

Editorial

Sri Sarada Devi—Perspectives

At the time of the Holy Mother centennial (1953-54), not much had been published about her in English. This has changed dramatically in the last fifty years. We now have a rich abundance of material through which we can savor her life. Three full-length biographies (by Swamis Gambhirananda, Nikhilananda and Tanmayananda) give numerous details as well as studied evaluations. Giving us a sense of even greater closeness than the biographies are the diaries and reminiscences of her disciples and devotees. Of particular importance are *The Gospel of the Holy Mother* (the complete translation of *Sri Sri Mayer Katha*), *The Mother as I Saw Her* by Swami Saradeshanda, and the reminiscences contained in *Sri Sarada Devi the Great Wonder*. And the process continues. Swami Chetanananda, Leader of the Vedanta Society of St. Louis and an avid researcher, continues to translate matter formerly unavailable in English. He has generously made available to *American Vedantist* reminiscences of several of Mother's monastic disciples which were not previously translated.

Through the writings now available, we get a direct sense of how Holy Mother lived her daily life, in particular how she related to many different kinds of people—how she related to monastic disciples and to lay disciples, to men, women and children, to people of different social and educational backgrounds, to Bengalis, South Indians and Westerners. We are enriched by these multiple perspectives. They fill in important gaps and enable us to visualize her life in much greater detail.

They can also help us to avoid the trap of thinking we have understood her because we assent to a creedal formula: she is an *avatar*, or she is the Divine Mother Herself. The problem with these formulas is that they tend to block further thought and growth. Do we really *know* what she is? Rather, our knowledge has to be a process of continuing growth and unfoldment, always open to new insight.

Meditation, prayer and the way we live our lives can be enriched by a fuller picture of the lives we contemplate. In this sesquicentennial year of Holy Mother's birth, we can celebrate by availing ourselves of the treasures now at our disposal and profiting from them to the fullest extent.

—The Editors

Reminiscences of Holy Mother

Swami Chetanananda

December 2003 to 2004 is an auspicious year: the 150th birth anniversary of Holy Mother Sarada Devi, the spiritual consort of Ramakrishna. She was born on 22 December 1853 and passed away on 21 July 1920. She was betrothed to Ramakrishna when she was five; at the age of eighteen, she moved to Dakshineswar to serve her husband. In 1872 Ramakrishna worshipped her as Shodashi, a manifestation of the Divine Mother. After Ramakrishna passed away in 1886, Holy Mother conducted his spiritual ministry for thirty-four years.

Although I did not meet Holy Mother myself, I have spoken to many of her disciples. In 1950 I began visiting Udbodhan, Holy Mother's Calcutta residence. I still remember Holy Mother's centenary in 1953, when I volunteered to take care of shoes of devotees who visited the shrine in Holy Mother's house. Later, I collected 47 reminiscences of Holy Mother from old magazines; this collection was published in Bengali as *Matridarshan* (Udbodhan Office, Calcutta).

There are many books about Holy Mother and other reminiscences in Bengali that have not yet been translated into English. In this article I shall translate some of these materials; I shall also include reminiscences that I have heard directly from her disciples.

Swami Haripremananda: A Visit to Bankura

I first met Swami Haripremananda, an attendant of Holy Mother, in Udbodhan and then in Varanasi. He recalled the following incident:

Let me tell you an incident concerning Holy Mother. I don't remember the date or year, and I don't feel they are important. Holy Mother's niece Radhu had been suffering from a chronic disease for a long time. Her body was reduced to a skeleton. She did not have the strength even to speak. Whenever she tried, a creaking sound came from her throat. Holy Mother was very compassionate to her. She said to me: "Hari, I shall take Radhu to Bankura. Please come with me. Vaikuntha [Holy Mother's disciple] lives in Bankura. He is an allopathic doctor, but practices homeopathy. He has a wonderful reputation."

I said, "Do you mean Vaikuntha Maharaj? Swami Maheswarananda?"

"Yes, yes. You lived in Bankura. You must know him."

"Yes, Mother, I know him very well. He is the head of the Bankura center. He is an excellent homeopath."

"Yes, you are right. I am talking about him."

I accompanied Holy Mother and Radhu to Bankura. At that time there were not many rooms at the Bankura center. There was no accommodation for outsiders, especially women. So a two-room apartment was rented for Radhu's treatment. Radhu stayed in one room, and Holy Mother and myself in the other.

One evening Dr. Maharaj [Swami Maheswarananda] came to see Radhu, then left. There was a small stool in our room; Mother was seated on it. On my own initiative I began to gently massage Mother's feet. They were wrinkled and dry. She herself was lean and thin. While massaging her feet, a question arose in my mind: "Is Mother truly the Mother of the Universe? Could the Divine Mother have such wrinkled feet, with such visible veins?" Although the question was in my mind, I did not say anything. I continued to massage her feet.

Gradually a mysterious change came. I felt that these feet were not the emaciated feet of an old woman; they were the well-developed feet of a young woman. There was a lantern nearby and in its light I clearly saw two beautiful feet outlined with a stripe of red paint [*alta*]; the toes were fully developed and close to one another, with exquisite half-crescent toenails. Around the ankles were also golden anklets adorned with gems and jewels. I wondered whose feet were these that I was massaging?

Astonished and dumbfounded, I slowly shifted my gaze from Mother's feet to her face. I saw the form of Goddess Jagaddhatri, with golden complexion, three eyes, and four hands. She was adorned with many ornaments, including a crown on her head. She held weapons in her hands. A magnificent luster was emanating from her body. Before I saw Her entire form, I lost outer consciousness, saying, "Mother, Mother."

I don't remember how long I stayed in that condition. When I came to myself, I found Holy Mother caressing my back with her hand and saying, "O Hari, O Hari, what has happened to you? Get up, get up!" I got up and saw again the old, emaciated Mother looking at her sick niece.

This is our Mother of the Universe—Mother Sarada—the spiritual consort of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna! Victory to the Master!¹

Swami Jnanananda: The Vagabond and the Mother

Swami Jnanananda was born in East Bengal. He went to Calcutta after graduating from school in 1912, a wayward young man who had no use for discipline and routine. He knew his neighbor Swami Arupananda who also came from Bangladesh and became a disciple and attendant of Holy Mother. When he visited Swami Arupananda at Udbodhan, the latter asked him to bow down to Holy Mother, who was then in his room upstairs. Jnanananda went to

1. *Vedanta Kesari*, tr. by Swami Chetanananda, Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, March 1994.

her and bowed down, touching her feet. He did not see her face because it was covered with a veil.

Later, at Arupananda's request, Jnanananda went to Jayrambati, the birthplace of Holy Mother, where she was visiting at the time. He went to the Mother's house and bowed down to her. Touching his chin, the Mother said: "My child, are you well? I was thinking of you and expecting your arrival." Dumbfounded, he responded, "Mother, perhaps you are thinking about someone else, because you have never seen me." Immediately, she replied: "What do you mean? The other day you came to Udbodhan House and bowed down to me."

"Yes, I went to see you for a few seconds. I had no conversation with you, and it seemed you did not see me."

She interrupted him and said: "Yes, I saw you. I did not make any mistake." She then asked him to go to the room where her disciples were living. From then on, the Mother gave Jnanananda shelter and he began to live in Jayrambati and work for Holy Mother.

Swami Jnanananda reminisced about his initiation:

One afternoon the Mother asked me, "Jnan, do you go to bathe in the river Amodar?"

"Yes, I do."

"Tomorrow morning you take a bath in the river. There is a tree of yellow flowers on the bank of the river. Please pick a basket full of flowers from that tree for the Master's worship."

"Yes, Mother, I will."

The next morning I took my bath, picked the flowers, and brought them to the Mother, who had then started her worship. The Master's picture was in front of her and an *asana* was at her left side. She motioned to me to sit on that asana. Silently, I watched her worship. When she was done, she asked me to come closer to her. She then initiated me with a mantra and gave me a few instructions. Then, pointing to the Master's picture, she said, "Bow down to him."

The Mother of All

My former wildness cropped up and I began to argue with her. I said: "Who is he? Why should I bow down to him? I don't know him." Surprised, the Mother looked at me and then said sternly: "Please bow down to him. You don't know him? He is all in all—he is the universal guru." I said: "Guru! How can he be my guru? You gave me the mantra, so you are my guru."

She immediately said: "I am no one's guru. I am the mother of all. The Master is the only guru."

"How can you be my mother? My mother is at our home. She is still alive."

“I am that mother.” She then said: “Look at me closely. Am I not your mother?” Stupefied, I saw that my own mother was seated in front of me. I shivered with awe and I fell at her feet, saying, “Mother, Mother.” All of my arguments ceased and I surrendered myself at her feet forever. She imparted to me the knowledge that she was not only my mantra-guru: she was my own mother, the mother of all beings, and the mother of the universe.²

Swami Vishuddhananda: The Mother Visits Bangalore

Swami Vishuddhananda, a disciple of Holy Mother, shared his reminiscences with some nuns of Sarada Math on 21 June 1953. Pravrajika Vishuddhaprana recorded the event, which I translate here:

Holy Mother came to visit South India with her entourage. We gave the whole monastery building of Bangalore to her for her stay; and we moved to a tent in front of the monastery grounds. Holy Mother did not want any publicity about her in the newspaper, so nothing was published. Still many people came to see her with fruits and presents and Balaram Basu’s wife would take care of them. She was overwhelmed when she saw the heaps of fruit. She asked me, “Can you tell me, what shall I do with them?”

I replied: “Please put them in the storeroom next to the shrine. These were given to the Mother; she will decide what to do.”

