

## Editorial

### *Vedanta and Christianity*

Most Westerners who come to Vedanta have at least some Christian roots. Finding that Vedanta accepts all religions as valid paths to God, the Vedantist who was raised a Christian is then faced with questions: How do I now relate to Christianity? Do I maintain an affiliation with a Christian church? How do I regard Jesus? What about Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that for most people it is better to continue in the religion one is brought up in? In many cases we would not have come to Vedanta at all if we didn't feel some dissatisfaction with Christianity as it was presented to us.

These questions are asked and answered by Western Vedantists in various ways. Some are very personally drawn to Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, or Swamiji, in a way they never were to Jesus. Jesus may seem to be a remote figure from the distant past. Others are still much drawn to Jesus, but are unhappy with organized Christianity. Others like the rational, impersonal approach of Vedanta, with its emphasis on principles.

One aspect of Vedanta that appeals to virtually all who come to it is the idea that each person has his/her own separate path to the divine, according to the makeup of one's own mind. If one particularly loves Jesus, or Krishna, or Ramakrishna, that particular manifestation of divinity becomes one's *ishta-devata*, one's chosen ideal. There is no compulsion to accept a particular path; one has to find out what is best for oneself. There is a tendency for some, having turned away from Christianity, to look at it negatively, and to think Vedanta alone has all the answers. This, in spite of the Vedic dictum, "Truth is One; sages call it variously." Others are able to integrate parts of both traditions into a meaningful synthesis.

The editors of *American Vedantist*, taking these factors into consideration, thought it would be useful to bring out an issue comparing the two religions. The issue is oriented mainly toward spiritual practice and personal experience.

In this time of increased contact and mingling of persons of all religious traditions, a sympathetic comparison of Vedanta and Christianity can perhaps contribute to mutual understanding and respect for both traditions.

—The Editors

# *A Eucharistic Path to God-Union and Creativity*

**Beatrice Bruteau**

From the point of view of personal devotional experience, Vedanta and Christianity have much in common. The heart of each spiritual tradition is the individual relation to God through a particular aspect that is intensely meaningful and vivid to that person. Each worshipper actually shapes an ultimately unique religion, even if it is nevertheless clearly identifiable as belonging to a parent tradition. The significant contribution of Ramakrishna Vedanta is its explicit articulation of this reality, that all the great traditions can lead to the spiritual goal, provided the practitioner is earnest and persevering. Personal verification of the reality of the Divine is possible for anyone.

In discussing Christianity alongside Ramakrishna Vedanta, one point that presents itself as an example is the sense of the real presence of Deity in or through some particular item in the worshipper's life. This may be a material object or an activity or a relationship. Both Christianity and Vedanta offer the practitioners strongly meaningful ways of developing a consciousness that enters the presence of the Deity and ultimately becomes unified with It. Vedanta, considered in its parent tradition of Hinduism, shows many paths to this realization. Besides the various yogas, there are numerous projected images of several conceptions of God in terms of human relations: God the Mother, the Teacher, the Lover, the Baby, or *whatever* works for the devotee. What is essential is that the *actual presence* of God is to some degree experienced. Christianity similarly presents ways of experiencing God in one's life. The way I will discuss here is one interpretation/development of the Eucharist.

## **The Eucharistic Presence**

*Eucharist* is a Greek word meaning literally “good gift” and then derivatively “thanksgiving.” It is used by Christians to refer to their celebration of a community meal in which they give thanks to God for sending a Savior who opens to them a new kind of life. The foodstuffs can be utterly simple, just bread and wine, the basic form of nourishment in the culture in which this practice originated. There are various lines of significance in this celebration. I will mention a few and then concentrate on the feature of presence.

As a Christian practice, the meal derives from and commemorates the way Jesus shared meals with friends and with strangers, the unconditional intimacy of his willingness to give himself to others. In particular, it commemorates the

Last Supper he took with his closest associates. The tradition tells that he emphasized this aspect of self-giving on that occasion by saying that the bread he was blessing and distributing was his own “body,” and the cup of wine shared among them was his own “blood.” [Mark 14:22-25; Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:15-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; this event does not appear in John, but see its chapter 6.]

This gesture became centralized in Christian worship, called an ordinance or sacrament, and ritualized into a sacred ceremony with various beliefs and customs attached to it, according to the various Christian sects, who name it The Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, the Divine Liturgy, or the Mass (from the closing words “Ite, missa est,” “Go, you are sent forth”). Unfortunately, and paradoxically contrary to Jesus' own practice and apparent intention, it also became highly conditional, available only to properly initiated Christians, and then only on certain terms, differing in the different sects and serving to separate them even from one another. But that is by-the-way, together with much else that can be said about this subject.

### **“Body” and “Blood”**

The point I want to develop is the sense of *presence* which at least some Christian communities recognize, and how this parallels Vedantic experience. But a preliminary explanation is needed, touching on the meanings of “body” and “blood,” and later a note on the significance of *eating*. There is a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding about this. Many people think that what is meant is that when the right words are said over the bread, it magically turns into flesh, which is both ridiculous and disgusting. The bread remains bread, they shout. Well, of course it does. The matter is much more subtle than that.

The mistake arises because people assume that they know what the word “body” means, especially when it is paired with “blood.” The Apostle Paul pointed out (in another context, 1 Cor. 15 :39 ff) that there are different kinds of “bodies.” Plants, for instance, are not made of meat, and the bodies of the moon, the sun, and the other stars are utterly different from animal bodies. The word can also be used metaphorically, as when we are warned not to limit ourselves to the “garments” of the Torah, the storytelling, but to look beneath for the “body,” the moral meaning, and deeper yet for the “soul,” the spiritual meaning.

Looking closely at how all the bodies we know anything about *function*, we can say that a “body” is *a medium for presence and communication*, a way of being in the world and extending aspects of this being to others. And “blood” in a Jewish context means “soul,” the life-principle.

Thus, when the eucharistic bread is consecrated, it becomes the “body of Christ” in the sense that bread is now being used by the Divine Person as a

medium of presence and communication. Where he formerly used a body of flesh, he now uses a body of bread. And a bread body is one very well suited to *function* for the purpose he intends: being the vehicle of nourishing self-gift and interior personal presence, because it is meant to be eaten, a unique metaphor for presence, gift, life-enhancement, personal intimacy, and active union.

Similarly for the wine. It is not only healing and nourishing, but it makes one feel good; it promotes happiness and emotional generosity. It is the mark of celebration and rejoicing. In this way it communicates the “soul of Christ.” Totality of self-gift for life-enhancement is what is being expressed. As we also sometimes say, I give myself to you “body and soul,” meaning entirely, without holding anything back. Some interpretations of the Eucharist see it as primarily a sacrifice, but there too the notes of self-gift and life-enhancement are the outstanding features.

Finally, when the community practices this ritual, especially when they feed the food to one another, adding their own self-gift, the community as such becomes “the Body of Christ,” in which all the “members” are to be treated with equal and great respect, and which is charged with extending this life-gift to any and all others. [See 1 Cor. chapter 12.] This is the beginning of how God-union expresses as creativity, as we see also in other spiritual traditions how the enlightened or realized persons expend themselves completely in service to others.

### **Sense of Divine Presence in Vedanta**

The worshippers' conviction that the Deity is really present in or through some representation is also a strong element in Hindu devotion. There are various forms of Deity and various representations of these. Sri Ramakrishna worshipped the Divine Mother as Kali present in a statue in the temple which he served as priest. This is not uncommon. The images—statues, paintings, photographs, symbols—after being made by human hands out of earthly materials, are blessed and consecrated by a special ceremony that invokes the presence of the Deity represented. The wood or stone or whatever it may be thus becomes the medium for the Presence of that Deity, i.e., that Deity's “body.” The wood is still wood, it doesn't turn into flesh any more than the Christian bread does. Nevertheless, the wooden statue is now inhabited by the Divine Presence and may therefore correctly be *worshipped*.

Sometimes the worshipper experiences a vision of the statue coming alive in the sense of moving and speaking, but this is something additional, something special for and peculiar to this particular worshipper, a subjective experience private to that person. The Real Presence of God as the Deity represented is held to be objective, true for all who present themselves in the temple.

It is worth pointing out that objects and occasions other than statues and photographs can be “bodies” of Deities. Arunachala is a mountain, Ganga is a river. Shiva may be a stone or sacred ash. Vishnu may be the whole world. Sri Ramakrishna experienced the Presence of God in the flight of white birds against a dark cloud. As a dancer enacting a sacred drama, he could identify with the reality of the avatar he was representing.

Christians feel that they experience the Presence of Christ in actions. “He had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35). In the doing of a good deed, the doer experiences the recipient as Christ, and the recipient may experience the doer as Christ. The Presence of the Deity has now begun to move into the devotee and it is time to speak of the significance of *eating*.

### **Eating as Union of Life**

The whole idea of the Ultimate Reality being present as common foundational food is deeply significant. “Food,” in the ordinary way, is that which, being outside me and having a life of its own, comes inside me and is transformed into me, into my life. If this “food” is God-life, this Eucharistic imagery means that my real being is actually a “name-and-form” version of Divine Reality.

