving the UN and the world. There are times when you're crazy busy at work and don't have time to meditate very much, but you come back to it when you can. Working in communications and public outreach, I've come to

understand how much the UN means to people around the world. How can we be instruments for peace in the world if we don't have that within us?"

Could the same question apply to people trained for war? In another meditation group at the UN, led by the Brahma Kumaris, **Samuel Leal**, Marine Officer, and Navy Captain in the Brazilian Marine Corps, who had been seconded to the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations at the time of this interview, described how meditation helped him in his own journey:

"I went to East Timor in 2000, just after the departure of the Indonesians. It was a very tense time with militias still active in the country. I was posted with the volunteer guerilla in a cantonment. The mandate for the UN mission was to do a 'DDR' (demobilization, disarmament and reintegration) of the soldiers, but as the volunteer guerilla was a strong symbol of the resistance against the Indonesians, the population wanted them to be recognized as a nucleus for a future Timorese defense force. That was not part of the mandate, so they decided to form a cantonment on their own and reached an agreement with Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Sergio Viera de Mello. There were crises when we were locked in the cantonment and threatened.... We were unarmed—we had our words and the UN beret—but at the end of the day, being unarmed was our protection. I was not regularly meditating at the time, but I used meditation a lot in tense moments; it was a very important tool to stay sane in a country that was devastated, and where we had to meet the challenge of patrolling with a minimal supply of food.

In 2005, I went to Haiti to run the military communications across the country. In Timor, we knew who the enemies were, but in Haiti the stress was permanent because we never knew where a problem would stem from. In these situations, you see the worst of humanity, but also the best. However, the long exposure to these kinds of environments brought about consequences: when I returned to Brazil, one day while leaving the barracks, I had the same reflexes that I had in Haiti—a kind of vigilance, or mental preparation. I experienced anger and a violent temperament.

There is no question that meditation helped me deal with anger and anxiety and enabled me to more clearly see both my potential to help, as well as my deficiencies, and where I need help from others. I come from a religious Catholic family and eventually became interested in meditation because I was looking for self-realization, trying to make the inner self or Christ-self stronger, but my training in the Naval Academy also contributed to my interest in meditation. For example, our training for the shooting team involved a mind-control course with relaxation exercises that are similar to what we do in meditation.

I think meditation centers on UN missions would be a great service. Sun Tzu says 'anger is the greatest enemy of the general.' It's true on the battlefield but also in a broader sense. My personal experience shows me that when you have a leader who is more balanced and cares for subordinates, this has a big influence on everyone and creates the environment to deliver better, no matter what the context."

*Photos clockwise: UN Photo/ AF (Meditation room Reopens, 1957)*

*UN Photo/ Teddy Chen (Stained Glass Window)*