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Welcome to Anugraha House, and welcome to the Epiphany Retreat.

In our first session, let's focus on the Epiphany as it appears in the Eastern Church where it originated. We have a contribution from Heiromonk Kyrillos, or Sw. Bhagavananda as he is known in the Community of the Mystic Heart Sannyasa:

EASTERN ORTHODOX VIEW
In the Eastern Orthodox Church the Feast of Epiphany is called the Feast of Theophany, the “appearance of God” among men. It is a unique festival in that it combines several events in the life of Jesus into one with no regard to time. Those events include the Visitation and Adoration of the Magi to the infant Jesus, the so-called “Three Kings”; the circumcision and Presentation in the Temple of the child Jesus and his mother; and, the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. In the Eastern Church there is no strangeness to the idea of suspending time and mixing several events in that suspended horizon since all time and therefore no time is ever present in the Creator, and he carries all such events as one and so shall we in His Heaven.

That being said, we need to recognize that the Eastern Church is more mystical in its approach to matters than the more juridical West. The Eastern Church relies a great deal more on Tradition than Dogma, Custom than Curia, and so in regard to the Feast of Epiphany, let us examine one of these Traditions that specifically relates to the Visitation and Adoration of the Magi.

It should be remembered that after the glory days of David and Solomon, their kingdom divided, wars erupted and the power and prestige of the former Israel diminished. Babylon conquered and then enslaved Israel and carried off the royal court along with all the educated class to serve the King in Babylon. Eventually there arose a core of young men who served in the Royal court of King Nebuchadnezzar as scribes and officials. Among
these young men was Daniel who was able to interpret a dream of the King when his regular soothsayers, astrologers and magicians could not. The King was so impressed that he:

“placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men.” Daniel 2:48.

That verse is the important one for this particular Tradition. From that one verse, the Eastern Church interpolated that since Daniel was then in charge of all the wise men of Babylon, it would follow that he would teach them and reveal to them the meanings of the Jewish lore-- not only the Torah, but also the Prophets, especially the Prophets who told of the eventual return of the Jews to their homeland and the coming of a great leader, a Messiah who would lead them to glory once again. So when the Jews did return some seventy years later, these traditions had become part of the wisdom lore of the Babylonian “wise men” which they then blended with their Zoroastrian religion that stressed the influence and movement of the stars. These “wise men” were called in the Persian language Magus, or Magi as a group.

According to the Eastern Church, these Magi were thus ever on the watch, along with other portents, for a sign of the Jewish Messiah; and when they saw a new convergence of the planets that signified kingship in the zodiac sign that represented Judea, they deducted that the time had arrived for the new King of the Jews to be born. A delegation was sent out to greet him. We always imagine three, the Three Kings, but some traditions hold with as many as twelve Magi who came searching for the new king. What is also of great importance to the Eastern Orthodox is the fact that the first to adore the Christ child were foreigners, Gentiles, not the leaders of the Jews receiving their King. This was seen as the recognition of the Messiah first by Gentiles, those people from whom the Eastern Orthodox would emerge. There are also several traditions of the origins of some of the Eastern Churches arising from the Magi themselves, who had supposedly become Christians after the Resurrection and gone back to their nations to preach as disciples.
What should we make of the gifts these three Magi brought and offered? The Gospel of Matthew only mentions three such gifts, and that is why we usually think of only three magi having visited. The gifts offered were gold, frankincense and myrrh. These are all precious items that would be more common in a royal or even priestly home, but certainly not in the home of a workman, farmer or shepherd. What, if anything, is meant by these gifts? In the Eastern Church they are seen in several ways. They represent the triune nature of Christ’s ministry: royal, prophetic and priestly; they show the three aspects of the nature of man: spirit, soul and body. They are also in their simplest form gifts fit for a king, fit for the worship of God and fit for suffering and dying.

They are certainly part of the great act of adoration by these great sages of the little child whom they find not in the royal palace but rather in a simple carpenter’s home. The spiritual lesson of this event is one that has become ubiquitous to the season. What becomes of the Magi is just as interesting as the explanation of who they are. Just outside of Bethlehem there is a small monastery that had been occupied since the 2nd century AD, and founded by Palestinian monks, destroyed completely by the Persians in the early 7th Century AD and rebuilt. The Monastery of St. Theodosius was established because of a small cave, still at the center of the monastery, in which it is traditionally held that the Magi stayed the first night after they presented their gifts to the Infant Jesus, and were warned by an angel to flee from Herod. The Cave of the Magi or Metopa in Greek is still a place of veneration.

