

Editorial

Memories and the Future

The current issue has two distinct offerings, some very fine pieces evoking for us the glories of the past and some quite lively pieces relating to concerns touching the present and the future.

Swami Vidyatmananda has focused his Memories of Swami Ritajananda in this final segment on Ritajananda's "nondirective method." Although Ritajananda addressed himself to the creation of several important instruments for the advancement of Vedanta in France, such as the meditation hall, a quarterly review and translation of basic Vedantic texts, he also took an attitude of "standing back" and letting "the Lord work things out." This means that decisions and directions about all sorts of things did not come down from above to be obeyed by all those associated with the Center, but that somehow, little by little as circumstances came into existence, things fell into place. This proved to be the successful way.

Charles Birx has offered us three pictures—literally photographs—of joy, light, and playfulness which are nondirective in their own way. Sri Ramakrishna just goes about being himself, and the light streams out, the joy abounds, the playfulness invites us all to laugh and dance with him. And what happens? What do we see in him?

Joy Greenberg's treatment of Thoreau's Walden-yoga in tandem with the Bhagavad Gita develops the paradox theme: withdrawing from the world, acting significantly in the world. The nondirective Brahman, both transcendent and embodied, lets Thoreau create new myths in which Eastern and Western views construct the total Reality.

Paradox expresses itself in William Page's insight into the deeper reality of Holy Mother as he discovers that Ramakrishna, Sarada, and Vivekananda are all One Spirit. The Spirit itself is nondirective, going where it likes, being one, manifesting as many. He reminds us that "Vedanta is always inclusive rather than exclusive," and this leads us to our second set of articles.

The questions about whether Vedantists are Hindus and whether American centers are becoming increasingly Indian in culture and language are being examined from various points of view in our Dialog section. (See the Summer issue also.) It is important for us to point out that we intend to encourage a variety of views. If you have something to say about these topics, please send us your letters. Don't be shy, we want to hear all sides.

Open and free discussion is a messier format than the authoritarian model, but much more successful. It is the way our modern world works. If Vedantic ideals are to reach people now, especially in the West, they have to be communicated in the context of open discussion, with freedom to challenge and criticize. At the same time, it is also part of the Vedantic tradition to honor spiritual teachers. Our next issue will focus on Reverence for Great Souls.

—Beatrice Bruteau and John Schlenck

Memories of Swami Ritajananda

Swami Vidyatmananda

[Excerpted from an unpublished autobiography by the author, an American monk who lived and worked at the French Vedanta center for many years. Continued from the previous issue.]

For Swami Ritajananda the purpose of religion, as I have indicated, was to produce a change in the individual who practiced it—a change of character, a change in his habitual reactions, a fundamental change in that person's very thought patterns. A genuinely spiritual man or woman is one who has learned to live at peace with himself, who lives in peace with others, and who copes competently with the vagaries of the everyday world in which human beings are forced to live. The Swami was not impressed by claims made concerning mystical experiences or celestial emotions when not accompanied by a corresponding amelioration in the individual's life-style. Have you become a mature person? would have been his question. Spiritual practice, properly applied, should transform an individual into something of a sage. And the means of reaching this state is meditation, steadily, relentlessly practiced.

Class in Paris Where Swami Vivekananda Stayed

Despite his commitment to the nondirective mode of operation, Swami Ritajananda succeeded in bringing into being numerous positive developments in ashrama procedures. Shortly after he arrived he initiated the construction of an auditorium for the Sunday lectures; these had previously been given in the rather inadequate public rooms of the main house. In 1968 the Swami began to give a class on the Bhagavad-Gita at 6 Place des Etats-Unis, Paris, the residence where Swami Vivekananda had stayed as the guest of the Leggetts in 1900. This bimonthly class was continued regularly over a period of seven years. In 1976 the Center published a new version of the Bhagavad-Gita which the Swami had translated directly into French from the Sanskrit, and in 1986 he brought out a book on meditation. The quarterly revue *Védanta*, begun in 1966, continued to appear regularly. He undertook the translation of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna from the original Bengali directly into French.

During all these years Swami Ritajananda traveled widely in the main countries of Western Europe, meeting with people individually or in groups. These contacts gradually swelled the number of friends wishing to make retreats at Gretz, thus rendering the Centre Védantique Ramakrichna a very flourishing and truly international religious community. Thus have been planted the seeds

which will surely sprout one day into full-fledged Vedanta centers in Germany, Italy, Spain, and other European countries.¹

There was, however, one project concerning which Swami Ritajananda took from the beginning a strong position. He felt that the Center should have a proper meditation hall. The chapel established by Swami Siddheswarananda was adapted from a former bedroom on the top floor of the main house. In the early days of the work in France, a certain discretion was considered indispensable. Only intimate devotees were permitted to know of the existence of the chapel and to have access to it. With the change of attitude toward meditation and the coming of Swami Ritajananda, any visitor interested in attending a meditation session or a religious office was permitted to go to the chapel. Thus the old chapel soon proved itself to be inadequate. Swami Ritajananda aspired always that there should be a suitable locale expressly designed for meditation. For many years there simply was not enough money to consider building such a structure. But the determination to produce a new chapel never left the Swami's mind, and by the year of his twenty-fifth anniversary as leader of the Centre Védantique Ramakrishna the project could finally be realized. The new facility serves the devotees well and remains a monument to Swami Ritajananda's steady belief in the transforming power of meditation.

Advantages of the Nondirective Style

Having observed at close hand the application of what has been called the directive and nondirective methods of operating in a center, I conclude that the nondirective approach has much to recommend it. It is slow, aggravating, and demands a high degree of commitment from him who would apply it. But for any leader or manager trying to pursue a spiritual objective, attempting to work purely for the spiritual benefit of those he is responsible for, I believe that the nondirective approach presents many advantages.

The technique is simply to stand back and "let the Lord work things out." Where the directive method is employed, there exists a subtle danger that when one makes and imposes a decision one may be, without knowing it, expressing an impulse coming from one's own wishes, prejudices, or will. Not being all-knowing—as the Lord is—one may be making a mistake. My own doubts began at Science Research Associates long ago when confronted with the uncertainties inherent in what was referred to as human engineering. In all active human situations more variables are involved than the human mind can take account of, and before a therapist can achieve results the variables tend to increase in number and change their character. I can recall examples where courses of action I was sure were indicated were subsequently shown to be, had they been carried out,

¹ The Vedanta Gesellschaft, in Steinebach, Germany, near Frankfurt, was formally affiliated with the Ramakrishna Order in 2004.

clearly erroneous. As I watched the working out of the nondirective style over some three decades, I have come to the conclusion that it gives results no less effective than those reached where the style of leadership is more aggressive; and is ultimately an effective technique for guiding the mature aspirant.

A Prisoner of Love

There is an Indian expression which runs like this: “God is at the disposal of his devotees.” Quite an idea. Years of observation have shown me that a genuine guru or holy man is equally at the disposal of any seeker who wishes to “take advantage” of him. He is a hostage to his own commitment, victim of his own goodness, prisoner of love—of his own impersonal compassion—that which Buddhist writers term the Great Compassion. Well, God can take it, but the poor earthly guru is only a man!

Some observers might believe that being a guru is an enviable lot. All that adulation, all those gifts! But no. That’s the least part of it, and a negligible part, since no genuine guru accepts such marks of esteem as due to him personally. One recalls Shakespeare’s masterly treatment of Henry V’s meditations as he, the King, disguised, walked among his soldiers in the night before the battle at Harfleur: “What infinite heart’s ease must kings neglect that private men enjoy!” It’s the comfort-station duties, the emergency-ward responsibilities which cost. The long letters to be read and responded to encouragingly, the interviews replete with tedious details of the disciple’s resentments and regrets, the sheer childishness of attitudes of the interviewee, the advice the guru is implored to give, often on matters purely secular. The embarrassing revelations he must listen to, the trouble-making potentialities of the unstable and the mad that he must defuse. Yes, and the denunciations he must face from disciples who temporarily or permanently choose to change their allegiance.

God is at the entire disposal of his devotee. The corollary to that is that the holy man or guru, performing as he should, is indeed more godlike than he or we can possibly comprehend.

Swami Ritajananda died at the Clinic of Tourman near Gretz just after midnight on 22 January, 1994. He was eighty-seven years old. The problems were heart and age. Two years earlier he had returned to Gretz from a long sojourn in Brazil in order to be present for his birthday on 9 December, 1992. Several days later he began a new journey, this time to India. During January, 1993, he was constantly ill, first at Delhi then in Calcutta. In February he returned to France urgently and immediately entered the Clinic. He was there a total of four times in the months that followed. Disciples and friends crowded in from all parts of the world to see their beloved friend while there was still time. During the final days he rested quietly in the hospital bed speaking little if at all, his eyes closed. At 15 minutes after midnight he simply stopped breathing.

