

4/10/13 Interview: Dada Maheshvarananda & Mirra Price with Jeff Messer on The Revolution Radio Station, Asheville, NC

Mirra Price: I'm happy to introduce Dada Maheshvarananda, a yogic monk and activist, who is currently director of the Prout Research Institute in Caracas, Venezuela, and who is originally from the U. S.

Jeff Messer: Okay. Living in Venezuela now? What made you decide to settle in Venezuela? What was the inspiration for wanting to live there?

Dada Maheshvarananda: There's a revolution going on there.

Jeff: It's rapidly changing right now. Were you in the country when Chavez passed away?

Dada: Yes.

Jeff: So you got to see the initial response and reaction to that.

Dada: Let me say a little bit about that. Chavez, for the first time in history, tried to use and did use the income the country was getting from sales of petroleum to help the poor. Venezuela is now sitting on what they calculate as being the largest oil deposits in the world...even larger than those in Saudi Arabia. He has used that money to help the poor people. When he came to power, 60 percent of the population was poor. They were marginalized and voiceless. His goal, which is the same as our goal in economic democracy, was to provide the minimum necessities of life to everyone. For example, free health care. One day I got sick from eating some bad yogurt. I was told, just to be safe, to come in for a free MRI the next day. There is free health care all over the country. There are doctors working in the poorest barrios, the poorest villages, doing house calls, so it is an impressive level of health care. Chavez has built 200,000 houses for the homeless last year. The plan is for two million houses over the next four years. There is free university education. The public universities, which are a little better, charge \$20 a month for tuition. So when Chavez died, Jeff, the most popular tee shirt was "I Am Chavez/Yo Soy Chavez". The people say, "We're not going back. We're going ahead. We're going to keep with these changes."

Jeff: It's interesting because you were born here in Philadelphia, attended college in the early 70s and were active in the anti-Viet Nam movement, so you have the American perspective and also the perspective of having lived in Venezuela for all this time. The hardest part about it is to understand that Chavez is loved in his country, but was ridiculed and turned into a sort of cartoon character in this country. Why, do you think that the American political system really passionately wants us to hate Chavez?

Dada: There are a couple of reasons. One of Chavez' biggest problems, in my opinion, was his mouth. I believe in non-violent, respectful communication. He considered it quite all right to insult the opposition. Anybody who didn't like him, he called them "squalids". It doesn't make any sense in English or Spanish, either.

Jeff: It just sounds like a bad name. I am going to have to write that down, so I can start using it.

Dada: He also called George Bush “The Devil” and obviously angered people. There is a gap between those who love him, about 60 percent, and those who don’t. He had won 16 of the last 17 elections. Jimmy Carter came down there several times with the Carter Commission to observe. He said that these were the freest and fairest elections in both South and North America. In the United States, in the November presidential elections, 59 percent of the registered voters voted in the elections. In Venezuela, almost everybody is registered. There was an 89 percent turnout for the October elections. So people are very conscious. They feel they live in a democratic country, according to the polls. They also are a very happy people, again, according to many polls.

Jeff: Well, they were clearly pleased with Chavez’ leadership. How is the transition going with the Vice-President? Early press reports paint a not so pretty picture of him.

Dada: Right. He’s not Chavez. Chavez came back when he was flying to Cuba for his last operation, to announce that his Vice President, Nicholas Maduro, was his appointed successor. He got back on the plane, flew to Cuba and was never heard from again. He had a respiratory illness and a tracheotomy. He was fighting for his life for two months. Finally, he passed away. The sympathy vote is clearly tied up with Nicolas Maduro. The constitution says that when a president dies, within 30 days a new election has to be held. So, within these 30 days, he’s completely copying the rhetoric of Hugo Chavez, including a few insults even.

Jeff: If it isn’t broken, don’t fix it.

Dada: Right. So he is just appealing to the regular voters who voted for Chavez in 16 out of 17 elections, to vote for him, so they can continue for the next five years, what they call “The Bolivarian Revolution”.

Jeff: Any projections as to where it will go from there?

Dada: Well, as I mentioned, there is this idea of “I am Chavez”. The people are determined not to go backward. I am going to say one more thing about why Chavez was demonized.

Jeff: Sure, go ahead.

Dada: I think that a major class shift happened. For 500 years the elites have been running the country. These are pure white people, European descendants, well educated, the upper class. They always ran the show. The one-tenth of one percent. When Chavez came to power, he didn’t appoint any of the old faithful to be his ministers. He appointed people of color. So the very rich people no longer have friends as ministers who are high up in the government. There is a word in Spanish “amigismo” which means that you get things done through contacts and friends. That happens in the United States, too, sometimes. Having a contact is a good way to get your foot in the door.

Jeff: Unfortunately, you can buy friends here.

Dada: Yes. The rich don’t have any more friends in the government. Chavez threw them all out and put his own people in. It is all people of color. Chavez himself is part American Indian, part Afro-Venezuelan and part European mix. This is the way the country is looking today. This is another reason the big banks are scared of him. Poverty went down 50 percent and extreme poverty went down 70 percent while he was in office. At the same time, last year there was a growth rate of 5.6 percent. The economy is not stagnating. It is actually growing. That is something you don’t usually hear about.