There are also a number of sites throughout the East as well as in Western Europe that claim to have this or that object or relic of one or all of the Magi. These pious traditions cannot be proven and the Church, East or West, has not spoken dogmatically about them, yet the traditions continue and have been maintained over the past two millennia. They speak to us, perhaps, in new and various ways as we view them under different prisms. Perhaps that is exactly what they are meant to do, to unfold these lessons as they are needed, when they are needed.
I pray that the lessons and Blessings of this Epiphany will open for you this year and for each year that you recall these events.

Heiromonk Kyrillos

A monk of the Eastern Church

Now, let's consider a disarmingly honest contribution from Sw. Arjunananda, also a monk in CMH Sannyasa:

A few weeks ago I didn’t know what the Feast of Epiphany was. I had heard of it and knew it was a holy day. January 6 is also the day I took this body. To get to know the story better, I read Matthew Chapter 2 verse 1-12; Luke Chapter 2 verse 1-20; John Chapter 1 verse 1-5 & 14

Before writing this, I made a list of everyone involved in the Epiphany: Herod, the Shepherds, the Magi, Zachariah, John the Baptist, the angels, Mary and Joseph, The Christ, the plant and animals. I contemplated each one and tried to put myself in each of their shoes to really breathe in what they were experiencing at that time. Although this sounds strange to some, I think to some degree it gave me an insider look at this Epiphany and why we are having a feast.

I find these Magi very interesting. Who are they, where did they come from, and how did they know that this Epiphany would take place? I have done a small amount of research into this topic - mostly talking to people and watching a video here and there. You could write books on this topic alone, not including the whole story by itself about these Magi.

What sheer joy the shepherds must have felt meeting up with singing angels. The animals they were taking care of must have felt a heart opening bliss as well.

I have given it some thought. Did Mary and Joseph have grace and peace at this troubling time in their lives, and when the Epiphany happened, did they have complete peace?
Giving birth to a GREAT, GREAT SOUL and just being around the birth of one, must take many, many lifetimes of good karma. Just hearing about the Epiphany can bring on the tears.

I don't have much to say about Christ and his birth at this time. I believe Jesus was a Shaktipat Guru, it just makes sense. For someone who does not have a degree in biblical studies I have done a good deal of studying on the Christ and the Bible. I am just confused and not sure where I stand. I don't have peace when I talk about Jesus, I am just uncertain.

I am, however, grateful for all the kind-hearted followers of Christ.

Love & Bliss,, Sw. Arjunananda
You are light and water. I mean everyone knows that you are water. We learn that we are mostly water in our first science classes.

But light? Yes, you are light, too.

Take your pick of Crosby Stills and Nash or Joni Mitchell to the tune of "Woodstock."

Well, and I paraphrase: we came upon a child of God walking along the road. We asked him, Tell me, where are you going? He said, I am going to a nearby farm. Gonna join a rock and roll band. Got to get back to the land and set my soul free. We are stardust, we are golden. We are a billion year old carbon. And we got to get ourselves back to the garden.

I don't know that Woodstock was the Garden of Eden. Maybe it was. But I am here today to tell you that you are made of stardust, and you are golden.

Science now tells us that the core of our being, and everything on the earth, is composed of star particles. So, we are, scientifically, made of stars.

We in the West spend a lot of time focusing on how we are made of water. We learn about it in science. We use it both in our primary sacraments, in baptism, to cleanse us, and in the Eucharist, to make wine. Light is used, too. We process with the light of Christ. But the light of Christ is not a sacrament.

The fact that we are made of light and water, and perhaps a little deprived of our light, is maybe why we find the Epiphany so intriguing. Maybe this is why we take our signs from RC and Cathedral in the West today.
Everyone knows the story. How the Magi, astrologers, or kings, followed a great light to meet the creator God. This is what we celebrate today. The Epiphany from the words Epi (to) and Phanen (show forth or shine upon). We remember that light is that which guided the famous astrologers to the birth of the Christ child.

It is perhaps the only day when we give homage to following our roots of star particles, that we remember on the first day of creation when the earth was formless, and empty, and darkness covered the surfaces of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the water. And, God said, Let there be light.

The postcard this week gave homage to tracing our roots to star particles. If you are on our mailing list, you received Geniveive's bright shining face, the star of the Christmas pageant, with the Epiphany greeting about the light of Christ shining in your life. If you aren't on our mailing list, pick out a card now, and fill it out, so we can send you well wishes and cute children dressed up.