[Conclusion]

Three Pictures

Charles Birx

There is a common saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. I can remember the first time I saw pictures of Sri Ramakrishna. It was as if a whole new wonderful world opened before me and its beauty set me on the path of spiritual practice to find that which is beyond words. What is it about these pictures that they have the potential to change the direction of one's life and the quality of one's heart?

Picture 1: Joy

The first picture I ever saw of Ramakrishna (many years ago!) is the one of him standing in samadhi during a kirtan at Keshab Sen's house. He is pictured supported by his nephew, Hriday.



The first thing that struck me about this picture is the joy shining from his face. The second thing was the sense that this joy is both still and moving. Ramakrishna's still, silent body is charged with joy! At the same time, this joy rolls like thunder with each beat of his heart and flows in rivers through his veins quenching in him that thirst and longing that we all have and which only joy or spiritual experience can extinguish.

As I look at this picture today I greatly appreciate this paradox of movement in stillness, the paradox of Ramakrishna's ability to evoke the joyous dance of life even while remaining perfectly still and silent.

In my own practice of Zen meditation there is the discipline of having to sit still and silent for long periods of time. This requires physical strength and strong determination. But this is not the military discipline of a soldier at

attention, it is the discipline of a ballerina, of one who knows how to dance! This is a discipline filled with grace and beauty. It is the movement of joy.

Picture 2: Lightness of Being

The second picture I saw of Ramakrishna is the one of him sitting in samadhi on the verandah of Radhakanta temple at Dakshineswar. The only thing I remember thinking at the time was - this man is beautiful!

Later I read that as the cameraman was about to take this picture he noticed that the body was a little slumped to one side and so he went over to Ramakrishna to make him sit erect by softly adjusting his chin. As soon as he touched his chin the whole body came up like a piece of paper because it was so light, weightless.¹



This incident helps to clarify my initial reaction to the picture and the sense of profound beauty I still see in it. It is an expression of the lightheartedness of true spiritual awakening. It is a still shot of this religious genius who jokes, laughs, plays, and dances with life and with his devotees. I am reminded of G. K. Chesterton's saying, "Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly."²

Humor, laughter, and playfulness allow the spiritual aspirant to be unpretentious, free from arrogance, self-preoccupation, and pious illusions. It gives each of us a chance to go beyond spiritual self-importance and enables us to laugh at our weighty seriousness. Sri Ramakrishna invites committed aspirants to engage in spiritual practice with uplifted spirits and with the incredible lightness of being.

¹ Adapted from Swami Chetanananda, *Ramakrishna As We Saw Him* (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 1990), 468.

² Quote DB- Interactive Data Base of Famous Quotations. Retrieved July 4, 2007 from <http://www.quotedb.com/quotes/1429>.



Picture Three: Samadhi

The third picture is the studio portrait of Ramakrishna standing in samadhi with his right hand resting on a column. He is dressed in a dhoti, long-sleeved Punjabi, a dark coat, and slippers. I was fascinated by this picture.

Here is Ramakrishna dressed in the common clothes of his day, standing in a typical photographic studio having his picture taken like any ordinary Joe and yet—in samadhi! Viewing this picture I thought, here is a living example that true religious consciousness is not limited by place or time.

In Zen there is an expression, *playful samadhi*. It refers to the wonderfully free state of mind in all circumstances; the mind that enjoys freedom at all times. It is the mind that delights in the ordinariness of life. It is sometimes called the samadhi of innocent play. I have always found in Ramakrishna a child-like innocence and spontaneity that is spiritually refreshing and inspiring. For example, one day while Ramakrishna was

talking with Mahendranath about throwing puffed rice into a lake where the fish come to the surface to eat it, he exclaimed, “Ah! I feel so happy to see them sport in the water. That will awaken your spiritual consciousness too.”³ This is why I return again and again to Ramakrishna, to enjoy with him his playful samadhi.

Three Pictures: What have you seen in me?

Everyone sees the world through his/her own eyes and so sees things differently. Some people will see more in these pictures and some will see less. I am reminded of the question Ramakrishna asked his devotee, Girish, one day while they were strolling through the temple garden, “Well, what have you seen in me?”⁴ □

³ Adapted from Swami Nikhilananda, trans., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942/84), 238.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

Walden and the Bhagavad Gita: How-To's for Navigating Life in a Contradictory World

Joy Greenberg

By the time Swami Vivekananda set foot on American soil in 1893, his beloved Hindu scriptures were already firmly ingrained within the uniquely, if peculiarly, American philosophy of Transcendentalism. Thanks to preeminent Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, translations of Oriental literature had preceded the swami's arrival by six decades. While Emerson may have been among the first Americans to read and then incorporate Indian wisdom into his philosophy, it may be argued that Henry David Thoreau was the first to actually model himself on its teachings. What Emerson abstractly hinted at in prose and poetry such as *Nature* and "Brahma," Thoreau concretized in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers* and in his seminal *Walden, Or Life in the Woods*. Thoreau thus epitomizes—perhaps even more so than Emerson—the impact of Hinduism in general and the Bhagavad Gita in particular on Transcendentalism. Indeed, the beauty of *Walden* is reflected not only by its parallel monist philosophy but its similarity in structure and style to the Gita. As a result, Thoreau's mythological rhetoric—in particular his integration of paradoxical tropes to explain paradox—succeeds in creating a new Occidental mythology.

Attracted to the Paradoxes in Hinduism

Long enamored of the Greco-Roman classics, thanks to his traditional Harvard education, Thoreau first became acquainted with Asian literature during his early twenties. Legend has it that while a guest of Emerson, the inquisitive Henry availed himself of Waldo's extensive library, including his unique collection of Hindu scriptures. In Hinduism he discovered a worldview that produced its own paradoxes, many of which could be apprehended as cultural constructs of universal conundrums involving the tension between such opposites as nature and culture or life and death. By exploring the opposing expectations engendered by its contradictory ideals, Hindu mythology seeks to resolve—though not always successfully—paradoxical concepts simultaneously. One such dilemma in Hinduism is the imperative for individuals to pursue two mutually opposing goals. On the one hand, according to *The Laws of Manu*, one should strive after certain religiously validated social goals: marriage, an occupation, the production of offspring and the performance of ritual acts for the attainment of one's desires. On the other hand, according to the same sacred texts, all such mundane activity is said to ensnare the individual in perpetual suffering and rebirth, known as *samsara* and *karma*. The *ultimate* religious goal, then, is the

renunciation of the world and activity in it: liberation (*moksha*) is achieved only by surrendering everything.

Thoreau obviously recognized the contradictions inherent in Hinduism and was attracted to it in spite of—or perhaps because of—this challenge. Except for its validation of caste, he took the Hindu canon to heart, making countless references to the Bhagavad Gita, in particular, initially in his journal entries and then in his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*. At one point he wrote to a friend, “I am a yogi.” Cognizant that the life of a yogi is by definition austere and simple, Thoreau’s so-called Walden Project became an experiment to enact the basic teachings of the Gita, while incorporating those of Transcendentalism at the same time. That both philosophies advocate retreating from society apparently informed the synchronous impulse in Thoreau to do just that. The written document of his experience became *Walden*. In fact, as noted by Frank MacShane,¹ what he did is a precise reenactment of yogic instructions from the *Gita*: “Those who aspire to the state of yoga should seek the Self in inner solitude through meditation. With body and mind controlled they should constantly practice one-pointedness, free from expectations and attachment to material possessions.”²

Encountering Oppositions on the Spiritual Journey

In order to address the inevitable oppositions encountered on his spiritual journey, Thoreau utilizes figurative language describing his experiences at Walden. Nature is the embodiment of contradiction for him, which he demonstrates by using paradox to epitomize the dual nature of his vision that is consistent with the *Gita*. He refers frequently to the “doubleness” of nature and its polarities, as in the following passages (where the emphasis is mine):

By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent...I may be either the drift-wood in the stream, or Indra looking down on it. I *may* be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I *may not* be affected by an actual event which concerns me much more. I...am sensible of a certain *doubleness* by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another...I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than you. When the play, it may be the tragedy of life, is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of

¹ Frank MacShane, “Walden and Yoga,” *New England Quarterly* 37 (Sept. 1964): 324.