Holy Mother’s room was adjacent to the Master’s shrine. I was the worshiper (*pujari*). When Mother arrived, I asked her to worship the Master’s picture that she kept with her in the Ashrama’s shrine. The Mother said: “My child, I shall worship the Master with a couple of flowers in the corner of my room. You continue your worship as usual.” What humility!

I said: “What do you say, Mother? How is that possible? You will have to perform worship in the main shrine. I will not do the worship as long as you are here.”

Holy Mother had rheumatic pain in her legs and she limped a little. One day I accompanied the Mother on a visit to the nearby temples of Ganesha and Shiva. She acted like the other pilgrims. She bowed down to the deities, then took dust from the floor and rubbed it on the painful spot on her leg for recovery. She also took some dust and put on Radhu’s head. At this, I smiled.

When I was returning with the Mother, I saw in the distance a large crowd waiting to see her. I told her, “Mother, you are attracting so many people!” She just smiled a little. When the carriage arrived at the gate of the Ashrama, she said: “Let me get down from the carriage. I shall walk among these devotees slowly. So many people have come to see me.”

I said: “No, Mother. It is not possible. Rather, let the driver drive the carriage slowly from here.” She agreed.

2. *Matridarshan*, ed. by Swami Chetanananda, Udbodhan Office (Calcutta 1987), 139-40.

The Bangalore Ashrama had been inaugurated a couple of years before these events. There were no big trees in the monastery grounds then and some small plants had just been planted. The devotees were seated, and they all stood up when they saw the Mother. They then prostrated themselves before her. At this, Mother went into an ecstatic mood. She remained in the car, making the gestures of offering boons and showing fearlessness. Five minutes passed. I was overwhelmed, but I controlled myself and then slowly helped her to get down from the carriage and to sit in front of the devotees. They were all overjoyed.

Another day the Mother sat in our big hall. Nearly forty devotees came to see her. The Mother sat there watching those devotees; and they were looking at her intently. The Mother sometimes closed her eyes and again looked at them. There was no conversation. Fifteen minutes passed in this manner. I stood there as a spectator, looking at the Mother and again at the devotees. Another fifteen minutes passed and the Mother went into deep meditation. After another fifteen minutes the Mother said to me softly: “My child, please tell them that if I knew their language, they would be happy listening to my words.” I translated the Mother’s words to them. The devotees were so joyful that one of them said: “No, no, this is enough! Our hearts are full of bliss seeing you, Mother!” I translated those words into Bengali for her. Upon hearing this, her face beamed with an Elysian smile. How did she learn to smile in such a beautiful way?

I gave a name to Holy Mother: “Gandibhanga Ma—Mother, the breaker of barriers.” All mothers whom we see have limitations: Their affections are confined to their own children. But Holy Mother is the mother of the universe. Do you know why a mother has so much love for her children? Because she sees her own existence in them. Why are people so attracted to their children, and to wealth? Because people identify themselves with them. In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad Yajnavalkya said to his wife Maitreyi: “Verily, not for the sake of the sons, my dear, are the sons loved, but they are loved for the sake of the self.” This makes us understand that one feels attraction to a person when one experiences one’s own existence in him or her. The devotees were attracted to Holy Mother because they saw their existence in her.³

Swami Ishanananda: The Mother in Everyday Life

I once asked Swami Ishanananda, a disciple and attendant of Holy Mother: “Swami, you lived with the Mother for almost eleven years. Could you tell me the difference between her and other women in our families?”

The swami thought a while, then replied: “Have you seen any woman in your life who is devoid of desire? The Mother was completely desireless. You see, human beings have desires. Only God is desireless. She was a goddess.”

When a divine being is born as human, he or she acts like a human being. Traditionally, an Indian woman’s life passes through four stages: daughter,

3 *Nibodhata* magazine, Sarada Math, Dakshineswar: 13 Year, issue 1.

sister, wife, and mother. The Holy Mother fulfilled each role to perfection: She was truly an ideal of womanhood.

Swami Ishanananda told me this marvelous story concerning the Mother's presence of mind, strong common sense, and ability to adjust according to time and situation:

It was winter 1919. The Holy Mother and her party went from Calcutta to Vishnupur by train and then by six bullock carts to Koalpara. On the way we stopped at Jaipur [8 miles from Vishnupur] and began to cook near a roadside inn. The cook began to prepare *dal* [lentil]. The Mother was happy to see the arrangements for cooking. The Mother washed her hands and feet in the nearby pond and then helped by cutting vegetables. Most of the cooking had been done when the cook broke the earthen rice pot while removing the extra foamy water. The cooked rice was scattered on the ground. What to do? We were in a dilemma. We thought that if we bought another pot and cooked more rice, it would be too late to reach Koalpara, and moreover the road was not safe. We still had to cross another 14 miles.

The Mother was not upset at all. She slowly removed the foamy part with a straw ladle and collected the rice from the top. She then washed her hands, took out the Master's picture from her tin box and placed it on the corner of the box. She took a *sal* leaf, put some rice, dal, and vegetables on it, and then placed it in front of the Master. With folded hands she prayed: "Master, you have arranged this food for us today. Please eat it now quickly while it is warm."

"One Should Act and Adjust According to Time"

Observing the Mother's unconventional behavior, we began to laugh. The Mother then told us: "Look, one should act and adjust according to time. Now all of you sit down and I shall serve the food." The Mother's women companions and we sat on the ground. She scooped rice with a wooden ladle from the top of the heap and put it on our leaf plates one after another, then added other dishes. She also took food in the same way and began to eat, extending her legs. She commented: "The food is delicious." We hurriedly finished our lunch, packed the luggage, and resumed our journey. We reached Koalpara Ashrama at 11:00 p.m.⁴

Swami Ishanananda told me how the Holy Mother assuaged the grief of a poor woman who had lost her young son:

I was then living with the Mother at Jayrambati. One day I hired an elderly woman porter to carry some groceries for the Mother. We reached Jayrambati at 10:00 a.m. She took down the load from her head and bowed down to the Mother. The Mother knew her as she used to carry luggage for Calcutta devotees from Koalpara to Jayrambati. The Mother asked: "Hello Majhi's wife, I have not seen you for a long time. What happened?" She replied in a sad tone: "Mother,

4. Swami Ishanananda, *Matri Sannidhey*, Udbodhan Office (Calcutta, 1971), 92-93.

now I am passing through a very hard time. I move around here and there for my livelihood. For that reason, your devotees do not find me to carry their goods and luggage. Some days ago my young son, who was the earning member of our family, died.”

At this, the Mother said: “What sad news, my dear!” Immediately the Mother’s eyes became wet. Having sympathy from the Mother, the elderly lady cried out loudly. The Mother sat on her veranda, pressed her head on a pole, and began to cry loudly. Hearing their crying, other women of the household rushed there and watched this pathetic scene silently. Thus some time passed. Later, when their emotion cooled down, the Mother softly asked her woman attendant to bring some coconut oil. The Mother poured that oil on that woman’s dry and dishevelled hair and rubbed it with her hand. The Mother also tied puffed rice and solid molasses in one corner of her cloth, and while bidding her farewell she said with tearful eyes: “Please come again, my sweet child.” Observing the face of that woman, I realized how much consolation she had derived from the Mother’s compassionate behavior.⁵

Swami Basudevananda: The Mother Dispels all Doubt

Many aspirants suffer from doubt and confusion in spiritual life. Swami Basudevananda was no exception, as he recalled:

Once I returned to Udbodhan from Noakhali [now in Bangladesh] after conducting some relief work. I asked the Mother: “Sometimes I get confused and do not find anyone nearby to ask about my doubts. What shall I do then?”

The Mother replied: “Keep a picture of the Master always with you, and think that he is with you and looking after you. If you have any questions, pray to him; you will see that he will show the solution in your mind. He is always within you. Because the mind is extroverted, people do not see within. They search for him outside. When you pray for something, and if it is absolutely necessary for you, you will find the answer arising within like a flash. If any person prays to the Master wholeheartedly, he listens and arranges things accordingly. Is it necessary to say something twenty times to a gentleman?”⁶ □

5. *Mayer Katha*, Udbodhan Office (Calcutta, 1965) vol. 2:224-25.

6. *Matridarshan*, 101.

Holy Mother's Advaita Vedanta

Swami Atmarupananda

[from a talk given at the Vedanta Society of Southern California, January 6, 1984]

It is not essential for those who are attracted to Vedanta to accept the idea of the Incarnation of God. It is something that many people come to naturally, but not something that we have to emphasize, that we have to push on other people. In fact, Swami Vivekananda said that even for membership in the monastic order, it doesn't matter how one looks on Ramakrishna, and, by inference, on Holy Mother also. What is necessary is that one accepts the principles for which they lived and taught. Many people do look on Holy Mother as a manifestation of the Divine Mother, and that is why you see worship directed to her and songs sung to her, but that is not essential to one's being a Vedantist.

“All This is Verily Brahman”

Advaita (nondualistic) Vedanta is a radical religion and philosophy. In one of the Upanishads it is said, “Nehana nasti kinchana,” which means, “there is no differentiation here whatsoever.” There is only the one reality of Brahman. Then what about this world we see, this world of differentiation? In the Chandogya Upanishad it is said, “Sarvam khalvidam Brahma,” — “all this that we see is verily Brahman itself.” The whole universe that we see is in truth Brahman. Each of us is not a part of reality; each of us is the whole of infinite reality. Not only that. This whole vast universe with its countless galaxies is just a speck in the ocean of our infinite being. We're not little parts of the universe; the universe is a small bubble in the ocean of our being.

