

Balancing Inner and Outer

As the Holy Mother Sesquicentennial Year nears its conclusion, this is perhaps a good time to take stock of what we have learned from Holy Mother's life and teachings. As spiritual aspirants, we gain a great deal of inspiration for our interior life from her teachings on devotion, work, knowledge, self-effort and self-surrender. From her life, we see how a person living in domestic circumstances can be pure and non-attached as well as loving and concerned. She played her part faultlessly, showing how the highest ideals can be made practical in the workaday world.

In some ways her workaday world was a very different place from ours. She did not face the stress of the modern workplace or such a dizzying pace of technological change. But Holy Mother's world did include terrorism, including state terror, political upheaval, and social stress.

Great teachers do not always give us specific answers to specific external challenges. Rather, they give us examples and principles that help us to make the right decisions as we respond to our own particular challenges. We have to engage in our own struggle in our own circumstances. One thing is clear: Holy Mother never attempted to escape or run away from difficulties. Think of her life in the cramped, stuffy Nahabat, without toilet facilities, with fish for her husband's delicate stomach splashing water all night from a pot hung from the ceiling. Think of her difficulties in Kamarpukur after the Master's passing, with hardly enough to eat or wear and the constant criticism of her neighbors. Think of her later life in Jayrambati, bringing up her unbalanced niece, living with her worldly brothers and neurotic female relatives. Think of the demands of hundreds of disciples, some of them inconsiderate and eccentric. Did she ever try to escape from any of these? No, she fought the battle of life heroically, ever focused on God and the welfare of others. Her inner life was never an excuse to ignore the needs of others; her outer life never distracted from her inner spiritual center. The two were in complete balance, each nourishing the other. She embodied Jesus' condensation of the Mosaic Law—wholesouled love of God and love of neighbor as self—fully realized as an indivisible whole.

Is this an impossibly high ideal to follow? No. In fact, unless we strive for that ideal, our lives will not fulfil their true meaning and purpose. To the extent that we can love and serve that ideal, depending on her (or whatever aspect of God we worship) for inspiration and guidance, to that extent we can gain the strength to fight our own battles of life, the strength to love God and serve others. To that extent we can learn to see the divine within and without.

Meditation on Holy Mother

Swami Atmajnanananda

(from a talk given at the Vedanta Society of New York, March 14, 2004)

This year is a very special year, marking the 150th birth anniversary of Holy Mother Sarada Devi. The tradition in our order is to make a full year celebration out of it. Her 150th birthday was this past December, and we are continuing for a full year. Our centers are observing the year with different types of programs. As you listen to many different speakers speak about Holy Mother, it's inevitable that there will be a lot of repetition. Many stories about her will be told over and over again. So I want to try to do something a little different, what I call a meditation on Holy Mother.

I'd like to do this by interweaving three different types of meditation: *lila dhyana*, *swarupa dhyana*, and *murti dhyana*. *Lila dhyana* means meditation on the life of Holy Mother. But not looking at her life the way we look at an ordinary life; looking at it from the divine aspect, to see how the various events of her life have the element of divine play, to see divinity played out on the human stage.

Swarupa dhyana means meditation on the real form, the real essence of Holy Mother. This can be looked at in two different ways. We can look at this from an abstract, philosophical point of view: Holy Mother was a God-realized soul, one with the supreme Brahman. Or we can say from a devotional standpoint that Holy Mother was in some very real sense one with the Divine Mother, the Divine Mother in human form.

And then there is *murti dhyana*: meditation on the human form, on the image of Holy Mother, and this can be done even with the help of a photograph. We can practice this type of meditation focusing on the actual photograph of Holy Mother, or with eyes closed we can try to project the image of Holy Mother on the screen of the mind.

Tools for Meditation

We are fortunate in our tradition to have photographs of both Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother and of all of the direct disciples. *Murti dhyana* is a type of meditation that can be done with eyes open, looking at a photograph. This (indicating Holy Mother's photograph on the chapel wall) is the standard photograph of Holy Mother in meditation, and it will play a significant role in my remarks this morning.

I want to develop this theme with the help of two different tools. One is a very beautiful hymn by Swami Abhedananda; the other is this particular

photograph of Holy Mother. We will see that the hymn and the photograph are very intimately connected.

In the Sanskrit tradition we have various types of hymns and mantras. There are *pranam* mantras which we recite when we make special offerings. There are many different types of *stotras* and other hymns. But there's a particular type of composition called a *dhyana mantra* which is used as an aid to meditation. Or we can say that the hymn itself is a type of meditation. And there is a special dhyana mantra, a very beautiful hymn which Swami Abhedananda composed which is used during the meditation portion of the daily worship of Holy Mother. It's of great significance in combining all these different types of meditation and it shows us how Holy Mother's divine and human aspects combined very beautifully in her life. When we read this hymn, we see how in some sense it's even based on this particular photograph of Holy Mother.

Swami Abhedananda's Special Devotion to Holy Mother

I think there is special significance in the fact that Swami Abhedananda was the author of this hymn. He also wrote "Prakritim Paramam," another very beautiful hymn to Holy Mother which is sung very often at evening arati time at many of our centers, especially on Saturday nights. Swami Abhedananda was a wonderful poet, and many of the Sanskrit compositions we have in our tradition were written by him.

The direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna were not all given mantra diksha (initiation into a mantra) by Sri Ramakrishna. It is well known that Swami Yogananda was the first of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna to take mantra initiation from Holy Mother. We know also that Swami Trigunatitananda took mantra initiation from her. But it seems that Swami Abhedananda may also have received a mantra from her, in addition to what he received directly from Sri Ramakrishna at their first meeting. This is written in *Sri Sri Sarada Devi*, the Bengali biography by Brahmachari Akshay Chaitanya. If it is true, this may help to explain the great devotion Swami Abhedananda had for Holy Mother and the beautiful hymns he wrote for her. But regardless of the reason, we find that this dhyana mantra is one of the most beautiful Sanskrit compositions in our tradition.

Let us meditate on Holy Mother seated in the lotus of the heart,
Sitting cross-legged, the embodiment of compassion,
With smiling face, the two-armed goddess with steady gaze,
Her dishevelled hair adorning half of her upper body and her white
cloth covering the other half,
Adorned with bangles of gold,
Her hands folded in her lap offering knowledge and devotion,



This is the first photograph of Sri Sarada Devi. It was taken in 1898 at the urging of Sara Bull, an American disciple of Swami Vivekananda.

Pure and luminous, removing the suffering of the sins of mortals,
Her heart merged in Sri Ramakrishna, delighting in hearing his name,
Her very being dyed in the thought of him,
The Mother of the universe who previously came in the forms of Sita
and Radha,
Who is auspicious to all, the embodiment of pure consciousness,
The granter of boons, eternal,
The Divine Mother Saraswati, the bestower of liberation.

Part of the beauty of this hymn is that we find the combination of perfect simplicity, perfect naturalness—everything about Holy Mother was very unassuming: her modesty, her bearing, everything about her—and at the same time we see that she had this divine quality, this divine nature. She wasn't an ordinary human being in any sense. We find also in this hymn a beautiful connection to Sri Ramakrishna, from a philosophical point of view as his Shakti, as his divine power, his partner in spiritual life; also as his greatest devotee, one who had more love and devotion for him than anyone else; and at the same time as one with Sri Ramakrishna.