² Eknath Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 34.

the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. This *doubleness* may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes.³

This repetition of the doubleness motif indicates Thoreau's awareness of the Self and World as both extremes of a continuum existing at once. Indeed, it is just this "paradoxical affirmation that self-transcendence is self-affirmation" to which he refers when he employs this motif.⁴ In other words, according to Arthur Versluis, it is "only when one throws open the door of one's self [that one can] become universal man... Thoreau holds that in order to truly understand and appreciate nature's meaning, one has to transcend nature."⁵ By calling up images that are both sacred and mundane ("drift-wood in the stream"), Thoreau shows that one's take on life is all a matter of perspective; where one stands—both literally and figuratively—determines one's outlook. The contradictory outlooks then make us both/either "poor neighbors" and/or "friends." This "doubleness" is extended by the numerous rhetorical reversals of which Thoreau was especially fond, and he wastes no time bombarding the reader with them beginning in Chapter One: "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of any thing, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?"⁶ Bemoaning what he believes to be a lack of wisdom in his "neighbors," Thoreau demonstrates that how one responds to a stimulus depends largely upon one's perspective.

Seeing Action in Inaction

The ease with which Thoreau handles the trope of paradox perhaps explains the ease with which he took to Hindu scriptures, which are nothing if not about confronting contradiction, as may be seen in the following reversal from Chapter Four of the Gita: "The wise see that there is action in inaction."⁷ The lesson being taught here is that in the midst of tireless service to those around them, individuals so identified with the Self "remain in inner peace, the still witness of action. They do not act...it is the Self that acts through them: 'They alone see truly who see that all actions are performed by prakriti, while the Self remains unmoved.'"⁸ The rhetorical economy expressed in the above examples is an earmark of reversals that convey in a few words concepts that would otherwise take paragraphs to explain or, in fact, are inexplicable—an important

³ Nina Baym, ed., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol. B* (New York: Norton, 2003), 1878-9; Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods*.

⁴ Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (Oxford, England: Oxford UP, 1993), 86.

⁵ Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 87.

⁶ Baym, 1812.

⁷ Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita*, 25.

⁸ Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita*, xli, 72.

consideration when taking into account the fact that the *Gita* comes to us from the ancient oral tradition that was passed through generations via memorization. These reversals frequently appear in the *Gita* in the form of epigrams such as: “The body is mortal, but he who dwells in the body is immortal and immeasurable.”⁹ Thus, the seeming separation between the Self and the outer body is rendered diffuse; an abstraction (immortality) is made more comprehensible by its relationship with the concrete (mortality).

A Strategy to Command Attention and Creativity

The *Gita*’s use of the trope of paradox thus elucidates the eternal, unchanging, spiritual essence that is called Brahman. All is unified in Brahman; God is one. Beneath the multitudinous variety of human beings, humanity is ultimately one. There are millions of Hindu gods; there is one God. Everything is true and nothing is true in this religion of antinomy and ambiguity where all that is important is thought of as both singular and plural. Yet, the number of gods and goddesses is not the salient point of Hindu polytheism. It is, rather, a strategy to command attention and to invoke creative thinking.

The recognition in Hinduism of a paradoxical unity underlying infinite diversity is expressed by Thoreau as well through his use of rhetorical reversals:

I never found a companion that was so companionable as solitude.¹⁰

My house was not empty though I was gone.¹¹

I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born.¹²

Not till we have lost the world do we begin to find ourselves.¹³

Give me the poverty that enjoys true wealth.¹⁴

Walden was dead and is alive again.¹⁵

At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable.¹⁶

Humility like darkness reveals the heavenly lights.¹⁷

⁹ Baym, 1879.

¹⁰ Baym, 1879.

¹¹ Baym, 1939.

¹² Baym, 1859.

¹³ Baym, 1897.

¹⁴ Baym, 1911.

¹⁵ Baym, 1970.

¹⁶ Baym, 1973.

¹⁷ Baym, 1973.

The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us.¹⁸

The latter two above represent a repetitive motif of light/dark opposition in *Walden*, forming what is considered its essential paradox, according to Versluis,¹⁹ who points to a passage in Chapter Two to support this claim: “Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius...to a higher life than we fell asleep from; and thus the darkness bear its fruit, and prove itself to be good, no less than the light.”²⁰ Here—as elsewhere in *Walden* and, indeed, also in Hindu, if not all, mythology—light symbolizes awakening/enlightenment, while darkness is its opposite—the unconscious.

Thoreau’s “penchant for paradox,” as Alan D. Hodder calls it, therefore demonstrates his indebtedness to Hinduism. His reliance on this trope, as evidenced by the multiplicity of examples, indicates his literary artistry. Indeed, this “habit of vision that gave rise to such paradox...came naturally to Thoreau; it was a natural expression of his bifurcating eye...”²¹ It also indicates his desire to engender critical thought by causing disorientation and confusion. For rational minds rebel at duality, which forces the apprehension of moral antitheses, thereby creating anxiety. The heavy reliance upon pithy paradox thus helps to convey the “dual nature of Thoreau’s existential vision”²² and enables him, according to Versluis, “to demonstrate that humankind exists as a continuum, a hierarchy stretching from base to ethereal, from sleep to waking, from cocoon to butterfly, from animal to transcendence.”²³

Creating a New Mythology

That Thoreau consciously creates paradoxical tropes to explain the contradictions of life suggests that he was aware of his own mythmaking capabilities. For the purpose of myth is to investigate and overcome the dueling dualities encountered by the mind. By presenting contradictory characters and situations, myth is designed to free the logical mind so it may accept that two opposing viewpoints can be held simultaneously. As Lévi-Strauss points out, “Mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions towards their resolution.”²⁴ The net result, then, is not a *solution* to the problem posed by paradox, which is, after all, insoluble. Rather, it is a *restatement* of the problem, allowing for continued re-creation of the myth—an exercise that enables humans to act upon the myriad dilemmas invented by the mind.

¹⁸ Baym, 1982.

¹⁹ Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 27.

²⁰ Baym, 1854.

²¹ Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau’s Ecstatic Wilderness* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001), 245.

²² Hodder, *Thoreau’s Ecstatic Wilderness*, 246.

²³ Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 88.

²⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, quoted in *Classical Mythology*, Mark P.O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 12-13.

Walden is, therefore, an attempt by Thoreau to confront the contradictions he found in mid-nineteenth century America. In so doing, he emulates the rhetorical techniques of Hindu mythology, which also strives to reconcile the conflicting oppositions of life. As a result, Thoreau arguably succeeds in creating through *Walden* a new mythology, a “joint Bible” as he called it—an eclectic melding of Eastern and Western scriptures that focuses on achieving transcendental truth through contemplation and its *de rigueur* complement, solitude. Like the Bhagavad Gita, *Walden* is thus an attempt by Thoreau to resolve the Ultimate Paradox: The creation of the Self through transcendence is indistinguishable from its surrender. Indeed, both works may be read as guides for how to be in a world of paradox. □

Reflections on the Holy Mother

William Page

One of the more remarkable developments in the Ramakrishna movement over the past fifty years has been the increasing importance of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother. When I first came to Vedanta back in the late 1950s, we heard very little about her. The emphasis was all on Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

Over the years her significance has become increasingly recognized. There are now organizations which emphasize her so much that she seems to overshadow Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Certainly it is true that she has come to form a new Holy Trinity with them. Many altars display her photo alongside those of Thakur and Swamiji, and often all three photos are the same size.

At one time this trend made me uneasy. Because of my own fondness for Sri Ramakrishna, I thought that the focus of the Ramakrishna movement ought to be solely on him. I thought that if we started multiplying the objects of devotion, soon they would come to include not only Swamiji and Holy Mother, but also Swami Brahmananda, Swami Saradananda, Swami Shivananda, Swami Premananda, and eventually all of the direct disciples. With so many objects of devotion to choose from, devotees would become confused; with so many to worship, their minds would be scattered.

But now I'm not so sure. Vedanta is always inclusive rather than exclusive, and I have to keep reminding myself of this. It's quite likely that my idea of focusing on one ideal to the exclusion of others is a carry-over from my Protestant upbringing, with its monotheistic orientation and its dualistic “either-or” attitude.

Sri Ramakrishna suggests a solution to the problem with his parable of the housewife who serves her in-laws respectfully but reserves her greatest love and devotion for her husband. In the same way, maybe devotees should pay homage to Swamiji, Holy Mother, and the other direct disciples, but reserve their greatest love for Sri Ramakrishna.

But even here there may be a problem. What if a devotee feels more attracted to Swamiji or Holy Mother than to Sri Ramakrishna? It would be natural for active, dynamic personalities to feel drawn to Swamiji, and for more withdrawn, inner-directed personalities to gravitate toward Holy Mother. It would also be natural for Swamiji, with his emphasis on manliness and strength, to appeal to men; and for Holy Mother, with her emphasis on motherliness and compassion, to appeal to women. That would seem to leave slim pickings for Sri Ramakrishna, even though he might be regarded as a synthesis of both types.

Who Is Sri Ramakrishna?

Digging a little deeper, though, a question arises—and at first it sounds silly. Who or what, exactly, *is* Sri Ramakrishna? Now that he is no longer in a physical body, is he dwelling in some far-off Ramakrishna Loka in his subtle body? No doubt he is; but the Atman is omnipresent, and since Sri Ramakrishna is one with the Atman, he must be omnipresent too.