The truths that nondualistic Vedanta teaches appear to contradict our experience at every point. But when we study them carefully something within us declares that yes, this is true, in spite of our experience. And we are able to feel that because we are even now this truth. We might have forgotten it, we may be blind to it, but some part deep within us has never forgotten our infinite, divine being. Admittedly not everyone accepts these teachings. Some study them for years and never accept them as true. Even Swami Vivekananda at first refused to accept the truth of nondualism, until Ramakrishna forced it down his throat, as it were.

But even for those who accept these teachings as true there is another problem. Many of us accept them as ultimately true, but feel that they have no real, immediate practical value in our lives here and now. We feel that as an ultimate realization nondualism may be true, but as far as our life here and

now goes we might as well forget about it. It only comes at the very end of spiritual life and has no relevance to us at present. Many people feel this in spite of the fact that Swami Vivekananda said that he had come to bring nondualism out the forest caves, out of the monasteries, to spread it broadcast in the marketplace of the world. He obviously felt that it had great relevance to people's lives even here and now.

I feel that the reason many people think that nondualism has no relevance to their lives at present is because of the way nondualism is presented. Often it's presented as a philosophy for intellectuals, or as a religion which demands the denial of human sentiments and emotions, the higher values of human life, as something dry, coldly rational, and very austere. If you examine the image most people have of the advaitist, the follower of nondualism, it's the image of a prune or a lemon—one who's shriveled as a prune and sour as a lemon. Of course there are people who find beauty in the abstract, people who are attracted to a very austere and rational sort of path. But there are others who feel the need of the beautiful, the organic, the whole, the poetic, and such people are often repelled by the way nondualism has been traditionally presented.

A Poetic Nondualism

In Holy Mother's life we find a poetic nondualism which is approachable even by people of this type. Some of you who are familiar with Holy Mother's life and teachings may be surprised that I couple her name with advaita. Most are used to thinking of her as emphasizing dualistic or devotional practices all her life. She performed daily *puja* (ritualistic worship), she was devoted to all the gods and goddesses, and her teachings are full of *bhakti* (devotion). But if we examine her life, we will find that at its basis was the living experience of pure advaita. There is no doubt that Holy Mother had the highest nondualistic experience. Those who look on her as a manifestation of the Divine Mother will of course feel that she not only had that knowledge but she is the keyholder to it, and those of us who want to attain it can propitiate her and attain it through her grace. But even those who don't look on her as an embodiment of the Divine Mother have ample evidence from her biographers that she did indeed experience *nirvikalpa samadhi*, the highest nondualistic realization. But the question remains: did she consider herself in any sense a nondualist?

As those who have studied the life of Swami Vivekananda will remember, he established a monastery in the Himalayas, the Advaita Ashrama, for the practice and propagation of nondualistic philosophy and religion, where there was to be no ritualistic worship. When he visited that monastery in 1901 after returning from the West, he found that some members in the monastery were performing ritualistic worship. He was very upset and he denounced the

practice in the strongest terms. One of the monks, the main *pujari* (worshiper), later wrote to Holy Mother to ask her advice, no doubt feeling that Holy Mother would be very sympathetic to him because she herself performed daily puja and was very favorable to the path of bhakti. Naturally her mother-heart wouldn't deny her son so beneficial a practice. But he got back an unexpected reply. She wrote, "Inasmuch as our guru (Ramakrishna) was an advaitist and you are his disciples, you are also advaitists. I may emphatically declare that you are all certainly advaitists." So Holy Mother undoubtedly considered herself, at least in some sense, a nondualist. Some of the most uncompromising nondualists I met in India were disciples of Holy Mother.

A Parallel in the *Ashtavakra Samhita*

But what interests us here is how she expressed that knowledge in her life and teachings. This she did naturally—so naturally, in fact, that most people never noticed that aspect of her life as being nondualistic. The spirit of her nondualism—its essence—is expressed in the word by which we all know her: Mother. Some of you may be familiar with an advaitic text called the *Ashtavakra Samhita*. It was translated into English by one of Holy Mother's disciples. It is a text of the most radical and uncompromising sort of nonduality. There is no place for devotion in it, and in some ways nothing could seem more out of keeping with Holy Mother's teachings and life. But if we examine it closely in the light of Holy Mother's life, we will find that there *is* an underlying similarity in the experience talked about there and the experience Holy Mother showed in her own life.

The *Ashtavakra Samhita* is a dialogue between the guru, Ashtavakra, and his disciple, King Janaka. After his realization of the highest truth, King Janaka exclaims, in a verse in the second chapter, "How wonderful! In me, the shoreless ocean of consciousness, waves of individual selves rise (are born), strike each other, play for a time, and disappear (return to the Self)." I feel that Holy Mother often had a similar experience of the world. Like Janaka, she often saw that individual beings had their birth in her, their existence in her, and that they returned to her. But how much poetic beauty there is in Holy Mother's nondualism! For her, this realization wasn't the basis for a saintly indifference, a saintly detachment. For her, the waves of individual beings that had their birth in her were her children. They were waves not merely of existence, or waves in the ocean of consciousness; they were waves of bliss, waves of love. They were hers, her children. It was the basis for her of a very personal and loving relationship with all that exists. For her there were no strangers.

Again, Ashtavakra says, "I am indeed in everything, from Brahma, the creator, down to a clump of grass." This knowledge was expressed in Holy Mother's life many times and in many ways. Once she was talking with a

monastic disciple, Kedar, outside of an ashram, when some local villagers came to worship the goddess Shashti, one of the minor Hindu deities, under a nearby tree. As villagers in India often do, they were making a tremendous racket beating drums and cymbals and gongs and shouting. Kedar was trying to talk to Holy Mother, and he was very annoyed at the racket they were making. So he turned to them and said, “Oh, why don’t you shut up?” Holy Mother turned to Kedar and said, “How you behave, Kedar. I indeed am all. Why do you get irritated?”

Identification with the Whole Creation

This identification she had didn’t extend only to people, but to animals and the whole of creation. Her niece, Radhu, had a pet cat. The cat and its family would lie at the feet of Holy Mother. Holy Mother showed great affection to the cats. Mother had a monastic attendant named Brahmachari Jnan who had no affection for the cats. In fact, he used to beat them. Once, when time came for Holy Mother to leave her village home, where the cats were, to go to Calcutta, she called the brahmachari to her and said, “Jnan, you should cook rice for the cats, so that they don’t need to go to others’ houses.” But knowing that this plea wouldn’t be enough, she added, “Look here, Jnan, don’t beat the cats, for I exist even in them.”

Another time, Brahmachari Dagan, another monastic disciple, was on Mother’s veranda at Jayrambati when Mother was sweeping the courtyard. From outside the compound, the voice of a beggar was heard, crying out for alms. Mother said to herself, “I can’t finish my duties, even though I’m working through innumerable hands.” Attracted by her ethereally soft and compassionate voice, the brahmachari looked up to see why she had uttered such strange words. She stopped sweeping and, bending forward with one hand on her knee, said, with a sweet glow on her face, “Look at the fun. I have only two hands, and here I speak of having infinite hands.” This reminds us of Vivekananda’s words, “It is I who am eating in millions of mouths; how can I be hungry? It is I who am working through an infinite number of hands; how can I be inactive? It is I who am living the life of the whole universe; where is death for me?” (*Complete Works*, II: 251)

In Holy Mother’s experience, we are not mere waves of consciousness, mere abstractions. We are waves of love, waves of joy on which she looked and still looks with the greatest and most personal concern. We take birth from her, we live in her, and at death we return to her. And that most familiar word by which we know her and address her—Mother—is the essence of her nondualism.

There is one other thing about her nondualism I would like to say. She used to tell some of her disciples, “Remember, no matter what happens, you always have a Mother.” Now this may not seem to have any connection with

nondualism, but, actually, in advaita it's said that even now in our present state, we are that divine, perfect being. As Vivekananda said, even the man being hanged, the murderer, the greatest doer of evil, is perfect God even here and now. And I feel that Holy Mother's statement here is a very personal and loving and devotional way of saying the same thing. She told her children, "Remember, you always have a mother." She didn't say, "If you behave yourself I'll be your mother." No, she accepted all people as they were, unconditionally, as her children here and now. It wasn't something conditional that we had to earn. No, it was something that was ever present.

A Powerful Transforming Influence

You may object that we all want to grow spiritually. If she accepts us as we are now, then her love has no transforming power. But to me that unconditional love which she gave to all has the most powerful transforming influence, much more than the schoolmarm's approach. For example, suppose I'm terribly afraid to get up here and speak before you. I should remind myself that no matter what happens—if I fall over in a faint, if I forget what I was supposed to say, or if no words come to my mouth—even then I should remind myself, "No, I have Holy Mother who is my Mother. Even if I mess up the whole talk it doesn't matter. The important thing is that I have Holy Mother. That gives me consolation, helping me now, and in the long term it has a very transforming effect. I give up worrying about coming here and speaking to you. I realize that's not the important thing. I'm to come here and do whatever I can, but the important thing is that I have a mother, Holy Mother.

Holy Mother not only experienced and lived nondualism. She also left us instruction in nondualistic spiritual practice. Most of you have heard these words before. On her deathbed she told a sorrowing devotee, "I tell you one thing: if you want peace, my daughter, don't find fault with others, but find fault with yourself. Learn to make the whole world your own. Nobody is a stranger, my dear; the whole world is yours." As her life was very simple, her instruction was simplicity itself. Yet, how profound. Those of you who have read this before perhaps have not noticed the nondualistic basis on which her words are founded. She says, "If you want peace, don't find fault with others, but find fault rather with yourself." Swami Vivekananda used to say that advaita means always seeking the cause of the objective in the subjective. That is, always seeking the cause of outer things within ourselves. Advaita says that this whole universe exists within my consciousness. So, then, how can I find fault with others? The whole universe exists within me. As the *Ashtavakra Samhita* says, "You alone appear as whatever you perceive. Do armlets, bracelets, wristlets appear different from the gold they are made of? It is through your ignorance alone that you see a universe outside of yourself."