I want to go through this hymn word by word and try to show its deep significance and how we can use this as a type of meditation.

The Source of Love Within the Heart

Let us meditate on Holy Mother seated in the lotus of the heart. . . We can say, well, we're imagining Holy Mother, we're trying to picture Holy Mother in the lotus of the heart. But to me this implies something deeper: that she dwells within. If we look on Mother as the Shakti of Sri Ramakrishna, she dwells within not just from some high philosophical point of view, as the witnessing consciousness, but as the source of love within. The manifestation of God within is in some sense the personal God. Swamiji himself says that—if we want to look for the personal God, look within every human heart. She dwells within us that way, as the source of love, the source of joy. And so we meditate on Holy Mother as that divine presence within the heart.

Sitting cross-legged, the embodiment of compassion. . . She's not seated in the lotus position. We see pictures of Lakshmi, Saraswati and others, all in some special yogic posture. Holy Mother is sitting in the most ordinary way, simply with folded legs, and yet she is the embodiment of compassion.

With smiling face. . . If we look at her face we see a very faint smile, almost a Mona Lisa smile. But the Sanskrit word (*prasanna*) means far more than more than smiling. It means pleased; it means gracious. It's the word that's most often used with regard to Mother Durga or Mother Kali, meaning propitiated. She has received the worship of her children and she's pleased. So when we look at her

face, we look at her lips, she has this faint smile, she knows that her children are offering their worship and she's pleased with them.

. . .the two-armed goddess. . . Why would anyone mention the fact that she has two arms? We all have two arms. But if we look on Holy Mother as the Divine Mother, then this is her two-armed form, we can say; this is her human form.

With steady gaze. . . I'll get back to this later. When we understand how this photograph was taken and what her frame of mind was, then we will understand that look that she has in her eyes.

Her dishevelled hair adorning half of her upper body. . . Half of her body is covered with her hair. Her hair is dishevelled. It's not tied in braids, it's not neatly combed. This is also Swami Abhedananda's way of identifying Holy Mother with Mother Kali. This is one of the descriptions of Mother Kali, that she has dishevelled hair.

Adorned with bangles of gold. . . This I want to save till the end, because to me this is the most significant of all the descriptions that we find about Holy Mother: her bangles. Throughout her whole life, her whole *lila*, this is a wonderful story, from her first getting bangles at the time of her marriage when she was a young girl till the very end of her life.

Her hands folded in her lap offering knowledge and devotion. . . If we look at the position of her hands, we find a very natural position. We know with all of the pictures we have of gods and goddesses, the position of the hands is very important. With Mother Kali, two of her hands offer boons and freedom from fear. Now what do Holy Mother's hands mean? If we meditate on her photograph, we see her hands there. Swami Abhedananda says this means *jnana* and *bhakti*. With one hand she's offering knowledge, with the other she's offering devotion.

How Does Holy Mother Remove Our Suffering?

Pure and luminous, removing the suffering of the sins of mortals. . . How does she remove the suffering that comes from the sins of human beings? Holy Mother was purity itself. To think of Holy Mother is a type of *tapasya*, of purification, of spiritual practice. So whenever we meditate on Holy Mother, this purification takes place and we feel uplifted. This is a way that all of our suffering can be removed, simply through this meditation on Holy Mother.

Her heart merged in Sri Ramakrishna, delighting in hearing his name, her very being dyed in the thought of him. . . Holy Mother had achieved the state of oneness with Sri Ramakrishna because her mind was completely merged in him. This is one of the goals of meditation. When we sit for meditation and try to merge the mind fully in the object of meditation, there is a transference that takes place. We take on these divine qualities. If we meditate on Sri Ramakrishna

and have in mind that divine ecstasy, we pick up some of that. If we meditate on Holy Mother, we pick up that love, we pick up that purity. Holy Mother's mind was completely given to Sri Ramakrishna, and her mind, like the white cloth dipped into dye, was dyed in the color of Sri Ramakrishna.

When Holy Mother went on pilgrimage to Vrindavan, shortly after the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, she had various spiritual experiences. One day she went into a very deep state of samadhi, so deep that it was very difficult for anyone to bring her mind down. Yogin Ma tried first. Then Swami Yogananda began repeating very loudly in her ear the name of Sri Ramakrishna. Finally her mind came down a little bit. But they noticed a very unusual thing. Everything that Holy Mother did was exactly the way Sri Ramakrishna used to do. Swami Yogananda put different questions to her and she answered them exactly the way Sri Ramakrishna did. She even asked for some *pan* (betel nut and spices wrapped in an edible leaf). Sri Ramakrishna had a particular way of biting off a corner of it and putting it in his mouth in a certain way. She did it exactly the same way. It was very clear that he had possessed her in some sense. This mood lasted for quite a long time. This is one example of how her mind was so merged in him that there were times when they were virtually indistinguishable.

Identified with Sita and Radha

The Mother of the universe who previously came in the forms of Sita and Radha. . . The same one who came as Holy Mother earlier came as Sita and Radha. We may say that this is poetry, that Sita and Radha were not even historical characters. It doesn't matter. It's that divine quality in them that we see in Holy Mother. If we accept that Sri Ramakrishna, as he very often said, had come earlier—"He who was Rama, He who was Krishna has now come as Ramakrishna"—then it follows that as his divine consort she came earlier as Sita and Radha.

When Holy Mother went on pilgrimage to Rameshwaram in the south of India, she had certain experiences. The temple there has an image of Shiva, a lingam made from a type of sandstone, very crumbly, not a hard type of stone. The temple custodians keep it covered with a metal cap, and only once a day in the morning they remove that, and the priest does some kind of offering. Everyone else offers to the image with the metal covering on it. Because the Raja of Ramnad was Swamiji's disciple, special arrangements were made for Holy Mother to worship. Every day she was there she went in the early morning when the cap was removed, and she worshiped the Shiva lingam with Ganges water. This is the tradition. Ganges water is brought from North India all the way to the South to offer to the image at Rameshwaram. When Holy Mother was asked about her experiences there, how she found Rameshwaram, how she found the image, she said, "It's just the way it was when I was there last time." One of her companions said, "Mother, what did you say!" And then she caught herself and

tried to say, “Oh, it’s the same way as I imagine it was when Sita was there.” Sita had worshipped Shiva in that form when she was there. So, whether we take this literally or as poetry, there was some sense of identification in Holy Mother’s mind, and we will see, also in Sri Ramakrishna’s mind, identification of Holy Mother with Sita.

Worship—Transformation—Liberation

Who is auspicious to all, the embodiment of pure consciousness, the granter of boons, eternal, the Divine Mother Saraswati, the bestower of liberation. She is the source of auspiciousness for everyone, pure spirit, offering boons, eternal, she who grants liberation. How does she grant us liberation? Not by any magical means, but through the process of purification. When we offer our worship to Holy Mother, when we fix our minds on Holy Mother, a transformation takes place in us. And just as she became like Sri Ramakrishna, we can become, of course to a very small degree, like Holy Mother. We can feel that universal love of Holy Mother, we can take on her attitude of universal acceptance, not looking at the faults of others, accepting everyone. This transforms the ego. And when this ego becomes fully ripened, we are fit for liberation.