We may ask, however, in a Vedantic context, if we are already Divine Reality, why does anything need to come into us from outside? Indeed, how can we even speak of “inside/outside”? We speak of it because we are speaking of human experience. We affirm that we are Brahman, but do we realize it yet? If we are already divine reality, why should we bow down to divinely inhabited statues, or honor and obey teachers? Or do any spiritual practices?

These are all, from our point of view and our eagerness for the goal of realization, transitional exercises. (What they are from God’s point of view remains to be said. ) They are all ways in which we access God-Life and God-Life makes itself available to us. The “transition” itself is imaged by the “outside to inside” action.

That we are living by eating God-food is a transitional realization, with the necessary dynamic built in, on the way to the apprehension of the whole Reality. The act of eating may be viewed as consisting of a sequence of steps. The first stage of taking the Divine Life into ourselves is that we must open ourselves to the possibility of enjoying God-Life. Then we have an initial *taste* of it and experience the characteristic joy. (Sri Ramakrishna once remarked that he “would rather taste sugar than be sugar.”) The next step is to *chew* on what we are learning, thoughtfully and thoroughly. This prepares us to *swallow* the new view of reality that we have learned. This is the second stage of Divine Life coming “inside” us.

*Digesting* the new stance and beginning to absorb it into ourselves so that it can truly feed all our thoughts, feelings, and actions, comes next. Entering every cell (metaphorically) to be built into the living tissue of our life expression is the third stage of “coming into” us. When this has thoroughly happened, then the God-Life power begins to express Itself in the activities of our life, and that which had been “outside,” apparently an “other,” is now so mingled with “me,” so active in and through and *as* “me,” that the distinction “inside/outside” no longer has any meaning. That we speak of this as a transition and present it as a series of stages is a common tactic, there being many examples of it in the famous mystics of the traditions who speak of steps on a ladder or courts in a castle, or levels up a mountain, or gates to pass through, or the eight limbs of the royal yoga.

### **God-Union and Creativity**

From this position we now presume to say something about what all this is “from God’s point of view,” that is, we will speak of the “inside” moving “outside,” or creativity and ex-pression, the “out-breathing of Brahman.” The Christian version of this is that creativity is the manifestation of the essential nature of the Divine, which is generosity, or self-giving, what is centrally shown in the Eucharist. The devotee now experiences self as God-Life present and active through oneself: “For me, to live is Christ,” says the Apostle Paul (Phil. 1:21); and “I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

The devotee now experiences that the God-Life that is flowing into one, through being continuously “fed” from the Divine, is God-Life that then flows out from one into all others. Food gives capacity to be, to act, and to give vitality in turn. The Christian experiences Ultimate Reality not only as the transcendent absolute Ground of all possible being, not only as the One to which there is no second, and no longer as the goal of spiritual striving, but as possessed of Its own intentionality, initiative, and outward creative movement of which the devotee is a participant.

When this sense of being the creative expression of God becomes strong and normal (as distinct from occasional and extraordinary), then we begin consciously to “feed” our neighbors with our “body and blood” (cf. the tenth Oxherding picture<sup>1</sup>), doing the divine thing. This is the fullness of the Eucharistic Supper, ideally all of us feeding one another.

I like to represent it according to the five koshas of the Taittiriya Upanishad: *annamayakosha* (food itself and other material goods), *pranamayakosha* (energies of work and emotional empathy), *manomayakosha* (memories, knowledge, skills) *vijnanamayakosha* (insight,

1. Oxherding Pictures: a series of Zen icons tracing the stages of the spiritual life.

illumination, spiritual instruction), *anandamayakosha* (bliss, holy joy, happiness, contentment, divine peace).

If we choose to see the divine "point of view" as an intention to express divine nature by projecting the world as an act of generosity and intellectual and esthetic creativity, then self-realization means participation in this activity. And if the eucharistic cross-feeding, each one feeding each other one, could be made perfect, complete, all-inclusive, then we would have God-realization as world-realization, God-union as creativity, generous self-giving in love and beauty. □

## *Translating Christianity: The Bloody Cross and the Empty Tomb*

**Steven F. Walker**

If indeed "truth is one, but sages call it by various names," then it follows that the main intellectual problem of following through on the idea of "the harmony of religions" is a problem of translation, that is, of finding things more or less equivalent in one religious outlook that can translate things in another. But one-to-one translations are often unsatisfactory, as anyone knows who has tried translating something from one foreign language into another. In fact, it is often better to translate the meaning of a key term through a paraphrase using several words rather than trying to find a single equivalent word. The same is true when it comes to "translating" religious symbols and beliefs. Every religion has its own particular sacred narratives and symbols; even though something is bound to be lost in translation, these foundational beliefs still ought to be translatable, if indeed "truth is one." The problem is to find a paraphrase that is "more or less equivalent." In the case of Christianity, I will be trying to translate two core symbols (the Crucifixion and the Resurrection) into Vedantic language. Yet I am fully aware that something is bound to be lost in translation, and that the paraphrases will be, at best, "more or less equivalent."

Swami Prabhavananda, in his pioneering work *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta*, and various others have translated successfully into Vedantic terms the mystical Christianity of some of Christ's words of spiritual instruction. Although there is still much to be done in the way of Vedantic interpretations of these wonderful teachings, already Christ's saying that "the Kingdom of God is within you" has become a kind of Vedantic spiritual saying. Similarly, Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Ruysbroek and Suso are much admired by many of us today as representatives of what one is

almost tempted to call Vedantic Christianity, although their status within the orthodox Christian churches is by no means so well established.

### **Sacred Narratives and Symbols**

But the Christian religion is based not only on the sayings of Christ but also on a set of sacred narratives and symbols that reinforce the belief that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, that through his crucifixion he redeemed humanity from sin and that through his resurrection he demonstrated that redeemed humanity will have eternal life. In modern times some may be inclined to dismiss this exoteric Christianity as appealing mainly to the emotions of the superstitious masses; others may find distasteful the emphasis of “Crosstianity” on the crucifixion and on a bloody sacrifice as atonement for sin. Nevertheless, this is the Christianity that has been the foundation for the more mystical, esoteric and rational Christianity that most Vedantists would probably find more congenial and more compatible with their own system of beliefs.

But you cannot have one Christianity without the other—unless you were to redefine “true” Christianity as something limited to its most rationalistic and/or mystical manifestations, which would not be very charitable to the mass of Christians now and for the last two thousand years, whose reverence and love for sacred narratives, rituals and symbols have been the very foundation of their faith. Furthermore, Christian thinkers have never underestimated the importance of these core foundational beliefs, even when their minds were operating on a very high intellectual level. So let us accept the fact that “real” Christianity contains both the sublime sayings of Christ as well as sublime narratives and symbols that are the foundation of Christian doctrine, ritual and worship. These narratives and symbols also need to be translated into Vedantic terms, and indeed, as I hope to demonstrate, can be translated, if by Vedanta we mean not only the philosophy of Vedanta but also the life and words of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.

### **Symbol of the Core Belief of Christianity**

Let us start with the Crucifixion, which is certainly at the very core of the symbolic belief system of Christianity. “The followers of Christ,” writes Jaroslav Pelikan (*Jesus through the Centuries*, 1985), “came very early to the conclusion that he had lived in order to die, that his death was not the interruption of his life but its ultimate purpose. Even by the most generous reading, the Gospels give us information about less than a hundred days in the life of Jesus; but for the last two or three days of his life, they provide a detailed, almost hour-by-hour scenario. And the climax of that scenario is the account of Good Friday and of his three hours on the cross.” He concludes,



that “the gospel of the cross pervades the New Testament and early Christian literature” (p. 95), and that “the sign of the cross of Jesus Christ pervaded the culture and the folklore of the nations of medieval Europe . . . as no other symbol had” (p. 96). So, like it or not, you can’t take the Cross out of Christianity!

It is highly significant, to my mind, that in Saradananda’s account of Ramakrishna’s mystical vision of Jesus, there is no avoidance of the bloody sacrificial imagery that can seem strange and exotic to the Vedantic mind; on the contrary, the crucifixion is shown to be at the very heart of Ramakrishna’s experience of the living Christ: “a voice from within told him: ‘this is Jesus Christ, the great yogi, the loving Son of God who is one with his Father, who shed his heart’s blood and suffered torture for the salvation of humanity’” (*Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, tr. Swami Chetanananda, p. 358). Saradananda’s account does not attempt to make this vision of Christ primarily one of a calmly enlightened yogi sitting with legs crossed as represented in the popular Vedantic iconic image Christ in the Wilderness, the original of which is at the San Francisco Vedanta Center (see Stephen Prothero’s remarks in his recent book *American Jesus*, 2003, pp. 267-290). Rather, by contrast, and rather paradoxically, it is a very “Christian” vision of Christ and a very unusual one for a traditional Hindu such as Ramakrishna to have had. For Ramakrishna, the infinite love of Christ for the world was immediately and vividly symbolized by “his heart’s blood” and “the endless tortures” of the crucifixion, in spite of the fact that one would be hard pressed to find any obvious analogies in Hindu myth, symbol or ritual.