According to Vedanta, if our minds were perfectly clear, we would see the universe as God himself. The reason we don't see the universe as God himself is that we project problems and impurities outside of ourselves.

Then Holy Mother says, "Learn to make the world your own." How personal and intimate Holy Mother's advaita was is revealed in statements like this. The world is mine, and I must learn to live in that consciousness. Or, as the *Ashtavakra Samhita* says, "The root of misery is duality." That is, as long as we see a second, as long as we see something outside of ourselves, there will always be misery and fear. Once we've made the whole world our own, whom can we fear, who can make us miserable? Here again we see the poetic beauty of Holy Mother's nondualism. She doesn't say, "Give up the world because it's the realm of duality, the place of misery, it's only composed of suffering." She says, "Learn to make the world your own."

Seeking the Cause of the Objective in the Subjective

So this is the discipline she prescribes. She advises us always to look within, never without, that is, always to seek the cause of the objective in the subjective, to learn to live in the consciousness that the whole world is our own. In the second half of Mother's statement—you could call it the metaphysical basis of her spiritual practice—she says, "Nobody is a stranger, my child. The whole world is yours." To Mother there were no strangers. She saw all as her own children; the world was peopled with her children. For those who don't understand the philosophical implications of Mother's teaching, it doesn't matter, because Mother didn't philosophize. Her words are very simple and go directly to the heart, whether one understands them intellectually or not. There is very deep philosophy contained within her simple statements, I wanted to point out, but they don't need to be understood philosophically for them to be effective in our lives.

There are many different levels on which Holy Mother's life and teaching can be understood. I don't mean to imply by that she was a nondualist and nothing else. She can be approached in many different ways. So great was her nature that she could and can approach each of us in the way we need to approach her. A swami at our center in Banaras, a disciple of Holy Mother, himself told me that at the time of his initiation Holy Mother appeared to him physically as the goddess Kali. And she appeared in different ways to different people. To some people who came to her she appeared as their own earthly, physical, mother. She can thus approach us, and we can approach her, in whatever way is most natural to our own individuality, our own spiritual uniqueness. But the advaitic aspect of her life and teachings is one which I think has been largely neglected, and I feel that's unfortunate, because to me that forms the basis of her whole life and teaching.

Mother was full of devotion to all the gods and goddesses. She lived in the family all her life and was burdened with many responsibilities, many duties. She was always engaged in household tasks. In her nondualism, nothing of human value is negated. Devotion, work, responsibility, human affection, an interest in human affairs. Her advaita demands only two things: first, the renunciation of the negative aspects of our experience—ignorance and attachment and impurity—and secondly the cultivation of an all-encompassing love which draws the whole universe to ourselves. And this was a great contribution, I feel, of Sri Ramakrishna, of Swami Vivekananda and of Holy Mother to nondual Vedanta. The practice of nondualism need not presuppose rejection and negation of all that is sacred to the human heart. Yes, Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swamiji all taught that the universe as we experience it at present, is ultimately false. But they didn't teach us to complain or despair because of it. They taught us positive ways of transcending the world, not only transcending the world, but seeing the world as God himself/herself. As Swami Vivekananda said, "Don't seek God, just see Him." And as Holy Mother said, "Nobody is a stranger, my child. The whole world is your own." □

In Memoriam

Sister Gargi (1912—2004)

Marie Louise Burke (Sister Gargi), a leading literary figure in the Vedanta movement and a respected monastic of the Ramakrishna Order, died peacefully on January 20, 2004 in her apartment in the convent building of the Vedanta Society of Northern California.

She came to Vedanta when she met Swami Ashokananda in 1948. Encouraged by him to write about Swami Vivekananda, she authored the six-volume classic *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*. Recent books included her biography of Swami Ashokananda (*A Heart Poured Out*), and her memoir of his spiritual training (*A Disciple's Journal*).

Marie Louise Burke became Sister Gargi (after the renowned Vedic scholar) in 1974 when she took her first vows in India. As Sister Gargi, her literary reputation continued to grow—a rich legacy admired by scholars and practitioners of Eastern religion worldwide.

Memorial services were held on February 1, 2004 at the Vedanta Society of Northern California and at the Vedanta Society of New York. A few excerpts from the New York service are given below.

Swami Tathagatananda: Friends, Marie Louise Burke, a celebrated scholar, passed away a few days back. Apart from her spectacular work on Swami Vivekananda in the West, she developed a spiritual quality during her

long association with Swami Ashokananda and the Vedanta Society in San Francisco. She was able to keep her mind calm despite the cancer of her final years; such serenity in the face of sickness is the outcome of spiritual growth and understanding.

Today we express our heartfelt gratitude to a noble life. Sister Gargi was a great devotee and made a unique literary contribution. She was important in the acquisition of the Vivekananda Retreat at Ridgely, a beautiful place of pilgrimage. Dr. Shelley Brown was lately associated with Sister Gargi very closely, and I invite her to speak.

Dr. Shelley Brown: Revered Swami, thank you. I will share a bit of the Sister Gargi I knew as her editor, publisher, and friend. Her personality was charming and childlike, candid and courageous. Genuinely modest, she would say on hearing reports of praise, “It doesn’t stick—there is no glue.” The lack of ego-glue was the result of her training with Swami Ashokananda. But she did want people to know about her teacher, so she was pleased with the success of *A Heart Poured Out* and *A Disciple’s Journal* and with their distribution by Advaita Ashrama in India.

There seemed to be no adjectives of praise that she would let me use in her author biographies or in the promotion of her books. She was horrified when I initially referred to her as Swami Ashokananda’s “most illustrious disciple.” “Cross out ‘most’—now cross out ‘illustrious’,” she said with a frown. “But Gargi, that leaves me only with ‘disciple’,” I protested. Finally, in desperation, I asked jokingly if I could describe her as the “cyclonic Hindu” (borrowing a phrase once used to promote Swami Vivekananda). “No,” she came right back, “but you can call me the ‘psychotic Hindu’.” Laughing, she agreed to one or two words of faint praise.

She loved India and spent months every year at Belur Math, but it was the convent building of the Vedanta Society in her native San Francisco that she called home. She had a keen interest in American culture—reading, for example, the new biography of Benjamin Franklin in her final months. “I love John’s music,” she told me when John Schlenck sent his new CD. “Please tell him that it is beautiful.”

Though weak and frail in June of 2003, Sister Gargi asked me to collaborate on a final book. I had my doubts, but *Shafts of Light* (Gargi’s title for the new book) will be published, as she wished, this June.

I would like to close with a powerful story. When Sister Gargi became too weak to answer her email, she asked me to do it. A question came from a devotee: Did she still feel the presence of Swami Ashokananda after all these years since his death? Sister Gargi immediately said, “Tell her that I feel like a fish swimming in the ocean—and *he* is the ocean.” Sister Gargi never lost her buoyancy and grace—Swami Vivekananda had taken hold of her through her guru, kept her in dedicated service, and finally immersed her in an ocean of bliss.

—Shelley Brown

*East is East and West is West?
Jung's Growing Appreciation of the Value of Eastern
Spirituality for Westerners*

Steven F. Walker

C. G. Jung was of all modern psychologists the one who manifested the greatest degree of sympathy and understanding for the spiritual traditions of the Orient. It is therefore unfortunate that the impression one often has of his attitude towards the mystical traditions of the East is based on some earlier pronouncements that do not do justice to the later evolution of his thought. Jung wrote an essay for *Prabuddha Bharata* (the Centenary edition of February, 1936) in which he argued that, no matter how valuable yoga might be for Orientals, it could not be of help for Westerners. Why was he "so critically adverse to yoga"? He explained that his criticism was "directed solely against the application of yoga to the peoples of the West" (p. 85), not at the value it had clearly had for the Eastern mind over the ages. The reason Jung discouraged Westerners from taking up yoga was that he believed that the Western mind had suffered since the Renaissance a dangerous split between conscious cultural aspirations, oriented around scientific and technological concerns, and what he called "the natural man," i.e., the repressed field of the body, the instincts, and unacknowledged religious needs. Thus what the Westerner needed was not the "mind control" of yoga, but rather an exploration of the unconscious—a willingness to enter the unconscious and to learn from it, not the ill considered ambition to control it or eliminate it. The split between unconscious and conscious minds, in the exacerbated form it took in the West, required psychoanalysis, not yoga, in order to be healed. For Jung, yoga, if attempted by a Western mind, would result in even further repression of the instincts and desires, including innate religious needs. And this repression could only reinforce the dangerous illusion that the mind can dominate and conquer anything, including the unconscious.

1936 Opinions a Step on the Road

Such statements as these made in 1936 and others like them made earlier, are for the most part what people remember about Jung's attitude toward Eastern spirituality in general and yoga in particular. But Jung's later assessment of yoga's value for Westerners became more and more favorable as he grew older. His 1936 *Prabuddha Bharata* article must therefore be read in the context of his later essays and remarks, that is, not as a definitive conclusion about the value of yoga, but as a step on the long road of Jung's evolving relationship with Eastern spirituality, not only in terms of its effect

on his conscious mind, but also, as we shall see when we consider the significance of his mystical visions in March and April of 1944, on his unconscious mind.