Her Photograph

Now when we look at the photograph, we can see how many elements of this hymn are taken directly from the photograph. In fact, the hymn functions as a companion to the photograph, a commentary on it. It is a picture in words and can serve as a substitute for the photograph when we don’t have it before us. We don’t know when Swami Abhedananda wrote the hymn, but it seems likely that he wrote it after seeing this photograph. He mentions in his diary that he first saw the photograph on March 14, 1899. We know that he wrote “Prakritim Paramam” sometime before that. So it is very possible that he wrote it after this. In fact, it’s very possible that he never saw the face of Holy Mother, at least before seeing it in the photograph. This is one of the reasons why this photograph is so precious. There were so many people, even her male disciples, who, because of Holy Mother’s modesty, and the fact that she kept herself veiled, never saw her face. And this would have been the only way they would have known what she looked like, through this photograph. □

[to be continued]

Sri Sarada Devi: Her Gift To Us.

Joan Elisabeth Shack

[from a talk given at the Vedanta Society of New York April 25, 2004]

Sri Sarada Devi assumed her role as a spiritual guide only after the passing of Sri Ramakrishna. She became “mother” to his disciples and to the many others who came to her for comfort and guidance. For thirty-four long years, she spiritually ministered to her “children.” They came to her residence in Calcutta or village-home of Jayrambati from far distances, each receiving the unstinting love and affection of their mother.

One of her biographers, Revered Swami Saradeshananda, writes: “In the endless procession of the members of the human species in this planet of ours, the Holy Mother stands out as a unique example. . . whose love never made any distinction between the deserving and the undeserving, in whose eyes the saint and the sinner were alike her precious children, whose wide heart held all humanity in its maternal embrace and who considered it a privilege to labor and to suffer for even the least of them.”

The Language of a Mother’s Heart

One of my favorite pictures of the Holy Mother is the one taken with Sister Nivedita, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda of Irish birth. In that picture, I find the greatest assurance that she accepted even those beyond the borders of India as her children. She is the universal Mother. When the foreign women disciples of Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita, Sara Bull and Josephine MacLeod, first met Holy Mother, she defied tradition and ate with them. The three women couldn’t speak Bengali; Mother didn’t speak English. But this simple act of hers spoke volumes. The language of a mother’s heart is universally understood! Later she visited these Western women, greeting each of them as “my daughter.” In later years, Sister Nivedita wrote of Mother’s great, open, catholic mind—its ability to embrace all thoughts and people. “I have never known her to hesitate in giving utterance to large and generous judgment, however new and complex might be the question put before her. . . She rises to the height of every situation. . . with unerring intuition she goes straight to the heart of the matter.”

We are all brothers and sisters under her universal motherhood. One day, Holy Mother said to an elderly lady, “When you are on your way to some place and come across someone fallen by the wayside, you should pick him up. One should never leave behind someone fallen on the road.” In her lifetime, Mother picked up the fallen—those men and women on the road of life who were in

need, the suffering, the outcaste, the destitute, the spiritually hungry. They were all her children. Likewise, she asks us, her children, to help those whom we meet on life's journey, whether we refer to them as friend or stranger. In these words of advice, Mother conveys that compassion (a willingness to help) and service (action taken to help) are the solid basis for our relationship with others. So in her role as the universal Mother, she awakens us—men and women of the world—to our own motherhood. This is Sri Sarada Devi's great gift to us. The mother-heart, within each of us, is the capacity to be open to the needs of our brothers and sisters, a capacity to offer compassionate selfless service. This ability defies identification with any gender or culture. It is a capacity universally held.

In his well-known book, *Ethics for the New Millennium*,¹ the Dalai Lama examines the challenge posed by the contemporary world. He writes, "the challenge of the new millennium is surely to find ways to achieve international or better inter-community cooperation wherein human diversity is acknowledged and the rights of all are respected." What does this mean in the context of the individual? According to the Dalai Lama, it means each of us must recognize our "universal responsibility," realize our capacity to "empathize with another" and conduct ourselves "inspired by the wish to help others." What human qualities do we need to develop in order to be universally responsible, to empathize with another and to be inspired to help others? His Holiness cites "love, affection, kindness, gentleness, generosity of spirit and warm-heartedness." These qualities deemed so important by him for the new millennium are the quintessence of the mother-heart residing in each of us, a fact to which Holy Mother awakened us. She charted this course of action proposed by the Dalai Lama some hundred years ago. Her heart expanded, expanded and then expanded further until it contained everyone in its embrace. Pick up any book on Holy Mother's life and on every page you will discover examples of selfless service. She showed that service was not only a means of spiritual ministering to her children but a means of realization when coupled with inner renunciation. In and through family, community, profession and relations to the world at large, our challenge is to find ways to serve selflessly with a loving heart.

Real Love, Kindness and Gentleness Are Not Signs of Weakness

The gentle qualities cited by the Dalai Lama as needed by an individual in order to address modern challenges were: love, affection, kindness, gentleness, generosity of spirit and warm-heartedness. Oftentimes, they stand in stark contrast to the cold world in which we live. Some might justifiably ask, "Is

1. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999), chapter five.

Mother's gift to us, the awakening of our own mother-heart, in keeping with our time?" We might even associate these heart qualities with weakness and subservience.

His Holiness noted that "nying je," the Tibetan words which encompass these feelings, has a strong cognitive component.

Only by familiarizing ourselves with these qualities through reading, deep reflection and finally consciously practicing them can we hope to foster and fully develop our appreciation for them. Weakness and subservience are not words the Dalai Lama associates with these heart qualities. There are also enough examples in the life of Holy Mother to illustrate that coupled with her softer qualities, there was a firmness, a strength, a real mettle, as well as a depth of clarity in her words and actions. No one familiar with her life and teachings perceives weakness.

I myself have encountered this coupling of the softer qualities of the heart with the selfless action of a hero many years ago in a very simple, tell-tale way. In one room of my apartment, a large picture of Holy Mother hung (3.25 high and 2.5 feet wide). While traveling in India, I purchased a picture of Sri Krishna and Arjuna in the chariot on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Sri Krishna held the reigns of the chariot, whip in hand, Arjuna standing next to him, bow strung, was poised for action. The four white horses were racing, their heads held high, tails flying. There were bodies and body parts strewn all over the field. I had searched for a long time for such a dynamic picture of Sri Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield. It was 4.5 high and 6 ft wide. The only wall available to hang it on was opposite Mother's picture. How could I put it there? The energy each emanated was so different. I certainly couldn't choose between them. It took me a while to decide what to do. Finally, the picture was hung. I never regretted that decision.

Holy Mother realized that this is exactly what we face and how we are challenged every day in this room or laboratory we call life. How to yoke those soft qualities of a mother-heart to dynamic, selfless service? For Mother's gift to us to be understood properly, we need to recognize and assimilate these seeming opposites as actually complementary.

Ordinary Actions, Extraordinary Life

Another point bears noting. Holy Mother's actions were very ordinary. Assuming her role as housewife, she did personal service to her husband, Sri Ramakrishna from 1872 to 1886. After his passing, she lived in an extended family, serving her brothers and raising her orphaned niece. Even as a guru, she served as a mother would her children. Her role as guru was in fact suffused with and subordinate to her role as mother.