### **Symbol of the Core Belief of Vedanta**

However, since the cross is at the very heart of Christianity, it must, if “truth is one,” be susceptible to being translated into Vedantic terms. Let us see if this can be done. Is it too bold to assert that what the sacred syllable Om is to Vedanta, the sign of the cross is to Christianity? Does it follow that we should translate “the cross” by “Om”—the bloody cross by the sacred syllable? It sounds a bit peculiar as a translation, and yet. . . what is Om, if not the symbol of Sat-Chit-Ananda, the core belief of Vedanta? But how to put “Sat-Chit-Ananda” into English? Swami Sarvagatananda, in his commentary on the Isavasya Upanishad, *God Is Everything* (2001, pp. 31-2), has argued that Sat-Chit-Ananda should not be translated as “existence-knowledge-bliss” (the usual but somewhat inexact translation) but rather as “being-consciousness-love.” Christ’s willing gift of self on the cross can thus be taken as a manifestation of Christ’s complete identification with “Eternally Pure Loving Consciousness” (Sat-Chit-Ananda) represented by the sacred syllable; the cross, it could be argued, is, like Om, a symbol of this ultimate truth. That the cross is a visual symbol referring back to a sacred narrative of

divine sacrifice through love, and Om a sound symbol with a set of more abstractly defined philosophical references, is more a question of context (one narrative, the other conceptual) than of meaning; the inner core of meaning is similar enough in each so that we can say that a translation of one by the other is possible. So let us say that Om is more or less equivalent to the cross of Christ, and that Om is the best available translation into Vedantic terms of the Crucifixion, since both are the most sacred of symbols for their religions and both, it may be argued, contain the idea of an infinite divine love.

Still, one must admit that something is lost in the translation. Only a Christian is likely to experience great intensity of feeling (bhakti) regarding Christ's crucifixion. Followers of Ramakrishna, by contrast, do not feel that Ramakrishna's lingering death from cancer (certainly in its way, as has been said before, a kind of crucifixion) necessarily constituted the central or crucial episode of his life, nor has it given rise to any special iconic representation. So this part of Ramakrishna's life has not been taken up as an equivalent symbol of Christ's crucifixion, although there is no apparent reason why this could not have happened or why it may not happen at some time in the future. Similarly, Christians have several prayers, starting with the Lord's Prayer, but nothing really equivalent to the sacred syllable Om, although for some the name of Jesus may come close to it. But translation only has to be adequate, it does not have to be perfect, and it is probably wise to credit each religion with an especially intimate and vivid appreciation of its own sacred symbols and sacred narratives. Translation may build a bridge between religions, but it does not totally eliminate the gap. In all events, and in the final analysis, the "truth" that is "one" is ultimately unutterable and unrepresentable, and consequently it is ultimately untranslatable; all that can be translated are the "names," and each name has its own special charm, which is often lost in translation.

### **Today's Problem with the Resurrection**

Let us now turn to the Resurrection, which is also at the core of Christianity in terms both of sacred narrative and of symbolic meaning. As Robert Louis Wilken has written recently, "the Resurrection of Jesus is the central fact of Christian devotion and the ground of all Christian thinking" (*The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 2003, p. xv). However, the problem today is that an empty tomb resulting from a body disappearing without apparent cause is too much for the modern scientific mind to accept. How can a body disappear into thin air? Is the Resurrection a case of Christian mystery mongering that unfortunately got recast as sacred narrative? Or is it something that can be translated into a language that Vedantists can understand?

It is wise to be cautious as well as suspicious, and to remember that the Gospel of Matthew tells how the chief priests and the Pharisees were afraid that the disciples would take away Christ's body (that Joseph of Arimathea had placed in a freshly prepared sepulcher), and then claim that a miraculous resurrection had occurred. In order to forestall this, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pontius Pilate: "Sir, we remember how that imposter said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore order the sepulcher to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." (Matthew 27.63-66) It is certainly to the credit of the writer of this gospel that he presents without commentary this alternative explanation for the disappearance of Christ's body.

We Vedantists are thus caught in a quandary, since the chief priests and the Pharisees clearly had a point. I confess that, as a Christian from early childhood on, I was later to be upset by the issue every Easter when a swami I greatly respected would give a talk during which he would mention that he favored the explanation that some of the disciples had quietly removed the body from the tomb, since, as he argued persuasively, a supernatural explanation of events should not be adopted when a natural explanation is readily available. (Interestingly enough, the dispute over the relics of Ramakrishna immediately after his cremation [see, among other sources, Swami Chetanananda, *God Lived With Them*, p. 413] might be said to illustrate the same initial rivalry among the Master's close followers that may have existed between some of Christ's disciples and Joseph of Arimathea regarding the possession of the body of Christ.)

### **The Subtle or Spirit Body?**

Of course, on one level it matters not the slightest to a Vedantist whether Christ's body "rose" from the tomb or not; the value of Christ's glorious teachings and life would not be the slightest diminished through the absence of a miraculous resurrection. In the case of Ramakrishna nobody claims that his body that had been burned on the funeral pyre somehow magically reconstituted itself later and had "risen." But what a Vedantist and follower of Ramakrishna finds similar and significant in the accounts of the period immediately after the deaths of both of these wonderful world teachers is that on several occasions some of their followers saw them vividly and spoke with them as though they were still very much alive. That a great soul might be seen after death in his spirit body may be beyond scientific explanation, but as a mystical phenomenon it is a good deal less problematic that assuming that a physical body disappeared into thin air and "rose from the dead."

Thus a follower of Ramakrishna has no problem in believing that Christ, like Ramakrishna, was seen and spoken with after his death by this or that

disciple. It is even possible to believe that doubting Thomas touched his wounds and that at another time Christ ate a fish to prove he was really alive. Maybe it happened that way, maybe oral tradition embroidered on the original factual accounts, but the main miracle for us, the one that proved that Christ had conquered death, was his appearance to the disciples after his death. The account of how these disciples strangely did not recognize him at first has the ring of truth, and it suggests that something about him was different—not to be expected if it were Christ in the physical body he had before death, but plausible in the case of his appearing in his subtle or spirit body.

So, as Vedantists and as followers of Ramakrishna, we have no problem with Christ's Resurrection—just with the empty tomb. Unfortunately, the Empty Tomb is almost as symbolic as the Cross, and hence it is impossible to neglect its importance for Christianity as it has been down through the ages. It is the setting for the crucial episode of the Easter story; in ritual and worship it is of great symbolic importance, since it expresses the idea that Christ defeated death and dissolution for himself and for others; the tomb was empty, hence Paul's joyful exclamation, "death, where is thy victory, death, where is thy sting?" (I Corinthians 15.55) But how the tomb actually came to be empty may well be an aspect of the sacred narrative that can safely be left alone, the essential part of the narrative for us being Christ's appearance outside the tomb to his disciples, starting with Mary Magdalen and the other women. This appearance and others following it proved to the disciples that Christ was not dead, but "risen from the dead." So the empty tomb, however it became empty, would have very quickly become unnecessary—except for the fact that it became almost instantaneously the occasion for the creation of a sacred narrative of overwhelming symbolic importance, and hence is remembered as the very emblem of Christ's resurrection, symbolically almost as important as the actual vision of the risen Christ that the women devotees had as they stood before it. The facts may be in doubt, but the power of the symbol is unquestionable.

### **Samadhi and the Empty Tomb**

If the emptiness of the tomb is not primarily a factual but a symbolic issue, what might we have in the way of translation into Vedantic terms? I suggest—and I hope this will not offend his devotees—that it is the great photograph of Ramakrishna sitting crosslegged in samadhi, a photograph that enjoys iconic status among devotees worldwide, that provides the closest equivalent. Vedantists like to think that theirs is a "scientific" religion. I must remind them that the state of samadhi is not at present scientifically provable, and may never be. Samadhi is as unprovable as the Empty Tomb. It is true that the skeptical and scientifically minded Dr. Sarkar examined Ramakrishna

in samadhi, and found no pulse and no reaction to being touched on the surface of the eye (see Swami Chetanananda, *God Lived With Them*, pp. 449-450), but one cannot prove an inner state through the examination of physical symptoms. The mystical state of samadhi cannot be proven through scientific examination, and consequently there is a large degree of pure faith (nothing wrong with that!) involved in believing that such a state exists, unless of course one has experienced it for oneself. But even then experiencing samadhi for oneself does not constitute scientific proof of an objective nature; at best, one can indirectly prove samadhi through its subsequent transformative effects on the one who claims to have experienced it.

### **Symbolic Truth, Not Scientific Fact**

So I believe it is fair to conclude, as regards the near equivalence of Christ's resurrection and Ramakrishna's samadhi, that each may be taken as making manifest a mystical truth, but that neither falls within the category of things for which a scientific proof can be expected. The Empty Tomb is a powerful symbol of the Resurrection, just as the photograph of Ramakrishna in samadhi is a powerful image of a realized soul, and the two are "near equivalents" as regards the translation I have suggested. Since in each case no scientific proof is possible, speculating about the cause of the emptiness of the Empty Tomb or the scientific probability of the Resurrection would be as fruitless as hoping that one day a scientific experiment will discover Brahman, since in Vedantic philosophy Brahman can never become an object of knowledge; one cannot know Brahman, but one can realize that one is eternally Brahman.