At first Jung's acquaintance with Indian thought and religion had been mainly through books (he had given a seminar in 1932 on Sir John Woodroffe's study of Tantric Yoga, *The Serpent Power*) and conversations with Indologists such as Heinrich Zimmer. His early position, formulated already in the 1932 seminar, was that Westerners needed to come to terms with the unconscious, not to try to escape this arduous task by claiming to rise to the heights of superconscious mystical experience; if Westerners "confuse the personal with the cosmic, the individual light-spark with the divine light," Jung insisted, they "get nowhere, but merely undergo a tremendous inflation" ("Psychological Commentary on Kundalini Yoga," *Spring: an Annual of Archetypal Psychology and Jungian Thought*, 1976, p. 29). And again, in a talk "Yoga and Meditation in the East and the West" given at the Eranos Conference in 1933, he argued that the Western mind was too different from the Eastern mind to gain much direct benefit from Eastern spiritual traditions.

Questioning His Own Presuppositions

But in the winter of 1937-38 Jung went to India and also visited Belur Math. The experience left him with a lingering case of malaria and no little confusion as to exactly how he was to make new sense out of the baffling world of Indian mysticism. This was a creative challenge to which he responded over the next few years in various ways. In a seminar he was giving in June, 1938, Jung began questioning his own presuppositions regarding the possibility of superconscious experience, and explored the idea of "realization" and other Indian ideas that "seem strange to us," he said, "because we always start with the idea that our consciousness is perfect. It never occurs to us that it could develop. That notion is left to the East, where they are fully aware of the fact that our consciousness is at fault" (*Nietzsche's Zarathustra: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1934-1939*, vol. II, 1989, p. 1289). Even in the case of his own psychological system (analytical psychology) he saw the ultimate problem as one of realization: "All the trouble in the work of analytical psychology comes from that resistance against realization" (*ibid.*, p. 1293). A few weeks later he told his seminar participants: "to know what the East means by realization, read the sermons of the Buddha" (*ibid.*, p. 1333.).

So, two years after having dismissed the value of yoga for Westerners in his 1936 *Prabuddha Bharata* article, Jung was now expatiating on the value for Westerners of the Eastern idea of "realization"—quite a step forward! And to follow Jung's thought over the next few years is to discover just how close he was coming to creating a synthesis of Eastern yoga and Western

depth psychology. As we shall see, the synthesis was never quite achieved, but, in the process of attempting it, Jung's psychology moved closer and closer to the wellsprings of Indian spirituality.

If Jung had come by this time to accept the idea of a higher development of consciousness, he was still bothered by the advaitic idea that the ego itself could be transcended in a high mystical state. Writing to the Buddhist scholar W.Y. Evans-Wentz, he argued that "the question of a highly intensified consciousness is not the important question. The point at issue is rather the question of the ego" (*Letters*, I, p. 261). As far as Jung was concerned at this time, "there is no consciousness without an ego that is conscious of something" (*ibid.*, p. 263).

Seeing Differently

Jung also wrote an essay in 1939 to accompany the translation by Evans-Wentz of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in which he once again asserted that "we [as Westerners] must get at Eastern values from within and not from without, seeking them in ourselves, in the unconscious" (*Psychology and the East*, 1978, p. 112). This advice was accompanied, however, with an acute sense of the West's inferiority in the area of spiritual techniques: "what we have to show in the way of spiritual insight and psychological technique must seem, when compared with yoga, just as backward as Eastern astrology and medicine when compared with Western science" (*ibid.*, p. 115). But behind this apparent humility lay a hidden agenda, which was to present Jung's own analytical psychology as a yoga suited for Westerners. Unlike Eastern yoga, which according to Jung "prides itself on being able to control even the unconscious processes, so that nothing can happen in the psyche as a whole that is not ruled by a supreme consciousness," Jung's own "yoga for the West" is based on his idea of the Collective Unconscious, "a dark power which must cooperate if all is to be well" (*ibid.*, p. 115).

For Jung the Collective Unconscious became the equivalent of a deity who must be approached with humility and supplication, with patience and perseverance. "We cannot compel unconscious compensation," Jung said. "We have to wait patiently to see whether it will come of its own accord and put up with whatever form it takes" (*ibid.*, p. 125). In short, Jung's attitude was a kind of *bhakti* based on a sense of helplessness and dependency in face of the divine ground, and this attitude explains his aversion to the heroically self-reliant attitude he identified (not incorrectly) with the idea of (raja) yoga as "mind control." This is, in fact, how Vivekananda described the initial goal of yoga in a lecture in Los Angeles: "practical psychology directs first of all its energies in controlling the unconscious" (*Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. II [Advaita Ashrama, 1971] p. 35). But what, for Vivekananda, was only the first step (the second being to go *beyond* the level

of ego-consciousness), became something that Jung at this time identified with the *whole* of the science of yoga and thus found incomplete.

The question of ego-consciousness, which Jung believed at this point in his life to be the only form consciousness could take, continued to preoccupy his mind. But in an essay he wrote in 1939 on Suzuki's *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* he takes a great step forward in acknowledging the possibility, at least, of a consciousness that is not ego-consciousness. The essay was a foreword to his Indologist friend Heinrich Zimmer's translation into German of Suzuki's book, and, perhaps because it was a book translated by a friend, perhaps because Jung felt more affinity with the modern approach to Zen that Suzuki advocated, Jung is able to change his mind on the issue. He starts out with his usual "East is East and West is West" type of assertion: "There is no *satori* within these Western limits—that is a purely Oriental affair." But then he immediately reverses direction: "But is this really so? Have we in fact no *satori* [in the West]?" (*Psychology and the East*, p. 142) Once Jung has asked this question, he replies by suggesting analogies to Zen *satori* and thinking in terms of the rather heterodox medieval Germanic mysticism of the *Theologica Germanica*, the Flemish mystic John of Ruysbroek and Meister Eckhart, lumping these in with Indian yoga and Zen Buddhism in the general category of "attempts to wrench oneself free from bondage to a state of consciousness that was felt to be incomplete,"—attempts which result in "a new state of consciousness" which is that of "a non-ego which has a conscious mind as its object." "It is," he adds significantly, "as if the subject-character of the ego had been overrun, or taken over, by another subject which appears in place of the ego" (*ibid.*, pp. 145-146).

This is probably the single most important description in Jung's writings, at this period, of the state of a mind, which, if not enlightened, is at least on the road to realization. His obsession with "East is East and West is West" has vanished, and with it his attempt to defend the proposition that consciousness can be only ego-consciousness. Jung highlights the way he has changed his mind on this question, when he has printed in italics in his text the rebuttal to the possible objection that ego-consciousness has not changed, but only the object of consciousness: "*It is not that something different is seen, but that one sees differently*" (*ibid.*, p. 146).

Making Psychotherapy an Ally of Eastern Disciplines

By the year 1939 Jung had thus ceased to distinguish radically between Eastern and Western modes of spiritual realization. "I have no doubt," he wrote, "that the *satori* experience does occur also in the West, for we too have men who glimpse ultimate goals and spare themselves no pains to draw near to them." But the problem for Jung was that the religious culture of the West had lost touch with these ultimate mysteries. In Jung's opinion, psychotherapy (by which he mainly meant therapy based on Jungian

analytical psychology) was the “only movement within our civilization which has, or should have, some understanding of these endeavors” (*ibid.*, p. 153). Thus Jung had now made his own brand of psychotherapy into a potential ally of Eastern spiritual disciplines, and the general trend of his thinking was moving towards the establishing of parallels—rather than contrasts—between traditional Eastern disciplines and analytical psychology, since both aimed at the transformation of human consciousness, “the only criterion of which is the disappearance of ego-hood,” the “decisive experience” which he felt was the spiritual goal of the process (which he called “the individuation process”) in both the East and in the West. Still, Jung was quick to acknowledge the superiority of the East in this area; through long efforts over the centuries, he writes, the East had “simply put all Western efforts along these lines into the shade” (*ibid.*, p. 154).

(to be continued)

Universal Religion in the Bible

Robert B. Dunbar

Vedantists often ask me whether and how I integrate the teachings of Vedanta into my sermons. The frequency of the question leads me to think that there may be interest in some of the passages I have found in the Bible that are compatible with universal religion. By universal religion I mean the common Way, Truth and Life that humanity’s religious geniuses, notably the Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed and Ramakrishna, experienced and taught. To be sure, one must sift the Bible to find this universal religion, but it is there, almost concealed by the particularism that characterizes both Testaments. Why should one bother to look for it? Because by matching scripture with scripture we may correct the narrow with the broad and the particular with the universal, thereby reducing the human suffering that results from One Way religion.

Universal religion in the Bible initially presents itself in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Humanity’s primordial and immediate knowledge of God is represented there by Abel, Enoch, and Noah. These figures knew God long before the first Hebrew, Abraham, who does not appear until chapter twelve.

In Matthew 23:35 Jesus refers to Abel as “righteous.” The son of Adam and Eve, Abel is invoked as a saint in a Catholic prayer for the dying. In the Irish calendar of saints his feast is celebrated on April 22, in the Coptic calendar on December 28, and in the Roman on July 30. The ancient Latin

Canon of the Mass makes mention of Abel's sacrifice. The point is that Abel, not a Jew, is acknowledged to have known God.¹

Enoch, the father of Methuselah came seven generations after Abel. Genesis 5:24 says this about him: "Enoch walked with God, then was no more, because God took him." Enoch, like Abel, had an immediate and intimate knowledge of the Divine, which is the meaning of "walking with God."

In the sixth chapter of Genesis we are presented with Noah, of whom it is said, "Noah was a good man, an upright man among his contemporaries, and he walked with God" (Genesis 6:9).