Today we celebrate light. In the Eastern Church today, they celebrate light and water. Remember that our roots tell us that water was there in the beginning and the first act of creation was light. Then, the waters separated.

In the Eastern Church, today is celebrated in a different way. The Epiphany, or the Manifestation, for the Eastern Church includes a series of events including the celebration of Jesus' birth, his baptism, and the manifestation of God as the Trinity. For when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Scriptures show us that Jesus was there. The heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit descended. And God spoke from above, This is my son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For the Eastern Church, the celebration of Epiphany, or Manifestation, is a series of events in which God comes in all sorts of forms--through water, and spirit, and voice, and stars. And the Christ.

I wonder what it is about our Western tradition that has caused almost every church I
know, despite the fact that the readings are for the baptism of Christ today, to pull readings from the Epiphany which was actually on Friday, Jan. 6, in the Western tradition. It makes me wonder if we feel light deprived. Today, at St. Patrick's, we have merged traditions choosing the Western Magi readings, but also acknowledging the baptism of Christ through reaffirmation of our baptismal vows and asperses, or the sprinkling of Holy Water on you, God's Holy People, celebrating the fact that we are both light and water.

Perhaps we are light deprived. Maybe because we just celebrated Winter Solstice, the longest day of the year, or maybe because our country feels divided. Or, because we so dualistically look at the word of God, and the world of us in black and white terms. As if we are here, and God is there. Instead of remembering we are an intrinsic part of God's creation, perhaps we are depressed, or are beaten down by health, family, jobs, or life situations. Maybe we are light deprived. And that is why in the West, we are fascinated by the Magi who found the light.

Today, we celebrate that God's light came. It came again. It came from the beginning of time, but this time, the light came to all people. To the Magi, the Gentiles, those who were not Jewish, or Hebrew, or Israelites, or maybe even faith practicing people. Through the appearance of a star, the Magi followed its brightness to meet the Christ. They were transformed by following the star.

God came for all. It's not like we as Christians, or Kentuckians, or white people, or Episcopalians, or those who are happy all the time just to get the light. The light came for us all. For you, me, black, white, sinners, saints, religious and non-religious alike.

The Psalm today reminds us that God's will is for all of us to be united. That God's will is for nations to be brought under a reign of peace. Paul reminds us that the Gentiles have become fellow heirs and sharers in the promises of God. The Magi remind us that the light of God can come to anyone at any time.

The light came for all. One of the great gifts for me this Epiphany is to have celebrated the
Feast of the Epiphany with our guests Alyssa Stebbing, a professed Franciscan from Texas, and Sw. Prakashananda, or Rev. Chris from the United Kingdom, and our own Sw. Shraddhananda, or Dr. Sonya, and others from St. Patrick's who spent the weekend at Anugraha House across the street exploring how the light of God comes to us all in many different forms.

Although we receive the light of God in so many different ways, many of you in this room physically received the light of God when you were baptized. When you returned to the primal waters of baptism to be reminded that you are one with the life, death, and resurrection of God through Jesus Christ, you most likely also received light although it is not in our prayer book. I have never seen an Episcopal Priest who did not pass light on. You remember this: after prayers over the waters are stated; after you are baptized, the priests dip their fingers in crisp, holy anointing oil and make the sign of the cross on your forehead, and say: You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. Then, in an act which is not in our prayer book, the priest takes a candle, and lights it from the Paschal candle, and says, Receive the light of Christ, and you physically carry the light of Christ with you.

You are not light deprived, for you carry the essence of light within. You received it when you were born of star particles, and you received it upon your baptism.

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep. And, the wind, spirit, breath, roar of God swept over the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light, and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And good separated the light from the darkness.

And in the time of Jesus, when God's earth was a mess of political turmoil, darkness, and smugness, and a mean old leader named Herod, as well as all sorts of other leaders with bad intentions, God sent the light of a star to guide the Magi to the light of love, hope, and incarnation of God.
At Jesus’ baptism, when the heavens opened, and the lightening descended upon Jesus, God said, “This is my Beloved with whom I am well pleased.”

At our birth, when we receive star particles, and at our baptism, when we receive the light of Christ, let our light shine in darkness, for remember that you and I are made of light and stars. We are stardust, we are golden. We are billion year old carbon. Let us get ourselves back to the garden, to the stuff we are made of--light, water, the Divine.

This little light of mine.

(Congregation joined Rev. Musterman in singing, "This little light of mine."
EPIPHANY IN RELATION TO YOGA AND OTHER SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS
by Rev. Acharya Sw. Prakashananda

My name is Swami Prakashananda, and I am very happy to be here celebrating the wonderful Feast of the Epiphany here with you all today.