For the eye of faith, symbolic truth is far more valuable than scientific fact, and faith tries to see into what cannot be seen with the ordinary eye and with the ordinary mind. As the saintly woman Hadewijch of Antwerp wrote in the thirteenth century (I translate the text as found in Dom André Gozier's recent study of her and her writings, *Béguine, Ecrivain et Mystique*, p. 45), "all that we can think or understand about God, or imagine in any way possible, is not God." □

# *Jesus as Yogin of Prema*

**Lalitha Devi**

I was born in Pittsburgh to a Jewish father and a Gentile mother. Neither was religious, but both cared about the highest values, ethical and esthetic, available in our culture; they loved Nature and the arts. I was trained in classical ballet, danced with the American Ballet Theater and in Broadway musicals in the 1950s. But this life did not satisfy my deepest longings.

In New York I was aware of various yoga personalities and found Swami Satchitananda's Integral Yoga opening a unique experience to me. I attended a lecture by the Sufi teacher Pir Vilayat Khan and learned about a worldwide yoga conference convening at an ashram in Pondicherry, South India. I went to this ashram for a month's study course in April of 1972. There I met Dr. Swami Gitananda, promulgator of Rishiculture Ashtanga Yoga, a fusion of two authentic yoga lineages: North Indian Bengali Tantra, handed down to him by his teacher, Swami Kanananda, known as the "Sleepless Saint," and South Indian Saiva Siddhanta.

This ashram was a wonderful experience for me. The *shakti*, the energy, of the community was offering me the kind of experience I had been reading about and had caught glimpses of from my childhood responses to the beauties of the natural world. We practiced hatha yoga and pranayama. We studied the moral and ethical principles necessary for a spiritual life. All the talk in the ashram was on the level of the excitement of exploring the way to the Supreme Self. Our consciousness was absorbed in the quest for Tat, with the question "Who am I?" (*coham*). This was central in our life there; it was our reality in our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual practices. I felt I had found what I was looking for, and I had a new name, after Parvati, consort of Shiva, the Divine Dancer.

## **The Place of Constant Unfolding**

I went back to New York, gave up my profession and my apartment, sold all my possessions, resolved to trust the abundance that supports the universe, and returned to Ananda Ashram in Pondicherry. I was "staying in the place of constant unfolding." In this location I was able to visit Arunachala and the Ramana ashram, and I spent some time with Father Bede Griffiths in Shantivanam.

In this context, and with this history, I began to learn how Christianity was doing the same sort of thing. The great mystics, such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, were tracing the way to the sense of Reality, of Truth, of Total Being. Joseph Campbell helped, too, showing how the myths of the

world are all pointing toward this experience of the Total Self, under whatever name.

My teacher spoke warmly of Jesus as a great yogin of Prema, supreme love. Jesus urges us to find the Kingdom of God within ourselves. It is hidden in us like a treasure buried in a field. We should be willing to give up all other desires and concentrate on obtaining this treasure of the experience of God's love. Jesus' example is a strong testimony to the possibility of rising to this height. He is a living proof of the possibility for all of us to become God-incarnations, to evolve into the divinity latent in us as a seed. He promises that everything he has done we can do as well. The realization of God and God's Kingdom are possible on Earth as they are in Heaven. I am convinced of this.

Everyone has this potentiality. The Christ-consciousness is available to all and is our natural goal. When we look at anyone, we should remember to see that hidden in the "field" of the other's external appearance and personality is the transcendent treasure of Prema: our power to experience supreme love. I am ever touched by the profound simplicity of the statement, "God is Love." If this be true, then "Love is God."

### **Born of the Spirit of God**

To find the Christ-consciousness in ourselves we have only to remove whatever is an obstacle to its shining forth in us. It is like the story of the sculptor who makes a beautiful statue by taking away the material that is not part of the statue. The beauty is there; we have only to uncover it. It is the True Self. It is important to trust Jesus' word that we are all "born of the Spirit of God." We must not succumb to the temptation to deify this one or that one whom we admire, as a substitute for bringing forth our own divine nature. The whole virtue of the God-man is that it is proof that the rest of us can be like that, too.

Jesus exhorts us: "Let your light shine!" This light is the hidden Prema. We have a basket over it. We need to take the basket off and the Light will shine of itself. It is Love that is not particularized, not limited, not conditional. I call it Love without an object. It is God's own nature, this shining, and it is our own nature, my own nature.

I have come back to New York from the ashram and now work as a psychotherapist. I persevere in dissolving away what is not the beautiful statue in me; I dig in the field to uncover the treasure. I watch my nature and seek the one who is observing it (for the sculptor and the statue are the same). I try to see through the illusions of conventional culture and center myself in the holy place that Jesus and others exemplify. I say the "Serenity Prayer" and pray to be able to distinguish the real from the unreal, the living from the dead. I repeat St. Francis' beautiful prayer that I may bring goodness into a suffering world. And especially I offer the love that surfaces in me, or even

that which is hidden in me, to heal the hurting people I meet professionally. They are carrying the hidden treasure: the light of Christ-consciousness is in them.

I must always say to them, *Namaste*—I see the Divine in you. □

### **Adanac**

Sometimes Canada geese  
fly into  
my dreams—

sometimes they take  
half a stand  
on Mary's Lake shore:

there are always four  
in a row.

Carefully spaced,  
respectfully preening—  
grooming, cleaning  
right next to each other,  
but never crowding.

Each dances in place;  
each swims with singular  
grace—

together, though apart,  
apart though  
together.

A part is but part  
of it all.

Parting a path through  
the water, finally we gather  
on the far shore: Adanac.

—Judith, Hermit of Sarada



# *Jesus and Sri Ramakrishna*

**Juliette Seelye Karow**

It is said in the Vedas that Truth is One; sages call it by different names. If this is so, and I believe it is, the highest truths of all religions are the same. The incarnations, avatars, and enlightened beings of all religions teach the same basic truths. For instance, the sayings of Sri Ramakrishna and Jesus (such as the Lord's Prayer) can be set in parallel and often seem to have the same deep, mystical meanings.

Due to different levels of spiritual understanding among people and cultures, realized beings have taught on several levels. In the New Testament the figure of Jesus is shown exemplifying different stances toward God, using his favorite metaphor, "the Father." There is a gradation from a clearly dualistic stance, through a modified nondualism, to full union. In the Gospel according to John, he says repeatedly "I do nothing on my own," but "the Father who dwells in me does his works," or "whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise," or "I always do what is pleasing to him," and "I speak . . . as the Father instructed me." Matthew shows a more intimate and privileged relation: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son." John again moves to "I am in the Father and the Father is in me. . . whoever has seen me has seen the Father," and finally "the Father and I are one."<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Sri Ramakrishna said,

The more you advance toward God, the more you will find His attributive grandeur falling off. The first vision an aspirant gets is of the ten-handed form (Durga). . . The Supreme Mistress of the Universe [the multiplicity in the unity. . . the Kingdom of God is at hand, out there]. In this form there is a great expression of power and grandeur. Next She appears in a two-handed form [the duality, the Kingdom is within, I and the Kingdom]. . . Next comes the vision of the Gopala form. Here there is absolutely no expression of power and grandeur—it is simply the form of a tender child. There is a vision even superior to this—the vision of the effulgent Light [I and my Father are One].<sup>2</sup>

Most religions are composed of ritual, myth, doctrine, dogma and symbols. These are used to shelter, protect and hide spiritual truths until humankind has progressed in understanding. Just as the shell of an acorn

1. John 14:10, 5:19, 8:28, 12:50. Matthew 11:27. John 14:9-10, 10:30.

2. *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1975) p. 274, paragraph 888.

protects the living embryo within the nut until the proper environment occurs, (rain, sun, warmth, etc.), so too the rituals and myths of the various religions can provide a nourishing environment for people to grow until they are ready to embrace deeper, eternal truths.

### **The “Our Father”**

Let us compare the deep mystical meanings found in the Lord's Prayer, “Our Father,” which is the most beloved prayer of Jesus, with the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. You may be familiar with the Lord's Prayer from the book of Matthew in the New Testament. I am using a less familiar translation from the Aramaic, by George Lamsa. Jesus spoke Aramaic, as it was the common language of the Jewish people in his time.

The Lord's Prayer from the Book of Matthew, chapter ten, verses 8 to 13, translation by George Lamsa:<sup>3</sup>

1. Our Father in Heaven,
2. Hallowed by thy Name,
3. Thy Kingdom come.
4. Thy Will be done, as in Heaven so on earth.
5. Give us bread for our need from day to day.
6. Forgive us our offenses as we have forgiven our offenders.
7. Do not let us enter into temptation.
8. But deliver us from error.
9. Because Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory for ever and ever.

“Our Father in Heaven.” Jesus has stated that God, the Father, and he (representing all mankind) are One, and that the Kingdom is within us. So this first line of the prayer affirms that all the qualities of God are already deep within our souls.

Sri Ramakrishna proclaimed the Effulgent Light as our highest understanding of Cosmic Reality, God.