Also belonging to pre-Abrahamic times is one "Danel," praised in the Book of Ezekiel as "upright" (Ezekiel 14:12-20). From the Ugaritic poets of Ras Shamra we know Danel was a celebrated ancient Canaanite king.

The Book of Ezekiel also mentions an ancient Idumean patriarch, Job. A later Jewish writer, making use perhaps of Idumean traditions, devoted to Job one of the most beautiful books of the Hebrew Bible, where he is presented as a model of righteousness and piety. The Jewish writer was well aware that Job was not a Jew. In fact, "Job is deliberately chosen by the author as a righteous man taken from outside Abraham's line" (Dom Duesberg, *Les scribes inspirés*, II, p. 54, quoted in Daniélou, op. cit., p. 86).

Most significant of all the gentile figures of the Hebrew Scriptures is Melchizedek, a high priest of the old universal religion. Here is Genesis 14:18—20:

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed [Abram (Abraham) the Hebrew], and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: and blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And [Abram] gave [Melchizedek] tithes of all.

Abraham Pays Homage to a More Ancient Religion

According to Daniélou:

Melchizedek is 'the priest of the most high God...possessor of heaven and earth.' He knows. . .God, not under the name of Yahweh which is to be revealed to Moses. . . , but under the [universal] name of El. . . Melchizedek is a priest of that primitive religion of mankind, which is not to be limited to Israel but to embrace all peoples. . . He receives tithes from Abraham,...[who thus] renders homage. . ." (Daniélou, op. cit., p. 104-105).

1. Jean Daniélou, tr. by Felix Faber, *Holy Pagans of the Old Testament* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1957), p. 29.

Far from rejecting the human race's ancient religion of El, Abraham, the first Hebrew, acknowledges its priority.

Associated with Abraham is his nephew Lot, whom the Book of Wisdom describes as righteous (Wisdom 10:6). Lot, the ancestor of the Moabite people, is another saint of the universal religion mentioned in the Torah.

Such recognition of a general knowledge of God never quite died out in Israel, in spite of the prevalence of particularism in the Hebrew Scriptures. Exceptions are the book of Jonah, which advocates inclusiveness, and the last book of the Prophets of the Hebrew canon, Malachi, contains a striking acknowledgement that God is truly worshipped everywhere, though you will not get Malachi's meaning if you read it in the King James Version of the Bible, which renders the Hebrew in the future tense. The fifth century BCE prophet Malachi is reprimanding the Jerusalem Temple priests for offering unworthy sacrifices. In the name of God he says this:

I am not pleased with you, says the Lord Almighty; I will not accept the offerings you bring me. People from one end of the world to the other honor me. Everywhere they burn incense to me and offer acceptable sacrifices. All of them honor me! But you dishonor me..."²

This universal sentiment is seconded in the New Testament by Simon Peter, who says, "God has no favorites; anybody of any nationality who is godfearing and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:35).

Universal Truth Beyond Name or Persona

Along with these admissions in the Bible that God has always been worshipped and known all over the world there are also statements of what the universal Truth is. No student of Advaita Vedanta will be unfamiliar with Exodus 3:14, wherein the Eternal Unity reveals his nature to Moses: "This is my name forever, I AM WHO I AM." The Hebrew is EHYEH-ASHER-EHYEH, meaning self-subsistent Being beyond any particular name or persona otherwise given in the Bible to the Eternal, names such as El Shaddai, Elohim, or Yahweh. In the New Testament, James 1:17 also reflects an Advaita understanding of God, with whom, it says, "there is no variation or shadow due to change."

Not until Jesus does someone in the biblical tradition understand himself in non-dualistic terms. "I and the Father are one," he says (John 10:30), and, "In all truth I tell you, before Abraham ever was, I AM," thus identifying

2. Malachi 1:10-12. Compare Bhagavad Gita, VII.21: "It does not matter what deity a devotee chooses to worship. If he has faith, I make his faith unwavering." And IX.23: "Even those who worship other deities, and sacrifice to them with faith in their hearts, are really worshipping me, though with a mistaken approach."

himself with I AM WHO I AM. We read that when Jesus said this, “they picked up stones to throw at him” for blasphemy (John 8:58-59).

Indeed, the divinity of man is not thought of as a biblical idea. Yet it is taught in several places. First we have Genesis 1:27, which declares that, male and female, we are made in the image of God. In Psalm 82:6 God says to the gods of the heavenly court, “You are gods, all of you are sons of the Most High.” Jesus applies this verse to human beings (John 10:34). Then there is the famous teaching of Jesus: “Lo, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 10:21). The Apostle Paul expresses the same idea: “Do you not realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you...?” (I Corinthians 6:19).

Concerning where everything came from and is going, the Bible is understood to teach dualism consistently, meaning that everything was created out of nothing, and eternally remains separate from the Creator. But about creation hear this comment on the first verse of the Bible from *The Torah, a Modern Commentary*, published in 1981 by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations: “Later scholars used the translation, ‘In the beginning’ as proof that God created out of nothing (ex nihilo), but it is not likely that the biblical author was concerned with this problem” (p. 18).

In fact it is only in the second century BCE that an unequivocal statement of creation-out-of-nothing is given in the Bible, in Second Maccabees 7:28, a book written in Greek and not officially part of the Hebrew canon of Scripture. About the End of all, the New Testament teaches that everything will return to its Origin. In First Corinthians Paul explicitly says that finally God will be “all in all” (I Corinthians 15:28).

Maya in St. Paul

On the subject of *maya*, biblical theologians have maintained that their doctrine of creation-out-of-nothing contradicts Eastern religions’ understanding that phenomena are not as solid, permanent and real as they seem. But these theologians customarily ignore certain verses from Paul or from those writing under his name. Is creation as we experience it the permanent state of affairs? Not according to Paul in Second Corinthians 4:18, where he says, “the things that are seen are temporal; but the things that are not seen are eternal,” or 7:31, “the form of this world is passing away,” or according to First Timothy 6:16, which says God alone is immortal. Paul teaches that these “animal bodies,” as he calls them, will be superseded by spiritual bodies, the real thing, of which Jesus’ resurrection is the model (I Corinthians 15:35-57). Because of that, he says, “from now on. . . we regard no one after the flesh; even though we once regarded Christ after the flesh, we regard him thus no longer” (II Corinthians 5:16). Because Christianity, Paul to the contrary notwithstanding, has dwelt on Jesus’ “flesh,” that is to say the

accidents of his humanity, it is, apart from its mystics, still in servitude to mere historic fact, as Aldous Huxley points out in *The Perennial Philosophy*.³

Jesus was not speaking of mere facts when he said “the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). Answering Pilate he said, “To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth” (John 8:37). Therefore when he says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:8), he identifies himself with the universal Truth available to everyone from the beginning. Sadly, most Christian readers reverse the meaning of John 14:8 to make it exclude non-Christians from “direct apprehension of spiritual Fact,” to use Huxley’s phrase.⁴

Enlightenment the Cure for Spiritual Ignorance

Concerning the idea of salvation, humanity’s problem is usually described in the Bible in terms of disobedience and unbelief, with repentance and faith being the solution. But I can offer you two verses from the Epistle to the Ephesians, written under the name of Paul, which suggest an Eastern diagnosis of ignorance, for which enlightenment is the only cure. Ephesians 4:17-18 states the problem as: “futility of [the] mind,” being “darkened in . . . understanding, alienated from the life of God because of . . . ignorance. . . , due to blindness of heart.” The solution, it says, is a “spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened, that you may know. . .” Colossians 1:9 speaks of knowledge, wisdom and spiritual understanding.

I could multiply such references. Indeed light and enlightenment are the theme of the post-Christmas season called Epiphany, though attention is almost always deflected to the symbols of light and enlightenment, the star of Bethlehem, and Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration—another illustration of Huxley’s point.

Two final examples of universal religion in the Bible: the First Epistle of John (3:9) says, “No child of God commits sin; for God’s nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is a child of God.” Who does First John mean is a child of God? Christians only? Not according to chapter 4, verses 7 and 16: “Love comes from God; and whoever loves is a child of God and knows God. . . God is love; and whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.” □

3. Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945), p. 52.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

A Western Approach to the Bhagavad Gita

Charlie K. Mitchell

When I was in college at Indiana University one of the professors assigned the Bhagavad Gita, translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, with an introduction by Aldous Huxley. I could not understand it. A few years later, now living in California, I discovered the same *Gita* on a friend's bookshelf. I read it again and was stunned by its insight, its sweep, its beauty. I annoyingly went around proclaiming it to be the greatest of all scriptures (as if I'd read them all). Then I met Prabhavananda and Isherwood. I read the *Gita* once more, now aware that my understanding was very limited. Over the years I read it again and again, read the major commentaries on it, read the commentaries on the commentaries. I intend to go on reading it as long as I can read, for every time I pick it up I am changed and my understanding changes accordingly. Each time (though I know better) I tend to think that now, at last, my understanding is perfect.

So how does a transplanted hick from Valparaiso, Indiana presume to have something new or interesting to say about the *Bhagavad Gita*? The short answer is, Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda famously said that he hoped the sects would multiply until there were as many sects as there were individuals, until "each individual is a sect unto himself." It was the "plan of nature," he said, that there be "infinite variation" in religious thought.¹ Thus encouraged, as a sect of one, I offer my approach to the *Gita*. But it is an approach only. Each reader, as a sect of one, will take away his or her own perfect understanding, again and again, for as long as each sect of one can read.

