

Editorial

Suffering and Spirituality

Spiritual life, as a practical matter, has to take suffering into account. The spiritual journey has to begin with the human condition as it is. Pain and suffering are part of that condition for all of us. In fact, it is suffering, whether our own or that of others, that prompts us to try to overcome suffering.

Some may ask, why dwell on the negative aspects of life? Why not accentuate the positive? There are many good things in life, things that bring us pleasure and happiness. Why not concentrate on those things? Yes, if we are content with our present life we will not struggle to go beyond it. If there are no problems, there will be no need for solutions.

But this attitude has major disadvantages. First, it cannot be sustained throughout life. Sooner or later, one has to face disease, old age and death, and also human evil. The physical body is not designed to last forever. Sooner or later we will become ill and die. And even if our bodies remain mostly free from disease, we are subject to suffering caused by others, by our environment, or by our own minds. Human beings without inner discipline and compassion will seek their own advantage without regard to the suffering their actions cause to others. Some time or other we are bound to be on the receiving end of suffering caused by others, whether intentionally or not. But the most important disadvantage of recognizing only the “positive” is that we don’t grow, we don’t struggle to realize our full human potential. Virtually all great men and women in all fields of endeavor had to struggle, had to suffer. Without that, they would not have become great.

With these thoughts in mind, we explore in this issue of *AV* how spiritual aspirants grapple with suffering, how they use it to grow, and how they relate it to their view of life, God and the universe. We encourage our readers to send us their own accounts of how they cope with suffering and how it relates to their spiritual lives.

—John Schlenck

Suffering: A Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Point of View

Swami Yogeshananda

[A Symposium on Suffering was held at Randolph-Macon College in Virginia, in 1983, to which five world faiths were invited to contribute their points of view. As delegate for Hinduism, I first presented the perspectives of the schools of Devotion, of Yoga, and of Sankaracharya, and went on to conclude with the outlook of our own movement. The paper has been edited for this article.]

Many have asked the question: How can we reconcile suffering with the existence of a merciful and loving God? On this crucial question it is our view of the Divine that “God” has both Impersonal and Personal aspects. This idea may not be very familiar in the West. Sri Ramakrishna has likened it to fire and its power to burn: one cannot think of the one without the other. That same Being which by the Advaitists is called Brahman in its transcendence, and the Atman in its immanence within us—that Being is also the All-powerful, All-knowing and All-merciful Personal God of the devotee, seen from the latter’s standpoint.

Moreover, we very often consider the Personal God to be the Mother of us all. We like to refer to God as “She,” the Mother, and to look upon this whole universe as her manifestation, her playground, even her embodiment. Patiently she waits while her children play with the toys and dolls of life. While we climb in the tree of the world, tasting its sweet and bitter fruits, she smiles indulgently, awaiting her children’s return to her lap. Here is the saving power, the grace that descends, as it were, to succor, to love and to transform the sinner. But it is also more than that: it is the power of self-effort within each of us, the energy, the intelligence we have, to remake ourselves in our true image. She is both: the Savior from above *and* the potency in us to struggle for ourselves. One could even say that it is God who discovers Selfhood through us.

An Opportunity for Learning

That is why there is no contradiction in calling suffering an opportunity for learning, yet suggesting ways of avoiding it. These apply at different stages of our spiritual life. Learning to avoid pain (that frequent cause of suffering) is a process of education: we teach the child the law of karma: “If you climb high in the tree and fall, you will be badly hurt. If you eat too many chillies your mouth and stomach will burn.” We teach the youth: “Treat others as you would be treated.” It is only later, when we discover that passing through distress can actually mature us or raise our consciousness, that we can join the company of the saints and advise ourselves to endure, or even embrace, suffering. Moreover, to say, as Swami Vivekananda did, that we learn more through our suffering than

through our happiness, does not glorify suffering or persecution. It is not morbid masochism. According to the Swami, it is a cheerful and courageous mind which is persevering and can overcome. Consider the feelings of the affectionate mother of a boy about to undergo football training. Fully aware of the risks he will be taking and injuries likely to be sustained, is she any the less compelled to endorse it in the interests of his maturity? She tells him to go ahead but to take all possible care.

We see, then, that in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda perspective there is a surprising combination of motherly tenderness and manly strength. “Hard as adamant, soft as a flower,” is an Indian maxim Swami Vivekananda liked to quote. He was of that nature himself and so were many of Sri Ramakrishna’s disciples. Strength, said the Swami, was the medicine for the world’s disease. In a spiritual approach to suffering, whether it is our own or that of others, strength is the first and last word, whether we are yogis, jnanis or devotees.

One following the path of devotion may deny the very vehemence of these statements. But think of the strength required to say “Thy will be done” and mean it; Swami Vivekananda remarks that one who says it twice is a hypocrite! In the Yoga perspective the role of strength is both evident and avowed. And as for the Advaitist, the implication is also clear: “Thou are That” means you are the Infinite, the Eternal—no more sin, no more bondage, no more limitation, pettiness, ignorance, partiality—to act up to this takes the greatest strength we have. To a mosquito a drop of seaspray is a disaster; not so for you or me. What is a disaster for us? That which we have not yet the strength to encompass.

The Suffering of Others

Our outlook here is certainly not one of ignoring wrong doing. Sri Ramakrishna said one should not hold one’s tongue at the sight of injustice and untruth. According to Swami Vivekananda, even if we practice non-resistance to the evil done to us, we need not do so in the case of evil being done to others. In its social activism this movement of ours differs from orthodox Hindu monasticism and is a restoration of the Karma Yoga doctrine of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Retrospectively, we can only say that from the teachings of Sankara and his followers India got saturated with the notion that work in the world could only bring attachment, that non-dualism was incompatible with external activity. (From Sankara’s *life* no one can draw that conclusion!) Those familiar with the work of the Ramakrishna Mission in India and beyond know how thoroughly we reject this point of view and how firmly we pursue the yoga of action—*not as condescending generosity* but as service to the God in all. In that sense those whom we “help” give us the opportunity to be helped, to expand. “Let the *giver* kneel down and give thanks.”

But strength is of different kinds and must be suited to the distress we wish to alleviate. Our workers struggle to fill the empty stomach, clothe the naked back

and rebuild the wind-ripped roof; yet we know that the physical is not man's most corrosive distress. Societies with lower levels of physical pain may have a great deal of psychological pain.

Difference is seen too in the same person in different moods or states of consciousness. In the case of Sri Ramakrishna, for example, there was a striking contrast on two successive days, in reacting to the same event. He was present at the death of his young nephew whom he dearly loved. (Here we need to recall how often he was in an exalted mood). He says:

"It did not affect me in the least. I stood by and watched a man die. It was like a sword being drawn from its scabbard. I enjoyed the scene and laughed and sang and danced over it. They removed the body and cremated it. But the next day I felt a racking pain for the loss of Akshay, as if somebody were squeezing my heart like a wet towel. I wondered at it and thought that the Mother was teaching me a lesson. I was not much concerned even with my own body – how much less with that of a relative. But if such was *my* pain at the loss of a nephew, how much more must be the grief of the householders at the loss of their near and dear ones!"¹

Pangs of the Mind

Wide variations are seen in the manner in which different societies handle mental suffering. Take the case of a young woman of Bengal, one of the circle of Ramakrishna's devotees, Yogin-Ma by name. Her family situation paralleled that of Mrs. Alving in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, who also discovers she has married a profligate and drunkard. Her inability to resolve her situation in the context of her time, her society and its religious dictates, is true tragedy. Yogin Ma's solution, vastly unlike Ibsen's, resolved itself instead by Yogin-Ma's being absorbed into the circle of women surrounding Sri Ramakrishna's widow, the Holy Mother. By internalizing her crisis and seeking the company of the holy, she transformed her life and eventually became saintly. Although the era is the same, one can scarcely imagine this happening in Mrs. Alving's Norwegian society. In fact, one wonders whether the tragedies of *The Doll's' House* and *Ghosts* could even be appreciated in the Indian environment and mental climate, where the message to the human soul who sorrows is, "You must go *in* and *up*."

Parents who in their suffering blame their children know full well the gamble they took in bringing them into this world. And children who blame their parents ought to consider their situation as an opportunity to exercise their developmental powers. To the Vedantist this is the mature point of view. We may often get misery in return for our love—not for the fact that we love, but to the extent that we demand love in return.

¹ *Life of Sri Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2002), p. 196.

Turning Pain in Another Direction

Thus it is that misery ultimately can leverage liberation. “Let us feel pain,” says Vivekananda, “that we have not reached the Highest, that we have not yet reached God, and that pain will be our salvation.” It will also make us manifest our maximum strength.