"Are you sitting comfortably? Then I’ll begin!"

These were the iconic words which anyone of a certain age in the United Kingdom will remember from *Listen With Mother*, the daily radio programme for children, which was loved by so many, for decades. There were songs, and always a story. Those words were a cue to sit up and be alert. My three brothers and I would usually jostle around the radio for a prime listening place.

This small cameo is an example of the power and importance of song and story-telling. These two traditions have carried the wisdom and knowledge of all our cultures for thousands of years, right up to the current day. Songs and stories have carried the knowledge and wisdom of practical and inner truths in a memorable form, and as such are built into the very fabric of our being as important survival skills.

Take, for instance, the song-lines from the Maori traditions in New Zealand, which carry the whole history of the various tribes, from what we would call pre-historic times right through to the present day. Through oral memory, these song-lines retell the initial migration of those tribes from Polynesia to New Zealand, recording the genealogy of all the original travellers and their families, something that historians could only conjecture…

In the New Testament, we are familiar with the Parables that Jesus recounted to convey deep teachings, stories that were a platform for contemplation and spiritual expansion.

This method is still used effectively today by modern spiritual teachers to great effect. In post-modern times, there is a tendency to rely more and more on technological support to
replace our memories and all the details go onto a hard drive. We have relegated deep truth to the shelves of the children’s corner of the bookstore, not really understanding, any more, the symbolism and metaphor, of the stories’ contents.

Today we are exploring the theme of the Epiphany star. The symbol of the star is repeated over and over in many cultures, not just the Christian one, and represents many ideas, the root of them all being wisdom.

The great sages of ancient times did not experience the wide separation of consciousness between themselves and Nature that we feel today in our industrialised, Western civilisations. They felt very much at one with nature and lived in the awareness that what they saw above was reflected below. They understood experientially that what they saw on the outside, was an expression of what they were experiencing on the inside…

Many folks these days have a tendency to see God as out there, or above, or somewhere other than in ourselves, on a platform of high ideals which excludes ourselves. Indeed, sadly, this is the predominant teaching given out in our schools and churches. This is the concept that children carry forth uncertainly into an adult Consciousness, and this creates a deep spiritual hunger for a more satisfying, more unifying expression! Really what is happening is that we are trying to get back to our ancestors’ deeper and simpler awareness of God, to the natural stream of living joy within ourselves—to the garden.

Close your eyes and listen for a moment to the words of the great modern Christian mystic Thomas Merton who described this primal state in this way:

“awake, fully active and fully aware… it is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life… It is gratitude for life, for being. It is a vivid realisation of the fact that life and being in us proceeds from an indivisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source.”

In ancient times the elders within each culture lived in this state of awareness and
sought to remind successive generations of the wisdom teachings. They foresaw a time of forgetfulness and so used markers from the natural world as key pointers. In times where traditions were mostly oral, certain visual symbols gained heightened significance. Stars became very important.

In Vedic times, the earliest stories which have been handed down from generation to generation, recount the presence of the seven Rishis who were wise men or leaders. Most likely these mythical figures were early enlightened teachers whose significance became connected to seven key stars in the night sky. As the adage says: as above, so below. There are many different versions of the tales where the Seven Rishis play significant roles. Eventually the significance shifts from the outer to the inner realms and becomes symbolic of the unfolding cosmic energies of creation itself, and, on a microcosmic scale, becomes symbolic of the various energies or pranas, moving within ourselves. In addition to this, in ancient times, the movements of stars and planetary bodies were carefully mapped, as it was realised that their appearance had an impact not only on the land in terms of growing crops, but also on ourselves, on our unconscious awareness.

In recent times even our sceptical scientists have noticed that the crime figures collated by the British Police reports, have peaked on each full moon night. In fact, the increase of activity is so marked that extra men are posted on duty on those nights.

Astronomy and astrology have been key disciplines in many early cultures, including the Mayan culture, where huge astronomical calendars etched out in stone, have been left behind for us to study. The Mayan culture had a highly developed awareness of the movement of stars, tracking and recording cycles over long periods of time. Their star calendars pre-date the great flood and record three even earlier cycles of civilisation. Not only did they understand the patterns of the past, but their work had a predictive quality where they were able to anticipate the movement of stars and energies and the subsequent impact on future generations, right up to the modern day.
Probably the most well-known figure from the Mayan culture is the extraordinary King and avatar, Pacal Votan. He is an example of an enlightened sage who was not only an awakener of the Holy Spirit in his students, but also a gifted mathematician and astronomer. Pacal, as with other enlightened Teachers, is intimately associated with the star Venus. The frequent appearance and disappearance of Venus in the night sky is a great metaphor for the inner light which, although always present, seemingly appears, disappears and reappears again.