Holy Mother has been quoted as saying, “He who is Thakur is Mother also,”¹ and “He [Thakur] is in this body in subtle form. Thakur himself told me, ‘I will live in you in subtle form!’”² Swami Premananda, too, has been quoted as saying, “Those fellows who look upon Mother and Thakur as separate will not get anything.”³

It has been suggested that Sri Ramakrishna’s life was primarily a model for sannyasins to emulate, whereas Holy Mother served as a model for householders. So it is possible that she represents a fulfillment, a completion, of a process which he initiated.

God is Spirit, Jesus reminds us. Spirit is subtle, and exceedingly fluid. Sri Ramakrishna once said, “There are two beings in this body; one is the Mother, and the other is her devotee.” What would be more natural than for the Spirit

¹ Swami Tanmayananda, *The Compassionate Mother: Sri Sri Sarada Devi*, (Sri Ramakrishna Sarada Sangha Malaysia, 2000), 230.

² Tanmayananda, 356.

³ Tanmayananda, 230.

that dwelt in Sri Ramakrishna to take up residence in the body of his wife in order to continue his work after his own body had been consigned to the flames?

The Ramakrishna movement had its origin in Mother-worship, because Sri Ramakrishna was a devotee of Kali. Mother-worship requires a mother-figure to serve as its object. Sri Ramakrishna cannot easily serve as a mother-figure because he had a male body. Kali herself can easily serve as a mother-figure in India, but many Westerners will be troubled by her ferocious iconography and her destructive aspect.

Mother-Worship Has Come Full Circle

Holy Mother is subject to no such objections. Her iconography is acceptable even to persnickety Westerners—although it is sobering to note that we have no photos that show her smiling. Her preeminent quality is her motherliness. We have hundreds of anecdotes testifying to her motherly compassion, and only a few in which she manifests the terrific, destructive aspect of Kali.⁴ She is the ideal vehicle for the Spirit which lived in Sri Ramakrishna, and she can function as an ideal mother-figure for the whole world. In her, the Mother-worship which gave birth to the Ramakrishna movement has come full circle. The road from Dakshineswar leads to Jayrambati.

Earlier I objected that devotees should focus solely on Sri Ramakrishna, and not get distracted by subsidiary figures like Swami Vivekananda and Holy Mother. This objection loses its force if we accept the viewpoint that Sri Ramakrishna actually *became* a part of Swami Vivekananda and Holy Mother. Spirit is indeed subtle; it does what it likes and goes where it likes; it is one, but it can manifest itself as many.

It is conceivable that Sri Ramakrishna can project from himself an infinite number of subtle bodies. This would explain the apparent contradiction in Holy Mother's statement that Sri Ramakrishna would live in her in subtle form, and also in the hearts of his devotees.⁵

Viewed in this light, the worship of Holy Mother is not a distraction from the worship of Sri Ramakrishna, but a fulfillment of it. It becomes a perfectly natural progression once we accept the idea that the same Spirit can manifest itself through different bodies. □

⁴ See Tanmayananda, 191-193.

⁵ See Tanmayananda, 350.

a poem?

not a technological
treatise. . .
its wording. . . not just words
but that energy which
is wrapping
its arms around the universe
emitting its sparks of beauty
its burst of truth
through our minds, our speech
till it shapes itself
inevitable
as it is.

—Elva Linnea Nelson

Clouds

The mind is deluded
By negativity.
Anger, lustful desire, hate,
Arrogance, grasping, fear,
Envy, self-absorption, pity, ego.
Clouds can hide the Truth
Of our True Being.
Clouds condense into cleansing rain.
Pain, tears and loss
Awaken our Real Self,
As the clouds dissipate.
The Soul is free to Be
A manifestation of Divinity,
Dispersing negativity,
Revealing unconditional Love, Compassion, Joy, Bliss.

—Juliette Seelye Karow

Dialog—Vedanta for the West

[Continued from the last issue. Editors and friends of AV have recently engaged in stimulating discussions concerning the nature of Vedanta in the West and prospects for the future. We share these thoughts with you in the hope that you will want to join the discussion. Please send your thoughts and comments to: The Editors, American Vedantist, P.O. Box 237041, New York, NY 10023. E-mail: VedWestCom@aol.com.]

Hinduism and Universal Religion: Are Western Vedantists Hindus?¹

Sister Gayatriprana

Introduction

The topic of our seminar is: Who is a Hindu? I shall attempt to answer this question from my central interest in the Great Sayings (*mahavakyas*) of the Upanishads—particularly as commented on by Swami Vivekananda—and in how to actualize them in my own life and share their insights with others. What are these sayings and how have I understood them?

The Purport of the Great Sayings of the Upanishads

1. The fundamental Vedantic notion of the intrinsic divinity of all human beings relates in my mind to the Upanishadic dictum, “You are That,” which can be interpreted as meaning that any “other” or “you” one encounters is, fundamentally, one with the Ground Reality, or Brahman. This does not have to be mere scholastic dogma; it can be the starting point for a radically different approach to our relationships with each other. If we can assert the intrinsic divinity of each and every being we encounter, we give life to the possibility of accepting, validating, and valuing others in a much more radical way than mere toleration or political adjustment.
2. The project of actualizing this conviction is centered in the dictum, I am Brahman. In addition to asserting the divinity of others, we have to establish ourselves thoroughly in the realization of our own divinity. Only when we have fully understood, from our own experience, what it means to be “divine” can we truly extend to others the understanding and fellow-feeling that validates and supports our assertion of the divinity we share with them.

¹ Abridged and edited version of a paper presented at the Third Dharma Association of North America (DANAM) Conference, held at the 2005 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Reproduced by permission. Graham M. Schweig, Jeffery D. Long, Ramdas Lamb, Adarsh Deepak, Editors, *Asceticism, Identity and Pedagogy in Dharma Traditions* (Hampton, Virginia: Deepak Heritage Books, 2006).

3. The issue of struggling with our more limited and limiting concepts which inevitably arise in the process we are describing here—and which are ultimately the cause of all of the misunderstanding and violence we extend to others—is one that can be resolved only by grasping the meaning of the dictum This Self is Brahman. We must take our understanding of what we might call “the forms of Brahman” from the ubiquitous you and I to a deeper level—the Self, which is the locus of the fullest integration within ourselves.

4. The Upanishads hold up Brahman as the Ground of Reality, unifying the you, the I, and the Self. Intellectually, Brahman is the Reality we are struggling to realize and express, conceived as pervading and also transcending all that exists in our finite order—our universe and any others that exist now, in the past, or in the future.

How, then, can we get any notion of this entity with which we are struggling to identify all our experiences? The Upanishads identify Brahman with *prajnanam*, which is often translated as consciousness, meaning pure, undivided consciousness. In commenting on this mantra, Swami Vivekananda often uses the word Intelligence, by which he means that which renders the universe coherent and underwrites the intelligibility and accessibility of its actual manifestation. At this level the symbols helping us to get an inkling of what it is are the universal and complementary processes of evolution (from matter to spirit) and involution (from spirit to matter), which, like yin and yang, or inhalation and exhalation, inform the movements of the entire universe in a seamless and indivisible way.

5. When we look at the universe we can directly perceive it as Brahman itself. Swami Vivekananda illustrates this idea by quoting an upanishadic text, “Working through all hands, walking through all feet and eating through every mouth—in every being He lives, through all minds He thinks. . . I am the universal.”² This is, of course, a very difficult concept to grasp, and I feel that the contemporary image of the hologram may help us understand: What Brahman *is* is contained in every single molecule of the universe, expressing itself totally, but with varying degrees of accuracy and fullness. From the standpoint of a spiritual person, what is important is that everything is indeed Brahman and the goal is to perceive that fact directly, at which point one understands that one oneself is that same universal including all of its forms of self-manifestation.

The Special Emphasis of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta

This is how I have absorbed Vedanta through the lens of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. I believe that it is firmly based on the great sayings of the Upanishads, but of course it takes a decidedly humanistic, psychological cast,

² Swami Vivekananda: Complete Works, Vol.1: What Is Religion?, 341.

which is not typical of traditional Vedanta. However, in my view such adaptation is absolutely necessary in order to speak to contemporary humanity. Nowadays our focus has switched from the purely metaphysical and scholastic to a hands-on emphasis on personal spiritual transformation and to finding a solution to the huge, current issues of relationship between cultures that are now in such intimate and contentious contact with each other.

Am I a Hindu?

That, very briefly is my belief system and what I am trying to live in practice. Does it make me a Hindu? In my own mind, the answer is no. I think of myself as a Vedantist, in the sense in which Swami Vivekananda used the word and which I have already outlined. The word does not imply any specific forms of religious observance. Swami Vivekananda himself felt that Vedanta is of universal significance, because it is a map, as it were, of the whole range of spiritual possibilities, covering the dualist through non-dualist positions, including all levels of consciousness which humanity has as yet manifested, and open to all possible forms of depth inquiry (including contemporary science) which are conceived of as expressions of the Vedantic principle.