“Hallowed by Thy Name.” We are blessed by understanding the Nature (Name) of God. Hallowed means made holy or sacred. So we are raised up and transformed by the understanding of the Effulgent Light within. This implies that our true spiritual nature is perfection, goodness, beauty, love, peace, and joy.

3. George Lamsa, tr., *Holy Bible, The New Testament from the Aramaic* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Co., 1933), Matthew, Chapter 6, 8-13, p. 10. The Aramaic text is in the possession of the Syrian Orthodox Church, which claims that it was delivered to them by the apostles. Contemporary Western scholarship does not support this claim. N.B.: Petition No. 2 is not a misprint; it is the interpretation offered by George Lamsa.

“Thy Kingdom come.” When we recognize and revere the Name or Nature of God, we allow the perfect Divine Will to manifest. Our lives become illumined by the Truth.

“Let Thy Will be done as in Heaven so on Earth.” We project into the outer world love, joy, and peace, the highest goodness we can possibly imagine, by our thoughts, words and deeds. This is doing the Will of God. Heaven is our spiritual nature or soul within. When we realize the Effulgence of God, we cannot help but project unconditional love in the outer world, Earth.

Sri Ramakrishna says,

What is the state of one’s mind in Samadhi? It is like the state of bliss that is experienced by a live fish which, after being kept out of water for some time, is again put into it.

Mysterious is that sacred state which recognizes neither teacher nor pupil. Brahma-Jnana is so mysterious that when one attains it, there remains no distinction between the guru and disciple.<sup>4</sup>

What are the indications of God’s advent into the human heart? As the glow of dawn heralds the rising sun, so unselfishness, purity and righteousness announce the advent of the Lord.<sup>5</sup>

### **Embracing the True Nature of the Universe**

“Give us bread for our needs from day to day.” This speaks both to our physical and to our spiritual needs. As in the previous lines, this line is an adamant statement, affirmation, a command. But the fulfillment of this statement rests on the first four sentences. Only if we dwell in the “Effulgent Light,” as Sri Ramakrishna says, or in “Thy Kingdom,” letting the Will of God be done as Jesus says, are we prepared for the results of this statement. If we are full of negative, limiting ideas, fear, resentment, anger, guilt, we slam the door of our consciousness shut to the fact of God. Hallowing the Name of God purifies our minds. Raising up consciousness to be in harmony with the will of God opens all the doors for the in-flood of his abundance. Being in harmony with the perfect Mind of God means we are full of faith. Fear is destroyed. There can be no sense of lack when we are in tune with the infinity of God. Doors open for us and we are shown the way to participate in the creative principles of life. When we realize that the true nature of the Universe is love and embrace this, all resentment, anger and hatred dissolve and we see Heaven even in this world.

“Give us bread. . .” implies that we are *expected* to ask and we need not take no for an answer. It also implies we need have no fear for the future, for

4. *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 284, paragraphs 913-14.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 292, para. 937.

our spiritual or physical life, because God, the Divine Reality, will supply all our needs from day to day. We expect, we know that it is so, and accept all for our use and learning. We now know the meaning of, "I and my Father are One", as Jesus said—one will, one mind, one thought, one desire.

Sri Ramakrishna says,

Wherein does the strength of an aspirant lie? He is a child of God, and tears are his greatest strength. As a mother fulfills the desires of a child who weeps and importunes her, so does the Lord grant to His weeping child whatever he is crying for.<sup>6</sup>

And also,

O heart, call on your almighty Mother sincerely and you will see how she quickly comes running to you. When one calls on God with heart and soul, he cannot remain unmoved.<sup>7</sup>

He who has faith has all, and he who lacks it lacks all.<sup>8</sup>

### **Responsibility for Our Words and Deeds**

“Forgive us our offenses as we have forgiven our offenders.” An offense can be anything we have taken from someone and not returned. It can be a hurt that we have not resolved, any form of abuse in thought, word or deed, a falsehood, a negative rumor (gossip), anything that has diminished another. It is said that even our thoughts are things. They set up subtle vibrations in the Universe that have an effect at a distance to heal or harm. The law of Karma states that as we sow, so shall we reap. We therefore have tremendous responsibility for our thoughts, words and deeds. This sentence of the prayer is not asking for, or proclaiming, blind wiping out of our negative misdeeds, our acts of ignorance. But rather it is stating that we have already forgiven those who have harmed or diminished us in any way. If the Kingdom has come within our hearts, we are already in tune with the will of God. There is no way at all that we would willingly, knowingly diminish another person. We live in the state of loving awareness. If we had harmed another before we arrived in the Kingdom, our overwhelming love now would be healing to those we harmed. Our unconditional love would forgive all who had diminished us in any way. Even acts that appear to be harmful to us can contribute to our working toward the goal. This is what being in Highest Spiritual Consciousness means. Our exalted sense of oneness with God makes us the forgivers and the forgiven. We must ever strive to purify our hearts and minds. Wipe the slate clean and rise up to our fullest potential of awareness of

6. Ibid., p. 191, par. 634.

7. Ibid., p. 188, para. 622.

8. Ibid., p. 157, para. 501.

Atman=Brahman. In this state of realization, friend and foe are all manifestations of the Ultimate Reality.

Sri Ramakrishna says,

When a man attains the knowledge of Brahman, he clearly sees and feels it is God who has become everything. He has nothing to give up and nothing to accept. It is impossible for him to be angry with anyone.<sup>9</sup>

“Do not let us enter into temptation.” The Gospel of St. Matthew says that Jesus was tempted by the Evil One three times. As our spiritual nature unfolds we may find that certain powers or psychic abilities develop. Just as our physical abilities may lead us away from our spiritual goal and toward physical power, selfishness and ego inflation, so *siddhis* (psychic powers) can do the same thing with even worse consequences. Jesus healed the sick and multiplied the “loaves and fishes,” but he did not use his powers to dominate others or to gain ego satisfaction.

### Jesus’ Response to Temptation

See how Jesus responded to the temptations of the Evil One. He was shown the stones and asked to turn them into bread to show how powerful he was. Jesus replied that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word from the mouth of God. The Evil One told him to throw himself down from the height of the temple and know that he wouldn't be hurt. Jesus said, “One does not try out God.”<sup>10</sup> Then he was shown the cities and towns in the valley and told that if he worshiped the Evil One he could become king of all the land as far as he could see. Jesus had no interest in being an earthly king, but only to do the will of God which we know is pure, unconditional love. As our consciousness becomes purer and purer, we become less and less interested in material acquisitions, power, control and importance in the world. Our God-consciousness does not allow us to be tempted. The desire for pure Mind comes first.

The sayings of Sri Ramakrishna beautifully develop these truths:

The true nature of the *jiva* (individual soul) is eternal Existence-Knowledge-Bliss. It is due to egotism that he is limited by so many *upadhis* (limiting adjuncts) and has forgotten his real nature.<sup>11</sup>

9. *Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 251.

10. *Bible*, Matthew 4:3, page 6.

11. *Sayings*, p. 34, para. 28.

Faith can achieve miracles while vanity or egotism brings about the destruction of man.<sup>12</sup>

“But deliver us from error.” What is error, sin or evil? It is whatever separates us from God-consciousness. Sin is defined as missing the mark. If we know even a little of the bliss of the nature of God, we would do nothing to block our progress toward the Effulgent Light. This is why Vedantists say there is no sin, just ignorance of the truth of Reality. What qualities do we entertain so passionately, even justifying their existence, which block our realization of our true higher Self? What are the mistakes that we make in ignorance that we are asking God (our highest potential) to deliver us from? What makes us less than blissful humans? Hate, anger, jealousy, rage, resentment, revenge, fear, selfishness, greed, all separate us from each other and from our true inner being which is perfect. All negative emotions keep societies from living in peace with one another. New science shows a relation between negative emotions and illness. So, in fact, we harm ourselves in our ignorance. We are in bondage to our own error.

### **Changing Our Perspective**

We deliver ourselves by looking toward the Light. As we change our perspective, we change our lives. We can get out of the habit of allowing negative thoughts to be processed in the mind. We are the controllers of our minds. Our consciousness is above the mind. Our will makes a decision to know God. The spiritual is the True Reality. It infuses everything in life and in the world of matter. We need but look for it, look for beauty in the smallest detail and in the largest unity. We need to see the whole picture as ultimately good. It is a matter of perspective or viewpoint. Every situation has a goodness in it to be discovered. This is our deliverance into the Light.

Sri Ramakrishna's comment follows:

Man suffers so much simply for lack of devotion to God. One should therefore adopt such means as would help the thought of God to arise in the mind even at the last moment of one's life. The means is practice of devotion to God.<sup>13</sup>

“Because Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory for ever and ever.”<sup>14</sup> This statement beautifully sums up what the prayer is saying. To God-consciousness belongs the perspective far beyond what mere material

12. *Sayings*, p. 34, para. 32.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 37, para. 44.

14. The majority of reliable ancient sources do not contain this doxology.

consciousness can fathom. The effort to describe it calls forth our most lofty words of beauty, abundance and all-encompassing love. But even these words fall far short of the Ultimate Divine Reality.