To some it may sound as if these solutions are rather like cutting off our head to cure the headache. Is the game really worth such a candle? They must fall back on the devotional approach: it never was *your* head in the first place, so not to worry. All heads are God’s heads, all faces Her faces, all hands Her hands. The Divine Mother is Creatrix, Preserver and Dissolver of this creation. Hinduism admits no Satan, no final cleavage at the heart of reality. For all is one Power, one Source. This is the game She is playing with herself. In this dream of life it is She, the Mother, who is taking all the parts—wearing all these masks. Mountains are one mask, molecules another, mollusks another, cosmic stars are one mask, film stars another. Sri Ramakrishna says:

“The Divine Mother revealed to me in the Kali temple that it was She who had become everything. She showed me that everything was full of Consciousness. The image was Consciousness, the altar was Consciousness, the water-vessels were Consciousness, the doorsill was Consciousness, the marble floor was Consciousness—all was Consciousness. I found everything inside the room soaked, as it were, in bliss—the bliss of Satchidananda. I saw a wicked man in front of the Kali temple; but in him also I saw the Power of the Divine Mother vibrating. That was why I fed a cat with the food that was to be offered to the Mother. I clearly perceived that the Divine Mother had herself become everything—even the cat.”²

On another day when he was expounding this truth, the following conversation took place:

Sri Ramakrishna: “. . .after the practice of hard spiritual discipline, one or two have the vision of God, through Her grace, and are liberated. Then the Divine Mother claps her hands in joy and exclaims, ‘Bravo! There they go!’”

A devotee objects. “But this play of God is our death.”

Sri Ramakrishna, smiling: “Please tell me who *you* are. God alone has become all this...It is God Herself who has become both knowledge and ignorance.”³

² *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna Vivekananda Center, 1942), pp. 345-346.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

With him this was no doctrine; this was his experience, often repeated. He reports near the end of his life:

“I saw houses, gardens, roads, men, cattle—all made of one substance; it was as if they were all made of wax. I *see* that it is God himself who has become the block, the executioner and the victim for the sacrifice.”⁴

This realization is what Ramakrishna used to call *vijnana*, this double process, negation followed by affirmation. We have first to realize (with our whole being, not just intellectually) the Nitya, the transcendental Absolute. Then, having reached the “roof,” we descend the stairs to discover that it is that very Being who has put on the garment of this universe. And she wears it as her own body.

This viewpoint is, of course, no monopoly of India; it is found in the mystics of the great world faiths. Meister Eckhart puts it in his own framework:

Folks tell us of the holy life, how they have suffered. To tell the tale of what our Lord’s friends suffered, time would be all too short. I say: they did not suffer. The least suspicion of God-consciousness and sufferings would be all forgot. This may well happen while the soul is in the body. I say more: while yet in the body a soul may reach oblivion of its travail not to remember it again.⁵

This is the same message and the same true ring of experience as found in Rabi’a and Ramakrishna.

Without at least a glimpse of the truth of this vision we shall never understand suffering or the problem of evil. That is the message which comes from these prophets of modern India: human sufferings and worries spring from our persistent thought that we are only this particular, limited human being. Suffering can mean the de-hypnotizing of ourselves. “All troubles come to an end when the ego dies.” “When this ‘I’ shall die, then shall I know who am I.” Let us close with a stanza from the poetess of Indian freedom, Sarojini Naidu:

Thou shalt drink deep of joy and fame,
And love shall burn thee like a fire,
And pain shall cleanse thee like a flame
To purge the dross from thy desire.⁶



⁴ Ibid., p. 942.

⁵ Franz Pfeiffer, *Meister Eckhart*, trans. C. deB. Evans (London: John M. Watkins, 1924) p. 323.

⁶ From “The Soul’s Prayer,” in *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*. Ed. Nicholson & Lee. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1917).

To Give Light the Candle Burns

Thomas W. Rea

I'll leave it to the great teachers to address the cause and nature of suffering. The most relevant ideas I can offer to this discussion are a few insights gained through time, hearing, and the school of hard knocks. I will, however, state while given the chance that I do not fancy the notion that somehow suffering appeases an angry God and creates a higher experience in some paradise or that our suffering fulfills some dreadful karma of a past life. Whatever the truth of the nature of God, of the existence of Paradise, or of the effects of a past karma, suffering is enough for me to deal with here and now. In and of itself suffering is nothing desirable or meritorious or something for self-aggrandizement. It is perfectly natural and intelligent to avoid suffering. It is not a religious or spiritual thing in itself. Nor is it some melodrama about the tormented "dark night of the soul." One of the most painful insights about suffering is that most suffering is self-inflicted and avoidable. What do we in Vedanta hear? That the cause of suffering is ignorance. Not an endearing philosophy at first because it places the responsibility solely on ourselves. Oh dear!

Don't Make a Melodrama out of It

Such views stated, I notice that suffering always seems terribly personal when one experiences it. No matter what lofty philosophy one aspires to, the minute suffering comes, it is a very visceral experience. From the Roman Stoics, among others, I found the idea helpful to try not to make my own suffering into a melodrama about me. In Vedantic language we call it being detached. But it is almost against our nature to be always detached. For example, at the death of a dear family member. Nor do I feel guilty for my vulnerability when suffering comes. For it is bound to come and even abundantly sooner or later. Neither should we advocate denial of suffering either. If anything, perhaps the best way to diffuse suffering is to accept it as the Buddhists would advise. To sometimes say "yes" to it as something that one cannot presently understand or change. One power we do assuredly have, however, is not to make a drama or story of "poor me" regarding suffering. The Stoics saw suffering as merely a part of the natural order, the nature of things and all human experiences and all relationships. From that viewpoint, there is nothing personal or special about suffering. It just is. Why do we desire to demand to know the "meaning" of everything? What if something just is? In order for the candle to give light it must burn. Perhaps we could view our suffering as burning, producing our own light unto the world. But let's not go too far with that either lest it too become a story. . .

But since suffering is a visceral type of experience, an emotional response has often proved helpful. If one is of a devotional nature, praying earnestly with all one's emotional might transcends the pain and connects the mind and heart to the compassionate nature of the Indwelling Spirit personified in one's object of devotion. Repeating the mantra has a soothing effect on a troubled mind. If you must have drama, have holy drama and throw oneself at the feet of the Divine Mother and plead most piteously. It is okay sometimes to have a childlike relationship with the universe, to plead and beg and cajole. When suffering is intense, meditation may seem difficult; then try simple controlled and focused breathing, attempting in spite of all to feel the Indwelling Presence in the midst of mental or physical torment. It is said that much of our suffering is actually the resisting of it. It sometimes diffuses suffering to momentarily surrender to it, to grief or anxiety, to prove to the mind that indeed one will not die by embracing fear, loss, grief, sorrow or the object of our momentary suffering. Another helpful concept, learned at our own mother's lap: "this too will pass." In the midst of suffering remember that suffering too has to end. Sometimes simply clinging to the thought of enduring until the brighter day with no answers is the only recourse.

Forcefully Speaking Back

In Vedanta I have found one simple practice most beneficial. One senior swami used to counsel us repeatedly that negative thoughts will not help us. No matter how true the negativity might seem, how real, how deserved, still it will not help us. The unbridled mind is wont to talk negatively and despairingly to us during trying times. At such times I forcefully speak back positive and hopeful sentences to myself. To get in a relatively soundproof place and shout out positive and hopeful messages can counteract negative impulses. Be one's own loving guru and talk truthfully to one's soul aloud. Be very emotional about it. This is an emotional experience, this suffering, and emotional insight is often the most creative and, therefore, spiritual part of us. There is no shame in approaching God emotionally with an open heart.

In Vedanta we have heard that all action is first a thought. Visualize good and happy results—flood the mind with what is beautiful, hopeful and true. Ask—no, *demand*—that our needs, our fears and tears be assuaged. Nothing is more intimate than the Indwelling Spirit; our teachers have advised us that no formality is necessary. Simply demand and ask the universe to manifest a healing or whatever is lacking or needed—always being aware the highest request remains wisdom, light and understanding. Hopefully, one result of suffering can be humility. And that is a boat that can take us "closer to the other shore." □

God's Justice or God's Just Us

Charlie K. Mitchell

I have undergone two back surgeries. They resulted in severe nerve damage and chronic pain that seems likely to be my companion for the rest of my life. Through it all I have fought to reconcile this experience with my 37 years of spiritual practices as a Vedantist. I am thus well qualified to offer a few reflections on the vexed intersection where pain and suffering collide with faith.

The question raised is the conundrum famously set forth by the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, distilled here as: *How can we reconcile the goodness, omnipotence and omnipresence of God with the reality of pain, suffering and evil.*¹ For a devotee in persistent pain, month after month, year after year, with no medical hope for a better future, this is not a trivial issue.

The Best of All Possible Worlds?

Hume's query in philosophical terms is part of an area called "theodicy," the inquiry into "God's Justice"—or how we justify God's apparent misbehavior. Such questions had existed for centuries (the doctrine of karma is a theodicy) but were not named until the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz used the term in his "Best of All Possible Worlds" theodicy in 1710. Leibniz's idea (If a better world could have been created, our God, who is all-good, would have created it. Therefore we live in the best of all possible worlds) caught on briefly, but about 40 years after he published it the devastating Lisbon earthquake and tsunami virtually destroyed the city of Lisbon and the notion that this was the best of all possible worlds, or even a pretty good world, fell into popular disfavor. Leibniz's rosy view of things was wholly destroyed a few years later in Voltaire's *Candide*, a deadly satire of Leibniz's ideas.