From the standpoint of Vedanta as thus defined, what is the place of Hinduism? Swami Vivekananda himself defined Hindus as Indian Vedantists.³ The people of the Indian subcontinent not only articulated Vedanta in a clear and thoroughgoing way, but also, within their geographical, climatic and cultural milieu developed forms totally appropriate for their spiritual progress, ranging from shamanism to the most refined and abstruse philosophy. From one standpoint, this incredible variety is a weakness, a diffusion that makes it very difficult to see how the whole thing holds together. From another standpoint, the amazing polymorphism of Hinduism is a proof of Vedanta itself: infinite forms may co-exist and mutually support each other when they are pegged to a worldview as all-embracing as Vedanta. Within this purview, the question is not what religious forms one follows but how they promote individual spiritual development and world peace. Here we can summarize spiritual development as the cultivation of unselfishness, unconditional love, an awareness of one's true identity as spirit, and the ability to see the divine in every object of the universe. These are the ways of practice, as well as the goals of the four familiar yogas, to which Ramakrishna and Vivekananda add a fifth: the ability to accept the validity of all forms and grasp how they work together in the total picture of human endeavor.

There is no doubt in my mind that Hinduism, as the modern Indian vehicle for Vedanta, has rendered the world signal service in keeping alive the well-articulated principles of Vedanta and demonstrating how they can be worked out

³ CW, Vol.5: Letter to Alasinga from New York, May 6, 1895, 81.

in so many different dimensions. If one goes to the spiritual core of any religion, one finds much that resonates with Vedanta. The conflicts we are experiencing at the moment are almost all due to too much emphasis on the exoteric aspects of the various religions. The view of Vedanta is that religion is a product of the human soul, and therefore there are commonalities in the deepest levels of all religions. But while other religions definitely have echoes or even quite good understanding of Vedanta as a principle, Hinduism is pre-eminent in its exhaustive working out of it historically.

This is not to say that Hinduism is the “best” or “only” religion. Every religion has made a contribution to the spiritual development of humanity. Each, in its own way, has developed one side or another of human experience and self-expression, and thus enriched the whole human race, if it could only wake up to that fact. There is a *raison d’être* for all religious forms, and in my understanding Vedanta supplies a good framework in which it becomes possible to see how they interrelate in an overall perspective. This at least was the view of Swami Vivekananda, and his work was to disseminate the core ideas of Vedanta so that interreligious understanding could develop globally.

How Can Vedanta Be Applied?

The Vedanta I have been discussing is, I would say, the result of Sri Ramakrishna’s response to modernity made available, at least to the Western world, by Swami Vivekananda’s discussing it in terms of (a) spiritual humanism, (b) yoga as a science, (c) *maya* or the obstacles we meet in practice as a product of the way we think, (d) a cosmology that includes not only evolution but also involution, and (e) a thoroughly holistic outlook, in which all religions are direct manifestations of the divine. In these terms, Swami Vivekananda claimed that Vedanta can be considered a “universal religion,” with the potential of answering the needs of anyone living in our contemporary world. The West also has worked towards the idea of a universal religion, which it has articulated since the Renaissance in terms of a Perennial Philosophy.

A number of Western Vedantists are very interested in and attracted by the concept of a universal religion, which not only answers the spiritual needs of humanity but also is compatible with modern science. To us, this is India’s special gift, showing us the core values and practices that can help us transform our lives spiritually without doing violence to our intellectual and intuitive understanding. But whether we have to subscribe to or follow the specific belief systems or traditional practices of Hinduism is a different question, and on that hinges the answer to what makes a person a Hindu. Do those of us who are attracted to the core values and teachings of Vedanta have to follow Hindu observances, believe in Hindu mythology, subscribe in toto to its metaphysics? These are issues with which Western Vedantists are currently grappling.

Does what was worked out on the Indian subcontinent over the last few millennia speak to the Western soul? There is no doubt that Hinduism is a bottomless treasure trove which richly repays deep study and involvement; but at the same time, it comes with a whole way of thinking that is radically different from the Western way. The traditional Indian attitude tends to subsume the individual in the general, both in philosophy and in social stratification; to emphasize a deity embodied in some mythic form or other; and to include a heavily ritualistic tradition. Some of these, of course, are not bad in themselves; but do they speak to the soul of someone coming from a background where the individual person is considered the locus of the divine, to whom this world itself is the arena for self-realization and self-expression, and where “ordinary” work is a sacred activity? The exigencies of geography, climate and cultural and social tradition make a huge difference to the strategies we use for survival and growth, and of course, to the way we think. The kind of philosophy and religion arising from the Arctic is going to be different from those arising from the sands of Arabia, the lush rainforests of the Amazon, the heights of the Himalayas or the huge cities of the West where people draw in the scientific viewpoint with their mother’s milk. These are some of the issues that engage our attention.

A Psychology Geared to the Experience of Westerners

What I am moving toward here is the idea that Westerners are going to have to work out their own interpretations of the Vedanta brought to the West by Swami Vivekananda. On account of its humanistic, democratic and scientific bent, it has tremendous appeal, but the forms in which it is to be expressed are not yet clear. If it is going to communicate with the Western world at large, it will have to use contemporary symbols, a psychology geared to the actual experience of Westerners and a social system that is open and democratic. There is a rapidly growing interest in the realm of the Spirit in the West. In scientific communities it is given the name of “consciousness studies.” There are also burgeoning spiritual psychologies and more sophisticated systems of spiritual philosophy which include not only science but universal patterns that are conceded to be supersensuous. In the light of the rapidly growing interest in the realm of the Spirit in the West (even in scientific communities, where it is given the name of consciousness studies), a burgeoning spiritual psychology and much more sophisticated systems of philosophy, which include not only science but also universal patterns that are conceded to be supersensuous. I feel that the West is definitely on track to grasping Vedanta and, with its usual address and efficiency, will soon be producing its own symbols and mythic forms with which to support its insights.

Can we call Western Vedantists Hindus? To my mind, this debate blurs important distinctions, because the particular forms of each tradition get their relevance from the role they play in helping the people living in specific

conditions to adjust to these conditions. Moreover, only those living in the tradition are capable of deciding which forms are currently helpful and of making whatever changes are needful. Any attempt to impose change on a tradition from outside, be it Westerners with Asians, or the other way around, is undesirable.

These are contentious issues, which we are going to have to work out empirically. To the extent to which we can recognize the universal applicability of Vedanta, we can understand that, whether we are Indian Vedantists (Hindus) or Western Vedantists seeking to find our own unique religious forms, we do share a common humanity, a common destiny, a common unfolding of our innate divinity. With so much in common, we may one day be able to see ourselves, as Swami Vivekananda did, as sisters and brothers, each unique and expressing oneself in different ways, but grounded in the same Reality, working on the same “operating system,” which at the moment I am calling Vedanta.

[The following are responses to discussion in our last issue.]

Full Throttle toward Indianization?

William A. Conrad

Shall our centers go full throttle on the path to Indianization, as Bill Page seems to advocate in his article in the last issue of AV? Given my experience with Vedanta, I think that would be ill-advised.

For about 45 years I have had a place at the back of our chapel in the Vedanta Society of New York assigned to me by Swami Pavitranaanda, operating the sound system during lectures. I have talked with many newcomers and followed a flexible routine which included asking people how they had heard of us. Being an experimental physicist, I would record the answers. More than 50% of Western newcomers had heard of us from other Westerners who had been to one of our centers. However, in recent years most of the people who have come to us have found us by searching the Web. This experience suggests to me that if word-of-mouth remains important, the decline in number of Westerners can only accelerate, because a self-reinforcing feedback loop has been established where Westerners inform Westerners. As the number of Westerners decreases, the number who can be informed in this way also decreases. I have already documented this decline by counting the number of Westerners and Indians in the audience at all services. Long ago, I counted the Indians separately; but in recent years, for convenience, I have changed over to counting the Westerners separately. The numbers show a marked shift in the ratio of Westerners to Indians. Clearly, once the decline in the number of

Westerners sets in, word-of-mouth becomes a less and less effective draw. We must start using the Web as our primary signpost, because it does not require personal contact.

Let me give some of my personal experience as I gradually became a regular visitor to the Vedanta Society of New York. I am somewhat atypical in that I approach most matters, including Vedanta, with a scientist's bent of mind. What mainly attracted me was Swami Pavitrananda's openness to questions. I argued with him for 10 years, whereas, in my observation, most people either stop questioning after 3 years or less or stop coming entirely. For me, the greatest thing Swami Vivekananda said was: "Think for yourself. No blind belief can save you, work out your own salvation." (*Inspired Talks*, CWSV Vol. 7, 86). I have observed that Indians customarily do not challenge the swamis. As our centers become predominantly Indian, questioning types like myself will become rare indeed. This has already happened in my experience.