Her actions of a day-to-day nature were devoid of all drama. In this day and age, they would be viewed as mundane. So why do we find her life so

extraordinary? Her actions were other-motivated. That is, her life was a litany of selfless service, rendered by a pure heart.

It is no surprise that through her gift to us, exemplified in her own life, Holy Mother is connected with some of the most vital spiritual currents of our time. Philosophers and noted historians have suggested that since the time of Jesus, there have been only a handful of saints of genius who have passed on truths by which those seeking spiritual sustenance in this world can live. These include St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Joan of Arc, St. Teresa of Avila and lastly St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, also known as St. Thérèse of Lisieux. A French Carmelite nun, St. Thérèse of Lisieux was a contemporary of Holy Mother. Born in 1873, her life of twenty-four short years consisted of prayer and acts of sacrifice. Heroic deeds like those of St. Joan of Arc were not given to her to do. Her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, documents her genius in using “little ways” to advance spiritually. Within the walls of the cloister, her “little ways” consisted of: rendering service without receiving recognition, giving a friendly smile, not leaning back against a support when seated, praying for a sister who made life in the community particularly difficult, holding back a reply, anticipating another’s needs and giving what belonged to her without asking for it back. Her extraordinary innovative mind discovered ways/attitudes to make all ordinary, even trivial actions like sitting, work for her spiritually.

In Thérèse’s mind, saintliness was not a way of ascending to heaven; rather, heaven was an extension of the work given her to do on earth. This life was not a means to an end for her. It was openly embraced for its own sake. She is quoted as saying: “I want to spend my time in heaven doing good on earth.” So her conception of heaven then included the performance of loving, selfless service. If the number of documented cures and favors granted pilgrims over the years visiting her graveside is any indication, Thérèse’s prayer was answered. Her love of God found expression and indeed fulfillment through her everyday, simple acts of service. It is her “little ways” that have endeared her to countless spiritual aspirants over time.

The mother-heart in each of us functions when the individual soul moves from a self-centered to an other-centered view of one’s life and actions. In other words, one moves from self to selflessness.

Modern Heroism: Transcending Self

Author Joseph Campbell offers further insight into the timeliness of Holy Mother’s gift. In his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*,² he delves into his favorite subject, the concept of a hero/heroine.

2. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), Epilogue.

Campbell writes that a hero's adventure is the destiny of every person. However, he notes that the hero-deed to be wrought today is not the same as in the past. For primitive hunters, the greatest problem was the task of sharing their backyard with saber-toothed tigers. Survival and his place in nature gripped man's psyche. Later, tribes supporting themselves on plant food, focused their attention on the plant kingdom. In the time of Galileo, it was the mystery of the cosmos that held sway over man's psyche. Today, these mysteries have lost their hold on us. Campbell goes on to describe the task/orientation of the modern hero—humanity itself. This is the mystery of today. The hero is seen as one who seeks to understand his or her own life not in terms of "I" but in terms of "thou."

In defining the hero/heroine, he writes: "he is someone who has given his life to something bigger than himself or other than himself."³—in effect, losing himself in the process. And thus from behind a thousand faces, as the title of his book suggests, the hero emerges.

Holy Mother's gift challenges us to be heroes/heroines from Joseph Campbell's viewpoint. Every act of compassionate service we perform, however ordinary, is a modern hero-deed. Such actions may "lead in the end to a realization of the All in the individual; the hero [is brought] to the Self in all."⁴ □

Greatness

Swami Yogeshananda

It is customary for many who write and speak about Sri Sarada Devi, our Holy Mother, to say—with just a tinge of apology—that in her life there were no history-making or dramatic events to record and to put her on the map of history. But who ever said that greatness lay in dramatic or historic outer events visible to the world of publicity? Says the Chhandogya Upanishad through the mouth of sage Sanatkumara, greatness is established on itself alone; not on external things.

If we have to measure it, greatness is to be gauged more by the little things about a person, than by great deeds. Somewhere Swami Vivekananda has remarked about this—that many can be heroic under emergencies, but the test of a person's character lies in how he or she handles the small details of daily living. Spiritual living is such an art that only those accustomed to its modes and spaces and tints are truly competent to judge it.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

Here are some suggestions about what the criteria might be, for evaluating the “little things” in the life of a significant person:

What reactions does she have, when treated in various ways by different people?

Injured, does she seek subtle revenge?

Does she pass unnecessary remarks about others (what to speak of criticisms!)?

Does she, through timidity, keep silent when speech might save the day?

Does she hesitate, through discomfort, to embrace the unfamiliar?

Does she throw tradition to the winds, unduly attracted by novelty?

Does she insert herself into all situations possible?

Those who know well the style of Holy Mother’s life will have the answers to these questions. Rightly we have used the feminine gender; for she was the epitome of womanhood, of femininity. Her ways of relating to the problematic figures in her life—brothers, sister-in-law and nieces—bring out the greatness in her dealings, large or small.

Look at the life of Abraham Lincoln: his outward, historical activities were the songs we sing about him; but it was in the small details that his life showed its magnificence: in the letter to the widow, the consolation to the mother, the humor undoing the stress of tangled affairs and the stress in persons put-upon by others, the patience of that life-locked relationship. . .

With Holy Mother we see the tremendous sympathy and rapport she had with all sorts of people: the fellow-feeling within her for a monk, a disciple, a babe, a profligate, a cat, a broom. This could come only from her identity with the Source. Long, long before the picture we see of this mature spiritual leader and guide and teacher, that linking with the Source had taken place. Almost no one knew it. Greatness in the small.

Swami Paramananda once said, “A loving mother dwells in the heart of every man and woman.” It is this which should come out, when we worship Sri Sarada Devi. □

Sarada Devi, A Power that Worked in Silence: The Testimony of a Ramakrishna Order Monk

Sister Gayatriprana

Sarada Devi expressed herself in myriad ways. People could see the divine in her through all of those ways and get the spiritual inspiration she came into the world to give. Here we shall see her as a power that worked in silence, as testified by a monk of the Ramakrishna Order.

The subject of my story is Swami Pavitrananda, who was head of the New York Vedanta Society from 1951 to 1977. He had a master's degree in English and, before coming to the United States, was editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*, the English language magazine of the Ramakrishna Order, and later President of Advaita Ashrama, a major publishing arm of the Order. All of these qualifications put him in a position to write and be at the center of thought-currents in the nineteen twenties through forties, some of the golden years of the Ramakrishna Order, when many of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna were still alive, along with Sarada Devi's own numerous disciples. Later, as editor emeritus, he was called on to speak and write on various occasions. His written work spanned some fifty years, and it is possible to trace the evolution of his thought on many subjects. I find such an exercise very valuable, especially in dealing with subjects that are very deep, such as Sarada Devi. With time, more insights come out and add to one's overall understanding and grasp of the subject.