Jeff: That's fascinating. It's hard to find anywhere you can say that about today. I am glad we have someone on the show who can help demystify the situation in Venezuela.

Dada: Chavez did do so much for the poor. I have spent 35 years of my life trying to help the poor. I had a lot of respect for the man. I met him. He called me "brother". When I met him ten years ago, he said, "Let's continue with spirituality, spirit, good faith, morality and the mystical force that guides the world." I like that. I can believe in that. He also told about three differences between him and Fidel Castro. One difference is that Fidel is a communist and he's a socialist. Cuba has a one party system; Venezuela has a multi-party system with free and fair elections. Secondly, Cuba has a centralized planned economy while Venezuela has a mixed economy with private enterprises and cooperatives—66,000 cooperatives and state-owned enterprises. The third difference is that Fidel is an atheist and he said that he wasn't. He said he believed in Jesus Christ, both as a social revolutionary and as a personal liberator. Yet Fidel and he were friends, Chavez said.

Jeff: If you get down to the teachings of Christ, it is "open arms".

Dada: Right. Well, I decided to go say "good-bye" to him. I called a friend at a national radio station. He told me the moment the plans were announced. The next day the body would be brought from the military hospital to the military base for viewing. So a few friends and I went there at 6:00 in the morning. The guard said that the body wasn't coming until afternoon. But, since it was Venezuela, we decided to wait. We were the first ones there. After one hour, there were 200 people waiting. After two hours, at 8:00 in the morning, there were already over a thousand people there. By noontime, the stadium was packed with 50,000 people. After eleven hours of waiting, we finally saw the body pass. I gave my regards. When it went for viewing the first night, the journalists reported that the line was a mile long. By the second day, they were pouring in from every state in the country. The line was five miles long. We talked with people in the line. They didn't come because they were paid. They didn't come because they had to. Each person had only a second, a passing glimpse. They did it because they wanted to say "thank you" to a man who had changed their lives and had changed their country forever. It was an impressive showing. It is going to continue. We need new leadership. He didn't empower so many other leaders. We have to find new leaders. But, people on a community level are going ahead.

Jeff: Great. That is good to hear. Thank you for sharing that. It gives perspective where perspective is needed. You say that you have been overseas for 35 years?

Dada: Yes. I've been in Venezuela seven years. Eleven years in Brazil. Fourteen years in Southeast Asia. 35 years I've been overseas.

Jeff: Now your book you have written is called *After Capitalism: Economic Democracy in Action*. There are few sacred cows in this nation that get people's ire up more than the term, "capitalism". Tell us a little bit about the book. What is the driving force that made you want to write it? You say that global capitalism is terminally ill and doomed to collapse. Care to expand on that?

Dada: Yes. Capitalism works for some people, but it doesn't work for everybody. The gap between the rich and the poor is increasing astronomically, constantly. Second is that the rich in the last 40 years are no longer using their money productively to open a new company or start a new enterprise. Rather, they are using 95 percent of their money in speculation. It is like going to the casino except it's called the stock market and the futures market. The money is not circulating. Rather, it is being hoarded. The third

problem is the destructive impact on the environment because of the tremendous drive for quarterly profits. Corporations are these nameless entities that can neglect or destroy the environment rather than protect it for the future. The fourth problem is the urge to buy on credit. The FEC says that \$16,000 is the average consumer debt per family, not student loans or mortgages, just credit cards and payday loans with very high interest rates. That is what most families carry.

Jeff: Since the average family carries \$16,000 in consumer debt and if a person makes minimum wage and works 40 hours a week, they get only \$17,500 a year, that doesn't leave much for the family to live on. That is astounding.

Dada: The first priority of any economy, of any society, is to guarantee the right to live to everyone. Every man, woman and child needs to have food, clothing, housing, education and medical care, because without these basic necessities of life, what good are the other rights? The right to live is first.

Jeff: When capitalism enters the picture, the basic rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, go out of the picture. This is so wrong. The basic tenets on which we formed this country are being ignored for profit.

Dada: We know that people who are neglected the most are the marginalized...women, people of color, the elderly, so maybe Mirra could talk about how economic democracy could help exploited people.

Jeff: Mirra, you're an accomplished person in your own right as an author and activist. Tell us a little bit about Prout. What is Prout?

Mirra: PROUT is an acronym for Progressive Utilization Theory. It was propounded in 1959 by P. R. Sarkar, who was an economist, humanitarian and spiritual leader in India. The basic tenets are that everyone should be guaranteed the minimum necessities of life. According to Prout, no one should go hungry and suffer for lack of other basic necessities. The main problem is not that we don't have enough food or enough resources, but that we are not distributing resources in a way so that most people can function to feed and take care of their families so they can thrive. Instead, many families are struggling just to survive. It's harder and harder for students to get an education due to rising costs and less availability of student aid. It's harder and harder for families to be able to help their children have a better future. Many women who are often head of households in families, especially among African-American families, for example, are living way below the poverty line and struggling to take care of their families. Child care, especially for one-parent families, is increasingly difficult for them to afford, since there is no national child care system. Cuts to education and student loan funding also severely hurt poor families.