God's Opportunity

Disappointment is the first, best opportunity for enlightenment. William Penn astutely observed that disappointments are the trials and corrections of Heaven. "Man appoints, God disappoints," said Cervantes more simply. And that's how the *Gita* begins, in disappointment, despair, confusion. It ends in enlightenment.

The *Gita* is about war. Like all scriptures, it's about God and Love and human nature; about spirituality and how to live your life in order to make progress and how to get connected with the divine. But first of all it's about war. The teachings are transmitted by God, who has made himself a body

Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Mayavati Memorial Ed. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), Vol. IV, page 376.

named Krishna, to his number one disciple, Arjuna. It all takes place on the battlefield of Kurukshetra just before Arjuna's army and the forces of his enemies will fight the war that decides the fate of India for generations to come.²

The Gita is not just about war but about *civil* war, internal war, war with yourself. Arjuna was the leader of the Pandavas. The opposing army was led by the Kauravas. But it is all one family—the Pandavas and Kauravas are brothers, half brothers, and uncles and cousins of every degree. “Kuru” is a short form of “Kaurava.” “Kshetra” means “field.” So the teaching of the Gita takes place on the Kurukshetra, the enemy's turf, the field of the Kurus, but also the *family* field. Arjuna is literally at war with his own blood. Later on there will be a chapter called “The Field and Its Knower,” where the Field is specifically identified as the human body. The real “war” of the Bhagavad Gita, then, is an internal one. In the immortal words of Pogo Possum, “We have met the enemy and it is us.”

Conquering the Enemy Within

Arjuna's despair about the coming battle in the beginning of the book is the despair of a good man who can't bring himself to kill his own kinsmen. It sets up a theme that runs throughout the Gita: what human beings must conquer is themselves, the enemy within. That's what the family emphasis is all about. Arjuna will have to kill himself in a certain sense. Because Arjuna will fight this battle as an embodied spirit, the fight is on the enemy's field—the body with its endless desires. The chief weapon available is the mind, and the Gita observes frighteningly that the mind is the only friend of the Indwelling Spirit and its only enemy.

Arjuna's problem, then, is his concern with self, family and society. He is looking at the coming battle from the wrong perspective. His viewpoint is materialistic. He's worried about the physical death of the family members he is about to fight and the breakdown of the social order that this great civil war implies. (Here, as in the Katha Upanishad, Death is a great teacher.) Krishna elevates the level of inquiry to the spiritual. He changes Arjuna's mind by giving him a more lofty point of view. The mind that was worried over the death of family members is not worried over the destruction of the Indwelling Spirit because that Spirit is indestructible. First and last, the Gita is about how to get and hold onto spiritual perspective, how to live a spiritual, enlightened life free from attachment to the vexed complications of the material world.

2. Apparently there was an actual Battle of Kurukshetra, but nobody knows when it took place. Maybe around 1400 BCE? Nobody knows when the Gita was first written down either, but I think it predates Buddhism since it doesn't mention it although it does provide a review of all the other major Indian schools of thought.

What is spiritual perspective? This is Krishna's first teaching. He explains carefully how the steadfast seer (the *Sthitaprajna*) understands life. As the Gita goes on, this theme is developed and enlarged: God is omnipresent and a living Spirit in all creatures.

Who sees his Lord
Within every creature,
Deathlessly dwelling
Amidst the mortal:
That man sees truly.

The second teaching of the Gita is how to attain this spiritual sight. The answer is in the four *yogas*, spiritual disciplines, "joinings," maybe, where the human mind is lifted up to participate in the "sight" of the indwelling *atman*, the divine spirit within.

Awakening the Soul

Even so, the idea of God in the Gita is mainly (like the New Testament) the concept of a personal God. In the NT, it's Christ; in the Gita, it's Krishna who says specifically that "when goodness grows weak, when evil increases, I make myself a body. In every age I come back. . ." But the Gita also goes far beyond the concept of a personal God, showing the innumerable ideas of God to be the facets of a single jewel. Read correctly, it is monotheistic: "Some bow to the countless gods that are only my million faces," Krishna says. And it also addresses the inherent divinity of human creatures, showing that the soul in its awakened state is one with the ultimate transcendental reality. The Gita teaches how to awaken the soul.

Krishna's relationship to Arjuna sheds much light: he is Arjuna's Charioteer, the one who literally and metaphorically drives him to battle, the one who moves him. The Gita begins (in Swami Prabhavananda's translation) with this pregnant verse:

Krishna the changeless,
Halt my chariot
There where the warriors
Bold for the battle,
Face their foemen.

"Changeless"? Krishna is a man who was once a boy, a baby, an embryo. But at the same time he is changeless. He is at once the absolute, unchanging Divine Ground (in Huxley's words) and Krishna the charioteer who moves, ages, halts and otherwise changes from moment to moment. Like Jesus, Krishna is a paradox, at once human and divine, changing and changeless, beyond the pairs of opposites.

I will never understand the Gita except in a provisional way, and neither will anybody else. Like every major scripture, it is too big to take on board.

We can only deal with bits and pieces, a little insight here, a little revelation there. While that fact is a bit daunting, it is also liberating. We don't have to come to some final understanding by the close of business on Friday. We don't *ever* have to come to some final understanding. What we've got today is good enough for today. Like kids in a candy store, if we come back tomorrow and invest some more, we'll get some more.

God the Mover Is Also God My Servant

“Halt my chariot”? Does Krishna take orders from Arjuna? Yes, oh yes! And from me, too, and from you and all the other billions of little godlets. It's the idea of God the mover, God the only doer, God the perfectly accommodating, God my charioteer, and my servant. That is Krishna's relationship to Arjuna and God's relationship to human beings. In terms of the Biblical religions, this is a revolutionary concept. Moses and Abraham and Job were not the servants of God; from the *Gita's* point of view, God would be the servant of Moses, Abraham and Job. It is an elegantly simple perspective, yet one crammed with complex possibilities. When Arjuna, the world's greatest warrior, despairs of the coming battle in which he will have to kill his own kinsmen, Krishna says:

Dream not you do
The deed of the killer.
Dream not the power
Is yours to command it.

People only dream that they are responsible for their acts. In reality, says the *Gita*, only God acts and only God is acted upon.

Well, then, doesn't this free me from sin? No, because I believe in my delusion and I live it every moment, even though I may be intellectually convinced of the truth the *Gita* teaches. Krishna anticipates my question and answers it:

Do not say:
“God gave us this delusion.”
You dream you are the doer ...
It is *your* ignorance. . .

And this is the main purpose of the *Gita*: to dispel the delusions that arise from ignorance. Krishna's last words to Arjuna are, “Have I dispelled the delusions of your ignorance?” And the answer is, “By your grace, O Lord, my delusions have been dispelled.” Although the *Gita* teaches meditation and discrimination as practices that will lead to the end of ignorance (i.e., knowledge, the awakening of the soul), ultimately the answer is grace. And the way to grace is self-surrender. Like Moses and Abraham and Job, all the way through Jesus, “Not my will, but Thine” is right understanding.

Lay down all duties

In me, your refuge.
Fear no longer,
For I will save you
From sin and from bondage.

But to get to this, to understand it, the Gita says you must acquire self-knowledge. That is, you must understand what your true duty is, and in order to understand that you must find out who “you” are, what is your inner nature.

Finding the Authentic Self

This is one of the Gita’s most important and complex themes. Your duty is dictated by your nature. If you do your duty in harmony with your nature, you are saved. For a warrior like Arjuna, this means fight and kill. “There is nothing nobler than a righteous war,” says Krishna. “Happy are the warriors to whom a battle such as this comes: it opens a door to heaven.”

There are four ways to pass through the door to heaven. The first is Jnana Yoga, the yoga of knowledge, reliance on intellect; then Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga. “Yoga” means “yoking” or “union,” and the idea is union of the individual self or soul with the divine Self, the “Oversoul” as Emerson had it. “Karma” means “action,” “bhakti” means “devotion.” So Karma Yoga is union with God through selfless action, and Bhakti Yoga is union through devotional practices. (If the teachings of Jesus Christ could be boiled down to one word, I think it would be “bhakti,” absolute, unswerving devotion.) Finally there is Raja Yoga, the “royal” yoga that involves meditation plus various combinations of the three other yogas.

In any event, the Gita makes it clear that the first job is to find the authentic self, one’s basic nature. Only then can the individual know whether the path to union is through reasoning, action, devotional worship or meditation combining these three. And *how* to meditate is also a question that is answered only by finding the authentic self.

Now, this basic nature/authentic self stuff is tricky. It was this idea that supported the caste system which, in its pure form, held that there were four “basic natures”—the priestly (Brahmins), the noble warrior (Kshatriyas), the commerce-oriented (Vaisyas) and the serviceful (Sudras). By faithfully following one’s caste duty, knowing that the outcome of any action was unimportant, one would gradually attain enlightenment. But in its pure form the caste system existed only in Krishna’s mind. In the world of human beings it was always a hellish mess. If Krishna incarnated to straighten it out, it didn’t work except for Arjuna. Very tricky stuff.

That’s what the despair of Arjuna at the beginning of the Gita is all about: confusion as to *dharma*, the right path, the occupation consistent with one’s basic nature. It’s nice that the Gita doesn’t expect you to be able to figure this

out easily. Even Arjuna, with God as his Charioteer and best friend, gets confused as to his authentic self. In the beginning of the Gita he becomes a teacher instead of a warrior, throws down his weapons, declares he will not fight, decides he'll go live like a hermit in a forest and actually lectures to Krishna on the concept of *dharma*.

“Your Own Nature Will Drive You to the Act”

Krishna smiles at this. He proceeds to deliver the entire Gita and then at the very end reveals why he smiled when Arjuna refused to fight. “If, in your vanity,” he says, “you say ‘I will not fight,’ your resolve is vain. Your own nature will drive you to the act.”