Bhupen Roy, A Young Man Torn by Cross-Cultural Conflict

With the wealth of materials available from Swami Pavitrananda, it seemed valuable and interesting to trace his thoughts on Sarada Devi, initially to throw light on him himself, but in the present context as another contribution to our overall understanding of Mother. Swami Pavitrananda met Sarada Devi only once, but, as we shall see, even that single meeting had tremendous value and importance for him. The meeting took place probably in 1917-18, about two years before Mother's death. At that time Swami Pavitrananda was still Bhupendra Roy, a student at the University of Calcutta, and caught in the grip of terrible inner turmoil. Like so many young men of his generation, he was split down the middle by the conflict between the Hindu devotionism he experienced at home and the Western rationalism he was exposed to in his formal education. Bhupen was endowed with intense devotion, but was also an enthusiastic advocate of rationalism, which he saw as an antidote to the excesses of traditional devotionism. He, therefore, belonged in both camps—or in

neither—and as a country boy suffered terribly at the university hostel he was living in, where the other, city-bred boys ribbed him mercilessly over his sensitive nature and unwavering devotion to truth and accuracy of self-expression. However, choosing not to fall back into Hindu devotionism, he was severely perplexed as to how to work out a formula that would support him both emotionally and intellectually. His mind was, as he would say later, like the witches' cauldron in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

By a stroke of luck, or perhaps destiny, he met Swami Arupananda, a swami of the Ramakrishna Order somewhat older than himself and a close devotee and attendant of Sarada Devi, who was then living at the Udbodhan House, her residence in Calcutta. The swami was a brother of a fellow student from Bhupen's native area in East Bengal and assumed towards the young man the role of mentor. He understood Bhupen's anguish at living in a hostel with Westernized, secularized Indians and undertook to find him somewhere more congenial to live. In time he succeeded, much to Bhupen's relief, but in the meantime he also rendered him a service of the first magnitude by introducing him to Sarada Devi.

Bhupen's Meeting with Sarada Devi

On the surface, the meeting with Mother was uneventful and even routine. Bhupen went upstairs to her quarters and took his place in the line of men who had come to meet her, one by one, at her formal "visiting hours." As was usual at such meetings with men, Mother was seated and, ever the self-effacing and shy country woman, was fully veiled. When Bhupen's turn in the line came he touched her feet in silence and left the room. He did not see her face; he did not talk to her. Nevertheless, he felt that he had received an impetus toward the ideal life, "an inspiration for a whole life."¹ We might say that Bhupen's pent-up spiritual intensity had suddenly been stabilized and its tremendous energy given a totally new dimension. The current of his life was established in a deeper, larger riverbed, which would enable it to flow forward, gaining in magnitude and power as it went along. Again, all of this took place in silence, unheard and unseen and, at first, not fully understood by Bhupen himself.

The silence of this encounter may have been due, in part, to the habitual reticence of those who knew and loved Mother to speak of her in public. At the time Bhupen met her, there simply was not an established tradition about Mother in which he could take stock of the tremendous change that had occurred in him. In those early days, little was known about Mother; rather, those who knew and loved her strove to hide and protect her from the gaze of the world. However, as

1. Swami Pavitrananda, "Sri Sarada Devi, A Great Saint of India," a lecture given at the New York Vedanta Society, January 8, 1956, informally reproduced in mimeographed form (hereafter, "Great Saint").

the swamis of the order came to hear and understand the tremendous appreciation of Mother by Sri Ramakrishna's direct disciples, their eyes were gradually opened to what she was.

Swami Pavitrananda did not indicate whether Holy Mother was the first great disciple of Sri Ramakrishna he met. It seems likely, in view of the fact of his friendship early on with Swami Arupananda, who was so close to Mother. If that were the fact, then we could say that Mother was the first great influence on Bhupen's spiritual development. It is also true, however, that Bhupen continued to be in a very agitated condition at that period of his life. Perhaps his meeting with Mother came later, bringing him stability and peace; or, as often happens at the first stage of spiritual life, it may well have been that, despite the grounding he received from his meeting with her, the old problems lingered on for awhile. Perhaps, too, there was a need to put much of his inner conflict into words in order to put it to rest for good.

That possibility was provided for him by Swami Turiyananda, another great disciple of Sri Ramakrishna who was willing to engage in intellectual thrust and parry with Bhupen until Bhupen had exhausted himself. When that moment arrived, Swami Turiyananda sent him to Swami Brahmananda, the President of the Ramakrishna Order and a flaming fire of spirituality. For all practical purposes Brahmananda incinerated the old, agitated Bhupen and reformed him in a mold entirely his own, where his deeply emotional nature and his demanding intellect were able to co-exist harmoniously around the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda ideal.

After Brahmananda's death in 1922, Bhupen came under the loving and motherly care of Swami Shivananda, another of Sri Ramakrishna's disciples, and also benefitted from the stimulating and challenging friendship of Swami Madhavananda, the formidable and uncompromising disciple of Mother who was Bhupen's superior at Advaita Ashrama in the Himalayas. From all these experiences emerged Swami Pavitrananda, on the track to high office in the Order and subsequently to head the historic Vedanta Society of New York, which Swami Vivekananda himself had founded in 1894.

Swami Pavitrananda Learns More About Mother from Her Disciples

As we have said already, at the time Bhupen met Sarada Devi, there was no established tradition about her which could help him articulate what he experienced in her presence. However, with her passing two or three years later, information and verbal testimony began to accumulate. This oral tradition included what the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna and of Mother herself shared with others from the depths of their own experiences with her. In addition to the senior monks of the order, Bhupen also heard from many other people, living apparently ordinary lives, but inwardly transformed by their relationship with Mother.

An Untouchable and a Writer

There was the untouchable man who went to visit Mother in her village home at Jayrambati, hoping to come into her presence. In those days, the caste system forbade any such meeting under any circumstances. The vast majority of Hindus, not excluding holy people, were totally committed to this iniquitous system, or afraid to confront it, such was the social pressure and traditional prestige behind it. To the man's amazement, Mother not only welcomed him but took him inside and, closing the door to her room, sat him down and fed him delicacies with the utmost tenderness and solicitude. Within her own space she treated him as a mother would her own son—and without compromising him socially at all. If word had got out that he, an untouchable, had thus sat with a brahmin lady, the consequences of ostracism and other social punishment could have been dire. With that in mind, Mother cleaned up his plates and the table after the meal, leaving no trace of what had happened.

The man was thunderstruck. After a whole life of rejection and humiliation, to be thus treated as the dearest of the dear! From being looked upon as the trash of society, unfit even to enter a brahmin home, he had been cherished by the Mother, the very acme of the brahminical ideal! Swami Pavitrananda, in recounting the story, added his own testimony from his knowledge of the rigors of the caste system: "It would be considered sacrilegious for a person even to allow such things to happen. I simply shuddered that Mother could do such a thing."² No wonder the man shed tears as he told the swami of this radical demonstration of what love really means.