There are probably hundreds of theodicies. Some illustrations will be useful:

- Advaita Vedanta— Pain and suffering are experiences of Maya, the incorrect understanding of life in terms of self and not-self. In reality, there is only one Self. Get rid of the illusion of duality and in your unitary consciousness there will be no issue. The goodness of God or the lack thereof does not arise in this context. (A number of Buddhist schools embrace this theodicy and are often called "Buddhist Vedanta.")
- Buddhism, various schools— Good and evil, joy and suffering, pleasure and pain are all in a balance. Until we find the right balance we must reincarnate and experience these pairs of opposites. God is not implicated in this arrangement.

¹ Hume's formulation of the question was more complex. See Richard H. Popkin, Ed., *Dialogues on Natural Religion* [Hackett, 1980], p.63.

- Catholic theodicy—Your suffering is joined to Christ’s suffering on your behalf and on the behalf of all the world. When you suffer, if you do it in the right spirit, you join Christ in redeeming humankind. Therefore, suffering is not only good but an act of spiritual altruism through which you acquire merit.
- Christianity, various denominations—Evil and pain exist in this world only. This world is a mere prelude to the afterlife, where no pain will exist for the good and the righteous. The scales of justice are not balanced here but in the afterlife. Therefore, there is no complaint against God.
- Consequentialism—Every bad thing will eventually have good consequences such that the initial pain and suffering will be offset by some gain that we can’t now imagine. God is all good, and apparent wrong is due to our short-sightedness. Thus, even the Holocaust will echo down the centuries to the ultimate good of the human race.
- Free will theodicy—We cause our own pain and suffering. God could prevent it, but then we would no longer have free will. As God has given us free will, we have no complaint against him.
- Islamic theodicy—Suffering means you are being tested, and Allah is doing things for your benefit in the next life. Allah is never evil to us. The events of this life are not meaningful except in terms of the next life. Allah is all good and so is everything Allah allows to happen, even if you can’t see it at the time.
- Just World theodicy—If someone is suffering it is because they deserve it, no matter how undeserving they may appear. We do not know the darkness in people’s hearts. God is just.
- The Leibniz theodicy mentioned earlier.
- Various religions and philosophies (1)—Pain and suffering are due to karma, an inexorable law of cause and effect. We can’t understand what is happening because the law of karma applies over numerous incarnations. Whatever is happening, it’s our own fault and therefore there is no complaint against God. (The Just World theodicy is a variant of the doctrine of karma.)
- Various religions and philosophies (2)—Suffering is educational. It makes us better people. Therefore, God is good.

I initially approached the question of suffering vs. faith from two angles. There is a former English instructor floating in my background, and a lawyer. The English instructor resolved to study the problem in order to find patterns of thought running through innumerable cultures, patterns that could be sorted and assembled to make a sense that would satisfy my troubled thoughts. The lawyer benefited from the study but approached the matter by dissecting every pattern of thought to determine where the errors had arisen that left me in mental and spiritual distress, the ornaments of chronic pain.

Was it “just,” what was happening to me? Had I done something to deserve it? Does God give people what they deserve? To paraphrase *Hamlet*, Give to everyone what is deserved, and who shall escape whipping? The observable world of my experience, like Hamlet’s, told me that the idea of God’s involvement with “justice” and what may be “deserved” makes no sense. As a Vedantist, of course, I was inclined to go with the theodicy of karma since it (sort of) omits God from the picture. (Sort of, because if you pray to a personal God you are assuming that He/She will save you from whatever karmic disaster may be upon you.)

The doctrine of karma would rationalize the problem away by positing instead of God’s justice a hidden, mechanical Law, which mandates that the intolerable horrors of life are indeed “deserved” because of wrongs done in previous lives. A baby born blind, without limbs and retarded simply got what he deserved. If we only knew this guy’s previous lives of sin we wouldn’t feel sorry for him at all. No wonder God doesn’t intervene. From this point of view karma is a theodicy, which, by bringing in a moral justification for all suffering, blames the sufferer and, by discouraging compassion, actually contributes to the evil it seeks to justify.

All Theodicies Are Unsatisfying

Absent karma, how to explain pain and suffering in a world created by a good, all-powerful God? The various theodicies may be endless. They are all unsatisfying. Some are interesting, some are more or less persuasive, some seem downright silly. All are flawed. The underlying assumption that God is good, all-powerful, etc., etc. (fill in your own adjectives) is incorrect. It imposes *some* attributes on the Ultimate Mystery while eliminating other attributes. If God is good, why isn’t He/She bad as well? That’s how human beings made in “His” image are, sometimes good, sometimes bad. We are Godlike. More accurately, our God is us-like. We have imposed upon God the attribute of being good, and only good, and then we are disappointed when the God we have created doesn’t behave according to our expectations. Sri Ramakrishna resolved this part of the question when he said, “Sometimes I think of God as good, sometimes as bad.” (*Gospel* p.299)

But that’s cold comfort for one who suffers and tries to reconcile suffering with faith. (There is a meaningful distinction between “pain” and “suffering” which I do not address here. Suffice to say that I have understood a little, but only a little, how to live with pain without suffering.) After spending much more time on it than it deserved, I abandoned the approach, which asks, *If God is good why do bad things happen to good people*. I abandoned theodicy. There is no answer to the question, Why. The lawyer in me found that the basic premise was flawed, and that’s *it* for this issue. Case closed. The English instructor, determined but mired in irreconcilable theodicies from a hundred sources,

reluctantly surrendered his research. (Ask any English professor: unfinished research leaves one with the edgy feeling that some portal to understanding lay just around the next corner and now will be forever closed.)

I stumbled upon a news item wherein a French journalist asked Mother Theresa why those unfortunates in her care suffered so horribly when she, the journalist, did not suffer at all. Mother Theresa replied, “Perhaps you do not suffer because you are not yet worthy.” **Worthy?** What might that mean? I didn’t quite get what Mother Theresa intended, but it reminded me of another comment I had never understood. Holy Mother said, “Misery is truly a gift of God. I believe it is a symbol of His compassion.”² Misery—pain and suffering—is a gift of God? It is not something to be hated but something to be cherished? A symbol of God’s compassion? You have to be worthy of it? How does that work?

Boiling the Ego

The short answer is, I don’t know. But the longer answer is that pain and its companion, suffering, diminish the ego. It gets boiled like a potato, as Sri Ramakrishna said in a different context. It becomes softer. The heart grows larger and more tender as it identifies with the community of human suffering and realizes that we human beings live – together – in a world of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual pain.

“Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison [of “I”] by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature ... ”

– Albert Einstein³

When this truth dawned on me (slowly, over time, no blinding flashes of revelation here) it resonated with the unfinished research into theodicies. It was as if my neglected inner English instructor suddenly awoke from a nap. “Wait a moment,” he seemed to say, “let’s take another look at theodicy. Maybe it isn’t entirely hopeless.” And it isn’t. In even the most simple-minded and banal theodicy there is this speck of truth: Pain and suffering may—*may*—be transformative. Not always, of course; not often, perhaps. But there is this tiny twinkle of hope in the darkness of pain.

² *Holy Mother: Being the Life of Sri Sarada Devi, Wife of Sri Ramakrishna and Helpmate in His Mission*, Swami Nikhilananda, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, New York, 1982, p.226.

³ H. Eves, *Mathematical Circles Adieu, Vol. III*, (Mathematical Association of America Inc., 2003) p.119. Letter dated 1950 to a rabbi whose 19-year-old daughter was despondent over the death of her sister.

I can't say that what I learned from the torture of back pain and nerve damage, and the attendant spiritual crises that pain and suffering inspired, was "worth it," whatever that might mean. But I can say that I took away certain treasures from my experience. It's all too complicated to set forth in a few words, but I can leave you who would inquire into pain with this truth: In pain's growth of the heart, in the outreach of empathy, there is a brotherhood. It is sweet. It is consoling. It is enriching. More people to care about, more to pray for, more to weep for, more to understand, more to cherish, more to love. □

Alive With Spirit: A Sacred Healing Journey

**An interview with Sister Judith Thackray,
Order of Sarada in America, Hermit**

Conducted by Brother Richard Simonelli, Order of Sarada in America

[Sister Judith Thackray took initiation from Swami Bhashyananda at the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago in 1976; she was diagnosed with acute EI/MCS (Environmental Illness/Multiple Chemical Sensitivities) in 1991; in 1993 she moved to a small cabin in Nederland, Colorado in the Indian Peaks Wilderness area and named her hermitage Mother's Rock.]

Brother Richard: Please tell us something about how your long suffering from illness became a healing journey for you, Sister Judith.