I have long mused over this comment, till eventually I saw the truth of it. To this day, I haven't figured out my “authentic self” or my “basic nature,” but I have understood that whatever it may be, I act helplessly in accord with it. I am programmed. Arjuna was programmed to fight the battle of Kurukshetra, and I am programmed to do what I do, to practice law (which I don't like), to meditate in my quest for higher consciousness, to read and study, and to write these observations on the wonderful *Gita* (all of which I do like).

Now, is that because writing and studying are elements of my authentic self and practicing law is not one? The former are jnana yoga sorts of things, contemplative stuff, reason, the path of knowledge. The latter is a karma yoga thing, the path of action, the doing of deeds. Am I a thinker or a warrior?

Wrong question. The Gita doesn't work that way. People are all sorts of things from one moment to another. Krishna knows that. What he is teaching is something else, something more profound:

I taught this yoga
First to Vivaswat,
Vivaswat taught it
In turn to Manu. . .

Vivaswat is the name of the sun. It shines because that is its nature, its self-path or *swadharma*. The fruits of its action—trees, crops, illumination—are not why it does what it does. The sun is purely indifferent to the outcome of its activity. “Manu” means “seeker” or “thinker.” The sun taught Manu without intending to teach, by its pure being, its *swadharma*. The seeker, following *his* own nature, learned.

When Krishna mentions the caste system, he is referring to great, general attributes among people. The Brahmin is the Seer, in general, but he has all sorts of other duties—to his wife, his family, even himself. The Kshatriya is the Leader, in general; the Vaisya is the Provider and the Sudra is the Server. In Krishna's thought, the Sudra who follows his *swadharma* is superior to the

Brahmin who does not. Action consistent with *swadharma* opens a door to heaven.

Seer and Leader,
Provider and Server:
Each has the duty
Ordained by his nature. . .
All mankind
Is born for perfection
And each shall attain it
Will he but follow
His nature's duty [*swadharma*].

Before and after the Gita, the caste system was understood to mean that one was born into a caste according to one's nature. But Krishna's words here can be read to mean the opposite. Caste is determined by basic nature, not basic nature by caste. If one's basic nature determines which of the four general categories of humanity one falls into, then as soon as one rightly understands what that basic nature is, one understands one's duty.

We Must Work, But the Results Are God's Business

When one acts according to "the law of his nature," says Krishna in the final chapter, "he cannot be sinning. Therefore, no one should give up his natural work, even though he does it imperfectly. For all action is involved in imperfection, like fire in smoke."

It's not merely that one is born into a caste and has all duties laid out accordingly. Action—*all* action—is "involved in" imperfection as fire is involved in smoke. Not only do the two go together, but fire actually creates smoke, is "involved" in it.

The point is that action creates the imperfections that accompany it, as brushfires and mountains create their own weather. We are not wrong to work according to the dictates of our basic nature and to try thus to perfect ourselves, but we are totally wrong if we condemn ourselves for failing at it. Failure comes with the territory. Life is a series of experiments, and experiments have the right to fail. The Gita is very understanding, very forgiving. It just asks for the effort, not the result.

Results, in fact, are nobody's business but God's, the Gita says. Arjuna should fight the battle of Kurukshetra without concern for winning or losing, not only because his nature will force him to it anyway, but also because attachment to the results of action is the essence of bondage. Fittingly, Krishna saves the most important doctrine—the path of renunciation—for the final chapter. It is a great key to spiritual life. "Renunciation brings instant peace to the spirit." What one must renounce is the fruits of one's actions.

That doesn't mean everybody has to go live in a cave or a convent. Just the opposite. Each individual must act according to his or her inner nature. This is "the inaction that is in action, and the action that is in inaction." One who understands this is "wise indeed," says Krishna, poised and tranquil even when engaged in action, doing whatever is done for the sake of the doing, like the sun shining because shining is its nature.

Opening Doors to the Gita's Riches

I haven't tried to "explain" the Gita here, just to open a few doors to its huge interior riches. Only a tiny fraction of the Gita's treasure is uncovered in these few remarks. It sets forth an entire cosmology and a profound psychology; it posits the notion of three fluctuating qualities called *gunas* which make everything happen and everybody act one way or another at one time or another. But far better (to me) than this dry intellectual stuff are the wonderful devotional passages.

There is the one where Krishna appears before Arjuna as "the whole universe with all things animate and inert made one within this body." Arjuna, amidst a storm of the most beautiful religious poetry, nearly faints with awe. In the end he has to ask Krishna to take away the vision.

I have seen what no man ever saw before me:
Deep is my delight, but still my dread is greater.
Show me now your other form, O Lord, be gracious.

And then there is this:

To love is to know me,
My innermost nature,
The truth that I am.

Prabhavananda and Isherwood did not translate it "To love *me* is to know me" but simply "to love is to know me." I think he had something very specific in mind, for when we feel love deeply—for family, for friends, for anybody or anything—I truly believe that in those moments, when the heart overflows and runs down the cheeks, in those moments we touch the innermost nature of God. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. □

Book Review

Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play
by Swami Saradananda, translated by Swami Chetanananda
Vedanta Society of St. Louis
1003 pp. cloth \$39.95 2003

For many of us, when we were first attracted to Vedanta, the book which initially drew our attention, and later reverence, was *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. It was in this remarkable volume that we met, on the most intimate terms, one of the great sages of modern times. Thanks to the phenomenal memory of its author, Mahendranath Gupta (“M”), the teachings, wit and instructive parables of Ramakrishna were recorded for the spiritual education of what must now be countless readers and devotees.

Here were the teachings of Ramakrishna, but what of his life? That enormous undertaking was left to one of his disciples, Swami Saradananda, who with extraordinary dedication to the task, ultimately composed his guru’s biography (later translated with the somewhat awkward title *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*) in five volumes over a period of several years. Although the 1952 translation by Swami Jagadananda was a monumental task in its own right, English was a second language for the Swami and the translation reflects it. In addition, the author wrote in what has been termed “classical Bengali,” which does not easily yield itself to translation into English. Nevertheless, the book has been read with devotion by many (myself among them) who have been willing to forage beneath the often stilted translation to seek the spiritual food it contained.

Remarkable Achievement

One can appreciate what excitement, therefore, so many of us experienced when we learned that Swami Chetanananda was planning to attempt a new translation of this classic. He has not disappointed us. For this major project, five years in the undertaking, the Swami wisely chose the help of a professional editor as well as teachers of English and journalism to turn his translation into beautifully rendered English. Enough cannot be said of the group’s remarkable achievement, which has been to bring into sharper focus the life of one of the world’s greatest saints.

It is also heartening to see the title Swami Chetanananda has chosen, for Ramakrishna’s life was indeed a divine play. Someone once shrewdly observed that the world can be viewed in three distinct ways: First, there is the occidental view, in which the world is seen as a construct. Westerners love to build on the present world for hopes of a better one in the future. Next, there

is the organic perception, in which man and nature are viewed as bound together in a harmonic whole. This view is primarily held by the Chinese (though this may be rapidly changing!) It has been left to India to maintain perhaps the wisest view of the three, the world as *lila*, a play, a magnificent drama in which each of us has a part—some small, perhaps even insignificant, and others with leading roles.

Such a leading role—perhaps one of the greatest of all—was given to Sri Ramakrishna. For as Swami Saradananda notes in his Introduction: “As there cannot be an effect without a cause, so God in his *lila* [Divine Play] never assumes a human body without the purpose of removing the sufferings of humanity. When such suffering affects every part of society, God’s infinite mercy crystalizes and induces Him to appear as a world teacher.”

However, it should be made clear that the purpose here is not to review this significant work, *per se*, but to provide some commentary on Swami Chetanananda’s new translation and the contributions of his editorial staff. Let us therefore imagine ourselves a prospective buyer, ambling through a bookstore of some distinction, credit card at the ready and prepared to buy if the right book catches our eye.

Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play stops us in our tracks. It displays a magnificent glossy cover, with a colorized photo of Ramakrishna’s birthplace. Intrigued, we pick it up. It is a bit on the heavy side (well, it *is* 1003 pages!); however, we soon realize that much of that weight is due to the quality of the paper. It is thick, glossy, and nearly opaque. We hold a sheet up to the light and fail to see the type on the opposite side as in cheaper papers. Excellent! The relatively large type is also easy on the eye, and the lines are well spaced. The text reads smoothly and gracefully; the editors have done their job well.

Contents, Index and Illustrations

We are surprised to note that the Table of Contents occupies some fifty-one pages. Though we are pretty certain that such was the decision of the author, we remain a bit puzzled as to why the translator has decided not to abbreviate it. A quick check reveals only thirteen pages of index. Here one would have liked to discover the fifty-one pages.

We *do* discover, however, a profusion of illustrations, nearly a hundred in all! What a wonderful addition to this new translation (the earlier 1952 translation had about a dozen). We find photos of many of those who sat at the feet of Ramakrishna, places and temples associated with his life, and others of historical importance that I am confident may not be found elsewhere—and certainly not in one volume.

However, we do detect something most curious that one would search in vain to find in any modern edition—summaries of the paragraphs inset into the text, usually one or two of them to a page. Alas, this was to be found in the

earlier translation, and it was hoped they would be deleted in this new one. Such summaries appear unnecessary and, we might assume, a typographer's nightmare.

Nevertheless, determined not to let such minor considerations deter us, we happily hand over our credit card to the clerk and, with *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play* firmly under our arm, wend our way home to the comfort of our favorite reading chair.

—Cliff Johnson

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