Again, there was the famous, but rather conceited writer (who felt that he was second only to Rabindranath Tagore in the Bengali literary firmament), who had been one of Bhupen's college friends. This friend had written a book in beautiful Bengali, in which he described his relationship with Mother: as a debtor before a creditor, insouciance before immeasurable compassion, and as a vessel completely filled up by her blessing and strengthened by her affection. In this case, Mother had prevailed, even against the ego of a Western-style intellectual, grounding him in his true nature as truth, consciousness and love. Apparently there was nothing she could not digest and transform into something spiritual.³

Swami Virajananda

As a monk living in the Himalayas, Swami Pavitrananda came into contact with Swami Virajananda, a close disciple of Holy Mother with very strong contemplative tendencies who had, nevertheless, proven himself a champion

2. Ibid., p. 9.

3. Ibid., p. 7.

worker in the cause of Swami Vivekananda, and who ultimately became President of the Ramakrishna Order. Swami Pavitrananda knew him intimately when he was at Shyamalatal, a retreat Virajananda had created in the interior of the Himalayas in order to live a life of seclusion. Swami Virajananda shared with the younger swami some of his own difficulties and struggles as a young man. He emphasized that what he was telling him was strictly private (and therefore a great privilege for Swami Pavitrananda). After the passing of Swami Virajananda the facts of his early life came out in print⁴ and Swami Pavitrananda was free to talk about what he had heard from him at Shyamalatal.

The swami had told Swami Pavitrananda about the very intense meditation he had done at home before he became a monk. When Holy Mother initiated him, she gave him a mantra other than what he had been repeating. Like Swami Pavitrananda, Swami Virajananda was very stubborn about his own experiences, and he ventured to tell Mother that what she had given him was not the same as what he had already worked on for some time. Quite unperturbed, Mother said quietly, “No, what I have given is for you.” Swami Virajananda went home and, out of a sense of respect, repeated the mantra Mother had given him. He soon found that she had been absolutely right. His spiritual path was now properly set, through the insight of Mother. Swami Pavitrananda was, once again, profoundly struck by the spiritual power of Mother that could so quietly turn round the whole life of a man of Swami Virajananda’s abilities.

Cured by Holy Mother’s Guidance

Another incident in Swami Virajananda’s life that is now well-known, but was not when Swami Pavitrananda was visiting with him at Shyamalatal, pertained to the swami’s difficulties on the passing of his monastic guru, Swami Vivekananda. Absolutely grief-stricken, he devoted himself to exclusive meditation and developed a sort of catatonia, a physical and mental short-circuit, as it were. He consulted physicians and the senior swamis in Calcutta, but nobody could help him. Finally, he went to Holy Mother at her village home, remembering her ability to see to the bottom of his soul. Mother quickly understood what was wrong. “How are you meditating?” she asked him. When Swami Virajananda told her what he was doing, she visibly shuddered. Clearly, he had gone off the rails in his state of intense grief. “What are you doing!” she exclaimed. She could see, as no one else could, the profundity of his grief and its relationship to his devastating malady. Then, more calmly, Mother said, “Look.

4. Articles on Swami Virajananda in *Prabuddha Bharata* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama): “Swami Virajananda,” June 1951; Swami Atmasthananda: “Kalikrishna at the Baranagore Monastery,” July 1951; “Kalikrishna’s Journey Onward,” August 1951; Swami Shraddhananda: “Swami Virajananda, the Sixth President of Our Order,” December 1951.

Please follow these instructions.” She went on to instruct him how to take charge of his life, treating his body, mind and spirit with love and gentleness, relying on the inner guru to guide. Swami Virajananda told Swami Pavitrananda that, after this blessing from Mother, he was cured completely physically and also spiritually.⁵ As the world sees it, he was then ready to come forward and shoulder the heavy burden Swami Vivekananda had prepared for him at Advaita Ashrama, the publishing center at Mayavati in the Himalayas; within two to three years he would be President of the ashrama and launched on the first stage of his meteoric career through the Ramakrishna Order.

A Work Forming in Swami Pavitrananda’s Mind

Swami Pavitrananda was again wonderstruck at Holy Mother’s insight and power, as he stored away like a squirrel these precious nuggets from Swami Virajananda to add to a work that was slowly forming in his mind.

From these examples, we see how Swami Pavitrananda’s understanding of Mother expanded. As he was to say later of the great spiritual personalities he had met, “It is not a common thing to see a man [or woman] of God in physical frame and talking to you. You may see a person aspiring after spiritual things, you may see a person intense in his or her devotion, but it is a rare thing to see a person with whom life is not a matter of spiritual struggle, but a matter of spiritual realization and whose only concern is to share the joy with others. We saw such persons with our own eyes and, as time is passing, they loom larger than ever before our eyes.”⁶ □

(to be continued)

[Holy Mother] slept very little. One night she was up at two o’clock in the morning. Asked for the reason, she said: “What can I do, my child? All these children come to me with great longing for initiation, but most of them do not repeat the mantra regularly. Why regularly? Many do not repeat it at all. But since I have taken responsibility for them, should I not see to their welfare? Therefore I do japa for their sake. I constantly pray to the Master, saying: ‘O Lord, awaken their spiritual consciousness. Give them liberation.’”

—Swami Nikhilananda , *Holy Mother* (N.Y., R-V Center, 1962), p.173

5. “Great Saint,” p. 8.

6. Swami Pavitrananda, “Swami Ramakrishnananda,” in *Vedanta Kesari*, September 1958, p. 229.

East is East and West is West?

Jung's Growing Appreciation of the Value of Eastern Spirituality for Westerners (Part II)

Steven F. Walker

After 1939 Switzerland was cut off from the rest of the world during World War II and Jung was out of contact with his many foreign friends and associates, especially with the Americans and the British who had formed such an important part of his circle. But this increased isolation prompted him to think through more deeply the problems of integrating Eastern mysticism into his own thought, and to challenge the “East is East and West is West” paradigm that had dominated his 1936 *Prabuddha Bharata* essay. This process of rethinking and revisioning his own previous positions resulted in two essays that corrected—or should have corrected—the earlier impression established in his readers’ minds in the mid 1930s that Jung was skeptical as to the value of Asian spirituality for Westerners. Unfortunately, people quote Jung’s earlier pronouncements as though they represented his final positions. This is simply not the case. Jung changed his mind.

Psychological Value for Westerners

The first essay, “The Psychology of Eastern Meditation,” originally delivered as a lecture in the spring of 1943, emphasizes over and over again the affinities that link Western spiritual aspirations with those of India and the East. Jung begins by stating that “in the overflowing wealth of Indian spirituality there is reflected a vision which *at first* [my emphasis] appears strange and inaccessible to the Greek-trained European mind.” (Jung, *Psychology and the East*, p. 159) He goes on, however, to demonstrate the psychological value for Westerners of a fifth-century Buddhist text, the *Amitayur-dhyana Sutra*, from which he quotes extended passages. Once again he warns against the “imitation of Indian practices and sentiments,” but this warning, although it reminds the reader of his earlier one in the 1936 *Prabuddha Bharata* essay, is couched differently. Westerners, writes Jung, should apply their understanding “to understand as much of yoga as is possible for the Western mind;” they should “find or build that hidden bridge which may lead [them] to a European understanding of yoga.” (Ibid., pp. 169-9) Once again Jung points out the dangerous split in the West between a rational consciousness and an unconscious full of repressed energies and impulses, and reminds the reader that this “dark corner” must be looked into and dealt with carefully before any substantial progress can be made in meditation. Westerners, unlike Eastern yogis whose minds are “perfectly aware

of the *kleshas*” (which Jung equates with the dark world of the unconscious), are in fact held back by a moralistic attitude towards the unconscious that prevents them from coming to terms with it, and this constitutes a major obstacle to spiritual progress. First deal resolutely with the personal unconscious and the moral conflicts it generates in the conscious mind, Jung advises, and then only will real psychological and spiritual progress be possible.