Sister Judith: I had been sick with chemical illness for about six years and I'd been through the worst of my recovery from the point of view of finding out, first of all, how to survive in the world as a chemically ill person. And then how to bring my life to a place where it could be livable again. Before I got sick I was a visual artist, a Vedantic practitioner, a therapist, and a single mother. I painted, using acrylic paints and watercolor paints, and that was a big part of my self-expression, my self-healing before I became ill. Six years went by in desperate recovery before I was able to even pick up any kind of medium to begin self-expression again.

A woman who had been a painter, a potter and a sculptor volunteered to come into my home as my art teacher. She was a senior. She patiently started me weaving because I was not able to handle paints at that time, so she would bring in yarns that she had in her home for many years. They were thoroughly outgassed, which was essential for my chemical sensitivity. They were safe for me to use and to hold in my hands. She brought in a hoop and I began to weave the "Cherokee Song" weaving. That was my first project and the first time that I had been allowed to use color. My life had become a monotone, very dark and unrelieved. I was sick and housebound most of the time. I began to hold these

yarns in my hand: the pinks, the yellows, the blues, the greens. A part of me began to sing again. That's how "Cherokee Song" came about. It came as my soul, able to use the colors again, began to sing its own rainbow. It was very healing. And as I wove, I was weaving my life back together again using these beautiful colors. This symbolized putting my own illness into some kind of perspective. I had gotten totally centered on my illness, as you have to when you are in such a deep and desperate recovery process.

So the illness began to find its place in the scheme of things and my soul began to sing. It literally began to sing again, because painting and art are the way my soul sings its joy. The "Cherokee Song" weaving healed me back into some semblance of wholeness again because I was able to recover the creative aspect of my being even though the illness was still very, very much with me. It took me a long time to do it; I had to work in very small sections of time. It was hard for me to do. But once I did it, I was at another stage of my recovery; I could express myself again even though I was still suffering a lot.

BR: What is environmental illness as you have come to understand it?

SJ: Environmental illness arises when your immune system crosses the threshold of tolerance. Suddenly you are vulnerable to things in your environment that you never even noticed before. Something happens to the immune system that causes tremendous sensitivity, and it can happen in many ways. My illness came about through an anaphylactic reaction to an antibiotic, which pushed my immune threshold to a place of chemical sensitivity that it has never recovered from. Normal things in your environment, which would normally not cause you discomfort, begin to produce allergic reactions in your body. You go through a period of trying to sort all that out, finding out how to survive with such sensitivity to normal things in the environment. You are very sensitive to the larger pollutants in the environment as well. This is constant stress on your body, and you have to learn how to manage that. You are constantly ill.

You have to learn how to adapt to all kinds of circumstances that other people take for granted. For example, you can park your car in a parking space at a park and think that you are in for a nice, pleasant sit, and then have a diesel truck pull up beside you and suddenly your whole life is changed until you can adapt to that situation. For me, diesel exposure can mean a trip to the hospital. It's a very challenging illness and can make you feel unable to cope with your environment. So you have to work through those things, and also what they bring up mentally and emotionally.

BR: I am amazed that your weavings were created at the height of your illness. Tell us about these two earliest ones—"Cherokee Song" and "Garment of Peace."

SJ: "Cherokee Song" was my very first weaving. I did it in a circle on a brass ring with a cotton warp and woof. I didn't realize until I finished it why I had to

start out with a circle, which is very hard to weave. It was to return to my art after a long, long absence. I had to re-connect. And the Native American Hoop also connected me with my Eastern Cherokee background. As I wove, I knew that it was coming out as a song. I was so happy to be able to use any kind of art materials again, especially color. I had only been able to do some pencil sketches up to this time; this was my first handling of color again. My Cherokee background was re-awakened here as I struggled to heal and rejoin the circle of life.

The song is the reconnection of the human and the divine into that one circle, into that unbroken existence of spirit. I didn't set out to make any kind of spiritual weaving at the time but I realized that it was a spiritual thing when I finished it; it was the re-connection of the two realms—the divine and the human, in order to find wholeness of being again. In it, you can see the divine coming down into the human plane and you can see the human spirit uplifted to the divine plane. I began to realize that I was in a deep healing process, and I began to cooperate and invite the healing more and more.

BR: What about the feathers? Can you speak a little about them?

SJ: The feathered bird is the symbol of the soul that is singing the song. It's a great expression of joy. The bird of spirit is expressing itself as human joy. When I finished it I could see the consciousness everywhere in it as well as the symbolic figures. As I've done the healing in the years of recovery, I've had so many people supporting me. The verticals lines are all the beings and all the ways that have supported me in my journey. They literally became columns of support in my life and I see them as both human and divine—support in both realms. The healing journey became a sacred journey watched over by the divine and maintained by the human at the same time. So it's a real circle that's been going on for me. And this is what my weaving expresses.

There are feathers that are grounding all of this—feathers of intention. Throughout my healing journey, I've had to find and renew my intention to become whole, over and over again. Those healing intentions were essential, absolutely essential for the rejoining to that circle.

BR: You hadn't weaved before?

SJ: Never. It was astounding to sit down and have the weavings fly out of my hands, so to speak, as though they were waiting to be born so that I could be reborn.

BR: So you really lived with them.

SJ: Oh, yes. You sit and meditate and your hands receive the meditation. This is very Native American.

BR: Weaving is a great tradition among the Navajo, and that's how their weaving is done, with prayer first. Would you tell us about the second weaving, "Garment of Peace?" When did you do this one?

SJ: It was after I did "Cherokee Song." It was a vision of Mother Spirit. One of the most important reconnections I had to do in my healing was to connect with Mother Spirit in body as well as in mind, and heart. The illness had basically taken all the pieces of my being and scattered them to the winds, and I had to put them all back together. The key thing for that reconnection was to connect with Mother Spirit. So this is called "Garment of Peace." It is a dress, just like an Indian dress would be for a woman or a girl child. You can see at the top the straps that would hold the dress in place. The top quarter is the bodice of the dress. And then as it goes down it tells a story, as Native American clothing often does. It tells a story about the person, about her journey in life. So this is that garment which tells my story at this point in time. It's also the dress of the Mother, and my reconnection with the Mother Spirit by coming to find out that I am that Mother Spirit; that She is right here inside me, and my body is her dress. This is a very important healing point for me.

You can see the four aspects of being—spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical—in each of the four quadrants of the weaving. The top is the heart. This is the emotional being. This is where I connect with Mother Spirit. It's a woman's heart, a feminine heart.

Then you go next to the next quadrant, the family. I am a mother of two children, and a grandmother—and that's the fruition of that aspect of life.

Next is the quietness, the solitude and the retreat that I've had to go into in order to find my reconnection with the Mother. So you see in that quadrant the total closing down. The total moving into one point, to one place, in order to have that reconnection.

The final quadrant, the bottom part of the dress, is the wisdom being that comes in when the other three are put together again and the reconnection is complete. The wisdom being has aspects of all the other three, and if you look at the weaving you will see those aspects of the other three quadrants in the final quadrant. You'll also see in the turquoise feather the oneness that comes as a result of this integration. That's why that quadrant has the feather, the one spirit there. But the integration hearkens back to the three feathers at the top, at the bosom of the dress, which is the heart. So the heart is fully integrated. The heart comes fully into integration with the wisdom that comes of the journey. It's a dress of tremendous celebration and tremendous owning of my being in the way that Native American clothing often is.

When I finished this, I was astounded that I had been back again to the Native American theme, instinctively and intuitively, for my own healing purposes. The three turquoise feathers are literally moving, so they are to show

the joy of recovering this dress. The joy of my spirit when I finished it was quite something.

BR: So you recovered the dress?