### Seeing the Glory of God

Jesus said, “Did not I say to you that if you believe, you will see the Glory of God?”<sup>15</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna said,

In the course of self-analysis, when the mind reaches the state of perfect peace, there comes the revelation of Supreme Brahman.<sup>16</sup>

A disciple of Sri Ramakrishna tells us,

The Master would go into the highest state of *nirvakalpa samadhi* by uttering the word Tat (That) only, out of the formula Om Tat Sat. Sat (Existence) might bring a remote suggestion of its opposite, Asat, and even the most sacred symbol, Om, seemed to fall short of the mark. But when he uttered Tat, all idea of relativity would be completely effaced from his consciousness. All discrimination between existence and non-existence would cease. He would become merged in the realization of the One that transcends all limitations.<sup>17</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna retells an Upanishadic story:

A father asked his son, “What is Brahman?” The boy remained silent. Not a word came out of his mouth, nor did he make any attempt to speak. At this the father remarked, “Yes, my boy, you are right. Nothing can be predicated of the Absolute and the Unconditioned. No sooner do you talk of It than you state the Infinite in terms of the finite, the Absolute in terms of the relative, the Unconditioned in terms of the conditioned. Your silence is more eloquent than the recitations of a hundred verses and the quoting of a hundred authorities.”<sup>18</sup>

And so it is. □

15. *Bible*, John 11:40, p. 205.

16. *Sayings*, p. 381, para. 1112.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 311, para. 987.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 384, para. 1117.

## *Kanyakumari and the Spirit of the Cross*

**John Schlenck**

In his first letter to his future disciple, Sister Nivedita, dated 7th June, 1896, Swami Vivekananda wrote:

Who will give the world light? Sacrifice in the past has been the Law, it will be, alas, for ages to come. The earth's bravest and best will have to sacrifice themselves for the good of many, for the welfare of all. Buddhas by the hundred are necessary with eternal love and pity. . . The world is in need of those whose life is one burning love, selfless. That love will make every word tell like thunderbolt.

This spirit of self-sacrifice “for the good of many, for the welfare of all” is found in Christianity under the symbolism of the cross. According to the New Testament, Jesus not only gave his own life as a sacrifice for the welfare of humanity, but urged his disciples to follow his example, to take up their own crosses, to deny themselves, to spread the gospel of divine love and sacrifice. The cross became the central symbol of Christianity, and the love and unselfishness represented by the cross became the hallmark of true Christian faith and practice.

### **Sacrifice at the Heart of Religion**

But the *spirit* of the cross is not limited to Christianity. From one standpoint, sacrifice may be said to lie at the heart of all religion: to give up something of value for the sake of a larger or higher good.

In the Hebrew Bible, God tests Abraham's faith and devotion by asking for the sacrifice of his beloved son, Isaac, a son born after a wait of many decades. Only when God is assured that Abraham is ready to do even this for His sake, does He ask Abraham to spare the boy's life.

In the Katha Upanishad, Gautama (not the same as the Gautama who became Buddha) undertakes a sacrificial rite, but is willing to sacrifice only those cattle which are old, lame and sick. Seeing his hypocrisy, his son Nachiketa asks him, “To whom do you give me?” Gautama is shocked and upset. On Nachiketa's repeated inquiry, Gautama says, angrily, “I give you to Death.” Nachiketa, unfazed, asks his father not to repent this vow and goes straight to the house of Death, from whom he wrests the highest spiritual truths.

Behind these stories is the message that spirituality requires a willingness to sacrifice, to give up the lower for the sake of the higher—the lower self for the higher Self, *islam* (submission) of the individual, selfish will to the divine will.



In Buddhism the same ideal is expressed through the Jataka tales, in which the future Buddha sacrifices his life 500 times before becoming Buddha, spiritually awake, illumined. His last temptation is to keep his enlightenment to himself, to give up his body without sharing his treasure. Rejecting this easy path, he instead devotes the remaining 45 years of his life to unceasing work for the spiritual upliftment of others. This is characteristic of the greatest teachers: their own illumination is insufficient; it must be shared with others.

### The Highest Sacrifice

The greatness of this sacrifice is sometimes hard for ordinary mortals to grasp, because we have not yet experienced the intense bliss of God-realization. Holy Mother, usually reticent, gave expression to this on one occasion: “Day and night my mind wants to soar high. I force it down out of compassion. . . And yet I am so tormented!”<sup>1</sup> Swami Pavitrananda once said, “For a soul like Swami Vivekananda, to take on a human body is itself a crucifixion.” It is possible for these great souls to remain always absorbed in divine bliss; yet they willingly sacrifice that bliss in order to show others how to attain the same fulfillment. Studying the lives of great prophets and *avatars*, one is struck by how hard they worked, entirely for the good of others. Shankaracharya realized Brahman while still a child. Yet he continued to work incessantly for the rest of his life for the revival of Upanishadic spirituality, writing voluminously and establishing spiritual centers and monastic orders all over India. In Mahayana Buddhism this highest sacrifice became enshrined in the ideal of the Bodhisattva, who, on the verge of Nirvana, takes a vow not to enter that state until all living beings attain to it.

Sri Ramakrishna guided Swami Vivekananda to that great sacrifice. When Swamiji wanted to remain absorbed in *samadhi*, coming down only to eat something once in awhile, Sri Ramakrishna scolded him for wanting “such an insignificant thing,” saying that he must be like a large banyan tree, under whose shelter thousands of people would find rest.<sup>2</sup> Swamiji was indeed prevented from remaining in *samadhi* for any extended period, by circumstances,<sup>3</sup> or, one may say, by the continued insistence of Sri Ramakrishna, until his compassion reached full bloom, until he became aware of his mission and willingly embraced that great sacrifice.

This happened in December, 1892. He had traveled the length and breadth of India and reached the southernmost tip of the subcontinent, the

1. *The Gospel of the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1984), p. 148.

2. Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1987), pp. 58-59.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

village of Kanyakumari. This place of pilgrimage contains a temple to Goddess Kanyakumari, an aspect of the Universal Mother. About a quarter mile from the shore, twin rocks jut out from the sea. After worshipping at Mother's temple, Swamiji swam through the turbulent, shark-infested waters to the farther of the two rocks. He remained there for three days and nights on the solitary rock, meditating intensely on the condition of India—her present degradation, the misery of her people, her past glory and future potentialities. He had already come to the conclusion that preaching metaphysics to starving people was “madness.” In this meditation on the rock, Swamiji's ideas for the regeneration of the nation took shape, ideas which eventually found concrete expression in the Ramakrishna Mission. At the same time, he decided to accept the advice of several of his followers to go to America the following year to attend the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. He would seek material aid for his country while sharing India's spiritual wealth with the Western World.<sup>4</sup> Today there stands a beautiful memorial temple on the rock in honor of the great swami, drawing thousands of pilgrims every year.

### **Visits to Kanyakumari**

Before my first visit to Kanyakumari, in 1971, I stayed at the Ramakrishna Ashrama in the city of Trivandrum, two hours' drive from Kanyakumari. The monk in charge of the ashrama, Swami Tapasyananda, talked glowingly of the importance of Kanyakumari in Swamiji's life and mission. This helped to prepare my mind for the visit. At that time the Rock Memorial had only recently been completed. In 1982 I visited Kanyakumari again. That time, while at the Trivandrum ashrama, I was asked by the then head, Swami Golokananda, to participate in a meeting of lay devotees and give a short talk. Swamiji's first letter to Nivedita, quoted above, came to mind, and some of the ideas sketched above began to take shape. Again my mind was primed to think about Swamiji at Kanyakumari. My hour on the Rock was the high point of that pilgrimage.

Returning to New York, I was faced with the responsibility of preparing a musical program for the New York Vedanta Society's annual July 4th Vivekananda Festival. It did not take long to decide to compose a work celebrating Swamiji at Kanyakumari. It was actually a way to extend my recent pilgrimage by another three months. I took portions of Swamiji's writings and Nivedita's paraphrase of his writings in “The Voice of the Mother” to try to convey the spirit of his revelation at Kanyakumari. A portion of the libretto is given here:

4. For a detailed account, see *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* by His Eastern and Western Disciples (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1979), Vol. I, pp. 340-345.

Sacrifice. . . out of the bedrock of sacrifice  
 Rise the twin pillars of renunciation and service.  
 These must be the ideals of the nation:  
 Renunciation of self and service of man,  
 Of man as God's living image—  
 For the deliverance of the nation,  
 For the liberation of all humanity.  
 Let the flame of self-sacrifice  
 Consume our youth with a passion beyond control of thought.  
 Let them thirst for renunciation as others for enjoyment.  
 Forgetting their own bliss and freedom,  
 Let them count labor and suffering and service as sweet instead of  
 bitter.  
 Seeking no mercy for themselves,  
 They shall bear great vessels of mercy to others.  
 They shall form a living bridge  
 For the multitude to cross over into joy and freedom.  
  
 They shall go from village to village  
 Worshiping God in his living images,  
 Serving God the ignorant, God the hungry, God the poor and the  
 sick—  
 God's living presence in every human form.  
 When these living images of God  
 Are again made strong in body and mind,  
 Tell them of their divine heritage,  
 Of the freedom and fearlessness of the soul,  
 Of the Oneness of all existence.  
 Teach them how to manifest their divinity  
 In every movement of life.  
  