It seems a shame that Jung was unfamiliar with Vivekananda’s presentations of yoga, although perhaps it is not really a shame, since by being unaware of Vivekananda’s writings Jung was forced to think through things in his own original way. If he had read them, however, he would have noted how Vivekananda also insisted that the first step on the spiritual path was the attempt to control “the vast mass of sunken [i.e., unconscious] thoughts that have become automatic with us.” (Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, II. p. 34) Thus both Jung and Vivekananda agree that unconscious (automatic) thoughts and tendencies are the first major obstacles to progress in yoga; what Jung called “recovering the natural man” had been expressed earlier by Vivekananda in the same passage quoted above by the injunction “the great task is to revive the whole man.” When that task has been accomplished, and *only* then, can the mind go beyond the personal unconscious. As regards the first steps in yoga, there is agreement between Vivekananda’s and Jung’s thought.

A Householder Saint to His Liking

The next essay that Jung published during the war years was an introduction to a German translation (1944) that his friend the celebrated Indologist Heinrich Zimmer, by then in America, had made of the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi. It is a curious yet highly significant essay, since it further defines Jung’s personal take on Indian spirituality. Jung, while in India several years before, had deliberately avoided seeking out Ramana Maharshi, in spite of his friend Zimmer’s advice. He explains this strange decision in two ways. First of all, he said that he felt that Ramana Maharshi was hardly unique, and that “the holy man” phenomenon was a common feature of the Indian spiritual landscape: “I saw him all over India, in the pictures of Ramakrishna, in Ramakrishna’s disciples [some of whom Jung had met during his visit to Calcutta], in Buddhist monks, in innumerable other figures of the daily Indian scene.” (Ibid. p. 177) Secondly, Jung tells how he had met by chance a householder disciple of Ramana Maharshi who impressed him greatly. He was a primary school teacher with many children (just as Jung had many children), and his “modest, kindly, devout and childlike spirit” taught him “how wisdom, holiness, *and* humanity can dwell together in harmony.” (Ibid., pp. 178-9) This householder saint was more to his liking—understandably, as Jung himself was a householder and a Protestant with

a certain distrust for monastic and celibate life—than Ramana Maharshi might have been, at least at that time in Jung’s spiritual evolution.

Be that as it may. What is most striking in the essay is what Jung quotes from the sayings of Ramakrishna. He quotes Ramakrishna—for the only time in his published works—as part of his ongoing wrestling with the problem of the relationship between ego and consciousness. But this time round the debate is less polarized between Eastern and Western positions. Jung admits now that “the goal of Eastern religious practice is the same as that of Western mysticism: the shifting of the center of gravity from the ego to the self, from man to God.” (Ibid., p. 181) But Jung still remains unsatisfied with the idea that consciousness could exist—as in a superconscious state—without some presence of the ego. Ramana Maharshi is for him too non-dualist in his insistence on the utter necessity of the extinction of the ego, on its total absorption into the Self. So Jung finds that in Ramakrishna’s sayings “the dilemma between ego and self seems to emerge more distinctly,” and quotes one of the Master’s sayings to that effect: “Very few can get rid of the sense of ‘I’ through *samadhi*. . . . We may discriminate a thousand times, but the sense of ‘I’ is bound to return again and again. You may cut down the branches of a fig tree today, but tomorrow you will see that new twigs are sprouting.” And Jung also finds in the following words of Ramakrishna a piece of useful spiritual advice, given the virtually indestructible nature of the ego: “If this sense of ‘I’ will not leave, then let it stay on as the servant of God.”

Christian and Oriental Mysticism Share the Same Goal

Jung has by the early 1940s reached a position where he sees that Christian mysticism and Oriental mystical philosophy are one in acknowledging the dissolution of the ego as the ultimate goal of spiritual practice, differing only, he now believes, “through having a different terminology.” (Ibid., p. 182) His thought is no longer obsessed with asserting radical differences between East and West; instead, he is much more prone to see similarities, with differences existing only in the terminology employed. This new intellectual position took Jung, as we have seen, over ten years of honest and independent thinking to attain.

Having reached this later stage of thinking, Jung was now prepared for the extraordinary visionary experiences that came to him during the early part of 1944—experiences that were unknown to the world until the publication of his autobiography, *Memories Dreams, Reflections*, in 1961-63. But he did refer to them a year later in a letter written to a close colleague in America, the Jungian analyst Kristine Mann, who was dying of cancer. Since Jung himself had almost died a year before from a heart attack, he surely felt that his revelations would be of some consolation to his colleague in her hour of need:

On the whole my illness proved to be a most valuable experience, which gave me the inestimable opportunity of a glimpse behind the veil. The only difficulty is to get rid of the body, to get quite naked and void of the world and the ego-will. When you can give up the crazy will to live and when you seemingly fall into a bottomless mist, then the truly *real* life begins with everything which you were meant to be and never reached. It is something ineffably grand. I was free, completely free and whole, as I never felt before. (Jung, *Letters*, I, p. p. 357-9)

“The Most Tremendous Things I Have Ever Experienced”

But to find a full account and description of these visionary experiences one must turn to Jung’s posthumously published autobiography. In March of 1944 Jung, then sixty-eight years old, was taking one of his long walks that had helped him recuperate from the long-term effects of the amoebic dysentery he had contracted in India; suddenly he slipped on a patch of snow and broke his foot. The period of immobilization in a hospital precipitated a heart attack, and for several weeks, in late March and early April, Jung was on the edge of death. What then happened to him was a series of visions that he was later to call “the most tremendous things I have ever experienced”: “I would never have imagined that any such experience was possible. It was not the product of the imagination. The visions and experiences were utterly real; there was nothing subjective about them; they had the quality of absolute objectivity.” (*Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p. 294)

The actual content of the visions is described in great detail in the autobiography, and will not be analyzed here. But the important thing to highlight is that all the visions were accompanied, as he wrote to Kristine Mann a year later, by “an incomparable, indescribable feeling of eternal bliss, such as I never could have imagined as being within the reach of human consciousness.” (*Letters*, I, p. 358) A Vedantist should have no problem noting the identical feelings of freedom and bliss that are said to accompany an experience of *samadhi*.

The visions were waking visions that occurred night after night after Jung, confined to his hospital bed, had fallen asleep, and then woken up around midnight. They mark Jung’s greatest spiritual realization. Years later, shortly before his death, in the course of an interview filmed in March 1959 for the BBC television program “Face to Face,” Jung was asked if he believed in God. His answer was simply this: “I *know*. I don’t need to believe. I know.” (*C.G. Jung Speaking: Interviews and Encounters*, p. 428) □

Discussion: Should Vedanta Have a Higher Profile?

[American Vedantist believes in the value of open discussion of issues concerning the practice and communication of Vedanta in the West. We hope our readers will respond, pro and con, and further the dialog.]