SJ: Yes, I recovered it, and now it's mine forever. It's something that will never be taken away from me again. I had to recover it, totally recover it. It jingles and it dances; you can even hear the jingling going up in there. It has been a long, difficult journey but the beauty has come as a result, and also the freedom of spirit I have again. □



Sister Judith Thackray, OSAH



Cherokee Song



Garment of Peace

Christ Consciousness

Sister Judith Thackray, OSAH

(Suggested guitar patterns)

Begin here

1 D min G D min G D min

9 D D min G D min

Why stand they, O Lord, on ei-ther

16 G D min G min G G min

side of thee? O cru-ci-fied Christ! —

24 G G min G D min G D min D min

O cru-ci-fied Christ! —

33 D D min G D min

Who can suf-fer, O my Lord? Who —

40 G D min G min G G min

does not know. O Christ Con-sci-ous - ness! —

48 G G min G D min G D min

O Christ Con-sci-ous - ness! —

57 D D min G D min

And they that know — bear — on —

64 G D min D D min

their backs the — marks and signs —

71 G D min G D min G min G

of — re - peat-ed blows. O cru-ci-fied

Christ Consciousness

79 G min G G min G G min G
Christ! O cru-ci-fied Christ!

87 D min G D min D D min
These stand not, O

95 G D min G D min D
Lord, on ei-ther side, who hold

103 G D min G D min G min G
Christ in their heart. O Christ Con-scious-

111 G min G G min G
-ness! O Christ Con-scious -ness!

119 D min G D min D D min
Nor does that

127 G D min G D min D
self feel an-y pain whom Di-

135 D min G D min G D min
vine Love has known.

143 G min G G min G
O Cru-ci-fied Christ! O Christ Con-scious-

150 G min G G min
ness! O God Con-scious-ness!

158 G G min G G min G
O God Con-scious-ness! God Con-scious-ness! 3x

Securing the Shadow of Ramakrishna's Suffering

Diane Marshall

The vision of suffering

The sight of suffering can be searing. Particularly painful images stick in the memory like cockleburs, prodding some sort of empathetic response. Many of us can recall, like Prince Siddhartha, the deep impression left by our first sight of a body ravaged by illness. Cancer was just a word when I was twelve. It meant my neighborhood friend could no longer come out to play due to a tumor in her leg. She was confined for months, and I guessed she might not live. Hearing of her death was sad, but abstract. Seeing her in her coffin revealed her ordeal in a flash. The disease had reduced her to a skeletal shell of a child, coddled in satin. Her sunken eyes and jutting cheekbones showed me what cancer could do. In retrospect, it taught me that vision is central to our understanding of suffering.

The first sight of Ramakrishna's funerary photograph is also a shock for those who have come to love him through the pages of the *Kathamritra*. Although M. relates many poignant bedside scenes, the story of Ramakrishna's illness from cancer does not linger on suffering. The reader is buffered by Ramakrishna's transcendent teachings and the earnest goodwill of his visitors. In the end, the written word simply falls short of the vision of suffering. After immersion in M.'s blissful dialogue, the sight of Ramakrishna's emaciated form sucks one's breath away.

A viewer may ask if this photograph tells too much. Our cultural attitudes towards the privacy of suffering or the stigma of disease tend to suppress pictures of the sick and the dead. When a progressive disease alters someone's familiar appearance, we deny that the changes really belong to that person. They are attributes of a medical condition. Photographs that reveal a person's ill health are considered misrepresentative. Obituary columns usually show photographs of the deceased in a state of vitality—never as they appear in the mortuary.

Fixing the Shadow

How did this picture come to be? On August 16, 1886, Dr. Mahendralal Sarkar, the physician who pronounced Ramakrishna dead, recommended that a photograph be taken before the body was cremated, and he donated ten rupees towards the cost. From the photograph we see that a poster bed decorated with flowers is set outside the Cossipore house. Upon it, lying on his right side, Ramakrishna's ochre-clad body faces the camera, his bent left knee supported by a pillow.¹ Garlands hang around his neck, and his forehead is decorated with

¹ Swami Chetanananda, *Ramakrishna As We Saw Him* (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 1990) 276.

sandal paste. Gone is the reported beauty of his countenance when he entered *mahasamadhi*. The vacant immediacy of death has settled upon his open eyes and mouth.² The devotees crowd behind the bedstead, clustered in tiers on the steps of the house. The Bengal Photographers Studio would have prepared at least two dark slides containing glass plates coated with wet collodion. It is not certain, however, which plate was taken first. Some of the fifty-three people shown reposition themselves in the second exposure, indicating a time lapse when the camera was moved. One of the prints (shown) is cropped, eliminating twenty people. Although there are two photographs, I refer to them collectively as one picture because they portray a single event with close similarity.

The viewer instinctively fixes upon Ramakrishna's painfully gaunt appearance. It corroborates his personal observation that his wasting body was merely a thin bamboo frame covered with cloth. The excruciating toll cancer exacts from the body makes clear the pathos of his last conversations. Tearing one's eyes away from the Master, the viewer scans the faces of the mourners to read their expressions. Awash in grief, M. accurately described himself and his companions as "men in a shipwreck."³

Nineteenth Century Practice

None of the accounts of Ramakrishna's *mahasamadhi* question the idea of taking a photograph before the cremation. Postmortem photography was accepted practice in the nineteenth century. No sooner had the daguerreotype become practicable in the 1840s, than there was a demand by family members for photographs of their recently departed— particularly children. "Secure the shadow ere the substance fade," was a typical advertising slogan for early photographers.⁴ Given our contemporary reticence on death, we consider the Victorians unnatural for lavishing so much social sentiment upon it. We forget that the men pictured here would be horrified by our unnatural custom of videotaping birth. Discomfort with the depiction of the deceased is a fault of our times, not this photograph.

Since Dr. Sarkar opposed glorifying Ramakrishna as an *avatar*, some assume he ordered the photograph to thwart mythologizing. If that were the intention, why did fifty devoted followers willingly pose with the deceased? Dr. Sarkar simply donated a small sum and left. It was up to the devotees to call the photographers.⁵ Perhaps Dr. Sarkar had attended enough deaths in Western educated society to know that a photograph was advisable when a family lost its favorite child. His generosity indicates that a photograph was considered a fitting

² Chetanananda, 133.

³ Swami Nikhilananda, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942) 975.

⁴ Daniel Fink, "Funerary, Posthumous, Postmortem Daguerreotypes" (*Daguerrian Journal*, 1990) 56.

⁵ Chetanananda, 133.

memorial. Clearly, some devotees appreciated this last memento. Ram said that the Master's decorated body looked beautiful, and he gazes imploringly at the camera.⁶ Narendra, however, is struggling to maintain a stoic façade. He seems in no mood to share this moment with his cousin.⁷ It was a very hot day, and I imagine he flung off his *chadar* before the second take.

The photograph of Ramakrishna in death is seldom published in its entirety on the grounds that it causes his devotees pain. In Medieval Europe, the rationale ran just the opposite. It was the demand of the devout that perpetuated the tradition of representing the suffering of Jesus in agonizing detail. Devotees of Ramakrishna may be as divided regarding this photograph as today's Christians are by the depiction—in cinema, for example—of the violence and suffering of Christ's Passion. From the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries, a meditation movement based on the *imitatio Christi* cultivated spiritual fervor through detailed, lifelike representations of Jesus' death.⁸ Dramatic, horrible realism has deep psychological resonance, which increases devotional experience of the Passion for the worshiper. It is not gratuitous, but empathetic. Empathy is more palpable than sympathy. It is an involuntary displacement of self-identification. From the many works of art on this subject, I find one of the most brutal compares well with our photograph.

The Terrible Crucifixion

The Isenheim Altarpiece is one of the great monuments of Christian art. It was commissioned about 1512 for hospital chapel in the monastery of St. Anthony at Isenheim near Colmar in Alsace. The wood altarpiece is approximately eleven feet tall by twenty feet wide. The Crucifixion is the dominant image upon which the reputation of the work is based. It is the outermost of three sets of scenes painted on hinged panels that swing open to reveal an inner sculpted shrine with patron saints. An obscure artist known as Matthias Grünewald is credited with the original compositions, which are a unique blend of Northern Renaissance and late Medieval styles. The total program of the altarpiece was tailored to the *vita contemplativa* of the Antonite monks who used it. This theologically rich polyptych has various art historical interpretations, but I shall describe only the Crucifixion panel.

The realism of Renaissance painting astounded sixteenth-century viewers. Comparatively speaking, Isenheim's famous altarpiece was the "Imax" of gruesome Crucifixions. Christ is magisterial in size only. His ungainly body is thoroughly scourged. Every inch of greenish, moribund skin is pitted with scabs

⁶ Ibid., 278.

⁷ Ram asked Narendra to stand by his side in the photograph. Ibid. 226.

⁸ The *devotio moderna* movement attributed to the Franciscan St. Bonaventura peaked with Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* (which Vivekananda admired). David Freedberg, *The Power of Images, Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (University of Chicago Press, 1989) 170-74.

and splinters. His slack body sags under its own dead weight, taut arms terminating in contorted hands, the stretched abdominal cavity racked from the ribcage. His head slumps most undivinely, mouth agape. Christ's agony is compounded by his gigantic scale in relation to the figures at the foot of the cross. The Virgin, St. John and Mary Magdalene on the left are convulsed in grief. Pitch black clouds hover over Calvary, and the dark scene would seem to be the death of Christianity itself were it not for the didactic, stalwart figure of John the Baptist standing on the right, pointing to a cryptic Latin inscription.⁹ What desperate souls could be uplifted by such a repellent image?