 Here before us is God's living presence,  
 Visible, real, omnipresent.  
 Rejecting these living Gods, where shall we worship?<sup>5</sup>

Swami Vivekananda revolutionized Indian monasticism. No longer was it  
 enough for a monk to seek his own liberation through meditation. Active  
 service to the “living Gods” around him was mandated. Today nearly every  
 Hindu monastic order undertakes works of social service. Some historians  
 attribute this to the influence of Christianity. I would rather like to think that  
 the spirit of the Cross is inherent in all religions, and that there are factors  
 intrinsic to Indian tradition that are mostly responsible for Swamiji's new

5. The cantata, “Kanyakumari: Vivekananda at Land's End,” was recorded in New York in  
 2003 by the Vedantic Arts Ensemble and is scheduled for release by Albany Records later  
 this year. An order form is enclosed with this issue of *American Vedantist*.

gospel. If we study his life in some depth, we see that the foremost influence on his spiritual development was Sri Ramakrishna. The Master inspired and guided Swamiji toward the highest sacrificial ideal. A secondary influence was the example and compassion of the Buddha.

### **Vivekananda's Challenge to Us**

Just as Jesus challenged his followers to give their lives for the love and service of others—"insofar as ye did it unto the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me"—so has Swami Vivekananda challenged us, his followers, to aspire beyond our own salvation, to regard every human being as a living image of divinity, and to love and serve these living Gods to the best of our capacity.

One who rose to this challenge was Swami Ashokananda, who served the American people unstintedly from 1931 until his death in 1969. His disciple, Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke) recorded in her diary:

Living in the company of Swami Ashokananda year after year, day in and day out, one sees enacted before one's eyes the sacrifice of the self to the Self. It is magnificent and it is heartbreaking, and also it is ennobling and uplifting. One sees the sacrifice and one also sees the transcendence of suffering. There is something here of such great proportions that the tragedies and dramas of the world, of life, seem paltry. Yet it unfolds so simply, so quietly, and so luminously. The days shine, just as Swami's face shines.<sup>6</sup> □

### **The Common Goal**

To go within by the "inner way" is incontestably the most efficacious method, while on actually reaching the goal the way itself evaporates. . . . The final task in the spiritual quest is to overcome this last difference: the distinction between the goal and the way; the goal and [the one] who is heading for it must finally disappear.

—Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux),  
*Guru and Disciple* [SPCK, 1974], 102-3

6. Sister Gargi, *A Disciple's Journal: In the Company of Swami Ashokananda* (New York: Kalpa Tree Press, 2003), p. 204.

## *Book Reviews*

### **Journey of the Upanishads to the West**

**by Swami Tathagatananda**

**The Vedanta Society of New York**

**pp. 599    cloth    \$30.00    2002**

The book before me tells the story of how a number of Western thinkers from Antiquity to the twentieth century encountered the spiritual ideas of the Upanishads and then transmitted them in various ways to their respective cultures, in the process rejuvenating Western thought and bringing spiritual regeneration to Western people. In his book *Journey of the Upanishads to the West*, Swami Tathagatananda uses the term “Upanishads” to stand for “all the sacred texts that have the Upanishads as the basis and elucidation of their teaching” (28). “Upanishads” and “Vedanta” are used interchangeably to refer to India’s spiritual legacy, and it was this spiritual legacy of India that Westerners sought out.

The book’s great achievement lies in its bringing alive for the reader the strivings of many Western thinkers over the centuries to make Vedanta their own. Though the book begins with the encounter of ancient Greek thinkers with Vedantic ideas, what stands out for me, as a Vedantist of the twenty-first century, are the many stories of Westerners from periods closer to our own. For example, Swami Tathagatananda paints a vivid picture of the trials and tribulations that the young Frenchman Anquetil-Duperron underwent in the mid-eighteenth century to obtain Indian religious texts in Pondicherry and Surat. Anquetil-Duperron managed to get hold of a Persian version of fifty Upanishads and translated it into Latin, still the language of European scholars at that time, in 1796. This work, called *Oupnek’hat*, was the first translation of the complete Upanishads into a European language.

Swami Tathagatananda writes that Germany “was first in Europe to discover the hidden gem of the Sanskrit scriptures” (237). The German thinker Friedrich von Schlegel studied Sanskrit in Paris at the turn of the nineteenth century, later returning to Germany to publish his book *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians* (1808), a book which had a great influence on later Western seekers of Vedantic truths, including G. W. F. Hegel and Arthur Schopenhauer. The following words reveal the respect and love that Schlegel felt for the Vedantic truths he had discovered:

It cannot be denied that the early Indians possessed a knowledge of the true God; all their writings are replete with sentiments and expressions, noble, clear, and severely grand, as deeply conceived and reverentially expressed as in any human language in which men have spoken of their God. . . (qtd. 253).

Closer to home, the American Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, among others, studied the Bhagavad Gita and other Vedantic works with great dedication. A quotation from Emerson illustrates the impression that the *Bhagavad Geeta*, which he read in Ernest Wilkins' translation of 1785, meant to him:

It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spake to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us (letter to Max Müller of 1873, qtd. 428).

Later, thinkers such as Max Müller and Romain Rolland were touched not only by the ideas in Vedantic texts but also by living Vedantic spirituality, through their encounter with the personality and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. Müller, best known for his editorship of the 51-volume series *The Sacred Books of the East* (1879), and a scholar and a translator of Sanskrit literature and Vedantic thought, had known of Sri Ramakrishna already from 1893, from his reading about the Chicago Parliament of World Religions. He learned more information about Sri Ramakrishna's life as an exponent of Vedantic ideals from Swami Vivekananda during the latter's visit to London in 1896. According to Swami Tathagatananda, these details "formed the basis of Müller's book *Ramakrishna, His Life and Sayings*," which was published in 1898 (286).

The French writer Romain Rolland, searching, according to Swami Tathagatananda, for "exemplars of truth" (206), found in Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda modern exponents of mystical experience, whom he revealed first to the French public, and later to the world, in his biographies of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda of the late 1920s. In a letter to the noted opera singer Emma Calvé, Rolland gave moving testimony to the spiritual closeness he felt to both Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda:

I lived so intimately with him [Swami Vivekananda] and with Paramahansa in these latter years that it is as though I was seated day after day in the little room at Dakshineswar on the banks of the Ganga (letter of 1930, qtd. 227).

Swami Tathagatananda's book contains many other such treasures, which one can find on every page. After reading the book in April, 2004, Swami Sarvagatananda, Minister Emeritus of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Boston, made the following comment: "As the Ganges comes down from the Himalayas, it gives sustenance to both sides of the river." That the Upanishads nourished "both sides of the river," India as well as the West, through the ages, is made beautifully clear from Swami Tathagatananda's rich book.

—Janet Walker

**Shafts of Light: Selected Teachings of Swami Ashokananda for  
Spiritual Practice**

**Compiled and edited by Sister Gargi and Shelley Brown**

**Kalpa Tree Press, New York, NY**

**165 pp. Paperback \$12.95 2004**

Spiritual manuals come into being not entirely through chance, but still there is an element of good luck in their creation. For example, someone knows a spiritual teachers and somehow the teacher feels motivated to write something down for that particular person's benefit, and the result is a book that benefits many others as well (this may be the origin of St. François de Sales' classic *Introduction to the Devout Life*). Or a group of devotees pool their efforts and select from the writings of the teacher short inspirational passages (this was the origin of the recent book *Living at the Source: Yoga Teachings of Vivekananda*, edited by Ann Myren and Dorothy Madison). With *Shafts of Light* the good luck came just in time, since Sister Gargi died early this year and, as her co-editor Shelley Brown points out, its preface was her last piece of writing. How the book came about is a long story. Many years before, Sister Gargi had acquired the lecture notes of some of Swami Ashokananda's students, and, equally important, had cleared with him the project to publish a selection. The swami died in 1969. But then years passed, and perhaps it was only the approach of death that stimulated Gargi to bring the project to fruition with the editorial assistance of Shelley Brown and her Kalpa Tree Press. And what a stroke of luck that was for all of us, for the book captures what Gargi's preface calls some of Ashokananda's "most striking, often jolting, sentences"—shafts of light, indeed!

These sentences are often jolting in the sense of being controversial as well as inspirational. Ashokananda was not afraid to shock his listeners into new ways of thinking. For those who, like this reviewer, are quite taken with the adventure and allure of depth psychology, the following may constitute a bit of a jolt: "Modern people do not delve into the unconscious in order to understand the mind; they do so because the conscious state has become unbearable." (p. 9) For those of us—all of us, at some time or another—who feel that someone really needs the benefit of our critical insights into their personality, the following is food for thought before one acts on that assumption: "if you see a fault in others, just wait a little and you will see the same fault in yourself." (65) In the midst of agonizing pain or mental turmoil we might be encouraged by this new way of looking at the problem of suffering: "to suffer cheerfully is not just to suffer; it is to conquer suffering. That is much better than to be relieved of suffering. Relieved of suffering, you are the same weak being; conquer suffering and you become victorious forever." (37)

The various sentences and sayings are organized under three main headings: the philosophical dimension of Vedanta (“Spiritual Perspectives”), the art of living Vedanta (“Spiritual Practice”), and the final goal (“The Experience of God”). Within each of these three main categories there are a number of well-chosen subcategories, such as “The Agony of Thinking” (“common sense is often no sense at all” 11), “Be Strong” (“only the strong can love; the weak can only be sentimental” 85), and “Quiet Your Restless Mind” (“if the mind is gloomy, why are *you* gloomy?” 131). The book is beautifully printed and the small format encourages using it as travel reading as well as shrine or bedside reading.