Pacal’s burial shrine is an intentional reminder of his wisdom teachings. The nine levels of his burial shrine represent the traditional nine levels of consciousness in Mayan thinking. His intricately carved tombstone lid is a unique legacy recording key creation myths and coded time markers using various star references. What amazingly painstaking preparations he made, to preserve spiritual wisdom for future generations – this demonstrates a great and loving compassion.

The Tibetan Buddhist traditions are far better known for protecting and preserving their wisdom. Certain teachers such as the great Padmasambhava are known to have protected their wisdom and locked it in the landscape for future discovery. There is also the development of reincarnated wisdom lineage teachers called tulkus. The Karmapa and the Dalai Lama are examples of famous ones and there are many others.

After the incarnation of a great teacher has died, elaborate search parties are sent out to find and establish the identity of the new incarnation. The old incarnation will often leave clues behind. Often newly incarnated souls will easily identify their own ritual objects hidden amongst others, and will recall key moments from the past. Their birth may well be associated with key landmarks or the appearance of certain constellations of stars.

In this context it is not difficult to conjecture that a group of wise men, oh, a party much larger than just the traditional three, might have studied stars and portents to predict the arrival of the awaited Messiah of the Old Testament, might even have been part of a
secret esoteric tradition with developed methods for seeking out and identifying the arrival of a Divine incarnation.

There is, in fact, a recent publication of an apocryphal text which has not been completely repressed. It is called *Revelation of the Magi*, and it is held in the archives of the Vatican library. It dates back to at least the 3C AD and probably much earlier.

There we read that a certain religious group had handed down orally from generation to generation for hundreds of years the story of the bright star which would appear at the time of the incarnation of a great Being. The account is focused on the journey of a group of wise elders called Magi because of their practice of silent prayer. Through this practice of silent prayer, they were able to access the deepest state of meditation, where the primal awareness of the Divine appears as a bright golden star or pearl. This golden pearl shines in a background of deep blue. Skilled modern meditators will tell you that this bright star or pearl is the seed from which all our daily experiences arise.

Guided by the light of the inner star of awareness, the Magi are not only intuitively led to where the newly born Jesus lives, but also, as they travel, they are sustained throughout the journey by inner and outer nourishment. The Magi not only bring outer and sumptuous gifts to the Christ child, but also receive gifts from the Christ Child in the form of inner revelation and spiritual awakening.

Quoting from the text, it is recounted:

‘And we offered him gifts that we took from the Cave of Treasures which were deposited by our fathers from his own.’

Thus, from his earliest infancy, Jesus is recognized as a great Teacher, an initiator, an awakener of the Divine in others. Additionally, we see here that the Magi have arrived not
only to honour the newly incarnated soul, but also to legitimise his status with their presence and gifts.

In much the same way as Pacal Votan left a physical symbol of his wisdom on the lid of his tomb, Jesus left his mark through his sublime teachings, mostly in the form of parables – AND – through the outer markers of key events in his life.

Even after two thousand years, certain events are imprinted in our cultural stories. The Star of Bethlehem takes a prominent place. I believe that this marker is a kind of seed teaching, an indication and reminder of the enlightened Master's state, AND - His intention to reconnect us to His state. Is this so far- fetched? I believe not.

Essentially Jesus wanted us to experience the fullness of his own state. He did not want us to worship him from afar; he wanted us to experience Divine union, the highest mystical state which he himself had attained.

Listen now to Jesus’s intention which is clearly stated at the event we now refer to as the Last Supper:

“Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said: ‘Father… that they may be one, just as We are one. I in them and You in me, that they may be perfected in unity… Father, I desire that they also, be with Me where I am, so that the love with which You loved me may be in them, and I in them’“ John 17:22-23, 26

Here, Jesus connects everything: He in the Father (God), we in the Father (God); Jesus in us and in the world, and we in Jesus and the world. Jesus sees the connectedness of everything and everyone whilst recognising the appearance of separateness. This is the highest mystical experience: ALL IS ONE.
Not only that, it is clearly stated that he wants us ALL to attain his experience. The Divine intention of such a Master is unfailing. Unfailing.

How might that intention manifest for us?