One answer is that the monastic Hospital of St. Anthony specialized in dire diseases, notably leprosy and ergotism or St. Anthony's Fire, as it was called then. Ergotism was transacted by ingesting rye flour contaminated with a fungus. Suffering from ergotism was excruciating. Victims were tortured by burning pain and developed gangrene in their extremities. The illness was incurable before modern treatment. In the Medieval world, illness of the body was a sign of illness in the spirit. As part of their treatment, sufferers were brought before the altarpiece to pray.¹⁰ Christ's visible wretchedness, more abject than their own, inspired humility and hope. A popular fourteenth-century devotional text cries: "our beloved Lord's holy face was as miserably transformed and disfigured as if he had been a leprous man, ..."¹¹

In time, with the dissolution of the monastery, the Isenheim altarpiece faded into obscurity as a functional work of art. During World War I, fighting in Alsace prompted the painter Max Beckmann to persuade the German government to remove the altarpiece to Munich for protection.¹² After the war it was cleaned and shown at the Alte Pinakothek. The writers J. K. Huysmans, Thomas Mann and Rainer Maria-Rilke led a large international audience to "rediscover" Grünewald's painting. His stylistically atypical handling of death, despair and rebirth carried a new inspiration for a generation devastated by war. The burgeoning German Expressionist art movement endorsed this reification of

⁹ *Illum oportet crescere, me autem minui.* (He must increase but I must decrease.) John the Baptist as the first anchorite points to "the suffering of Christ as the 'increase' of God and to asceticism as the 'decrease' of man." Georg Scheja, *The Isenheim Altarpiece* translated by Robert Erich Wolf (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1969) 15, 65.

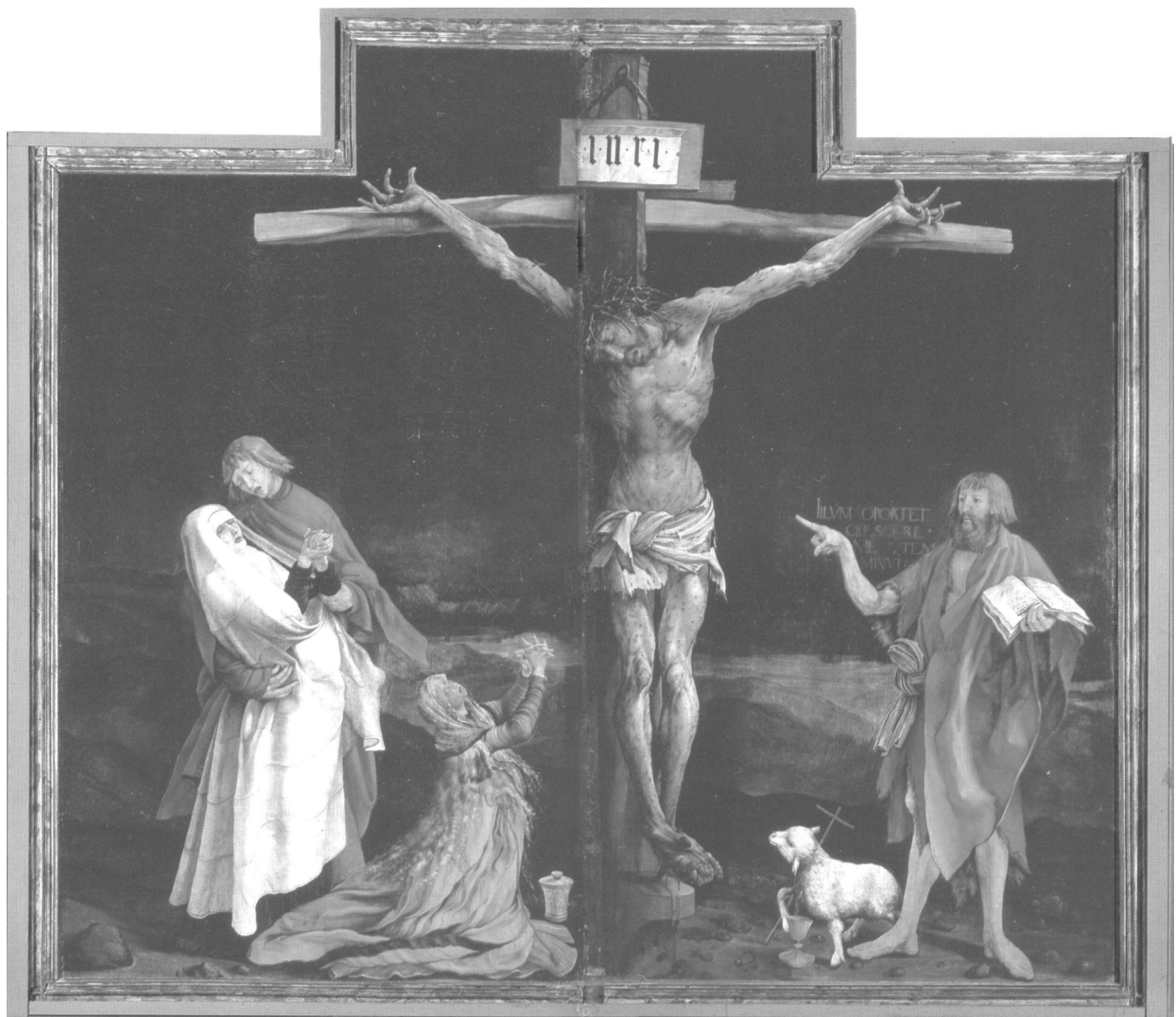
¹⁰ "Antonite statutes of 1478 ordered all preceptors to bring the sick in their care before the altar,..." Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Devil at Isenheim: Reflections of Popular Belief in Grünewald's Altarpiece* (University of California Press, 1988) 3.

¹¹ Ludolph of Saxony's *Vita Christi* quoted from the Dutch. Freedberg, 173.

¹² Stanley Meisler, "A Masterpiece Born of Saint Anthony's Fire" *Smithsonian Magazine* (September 1999). Toward the end of his life, Beckmann was artist in residence at Washington University in St. Louis where his wife became acquainted with Swami Satprakashananda.



Funerary photograph of Sri Ramakrishna with grieving disciples



The Isenheim Altarpiece — painting by Matthias Grünewald c. 1512

Christ's suffering as having a new relevance for a new age. Public enthusiasm for Grünewald's ergotic, distorted Christ secured masterpiece fame for the altarpiece.¹³ As objects, there can be little comparison between the grand oil painting and our small black and white photograph. It is in the shared content of their imagery that these two works converge on the theme of suffering.

The Facsimile of Realism

These pictures extract a visceral reaction from the viewer, due to the severe realism by which death is portrayed. The viewer must accept the harsh fact that Ramakrishna and Jesus were forced to abandon their uninhabitable bodies. Furthermore, no signs of divinity remain on the persons of Ramakrishna and Jesus—that is, there is no idealization of the corpses. For the lamenting devotees, all hopes for reprieve from death have been dashed.¹⁴ So, a pall of grief and mortality is cast over both images with corporeal certitude.

The images exhibit the unkindness of a thousand cuts. The Crucifixion overwhelms the eye with myriad detail of the wounds on Jesus' beaten body. The photograph defeats the memory fixed in the mind's eye with a surfeit of mechanical minutiae. We foolishly trust photographic realism because the camera lens has a greater capacity for mundane detail than selective human vision. It is this mechanical capacity which grants the photograph its merciless and therefore "truthful" reputation. Ramakrishna's body has been tenderly adorned, but the devotees could not foresee the clumsy jumble the camera captured. In actuality, photographs equivocally betray as many emotive memories as they preserve.

Contrary to Renaissance proportion, Grünewald had the expressive license to enlarge Jesus' figure. Jesus' pain is magnified by his awesome size, multiplying the surface area of flesh open to mutilation. On the other hand, Ramakrishna, who looms so large in his devotees' hearts, is cruelly reduced by the lens. The disappointment of death has been bitterly intensified by inadequate photography. Surely this is less than the moment the devotees wanted to remember. In both painting and photograph, there is manipulation of "reality" that alternately raises and dashes our expectations of what reality is.

The *Passio* of Compassion

The last days of Ramakrishna and Jesus cannot be considered without eliciting compassion for their Passion. The two Latin modes of *passio* and *compassio* are bound in a symbiotic relationship. According to Georg Scheja "The *Compassio* is the recognition of that all-embracing character of the Passion

¹³ Scheja, 5.

¹⁴ Except for John the Baptist who is already dead.

which the artist portrays with all the immeasurableness of Christ's suffering."¹⁵ The mystical aspect of the *Compassio* is the "ecstatic co-consummation" of the Passion of the Incarnation by those closest to him.¹⁶ Ramakrishna said that only God could show compassion, but he was totally in tune with the *sadhana* in which the *bhakta* wholly identifies with the Beloved. At the foot of the cross, Grünewald paints the swooning Virgin not in her royal blue robes, but as a nun all in white. Close by, Mary Magdalene weeps with penitent agitation, but the Virgin is overcome by emotion that surpasses grief; she is in ecstasy.

Though Ramakrishna and Christ are central to these compositions, the fact of death isolates them. The scene on Calvary as Scheja puts it, is "a lonely dying in an empty world from which all light has fled."¹⁷ However, Ramakrishna and Christ are obviously not alone. Their "co-sufferers" are meditating on their presence while grieving their absence. Previous editing of the photograph, excising Ramakrishna's body, attempted to show the emotional response of the assembled devotees without the reason for their anguish. The *compassio* of the devotees makes no sense without the *passio* of the Incarnation. Without Ramakrishna, a caption must explain the photograph. With Ramakrishna, no words are needed; the image speaks to the heart.