The reader who wishes to pursue further the study of Swami Ashokananda’s teachings could turn profitably to Sister Gargi’s *A Disciple’s Journal: In the Company of Swami Ashokananda* and *A Heart Poured Out: A Story of Swami Ashokananda* (both published by Kalpa Tree Press in 2003). Some of his lectures are available from the Vedanta Society of Northern California, including his classic *Swami Vivekananda in San Francisco*, which no Vedantist in the Bay Area, whether resident or tourist, should be without, although it really should be in everyone else’s library as well, since Ashokananda’s thesis that Vivekananda made public his deepest insights and ultimate perspectives on Advaita in San Francisco deserves to be much more widely known and debated.

—Steven F. Walker

**Bede Griffiths: An Introduction to His Interspiritual Thought**  
**by Wayne Teasdale.**  
**Skylight Paths, Woodstock, VT**  
**Pp. xvi + 296      paperback      \$18.95      2003**

The present treatment of Dom Bede Griffiths' remarkable career as a Christian sannyasi in India might have been lost to Western readers. It was originally presented as a doctoral dissertation in the Theology Department of Fordham University in 1985. It was later published (1987) in India by the Asian Trading Company under the title *Toward a Christian Vedanta: The Encounter of Hinduism and Christianity According to Bede Griffiths*. But that was 19 years ago and the book did not reach too many readers in the West. Fortunately Skylight Paths has brought out a reasonably priced, slightly revised edition of the book. The 2003 volume includes a new Preface, a most informative Epilogue, along with a useful Index, and a vastly expanded Bibliography.

Alan Griffiths, though baptized a Christian in the Church of England, was more drawn to nature mysticism than to institutional religion during the years when he studied at Magdalen College in Oxford. It was his tutor and friend,



C.S. Lewis, who encouraged him to make contact again with his Christian heritage. Instead of returning to his Anglican roots, Griffiths became a Roman Catholic (1931), entered Prinknash Abbey in 1933 taking the name Bede, was ordained as a priest in 1940, and during his stay at Prinknash, and later at St. Michael's Abbey, became interested in Asian culture and religion. When offered the opportunity to go to India in 1955, he eagerly joined another priest and together they founded Kurisumala Ashram in Kerala in South India. He later transferred to Saccidananda Ashram and became superior there in 1968. He died at his Ashram in 1993 at the age of 86. By that time he had become an internationally known author and spiritual leader.

Bede went to India not to convert Hindus but to learn and to cultivate what Dr. Teasdale calls an "interspiritual" path. Beyond a purely academic interest in religions other than one's own, "Interspirituality. . . presupposes an intense personal interest in these other forms of faith and spirituality." When Christian missionaries first went to India in the sixteenth century, they brought with them the kind of Western manners, lifestyle and dress that immediately marked them as "foreign." Somewhat later when the Italian Jesuit, Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) travelled to India, he mastered Sanskrit, studied the Vedas and the Upanishads, and melted into the Indian scene. Adopting a lifestyle of poverty and wearing the garb of a sannyasi, he sought to adapt his Christian faith to Hindu cultural ways. Eventually his activities became suspect, and he suffered from opposition on the part of Roman authorities who feared that inculturation meant abandoning certain non-negotiable doctrines. Similar "interspiritual" efforts had to be abandoned more recently because of the opposition of some local Catholic bishops.

However, when Bede Griffiths came on the scene considerable progress had already been made at Saccidananda ashram due to the work of Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda). Unfortunately, Monchanin died in 1957 and Le Saux left the Ashram to become a wandering sannyasi. Bede's task as the new superior was to give some form to the work of inculturation, to live a life of evangelical poverty, eat and sleep as Hindus do, and introduce a form of Christianity that would be thoroughly Indian without sacrificing any essential Christian teachings. Bede said that he came to India to get in touch with the other (Eastern/feminine) half of his (Western/masculine) soul. It is the feminine aspect of deity that is often lost or forgotten in the West. In India God as mother complements masculine imagery and informs an integral notion of God, while the Ultimate Ground of Being is neither male nor female.

Bede learned from his study of Tantric Yoga the importance of *shakti*, the inner, feminine energy of the soul, which is often suppressed in Christian spirituality. Wayne Teasdale observes in his Epilogue: "India greatly sensitized Bede to the feminine dimension of the Divine, where God is regarded as Mother and Father. Bede's own mystical process that he went

through, after a stroke in 1990, opened him up to the feminine both in God and in himself” (201).

Is a Christian Vedanta possible? Bede seemed to think so, and Ramakrishna, basing his judgment on his own experience, might have agreed. Like de Nobili, Griffiths immersed himself in the Hindu classics, wrote extensively on them (cf., for example, his commentary on *The Bhagavad Gita: A Christian Reading*, 1987) and went so far as to adapt the liturgy of his Mass to include Sanskrit chants, arati, and other externals of the kind used by Hindus.

Wayne Teasdale is well qualified to write about Dom Bede Griffiths. He was in close touch with Fr. Bede for many years, both in India and in the United States. He cherishes the impression so many have had when they met Bede Griffiths, or visited him in his ashram in India, that he was a true contemplative and a man of boundless love. The Ashram he headed in India is still thriving under Indian auspices and men and women come from various parts of the world to enter into the deep interspiritual spirit that Bede so convincingly preached and practiced.

—James M. Somerville

## *Video Cassette Review*

### *Discovering the Feminine*

**Father Bede Griffiths.**

**MTI Films Sydney, Australia 1993.**

This short film should prove fascinating to Vedantists. A Roman Catholic monk at age eighty-four, lies on a chaise-longue in his undefinable ashrama, in the ochre robes of his sannyasa, speaking to a person or persons unseen, about the intimate experiences of his enlightenment. Skeptics may have a surprise ahead of them; the utter openness and simple sincerity of the speaker carries this disquisition on the “end” of the spiritual search beyond any suspicions of cant or proselytism.

Many of us have watched for some years the journey of Father Bede Griffiths from his British Anglican roots into the Roman Church and beyond, as he sought “the other half of his soul,” and, some said, a thinly-disguised agenda, and began to immerse himself in the waters of South Indian Hinduism. They will already know that in 1990 Fr. Bede had a frightening stroke which left him speechless and unaware for a week. Thinking he was going to die, he prepared for death. Instead, his understanding of himself and matters of the spirit immensely deepened. The film is his recounting of all of that. He also tells us how much it may apply to us. More relevant than what he

says about “left brain” and “right brain,” is his surrender to what Bede calls “the Mother”: he sees Her as “Mary, of course,” but especially as the Black Madonna—then again, as Mother Nature, protecting the earth, and (in almost a whisper) his own mother.

Along with this came the Advaitic experience (his words), in which he felt that everything was flowing into everything else. At this point Fr. Bede begins to speak in terms we recognize in Vedanta, with which he is obviously very familiar. Shankara’s nondualism is compared to those of Thomas Aquinas and Nagarjuna. The *differences*, he says, remained, did not disappear. Bede is adamant about this. It is very important to him that the diversity is somehow “taken up” in Unity. Dismissing words, the Truth lies somewhere between One and two. The danger in Shankara’s Advaita is its minimizing of the universe as a play, not sufficiently serious. One could be quick to say, “Ah, a qualified non-dualist,” but no, Griffiths is not exactly that. In fact, he goes on to show that we all understand Shankara better today, as not an “illusionist”; the universe is neither “sat” nor “asat.” This is the Universal Wisdom. Although one may read at length the reflections of this monk in various books, especially Beatrice Bruteau’s *The Other Half of My Soul*, there is a distinct impact from this personal recounting.

How spontaneously Father Bede proceeds to give his interpretations of the Trinity, the Crucifixion (Jesus’ darkness), the Resurrection and the Eucharistic mystery. On world faiths, he calls them the fingers of a hand: at the extremities quite different, but the farther down you go the more oneness you find. Every faith *must* go behind its externals of doctrine and ritual and its earnest seekers come to this surrender to the Mother.

The pairs of opposites are here—chaos and order; exhortations not to run from chaos, to face death with readiness, to learn to let go; to rediscover the laws of our body and its domain.

Bede left this reviewer breathless, in saying that spiritually he has grown more in the last two years than in the previous eighty-four.

This is one not to be missed.

—Swami Yogeshananda

## *Contributors*

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SWAMI YOGESHANANDA became a monastic member of the Vedanta Society of Northern California in 1945. At present he is working in Atlanta with a group started by the Chicago Vedanta Center. It now has its own premises and is known as the Vedanta Center of Atlanta.