Ultimately, when the seeker is ready, it manifests for us through the awakening of the Holy Spirit, known in Yoga terms as Maha Kundalini Shakti or in Tibetan Buddhist terminology as Windhorse. We can all recall the famous mass awakening of the Holy Spirit which is recorded in the Bible as the event of Pentecost, where all manner of inner gifts were awakened and experienced. It is not just a Biblical event. It is available to you, too.

Sometimes, the awakening of the Holy Spirit might arise spontaneously in a seeker. Often this kind of awakening is partial or sporadic without the guidance of a facilitator. Just as when we want to learn to ride the rapids, we seek out someone who knows the ropes to help us through the first steps, in the same way, it is really helpful to have the help and guidance of someone who is permanently established in that awareness of the Divine when we are opening up to the Holy Spirit. It is challenging to tread the spiritual path and hard to navigate it without some help. We sometimes get stuck, so such a Teacher can instantly and effectively cut through our repetitive habits and the false ideas that keep us feeling separate from the well of joy inside us.

When Jesus states “I and the Father are One,” it indicates that he is in the highest state of awareness, the state of unity consciousness where there is no sense of separation from the universal stream of the Divine. This is the state of a dependable guide. When coming into contact with a skilled Teacher, it is possible to receive the initiation of the Holy Spirit, or Shaktipat – the descent of grace, as it is known in Yoga. In the Christian tradition it is often conferred through the sacramental ritual of Confirmation, though actually, Jesus’s Divine intention for awakening underpins each one of the sacraments.

In his teachings, Jesus talks about the “Pearl of Great Price.” *The Coptic Gospel of Thomas* states:
“Jesus said: ‘The realm of the Father is like a Merchant who had a consignment of merchandise and who has discovered a pearl. The merchant was astute. He sold the merchandise and bought solely the pearl for himself. You too, seek his reliable and continuing treasure where no moth approaches to devour and no worm destroys.’"

On a superficial level, one might interpret the parable this way: An astute person handles success by fine tuning his attachments and uses his skills to travel along his spiritual path.

On a deeper level, Jesus is referring to one of the highest visual experiences of the Divine state. The pearl is the bindu or point of light perceived between or slightly above the space between the eyes (where Indian ladies put the red kum kum mark). A well known modern mystic and Meditation Master called it the “Blue Pearl” and its appearance in the awareness of the seeker, whether during meditation or in everyday life, is highly significant.

The pearl or star is well recognised in many inner traditions, not just Christianity or Yoga. The great medieval Sufi meditation Master Ibn ‘Arabi, called it the “Divine Flash.” In his writings he records:

‘a divine flash flashed for me, and in it I saw whatever sciences God willed.’

A seeker may see the “Blue Star” as a tiny saffron or bright whitish blue light flashing forth from the blue light of the deepest state of meditation. It is literally the Divine within, flashing forth as light. One might say that world upon world unfolds from that point of light which may be regarded as our own personal form of Genesis. As St. John says:

‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God…’ John 1:1
That whole section is not just describing how the outer world was created, it is also a teaching describing how our own inner worlds unfold and of how we can return to unity.

One time as I was meditating, that blue / saffron flash of light stood still. Then it began to expand until it seemed almost person sized. A small child made up of brilliant blue light then stepped out and started to dart around the star itself, first this way and then that, stepping into the light and then reappearing again. For me this was a beautiful visual depiction of the play of the Divine within myself, manifesting and dissolving into the Light before my very eyes.

Listen now to a retelling as a story, of a poem known as “The Pearl of the Soul.” It is taken from a Gnostic text called The Acts of Thomas.

When I was a little child living in my Father’s Kingdom, I was cherished by my parents, who loved me very dearly. They clothed me with a garment of the deepest purple hue, and a radiant cloak of shimmering rainbow colours. I wanted for nothing in my childhood. In time, I grew and one day my Father sent for me, took away my beautiful garments and sent me on a dangerous quest.

‘Go to Egypt,’ he said, ‘and find me the pearl which is lying in the sea there, guarded by a fierce and mighty serpent. You must find a way to rescue the pearl and bring it back. My son, know that you always have our full love and protection. Should you succeed, then return to us with it and we will make you an heir to our kingdom.’

And so I set off on my long journey, with a sorrowful heart, leaving behind my beautiful robes. I travelled for many weary days, encountering many challenges and eventually arrived in Egypt to find all manner of delights. Soon I forgot my Father’s request and lost myself in useless pursuits and pastimes.