The Picture of Pain

Part of our difficulty with the photograph is that Ramakrishna's folded, cast-off body does not as yet fit our visual vocabulary of resurrection. After centuries of Christianity, the cross finally lost its gallows stigma. It no longer appears as ignominious as it did during Roman rule. We are conditioned to seeing Jesus' posture on the cross as authoritative, which is why Grünewald's hapless Christ is so shocking. We see the body attached to the cross in a salvific *asana*, but our regard is culturally conditioned as much by habit as by belief. The wings of the Isenheim altarpiece could be opened for a glorious vision of the Resurrection. Sophisticated photographic art is now ubiquitous, but we cannot as yet turn a page in Ramakrishna's photo album for a hologram of him shimmering with celestial beauty. Much has been written about Ramakrishna, but as yet comparatively little has been visualized by drawing, painting or computer generation. Eventually, his last photographs may integrate with his visual repertoire and generate ideas for new pictures.

Christianity has shown that with unshakeable faith a *sadhana* can even be based upon the degradation of the Beloved. It was accomplished with images far

¹⁵ Scheja., 65.

¹⁶ Ibid., 65.

¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

crueler than the camera's failure to capture Ramakrishna's aura.¹⁸ The photograph's real pain does not come from Ramakrishna's deserted body or the sober faces of his devotees. The pain arises, I think, from frustration—the helplessness that stems from grief and rails at the impossible—at what the photograph does **not** show. This is not the scene that Raja Ravi Varma would have painted.¹⁹ This is not the moment when Ramakrishna cried, “Kali! Kali! Kali!” with tears streaming and hair horripilated in the thrill of mahasamadhi. This is not the “indescribable sight” of the flaming cremation pyre with kirtan reverberating and flowers flying.²⁰ Instead, this is a blurry memorial to passio and compassio that deserves greater understanding.

The Power of the Image

What is to be learned from this photograph with respect to suffering? According to contemporary psychology, the opposite of love is not hate, but depression. Ramakrishna's good cheer corroborates his love for his devotees. The acid test of his vaunted mart of joy—that it was not merely a fair-weather phenomenon—was his cheerfulness despite intense suffering. His clear-sighted happiness harbored no hope for physical recovery. Until the end, his beatific smile shone undiminished despite his peaked face and the circles of fatigue around his eyes.

For those of us raised in the suffering of Jesus, Ramakrishna's wasted body endorses his sainthood. What is evidently real is that he did not resist the evil we call cancer, and the integrity of his suffering is actual. It eclipses Ramakrishna's accomplishments as a yogi, which enabled him to withstand pain and detach his mind from his deteriorating body. In other words, rising above suffering happens not so much by skill as by the irresistible pull of love for love's sake. It is obvious that he did not use his yogic power in any image-conscious or self-serving way. One may counter that he appears in the photograph as if he had no power at all—but to say that, one would have to be blind to the power of the total scene. Ramakrishna's power resides in the fifty-plus people gathered about his bier. He has changed all these lives. Now most of them are gazing intently at the viewer. Even Ramakrishna's vacant eyes glisten, challenging us to react. Like great art that can be painful to look at, this photograph is not a sight that can be easily flipped past. It forces the viewer to search for answers. □

¹⁸ Swami Abhedananda's recollection refers to morning interior light, several hours before the photo was taken in harsh afternoon sun: “It was not apparent that the life force had left his body. There was a sweet smile on the Master's face, and it seemed as if a divine glow were emanating from his whole body.” Chetanananda, 226.

¹⁹ Kerala painter, Raja Ravi Varma, (1848-1906) was Ramakrishna's contemporary. He was praised in his day for the “naturalness” of his Europeanized rendering of Indian mythological characters.

²⁰ Chetanananda, 227.

Spiritual Life and Suffering

Charles Birx

Forty years ago as an undergraduate student at Cornell University I read *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. It changed my life and put me on the path of spirituality. Life circumstances were such that I took up the practice of Zen and became a Zen teacher. However, I am still encouraged and inspired by Vedanta. Recently I read these words by Swami Vivekananda, “What do you gain in heaven? You become gods, drink nectar, and get rheumatism. There is less suffering, but also less truth.”¹ Suffering cannot be escaped even in some heavenly place and there is great truth to be learned from our own suffering and the suffering of others.

From the Zen perspective, awakening means to awaken to all aspects of life, including suffering. The sacred includes the whole of life, and any attempt to deny that suffering is a part of life or any expectation that you “will not” or “should not” suffer will only multiply your suffering. To awaken is not to eliminate suffering but to understand it profoundly, accept it radically as it is, and experience freedom not *from* suffering but *within* it. The depth of this awakening is illustrated in the following koan.

Transcending the Pairs of Opposites

A monk came to Zen master Tozan and said, “Cold and heat descend upon us. How can we avoid them?” Tozan said, “Why don’t you go where there is no cold or heat?” The monk said, “Where is the place where there is no cold or heat?” Tozan said, “When cold, let it be so cold that it kills you; when hot, let it be so hot that it kills you.”² We all can sympathize with this monk who has worked so hard to escape the problem of suffering. Yet he has not found the way to avoid the pain of cold and heat. Cold and heat here can refer to the difficulties of external life such as physical pain, hunger, accidents, natural disasters, and wars. Cold and heat can also refer to internal life such as feelings of anger, fear, guilt, shame, and anxiety. This monk, like many of us, has come to spiritual practice hoping to find a place free from these sufferings.

At an even deeper level cold and heat can refer to the life of duality, the life of opposites such as pain and pleasure, sorrow and joy, subject and object, self and other, or Absolute and relative. Again this monk, like many of us, having heard the teachings about Oneness has come to spiritual practice hoping to experience

¹ Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Boston 2003-2008, Vivekananda Vedanta Network: *Vivekananda’s Quotes*. Retrieved January 16, 2006, from <http://www.vivekananda.org/quotes.aspx>.

² Katsuki Sekida, *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku*. (New York: Weatherhill, 1977), p. 265.

this life of nonduality. Yet, even though he has faithfully carried out spiritual practice during the cold of winter and the heat of summer, still he experiences duality. Where is this Oneness, this wholeness of life?

He must have been encouraged to hear Tozan speak of a place where there is no cold or heat. Here at last is someone who can show him the way to escape duality. So the monk asks, “Where is this place?” To his surprise Tozan says that Oneness or wholeness of life is right here, right now, right in the midst of cold and heat. It is not in some other place, some heavenly realm or higher state of consciousness. Therefore there is no other place you must reach or higher self you must achieve. Just awaken right here and now in this place as this person. In other words, become completely aware of what you are experiencing.

Tozan is saying that the way to deal with any kind of suffering is to go into it *completely*! Go into the experience *totally* without any thought of escape, without any thought of a self that is trying to change the experience or bring it to an end. To do this you must let all avenues of escape come into the light of clear awareness that sees that any desire to avoid or escape suffering is the working of the separate self and that all attempts of this separate self to eliminate suffering or defend itself from experiencing suffering only lead to inevitable failure and more suffering. When this is clearly seen and experienced to the very depths there is a natural letting go of our sense of a separate self that is singled out for suffering. This is the self that is killed off.

Awake in the Unity of Life

With the death of the separate self there is a transformation of the limited self into the whole which is vast and boundless. Individual consciousness opens beyond limitations and arrives at the wonderful sense of fullness and wholeness. Such a life is not passive, it does not merely endure suffering. Alert and awake to the unity of life, great energy gathers and the awakened person is strengthened to stand on her/his own two feet and step boldly forward living a vivid, dynamic, and complete life in the midst of cold and heat.

With the death of the separate self, body and mind also become limitless. Simultaneously by experiencing no separate self, one’s self expands to include everything. The other is myself. There is only one body. With this realization compassion arises naturally and spontaneously. The wisdom of nonduality and the functioning of compassionate action go together like a hand and glove or a box and its lid. They are two sides of the same coin. If you cut your left hand your right hand immediately reaches out to help and soothe the pain. Like this, the spiritual person freely and spontaneously reaches out to others in selfless service in order to help and soothe suffering in the world.

Vivekananda and Tozan are inviting us to let go of our small isolated self and experience a greater truth that is clear, bright, and full of potential. Truth encompasses both suffering and joy. Oneness, or seeing the true nature of all things, is not in heaven or some other place, it is right here, right now, right in the midst of cold and heat. □

Suffering?

I bloomed like a puff of cotton.
So far, so good. Nice world.
Then I got yanked away,
cleaned and carded.
Ouch! What a beating.
Whoops, spun into yarn,
then hung upside down on a loom,
whacked by a shuttle more than I care
to remember,
after awhile a piece of cloth
getting pounded on wet stone,
then thrown into a vat to be drenched
in dye.
I felt myself getting cut up piece by piece.
And that's how I happened to meet
my tailor.