Now with respect to Indian food. Personally, because of my health and many allergies, I cannot take it. However, in my youth, I could be more liberal. When I first came to the center, I became friends with a young Indian about my age. He would often invite me to dinner, but we generally ate Western food. However, he would offer me lemon pickle as a relish. At first, I did not like it, but he always pressed me to take a little taste. Time after time I would try the pickle, until I developed a taste for it and would eat large chunks with gusto. This experience seems to me to suggest a way for an accommodation between Westerners and Indians. We have to find a way to introduce newcomers to Indian ideas and customs in a gradual way. Let them slowly develop a taste for things Indian before giving the full blast of Indian ways and ideas. I do not know how to arrange such a gradual introduction, and I leave it to future discussion to flesh out a way. As has been said, "The fact that we cannot do everything does not give us license to do nothing."

The Indians are coming! The Indians are coming!

Amal Gupta

I empathize with the anonymous devotee who, even after 30 years' association with the American Vedanta Centers, not to mention having been blessed by coming in contact with swamis who were "spiritual giants" and "the monks who were inspired and initiated by the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother" feels in such a negative way. I agree that the influx of Indian immigrants starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s (my family and I are among these culprits!) might have changed the character of the American Vedanta Centers to some extent. But I do not think it's the end of the world.

Setting aside the problem of dwindling American presence at the Vedanta Centers, we need to discard our tunnel vision and look at the bigger picture. If we take into account the contributions these immigrants have made to the socio-economic, cultural, and political landscape of the USA, I am sure this devotee will agree that the overall outcome of this influx has been positive, and that too in the Vedantic context. Was not that Vivekananda's vision?

“No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labor is to pray. . . Life is itself a religion. . . To him [Vivekananda] the workshop, the study, the farmyard, and the field are as true and fit scenes for the meeting of God with man as the cell of the monk or the door of the temple.” (Sister Nivedita, *Introduction, CWSV Vol. I, xv.*)

As already noted, the Western Vedanta Centers might be facing some problems today. But so is the entire world, including every nation, every state, every city, every institution, every organization, every business, every school, every university. No century in the past has had to face the kind of global changes that are taking place in the world today. For the sake of space, I would like to defer discussion of possible solutions that Vedanta Centers might pursue to another discussion.

Western Gargis and Rabias?

In closing, one thought on the anonymous devotee's comment, “Fewer and fewer [Westerners] will attend [the Western Vedanta Centers] till at last the only Westerners attending will be a few American women who like to dress in saris and put dots on their foreheads.” Frankly, I found this comment very amusing. But seriously, if that happens I think it will be fantastic! Hopefully during this century, due to Divine Grace, many such “sari-wearing-dot-putting” Western women will appear on the world stage as spiritual giants like Gargi and Rabia, spreading the profound principles of Vedanta as taught by Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother, and Vivekananda, and guiding the misguided men who are determined to destroy this wonderful world spiritually, ethically, morally, socially, culturally, economically, politically, and, last but not least, environmentally. In the words of the Holy Mother, “Do you know, my son, that the Master [Ramakrishna] looked upon all in this world as Mother? He left me behind *this time* for demonstrating that Motherhood to the world.” (*The Gospel of The Holy Mother, p. 321*) Did not Vivekananda echo it also as the “emancipation of Women and manifestation of the Divine *Shakti*?” We know that this profound change will not take place overnight, but we do see some signs of this manifestation all over the world today. More on this theme in another discussion.

A Dynamic Exchange of Values

P. Shneidre

In regard to the increasing Indian element in American Vedanta groups, I'll add briefly an observation from my vantage point as caretaker of the library at one center.

It seems that most of the Indian members here are Indians who were not particularly drawn to Vedanta or, indeed, any philosophical version of Hinduism while they were in India. Many of them had family deities and gurus and rituals but no deep relationship to them. In America, their studies completed and their careers and families underway, they have developed a strong interest in studying the religion of their homeland in the context of the Vedanta Societies.

One good friend has confessed that it was only when he felt a need to impart some fatherly guidance to his teenaged son, raised in America, that he turned to the Vedanta classics for help, and found himself getting absorbed in scripture for the first time. Apropos of Page's praise for Indian cooking and hospitality, Sam spends all of his time, at not one but two separate Vedanta groups, serving the devotees those well-known Indian treats—coffee and donuts!

This is a far cry from Vedanta Societies becoming Indian curry klatches; it is in fact part of the exchange of values that Vivekananda sought. In the working out of his desire or prophecy, it seems that the exchange is a continually dynamic one, not just a simple trade of Indian spirituality for Western technology. Who can forget that Swami Vivekananda met Sri Ramakrishna only after his English teacher, a Scotsman, suggested it? A meeting from which has flowed all that is being discussed here. Oh—and how did Professor Hastie happen to mention the saint of Dakshineswar? He was reminded of him by a passage in a poem by—Ramprasad? No: William Wordsworth.

In this connection it's interesting that at least two American Vedanta groups with substantial Indian representation are facilitated by American monastics. Meanwhile, India has become a leading technological power.

Americans and Indians are becoming ready for Vedanta at the same time. How could anything be more universal than that?

Let Us Be Vedantic Lumens

M. G. Corson

The last issue of *American Vedantist* kept me awake all night trying to pierce into the truth of what the American problem is in regard to our Centers. It was not just an all-night wrap-up. I've thought most of my life about this matter of organized religion.

We have been most fortunate to have been introduced to real Truth through those that God sent to us. Our "thank you" should be our own enlightenment. Could we not consider it our given way and high blessing by the Great God to flee the organized Vedanta coop and find our way directly back to our very Self? Do we still need an inspired watchman to keep telling us that bright way with a little candle? I see the growing Indian presence at our Vedanta Centers as a signal to check our longing. Is it for camaraderie or is it for soul freedom? Do we not know the way our spiritual guides have pointed out to us? Time is waiting too long for us to knock hard on God's door. As the Christ said, "Knock and it shall be opened unto you." He didn't say you must first get permission from another or that you have to be an intellectual and hear so many lectures.

What are we waiting for? America desperately needs great souls of her own. We need to stand firmly on the ground and determine to take the bull by the horns. There is absolutely no reason why we shouldn't or can't do this. It's all a matter of longing to be free. We know the way.

There is something unique about America that no other nation has. As Walt Whitman said, "We can go where mariner has never dared to go." That is our spirit.

We ought to be ready and excited that the Satya Yuga (The Age of Truth) is upon us. It's shaking with vibrations of spirituality and goodness. Why not take advantage of it? Each one of us can be original and find a way that suits, to keep God in thought while living our daily lives. Remember the song, "Whistle while you work" from *Snow White*? Our spiritual words can be put to that tune, or we can invent a tune or a thought that fits it. It doesn't need to be an East Indian chant. We need to make moving to God a joy. Each individual usually has a strong sense of what will move him or her.

Let us be Vedantic lumens! In America we badly need souls who are illumined, who have reached the knowledge of Oneness, those to whom the welfare of others' spiritual advancement is more important than what happens to themselves. Can we not be great souls and help reintroduce the ancient message of who mankind is? □

A Laughing Matter

Vimukta Chaitanya

The Vedanta Retreat, which is the property of the Vedanta Society of Northern California, occupies well over 2000 acres of land in the coastal wilderness of Marin County, about 35 miles northwest of San Francisco. It is bordered on all sides by the Point Reyes National Seashore, a federal park, and has many things to recommend it as a spiritual sanctuary, aside from the substantial measure of privacy and seclusion that the park provides. From a woman's point of view in particular, the women's retreat house, an extensive, single-story edifice well off the beaten path, warrants being cited as an example. It accommodates women on retreat comfortably, and it pleases the eye, both as to its design and its idyllic setting: trees, shrubs, flowers conspire to invest the house with an aura of enchantment. Deer in the vicinity, as if on retreat themselves, seem to make the house itself more visitor-friendly. Like the cows in the pastures, grazing contentedly, they inject into the atmosphere a note of tranquility. Women of all faiths are welcome to avail themselves of the house, with the proviso that they be in quest of the grail of spiritual attainment, and have made proper arrangements.

A Five-Star Retreat House?

The house is mentioned in the retreat brochure as a "five-star" retreat house. The designation, which happens to be mine, as the author of the text, is purely unofficial and may sound opinionated. Nevertheless, I stick by my guns—quietly, yet resolutely, I insist that I know whereof I speak. Nor has anyone who has seen the house ever advised me that the designation overstates the case for the house. That it may actually understate it was, for me, so remote a possibility as to be clean out of sight. Not even for a moment did I entertain the possibility. Of late, though, certain women have entertained it, the women high-spirited, happy-faced, boldly assertive.