After a while my Father, worried, sent me a magical letter winging through the air, which sang to me a loving reminder of my noble quest. Horrified at the state I found myself in, I
shed my soiled clothes and made haste to complete my mission. I arrived by the shore of the sea and looked across to the serpent guarding the water. He was every bit as fierce and terrible as I had imagined.

Summoning up every bit of courage and fortified by my Father’s words, I began to chant my Father’s name in a loud voice. The serpent began to listen and then to swoon. I renewed my efforts with even more vigour, calling out my Father’s name in a sonorous voice, over and over again, until, slowly, slowly, I saw the serpent fall into a deep sleep. Immediately I seized the moment and ran forth, collecting the pearl from the sea. I set off at a fast pace, back to my Father’s house.

Oh what joy I felt on arriving at the gates of his Kingdom!

My beloved Father ran to greet me, offering me back the robe of purple hue that I had left behind at the beginning of my journey. He put the rainbow robe around my shoulders and it shimmered even more beautifully than before. Amazed, I saw that it was made, not just of cloth, but of all the beautiful virtues that I had inherited.

With great delight, my Father took me by the hand and led me to the court of the King of Kings, to the court of holy love. There in that place, I was received with great joy. I placed my head at His feet in silent adoration, and offered Him the pearl of my soul, receiving in return, the fullness of his radiant Kingdom in my heart.

Let us spend a few minutes now in silent contemplation.
THE EPIPHANY IN LITERATURE AND LIFE

Rev. Dr. Sw. Shraddhananda

For the last session of the retreat, I intend to speak about the idea of the Epiphany in literature and life.

It was the Irish writer James Joyce (1882-1941) who popularized the term "epiphany" with his collection of short stories entitled *Dubliners* (1914).

Joyce was born in the same year as another great writer whose name is Virginia Woolf. Together with Thomas Mann in Germany and Marcel Proust in France, Joyce and Woolf are among the most skillful fictionists ever to practice the craft.

I, for one, and please permit me something of an aside, do not believe that Virginia Woolf was mad when she walked into swirling waters with rocks in her pockets to her death by drowning. I believe Woolf had tapped into voices on an ethereal plane, she did not know what they were, and she could not stand to listen to them any longer.

Plenty of people probably would denounce Joyce as being crazy, too, especially after publication of *Finnegan’s Wake* in May 1939 just four months before W. H. Auden penned a poem marking the start of World War II. We must not allow ourselves to be deceived by Joyce’s mischief. He was famous for provoking critics and bureaucrats who tried to censor *Ulysses* (1922) and keep it from entering the United States.

Two stories from *Dubliners* are, perhaps, best known for the ways in which Joyce employs epiphany as a literary device. "Araby" is a very short story about a young boy coming to terms with sexual feelings in an age when sex was rarely spoken about out loud in polite society. "The Dead" is the last story in *Dubliners*-- and the longest at 15,000 plus words. It is also Joyce’s masterpiece in the short form.
"The Dead" is set at Christmas time, and it is snowing just as it has been here on W. Columbia St. for our Epiphany Retreat. The Missus Morkan, Gabriel Conroy's unforgettable aunts, are giving their annual Christmas dance, and they are eager for Gabriel to appear. It is 10 o'clock, and they fear that Freddy Malins might turn up "screwed," or drunk.

Gabriel is a writer, a journalist by trade, and he is to give a speech at the party. He must watch his tongue as he has English sympathies, and many of his aunts' guests are Irish Nationalists. He elects to address the subject of hospitality, an appropriate topic for this setting.

When Gabriel and his wife Gretta arrive, Gabriel makes something of a fuss over kicking the snow on his galoshes. Galoshes are popular on the "continent," he says, echoing Joyce's fondness for Europe.

In the course of "The Dead," Gabriel is rebuffed three times. It can be no accident that his name is the same as a famous angel's, or that Jesus also was denied three times. James Joyce was a cradle Catholic who never let Rome out of his hearing distance despite his strong rebellion against her.

First, Gabriel is rebuffed by Lily, a vivacious maid who declines his tip. Secondly, Miss Ivors lets him know pointedly that she does not care for his politics. Lastly, his wife Gretta turns a cold shoulder to him this snowy evening when her mind and heart are elsewhere.

As music has had the power to do across time, a song reminds Gretta of a lover from her youth whose name was Michael Fury. Apparently, he caught a death of cold while trying to make his way to her.