Jeff: Right. People who have attained a certain level of wealth, a certain degree of power through their success in the capitalism system seem to be trying to restrict others from having access to the benefits of that same system. It's easy for those who have the wealth to like the fact they are rich and have all they need and all they want, and to not want others, like marginalized groups, to take away from what they have. We are seeing that our government has been cutting programs that supply basic needs and services, the social safety nets to people in this country. How does Prout work to try to reverse this trend?

Mirra: One of the very basic initiatives that Prout supports is going to a more cooperative base in the economy in which people are no longer getting most of our goods and services from huge multinational

corporations. Money is leaving our local communities and going to line the pockets of people who are already very wealthy and to these huge corporations that don't have the best interests of communities and the people in their plan.

Jeff: In *After Capitalism*, you say that there is enough out there for everyone, that there are enough resources on the planet so that everyone can have all those basic needs met, but clearly, that only comes if people are willing to share. The rich people are not going to give it up willingly. Although there are people who are forward thinking enough to realize that we have to level the playing field. If the system becomes too top heavy, it will crumble.

Dada: Jeff, we have a minimum wage in this country which is clearly not enough to provide the minimum necessities. What about a maximum wage? When I talk to students around the country, I ask them, "Is there a maximum wage in this country?" They always laugh and say, "No." But, there is. Every federal employee who starts gets something like \$17,800 in any department of the government. Every new federal employee gets this same starting salary. No matter how many promotions you get, if you get to the top position like President, supreme court judge, senator, Five-Star General, you don't get more than ten times what the starting salary is, \$179, 700, a ten times gap. Everybody considers that fair and just. Nobody calls the military or the U. S government "communist". Everybody's not getting the same. It's a ten times gap. In Norway it's only a five times gap between the top and the bottom. The starting salary is much higher. Norway is one of the richest countries in Europe. I just propose that we have this same type of cap in terms of society. Everybody has a right to a house, but not 2000 apartments in the center of the city. When your income reaches ten million dollars, you can live on just the interest alone. You don't have to lift a finger any more. You're making thousands of dollars a month just on the interest. That's not fair.

Jeff: There was a caller on the show who suggested that when someone's wealth exceeds a certain amount, the government would just give you a card, and the government would then just give you anything you want.

Dada: Sure. They have it now. It's called American Express.

Jeff: "Don't leave home without it." The point is that at that level of wealth, nothing means anything to them. Why not put that money back in the system and raise everyone else up? If you could have everything you have ever wanted, why not give the rest back to help others?

Dada: Of course.

Jeff: We've been talking about the various projects they've been involved with and we found out that Mirra has a theatre background.

Mirra: Yes. I have a BA in theatre from Indiana University and taught theatre and English on the Navajo Reservation for most of my career.

Jeff: So now your focus is more on Prout and social service?

Mirra: Now that I've retired I am able to give more of my time to the causes in which I believe.

Jeff: You've always been an activist. I was reading your bio and saw that you've been involved in many different causes. Once an activist, always an activist.

Mirra: I started with the anti-Viet Nam war movement, and then went into Women's Liberation. I also worked with Cesar Chavez in the grape boycott movement with the farm workers and supported many environmental causes. While I was on the Navajo Reservation, the U. S. government was forcibly relocating many Navajos, or Dineh, as they call themselves. I worked with resistors to that relocation.

Jeff: Thank you for all your involvement. It has to be frustrating to see how much progress has been made, but it is still not enough.

Mirra: Yes. I just wanted to mention, regarding women's rights, that yesterday, April 9th, was Equal Pay Day for women. It is a different day every year. It is the day after the previous calendar year that women have to work to get the same salary that men did in the whole previous calendar year.

Jeff: So you are aiming for January 1st to be the equal pay day.

Mirra: Yes, or maybe there would come a time when the days would coincide so we wouldn't need to have an equal pay day. A lot of people think that with the women's movement, that we are all done. But, we are not! People of color and women tend to suffer more in these days of a worsening economy. Women make 77 percent of the salary of a white male in the United States; African- American women make 59 cents on this dollar; Latino women, around 45 cents on the dollar. In this economic downturn, the part of the pie that women and people of color have gets smaller and smaller. And many women can only get work part time and seasonal jobs. Due to employment discrimination and harassment, some women face a hostile work place as well, and may choose not to work for fear for their safety.

Jeff: Sure. What is a website that people can find out more about Prout?

Mirra: Dada, do you want to give your website?

Dada: It's www.aftercapitalism.org and the Prout Research Institute in Venezuela. If people want to come down, we can take visitors and volunteers. That is www.priven.org.

Mirra: Here in Asheville, locally, we have a Prout Research Institute in Marshall. They have published some books. *Principles of a Balanced Economy* is their latest book.

Jeff: Thanks. Excellent, folks. Go to www.aftercapitalism.org for copies of the book.

Mirra: Firestorm Co-op and Malaprops bookstore are carrying it as well.

Jeff: Let us know when you are back in town and we will gladly have you back on the show. It's been a lot of fun.

Mirra: Thank you very much.

Dada: Thank you, Jeff.