When you enter the retreat from Shoreline Highway and proceed along a graveled road lined with cypress and eucalyptus trees, the first building that you come to, quite some distance from the highway, is a big green barn—this is our monastery—and the first door that you come to at the barn has a sign just to the

left of it that reads “Information.” If you ring the doorbell, the “Minister of Information,” meaning me, will usually appear to welcome you, to make you feel at home in a lovely but unfamiliar environment, and to answer questions. Not long ago, I told a woman who stopped by to inquire of me specifically about the women’s retreat, which I had evaluated as a “five-star” retreat house—a lofty rating, I readily admitted, yet one from which I was not prepared to back down. She smiled and accepted this judgment unquestioningly. The Minister of Information had spoken, and you don’t lightly challenge the pronouncements of the Minister of Information. She figured that I knew what I was talking about.

But did I? A few weeks later, having made her initial retreat at the house and seen how attractive the architecture was, how handsomely the house was appointed, and how nicely it was landscaped, she looked me up before she left the retreat. She wanted me to know that my evaluation of the house had not done it justice. “I’d say it’s a six- or seven-star retreat house,” she said, her face wreathed in a warm, winsome smile.

A Major Determination

I was charmed, and not long after, when a couple of middle-aged African-American ladies, poised, amiable, asked me for directions to the house, where they were to be on retreat for the first time, I built up their expectations by telling them this story. They were well pleased by the story, and richly amused—their eyes lighted up, twinkled, and danced. They warmly assured me that the story was quite in keeping with the many nice things that they had heard about the retreat. The ladies told me that they were to be in residence at the women’s retreat house for five days, and five spiritually profitable days those warm, sunny days turned out to be. I know, because when the ladies had wrapped up their stay at the house and were leaving the retreat on their way home, they stopped off at the barn to see me, getting out of their pale blue Chevy Blazer with a light-hearted air of composure, and told me so. But this piece of comparatively inconsequential information was merely a prelude to a high-impact statement. They had reached a major determination, they said, and they wanted me to take due note of the fact: they had evaluated the women’s retreat house as a *ten-star* retreat house! We all laughed. □

Book Reviews

Philokalia: The Eastern Christian Spiritual Texts

Selections Annotated and Explained by Allyne Smith

Tr. by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Bishop Kallistos Ware

Introduction by Allyne Smith

Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont

xiv + 221 pp. paperback 2006 \$16.99

The Philokalia, The Love of Beauty, is a substantial collection of ascetic-theological, uniquely monastic, texts written by Eastern Christians over a period of 1,000 plus years (fourth to fifteenth centuries). Its status in the Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches, as the prime source text—along with the Bible and the numerous and varied writings of the Church Fathers—relating the way of union with God, is comparable to what Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, the Bhagavad Gita, and the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* are for the yogic traditions, or what the Vedas (particularly the Upanishads), the Bhagavad Gita, and the *Brahma Sutras* are for the Vedanta.

The dominant literary form of the Philokalia is the centuric. It is a roughly aphoristic technique dividing a work into approximately 100 chapters, or paragraphs, and is utilized by the reader as a means to more easily assimilate the teachings contained in any particular work. Throughout the day the reader, traditionally under the guidance of a master or an elder, either meditates on the import of the text or puts into practice what is related therein. In contrast to the Brahma Sutras with their pedagogically structured chapters (*adhyaya*), quarters (*pada*), and topical sections (*adhikaranas*), the Philokalia cannot be characterized as a logically consistent whole. Nonetheless, one does find among its texts entire, thematically homogeneous works such as Evagrius of Pontus' "Chapters on Prayer" or Maximus the Confessor's "Four Centuries on Love," where each author examines the conditions for, actualizations of, and subsequent effects following upon the subject of his particular topic. The subject addressed is invariably, explicitly or implicitly, the reader.

Recurring Themes Illumined and Illustrated

Allyne Smith has presented us with a serviceable collection of writings from the Philokalia. His brief Introduction successfully acquaints the reader with its origins, context, import, and influence. In keeping with the nature of this treasury, he does not attempt to systematize the writings of any particular writer, thereby giving one a sure sense of what one must confront if one opts to read and meditate upon the entire work. Nonetheless, because several dominant, recurrent

themes will present themselves through such an endeavor, Smith assists his reader by bringing these motifs to the fore. The topics of repentance, the heart, prayer, the Jesus Prayer, the (psycho-physical) passions, stillness (of body and mind), and theosis (the divinization of the human person) are aptly illumined and illustrated by numerous texts. Under the theme of stillness, for example, Smith presents us with a chapter by St. Mark the Ascetic (early fifth century) that speaks of the psycho-somatic relation of soul and body and the virtues/practices which result in the quieting of the physical, mental, and spiritual senses familiar to many in the yogic and Vedantic traditions:

He who wants to cross the spiritual sea is long-suffering, humble, vigilant, and self-controlled. If he impetuously embarks on it without these four virtues, he agitates his heart, but cannot cross. Stillness helps us by making evil inoperative. If it also takes to itself these four virtues in prayer, it is the most direct support in attaining dispassion. The intellect cannot be still unless the body is still also; and the wall between them cannot be demolished without stillness and prayer. (I, “On Those Who Think They Are Made Righteous by Works,” Sec. 29-31)

Partakers of the Divine Nature

Another example, this time under the theme of theosis, is the following chapter by one of the greatest Byzantine theologians and one of the principal authors amply cited in the *Philokalia*, St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662):

God made us so that we might become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1: 4) and sharers in His eternity, and so that we might come to be like him (1 John 3:2) through deification by grace. It is through deification that all things are reconstituted and achieve their permanence; and it is for its [deification’s] sake that what is not is brought into being and given existence. (II, *First Century of Various Texts*, Sec. 42)

Smith annotates his compilation by placing brief biographical, theological, religious, or bibliographic information on the page opposite the main text. Although the target audience of these remarks appears to be Western Christians, particularly those of the Protestant traditions, these data will be helpful for anyone unfamiliar with the Eastern Christian ascetico-mystical tradition. To assist his readers in further exploring the riches of this tradition, Smith also provides a concise “Suggestions for Further Reading” section at the end of the book. This section is divided into a very brief listing of English editions of the *Philokalia* with a slightly longer one comprising secondary sources. If by reading this latest compilation of *Philokalia* texts one is encouraged to make further inquiry into the tradition, then Smith’s efforts have been well spent.

—Stanley Ziobro

Science as Sacred Metaphor: An Evolving Revelation

by Elizabeth Michael Boyle, O. P.

Liturgical Press. Collegeville, MN

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The author, a Dominican sister and Professor of English at Caldwell College, New Jersey, is a poet and playwright who has a keen appetite for up-to-the-minute scientific activity. She examines even such difficult fields as quantum mechanics and string theory as ways of advancing “in the land of mystery.” She believes, with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, that “there is less difference than people realize between research and adoration,” and she urges us to acknowledge that “scientific exploration can open the door to prayer.”

Thus, the thesis of this book is, as the title indicates, that science does not have to be seen as turning us away from the sacred, but quite the contrary, is admirably suited to leading us to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the holiness inherent in the cosmic order. As we probe further into the mysteries of the world, each successive layer of explanation, each set of orderly relations, is revealed as a metaphorical way of guiding our perception of the creation’s amazing organization for producing novelty, variety, and cooperation. This awakens and gratifies our sense of wonder and awe, the essential emotion in the presence of the sacred.

The Universe Seen As A Whole

The sacred universe which the author celebrates is seen as a Whole. a dynamic, interacting, evolving, and beautiful Whole. She is able to discuss these qualities presented by current scientific views in terms of the general Christian calendar: “experiences” for Advent, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. But the text is not limited to physics and theology; there is a great deal of poetry throughout the book, by Boyle herself and by other poets. Nor does she neglect the “sorrowful mysteries” of our cosmic reality; human suffering, even divine suffering, receives serious treatment in the context of freedom, creativity, and the vulnerability of unconditional love.

It is not a difficult book to read but an elevating meditative experience that makes clear that Imagination is perhaps the prime root of both the creation itself and our conscious—scientific, artistic, religious—interaction with it.

—James M. Somerville

Film Review

Spider-Man III

Sister Gayatriprana

The release on May fourth this year of *Spider-Man III* was considered the beginning of the summer entertainment season. This was an eagerly awaited moment after the success of the previous two episodes: *Spider-Man I* (2002) and *Spider-Man II* (2004), which introduced us to the tale of teenage Peter Parker, in his own words “a nerdy guy from Queens,” who, on a high school biology outing, gets bitten by an irradiated spider and miraculously acquires the ability to scale New York skyscrapers and swing from them by means of the spider-silk he produces from his wrists.