Gabriel had hoped for an intimate evening with his wife. He has let a room at a local hotel. The children are safe with their governess.
Feeling very sad, Gretta cannot return Gabriel's affections. And, herein lies the epiphany. Gabriel cannot be present for his wife in her sadness, and he recognizes his selfishness. In the midst of his epiphany, he burns with shame. And, shame, more so than guilt, can be a transforming emotion.

As the story ends, the narrator shifts his focus to the snow that is "general all over Ireland," surely one of the most famous lines in modern literature. The snow is falling on the living and the dead, giving credence to the law of impermanence.

"The Dead" was adapted for film by legendary director John Huston (1987) with his daughter Anjelica in the role of Gretta. It is highly recommended, especially on a snowy evening in the Christmas season moving toward the Feast of the Epiphany.

Now, let's see what kind of resonance Joyce's story and Gabriel's epiphany might have for our lives. Take a good posture, and focus on the breath. "Om Namah Christaya" on the in breath. "Om Namah Christaya" on the outbreath.

Imagine that you are Gabriel Conroy, or Gretta Conroy. Put yourself in their shoes. Put yourself in their position at the Christmas party--and afterwards as snow is falling on your carriage en route to your hotel.

What message does Gabriel's epiphany hold for you? And, how might you integrate that "aha moment" into your life?

**SW. SHRADDHANANDA’S FINAL ASSIGNMENT FOR EPIPHANY RETREATANTS:**

Let's say you are one of the wise people who follows the bright star and makes your way to the feet of the Christ child. What gift do you offer? And, what gift do you ask for from the Christ?

Sw. Shraddhananda's response: a willingness to work, and a willingness to be guided in the work of assisting others to attain Christ consciousness.
BIOGRAPHIES

Rev. Dr. Sw. Shraddhananda Saraswati, as its founder, serves as Provost and CEO of the Anugraga Institute for Yoga and Interspiritual Studies. She has published numerous articles and books, most recently *Jesus Was a Shaktipat Guru* (Sacred Feet, 2014) and *A Short Book about Killing* (Sacred Feet, 2016).

Swami Shraddhananda has a long history in academic teaching dating back to Allegheny College, a select plus liberal arts institution where she was tenured and promoted to full professor, followed by the Honors Program at the University of Kentucky and service as the first Dean of Graduate Studies at The New Seminary in New York City.

She has studied Yoga since 1988 as a disciple of the Siddha lineage as it manifests in Bhagawan Nityananda of Kanhangad and Ganeshpuri. In 2010, she received transmissions for the founding of Sacred Feet Yoga, an Interspiritual, right-handed intra-Tantric Yoga which she heads as disseminator of Shaktipat, the sacred energy known as the Holy Spirit in Christianity. She is also a lifelong Christian, and for eleven years, she meditated and studied with the Shambhala Buddhists. She attended Warrior Assembly and is a Registered Shambhala Buddhist Guide.

Sw. Shraddhananda currently serves as Preceptor and Lineage Holder of the Sannyasa prong of The Community of the Mystic Heart, an Interspiritual community anchored in the teachings of Bro. Wayne Teasdale. With the approval of the Mahamandaleshwar, she also offers Sannyas in the Saraswati Order of Monastics dating back to Shri Shankaracharya in 8th century India.

She holds a Ph.D. from Emory University. She has lectured on six continents.

Rev. Acharya Sw. Prakashananda Saraswati (aka Rev. Chris Deefholts) is a disciple of the Siddha lineage and a member of the Saraswati Order of Monastics as well as The Community of the Mystic Heart Sannyasa. She serves as Bishop and Priest in the Mission Episcopate of St. Francis and Clare in the Liberal Catholic movement.
Sw. Prakashananda studied Vedanta with Sw. Anubhavananda for fifteen years. She also studied Tibetan Buddhism with Lama Gangchen for several years. She received Sannyas and was ordained as a Sacred Feet Yoga Acharya by Sw. Shraddhananda.

She lives in the United Kingdom where she has worked as a healer, a hatha yoga teacher, and a bookseller in Oxford. A graduate of the University College London, she was certified in hatha yoga with distinction by the Friends of Yoga--All India Board.

She has three grown children and five granddaughters with a grandson due in April 2017.

**Rev. Amanda Musterman** serves as Priest-in-Charge at St. Patrick's Episcopal Church in Somerset, KY. She holds an M.Div. from Emory University's Candler School of Theology. Prior to returning to her hometown of Somerset, she served as Resident Minister to Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and then as Youth Minister to Christ Church Cathedral in Lexington. She is known for her friendliness, and the delight she takes in serving as Priest at St. Pat's, a very loving community.