—Lalla of Kashmir, translated by P. Shneidre

Discussion

How Do We Respond to Fundamentalism?

Answering “Do You Think You Are God?”

William Page

Juliette Karow’s account of her dialogue with the Christian fundamentalist minister in the Fall 2005 issue of *American Vedantist* raises an interesting question. Given the metaphysical presuppositions of Vedanta, if anyone asks us “Do you think you are God?”, how should we answer?

I’d vote for “no.” The question reveals a misunderstanding of Vedanta, and a “yes” answer would be automatically misunderstood.

We Vedantists often use the word “God” in a broad or loose sense to mean Brahman. When non-Vedantists use the same word, they’re not thinking of Brahman, because they don’t have the concept. They’re thinking of the personal God of the three great West Asian religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—whom the Jews call Adonai, the Christians call God, and the Muslims call Allah.

To believers in the West Asian faiths, anyone who dares to say “I am God” is committing blasphemy. The Sufi mystic Al-Hallaj was crucified for this offense. Blasphemy does not play a role in Vedanta (and neither, fortunately, does crucifixion), but in a world where there are different ideas about the nature of God, any Vedantist who is asked “Do you think you are God?” would be wise to insist on a definition of terms.

While Vedantists believe that Brahman is the ultimate reality, we also believe in a personal God. We call him Ishwara. And while we believe that ultimately we are one with Brahman, we can never be one with Ishwara.

In their introduction to their translation of Shankara’s *Viveka-Chudamani*, Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood clarify the distinction between Brahman and Ishwara:

Are there then two Gods—one the impersonal Brahman, the other the personal Iswara? No—for Brahman only appears as Iswara when viewed by the relative ignorance of Maya. . . . God the Person is not the ultimate nature of Brahman. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, “Personal God is the reading of the impersonal by the human mind.” . . .

Although Iswara is, in a sense, a person, we must beware of regarding Him as similar to, or identical with the jiva, the individual human soul. Iswara, like the jiva, is Brahman united with Maya, but with this fundamental difference—Iswara is the ruler and controller of Maya, the jiva is Maya’s servant and plaything. We can therefore say, without paradox, that we are, at the same time, God

and the servants of God. In our absolute nature, we are one with Brahman; in our relative nature, we are other than the Iswara, and subject to Him....

We can become Brahman, since Brahman is present in us always. But we can never become Iswara, because Iswara is above and distinct from our human personality. It follows, therefore, that we can never become rulers of the universe—for that is Iswara's function. The desire to usurp the function of Iswara is the ultimate madness of ego. It is symbolized in Christian literature by the legend of the fall of Lucifer.”¹

Considering all this, our position on this issue and the position of the Christian fundamentalists are not so far apart as one might expect. The main difference is that they do not have the concept of Brahman, hence cannot conceive of being one with It.

Book Review

The Holy Thursday Revolution, by Beatrice Bruteau
Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York
xiv + 338 pp. paperback 2005 \$20.00

Beatrice Bruteau has added her voice to the chorus of voices who are saying that an experiential/conceptual/social shift is needed today in order to overcome the great ills, which infect modern society. While there are signs that such a shift is actually in process (what Bruteau calls a “phase transition”) and has been for a long time, it has a long way to go. “On an evolutionary scale, phase transitions may take thousands of years, and we will continue under pressure until the new phase has fully emerged.... A phase transition means that a new state of being is entered into, a new set of operational principles begins to function....” (103)

The voices have increased in recent years, and they come at the situation from many different directions. Dr. Bruteau's approach is unique in that she uses some of the great stories from the Judeo/Christian tradition to express the revolutionary shift that is needed. She has been working for many years with the idea of a fundamental social paradigm shift – from a “Domination Paradigm” to a “Communion Paradigm.” She uses the stories of Holy Thursday (New Testament) and the Covenant at Sinai (Hebrew Bible) and other stories from the tradition to “dramatize and present the idea.”

Holy Thursday is the Thursday in Holy Week in Christian tradition and marks the celebration of Jesus' “Last Supper” with his disciples at which (in the Gospel of John) Jesus washes the disciples' feet and says “I no longer call you

¹ Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination* (Hollywood, Vedanta Press, 1978), pp. 18-19.

servants but friends.” Then later (according to the other three Gospels) at supper he proclaims over the bread and wine the words which have become the basis for the Christian Mass (or Holy Communion), “This is my body,” and “This is my blood,” thus feeding them with his very self. Even though Dr. Bruteau declares that she is not giving an alternative interpretation of the Last Supper, she certainly augments and expands traditional interpretations. Such a powerful new interpretation is even more evident in her use of the Covenant at Sinai as the beginning of the phase transition which is carried further in Jesus’ teaching and action, particularly at the Last Supper. Here, she says, he implements the Torah, the great instruction and covenant, summed up in the so-called Ten Commandments which God gave to the people of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai.

Examining Fundamental Assumptions

In order for this revolutionary shift to take place, it is necessary first to examine our fundamental assumptions and perceptions of reality or the way the world is. So the first fifty pages of the book describe what Bruteau sees as society’s ills, and how present conditions in many fields – economics, politics, education, religion, etc.—are defined by the domination paradigm, so deeply embedded in human nature and society. To achieve the shift, a revolution is needed—it is not sufficient merely to “move the furniture around the room.” Transformation in consciousness lies at the root of all social regeneration—societal changes don’t work without a shift in human consciousness – we have to go to the very roots of our perceptions about reality. The paradigm shift has to begin with how we identify ourselves. When we see all the beings of the world as separate from one another, the fear this sense of separateness engenders keeps us apart from our own deep essence. The mutual recognition of God in each other, and the conscious realization of this “is gradually forming as a paradigm shift – this is a revolution.” (46)

Bruteau then presents the Holy Thursday story and shows how Jesus is moving from the “Domination Paradigm” to a “Communion Paradigm.”

“The thesis of *The Holy Thursday Revolution* is that, while rank ordering and domination have been the rule in the course of evolution and have been selected because of advantages to socially developing animals, human beings, with consciousness capable of empathy and ethical responsibility, can live by another set of operating principles. This was not a totally new idea on Holy Thursday, having already been voiced by the Hebrew prophets, but it is still shocking and confusing when put forward as explicitly as it was then laid out. It has emerged, more or less, at various times and places in the last few thousand years.” (29)

A new paradigm needs its own logical and metaphysical foundation, expressed in a psychology of love and a politics of friendship, and this comprises Part II: “Person as the Basis for the New Paradigm.” Part III: “Human Nature”

features two brilliant summaries of the contrast between the voices which say that “You can’t change human nature,” and those who maintain that “It’s the nature of nature to change.” In “Memes, Mysticism and Phase Transitions,” we find some clues as to how we might go about making changes. Bruteau feels that we deeply want freedom from the Domination Paradigm and entrance into the Communion Paradigm. She uses “the biblical story of the escape from Egypt, the revelation at Sinai, and the giving of the Torah as guidance to the Promised Land to dramatize this idea of the paradigm shift. It will also be described as a ‘phase transition,’ for which the Jesus-led covenant-renewal movement to ‘implement’ the Torah will offer some detailing.” (160) The remainder of the book focuses on “the transformation in consciousness that lies at the root of all social regeneration” and a “final layout of life according to the Communion Paradigm.”

The Capacity to Engage in Conscious Evolution

If the beginning of this book sets a very grim picture of the state of the world today, it ends in great optimism, with the sure sense that we have the capacity to engage in conscious evolution. “We ourselves are the ‘elements’ of the next creative union... We cannot thoroughly unite beyond all need to seek private advantage over our fellows unless we are in touch with the deep self, the *person*, the transcendent one beyond the labels. *Persons* are naturally in living communion with one another and naturally engaged in creation. When we know ourselves at that depth, we begin our conscious evolution.” (119)

Beatrice Bruteau is a brilliant philosopher, and the author of many equally provocative books and articles. *The Holy Thursday Revolution* may well be her *magnum opus*. The original paper of this title was written in the late 70’s, and, in her words, “From that time on I have told the story and worked out the implications of ‘I will no longer call you servants... but...friends’ (John 15:15) until gradually it seemed possible to attempt a book-length treatment.” (Preface) Although there are only 264 pages of text, it seems like at least 500 pages of information, so tightly packed that it challenges both sides of our brains. There are copious endnotes (51 pages) but they are set out in such a way that they form a bibliographical essay for each section and the breadth of material covered is extraordinary.

A good deal of Bruteau’s philosophical and theological material is perhaps clearer to those with at least some Christian background, but Vedantists will find much here that is familiar territory while being expressed in Judeo/Christian terms. It takes considerable mental effort to peruse Bruteau’s writing at any length, but it is effort well spent—gleaning even 50% of her insights leaves us that much wiser. Hopefully the people who most need to read this book will persist to the end and become truly “Partners with God in Creation.” (Chapter 12)

—Barbara Henry

Contributors

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