With Power Comes Responsibility

The first movie is about how Peter seeks to relate to and use his unsought-for miraculous powers. His beloved uncle, who with his wife, Aunt May, brought Peter up, makes the weighty statement in another context (for Peter has kept his metamorphosis to himself): “With great power comes great responsibility.” Peter takes this to heart and makes it his guiding principle, soon finding out that his powers to fly like a spider and engage in aerial combat can protect the innocent from murderous forces—in this movie the Green Goblin, a scientist demented by his own invention and riding on a maneuverable motorized craft somewhat like an orientalized skateboard. Although the victor, Peter begins to realize what responsibility his strange powers are thrusting on his young shoulders and begins to feel that on that account he cannot hope to lead a normal life, including marrying his beloved next-door neighbor, Mary Jane.

In the second movie Peter feels he has to make a choice between his strange life as Spider-Man and pursuing his studies in science (at which he is very gifted) and developing his relationship with Mary Jane. He opts to throw away his powers and settle down to being “ordinary”—but as always, fate intervenes. A terrible fire draws him in to save a child—without his magical powers of escape—and he realizes that serving others is his destiny and he can no longer refuse to play his role as Spider-Man.

From all of this it is quite clear that we are dealing with pure myth and archetype, in which good prevails over evil, playing in and through the character of a teenage American kid who could be the boy next door. But Peter is unusual in that his life is tied in with issues of what Vedantists would call dharma: his devotion to his study of science (while, interestingly, his adversaries are so often scientists gone wrong); his respect for and loyalty to his family; his one-pointed love of Mary Jane; and his unconquerable dedication to Doing Good, even at the

risk of his own life and all that he holds dear. This is by no stretch of the imagination one of your average contemporary Hollywood anti-heroes; Poor Peter and Mary Jane are squeaky-clean: they never even get to kiss each other—some demon almost invariably intervenes to prevent even the most innocent cheeper!

The appeal of Spider-Man, of course, goes back to the Marvel comics where he appeared in 1962, created by Stan Lee, the pseudonym of Stanley Lieber, the son of immigrant Romanian Jews. Stan is credited, along with his collaborators, with conceiving of a superhero with “ordinary” human problems, after having crafted several heroes such as Captain America, more in the classical macho mold of the superman. The result was Spider-Man, and the response was immediate: American teenagers snapped up the comics and digested them avidly. Stan created several other heroes in the “anti-hero” mold, but Spidey always remained the one whom everybody loved. It was the Japanese company, Sony, which saw the potential in Spider-Man and undertook to portray the story audio-visually. After the remarkable success of the first two movies, all stops were pulled out for the third installment: a budget of over 250 million dollars, 1000 people on production, 8,000 hours of work in creating 40 Spider-Man suits, and CGI software that required “10 man-years to code” were dedicated to the project.¹

The Blockbusters Relate to Myth and Symbol

The world waited in awe while the figures were batted about. Would the movie be worth it? Would Sony ever recoup its costs? And, in the minds of many: What on earth is it all about? Why should such a fanciful tale (after all, it is from the brain of someone with a background in Romania, the home of Dracula and many other mythic tales!) be given the time of day by right-minded citizens? Have we regressed completely from our rational, humanistic, sturdy American values to take a part-human, part-animal skyscraper-swinging so seriously? But the evidence is already in: *Harry Potter*, *The Matrix*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Tales of Narnia*, the *Da Vinci Code* – the blockbusters relate to myth and symbol, and what can be done about it?

The keynote of the third movie is struck by Aunt May near the beginning: “A man must put others, must put his wife before himself”, in connection with Peter’s plans to ask Mary Jane to marry him. All very noble and uplifting, and what we might associate with this latter-day saintly superman. How many heroes today would get behind such timeless, “family values”? One wonders if this is an echo of the pre-World War II generation of Stan Lee, sounding the trumpet before we all became “cool” in the seventies and eighties and on up till today,

¹ Kenneth Turan, “Can’t Buy Everything”, *Los Angeles Times*, Wednesday, May 2, 2007.

when our “coolness” has actually chilled us out to the point of moral and esthetic insensitivity?

Such questions come to mind as we contemplate this Hanuman-like young man, so restrained, so serious, devoted to study and doing good, balancing his mild, forbearing and rather sweet human persona against the towering greatness bestowed on him by his magical participation in the animal world. But if we think that we are dealing with a canonizable saint, a plastic icon we can dangle with safety from our rear-view mirror, *Spider-Man III* gives us a wake-up call. It is clear from the first frame that Peter is not immune to the classic problem of pride, of the hubris that attracts to himself an evil of cosmic proportions, which seems to follow him from its emergence from a meteor landing in the park to his dingy lodgings in New York. There it takes him over and, as Aunt May says, “turns him into something ugly.”

Like it or not, we see Peter and Spiderman take on many of the negative qualities that distinguish so many of our so-called heroes nowadays: self-absorbed, promiscuous, callous, vengeful, violent and even cruel. Many people have criticized *Spider-Man III* for bringing in not just one, but three monsters to battle Spidey, saying that it simply complicates and clutters the plot; but from another standpoint it makes a lot of sense. Peter, in the clutches of his own pride, attracts evil, not only from outer space, but also from all the dark and dingy alleys of New York, including two of his adversaries from the first movie.

“We All Have a Choice”

What is so very unusual and again, uplifting, is that Peter is sufficiently sensitive to realize how much he is hurting himself, Mary Jane, his aunt, and others by letting himself descend to his lower nature. Unlike so many stories nowadays, Peter is able to see where his attitude is taking him and, as he says himself, to “make a choice.” And Peter can make choices, such as to forgive the formidable and indestructible Sandman, a reluctant villain driven by the need to provide for his disabled daughter. Indeed, the last frame of the movie, as Peter attends the funeral of his friend Harry Osborne, killed while helping him battle Sandman and Venom, Peter, dressed in a ruffled and thoroughly undistinguished raincoat, confides in all of us: “We all have a choice.”

As I sat through this movie, loaded with all of the negative reviews I had read (for the reviewers seem out to “get” Spidey and the expensive tag he brings with himself) and wondering if perhaps I was about to waste over two hours, I could not help picking up the mood in the theater, packed with children and teenagers, many of them boys, though some reviewers had opined that the “sappy” aspects of the movie would tend to draw more women than men. There was a palpable sense of joy, of participation, of anguish and even laughter over Peter’s misidentifications and misadventures, of exaltation over his triumphs and even pin-drop silence as he explores his soul and behaves with his aunt and Mary

Jane in the most tender, sweet and lovable manner. Not at all “cool,” I would say. If anything, totally “hot,” full of the sorts of feelings and struggles we ordinary folks go through, but of course magnified to the nth degree and reaching out to the cosmos. In short, *dharmic*. How long will it be till that word is as mainstream as *yoga* and *guru*? In another dimension, I couldn’t help thinking that the words of the Romanian scholar, Mircea Eliade, who comments on the effects of reading, could, perhaps even more strongly, apply to the formidable power of audio-visual technology:

Through reading, modern man succeeds in obtaining an ‘escape from time’ comparable to the ‘emergence from time’ effected by myths. Whether modern man ‘kills’ time with a detective story or enters such a foreign temporal universe as is represented by any novel, reading projects him out of his personal duration and incorporates him into other rhythms, makes him live in another ‘history.’²

That seems to be the phenomenon we are looking at. We have had America the Beautiful. Now we are seeing America the Mythical. What next, if not onwards and upwards (or sideways, if we think of Spidey’s capabilities)?

Dharma and Self-Transcendence

Yes, Spider-Man is indeed a powerful door to the realm of myth, dharma, and self-transcendence, though clothed in jeans and a T-shirt and wedded to “family values” geared to the mentality of teenagers. Just how powerful it is is attested by the ultra-record numbers who turned out to see it on its opening few days—from Japan to China, to India, to Europe, Mexico and North America. Sony, we are all glad to know, has covered its costs and is mulling another sequel. Where it is taking us? Back to an awareness of the power and divinity within all of us? Back to an appreciation of traditional values of self-control, self-respect and standing on principles? To a feeling of oneness with even the lowest forms of life, even of spiders? And all through, an American tale, spun by an Eastern European and brought to us with the latest technology by the Japanese! Could it be that universal values are raising their head in forms that can be related to all over the world? Or is it all about money and domination of the entertainment field, as the critics would have it? As with the internet, the people are casting their own votes, as they did for the *Da Vinci Code*, that much-maligned paean to the Divine Feminine. Could it be that, after all, our heroes are finally of the people, for the people, and by the people? In the fullest, if nerdiest, sense of the term. □

² Mircea Eliade: *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. from the French by Willard R. Trask. (New York: Harcourt Harvest Book, 1987. Originally published 1957.)

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