1. Why Did Vedanta Retreat?

P. Shneidre

Vedantists are a hangdog lot. We rarely speak up. We are the divine Self, paralyzed by humility. And there's an institutional component of this syndrome. Many of the Vedanta Societies I visited on a pilgrimage were missing at least one of the following: a listed phone number, a sign, a bookstore, adequate parking. To have such an unlisted faith, untroubled by newcomers, seems to be what many Vedantists want.

Not so Buddhism, whose Western adherents have crafted a mode of religion that reaches out successfully to increasing numbers of Westerners. Buddhists talk about Buddhism in their own words, daring to make it up-close and personal (in fact, if you browse the flap of a book by a contemporary Western Buddhist, you're likely to learn when and where the author attained his enlightenment--usually anywhere between three and six years after beginning his practice, just before becoming a priest).

Must Vedanta Play Second Sitar?

Two questions follow from this. First: Must Vedanta play second sitar to Buddhism in winning Western hearts and minds? Humbler than a blade of grass, will it always be mowed down by more communicative approaches? The second question: Might this collective vow of silence be one of the reasons why Neo-Vedantic Hinduism as a cohesive group is in retreat in the West, and Buddhism and Kabbala and other groups are on the advance?

Aldous Huxley, back when it was acceptable to share one's thoughts, called Vedanta the perennial philosophy. But a thing is perennial because it stays alive through the seasons, putting forth new shoots—not when it's petrified. Our most recent prophet, Vivekananda, declared that the truth was located in every human heart, waiting to be set free. Yet rarely does an original work on Vedanta appear.

True, the Ramakrishna/Vivekananda movement has had some luck attracting biographers, but some of this luck has been bad. A couple of years ago I noticed that Jeffrey Kripal's *Kali's Child* was the only book on Sri Ramakrishna assigned to a comparative religion class in San Diego. (I blinked, then remembered from

my own university days that the best way to keep a book from being read was to assign it to a class.) And punctually, about three times a century, a memoir from a literate and qualified swami like Atulananda, Vidyatmananda or Yogeshananda appears in a small edition, but that's about it.

A Hermit Objects

"If that's true," e-mailed a hermit friend of mine, when I praised a rival spiritual group for its ability to meet potential devotees halfway, "that means there was no need for Thakur and his companions to have come to earth." Many people are sure that if they simply meditate harder, the world must notice--and that any other group's wordslinging or church-building means that they have been conquered by Maya. Then the hermit lightened up, ending his letter with a blessing: "You've got your mantra. Shut up and use it." So let's call this the shut-up-and-use-it school of Vedanta.

To be true to this school, you have to be a professional hermit or else you're betraying the message. But most of us only got the message by dint of a lot of hard work on the part of a lot of non-hermits. The great 20th-Century Vedantists that we know of were, by definition, not cave-dwellers; they were people who took the message outside—out of their country, outside of Sanskrit. I'd be happy to show you the block in downtown Los Angeles where Swami Vivekananda walked to have tickets printed for a lecture he was giving on Broadway the following week.

Longtime Vedanta students recognize this as a controversy that stretches back at least as far as Vivekananda's sojourn in the West. One devotee's desire to raise the profile of Vedanta has always been another devotee's shallow exhibitionism. The rigorous emphasis on spiritual practice may be the foundation, the genetic code of Vedanta that distinguishes it. But some of the Vedanta pioneers and settlers we revere also got their hands dirty building a church that others could walk into.

Whose Job Is It?

A weary seeker—after running here and there—meets a quiet and unassuming Swami who teaches her to meditate, recommends *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* to her, and then gives her permission to go on retreat in the country. For this simple tale to unfold in the West, a lot of perspiration joined in the inspiration: someone bought the building where the meeting took place, someone else translated and printed the scripture, and someone else built the retreat—and they didn't do it while meditating. Our church may not have a sign but it is here

nonetheless, and it had to be built—brick by brick, word by word. But is it finished? And if not, do perfected souls have to do all the work?

Getting It In Writing

A possible case in point for how things could be different, how the code of silence might be broken, was published last year. You might not find it in your local Vedanta bookstore or catalog, because it makes too much noise. But think of it as an exception to the rule, a harbinger, or an embarrassment, depending on the depth of your commitment to the shut-up-and-use-it school.

In *Eastern Light In Western Eyes* by Marty Glass we have a Vedantist willing to speak about his own practice, instead of crawling into a fort of quotation. Not that Glass doesn't cite scripture and sage, but he does so only when they offer a more compelling expression of a point he's already made. *Eastern Light In Western Eyes* is not an anthology; it's a deliriously clear, step-by-step explication of one particular bhakta's devotional meditation, aided by a system of checks-and-balances called jnana-yoga and nondual Vedanta. Love of God is the subject, ecstatic prose the method. The book, for all its textures and digressions—poems, stories, asides, Eckhartian aphorisms—is monolithic and holographic, just like God. You can dip into it anywhere and come up drenched in the same divine excitement. It's all of a piece because it is steeped in the experience of its author.

This vigorous apologia for the path of bhakti is not the work of someone who confuses silence with humility:

I am made of the universe, with nothing else 'left over.' The universe is my being, my substance, beginning at the crudest level with this body I call 'mine' and ultimately incorporating the total content of 'my' experience, and that's all: there is no 'person' comprised of the elements of this totality, no 'I.' Which explains the smile on the face of the Buddha. There's just the universe, a continuously unfolding appearance in consciousness upon which innumerable nonexistent 'I's have been projected, among them the precious 'me,' fleeting imaginary containers of a share allotted to them from the ceaseless infinite simultaneous blossoming and disappearing called Creation.

Who is this Marty Glass, made of the universe? Except for the obligatory blurb from Huston Smith,¹ the book and its author arrive—like their ancestors, *Leaves of Grass* and the Vedic rishis—without portfolio or credentials.

1. How urgent have the good graces of this mild sage become! Smithic praise as faint as "worth reading" now appears on book covers. On the back of this book, the good professor advances the art of blurbology by quoting, within his own quote, the still higher authority Fritjof Schuon. How can a mere reader stand up to this?

What do we learn about Glass? That he practices meditation more or less along the lines laid down by swamis of the Ramakrishna Order of India, and has done so for 30 years. Is he a monk? No. Spokesman for schism? No. Talk show host, charismatic inspirational speaker? Nope. In the place usually reserved for worldly honors, we are told only that his Chevrolet is old enough to have voted for Hubert Humphrey. Beyond that, he is prone to explaining himself thus:

I am not somewhere or something separate from the universe, I am not a discrete part of the universe, I am rather a particular infinitesimal fraction of the countless ever-flowing moments whose continuous appearance and dizzying transformations within countless apparently separate minds, including “mine,” make up the infinite universe as it unfolds in Time. I am constructed, from haphazard “pieces” of the universe, a chance assemblage extracted and temporarily preserved (by those countless minds, including mine) from the universal transience and then arbitrarily assigned or declared an identity, an “I,” and given the name to which “I” answer.

One facet of Glass’s work is reminiscent of the “Student’s Notebook” feature of the old *Vedanta and the West* magazine. For example, how should one deal with the feelings of friends and family at a time when one is trying to see everything but God as illusory?

“It takes strength also, or skill as a form of practiced strength, to handle personal relationships impersonally, with detachment from and compassion for both our own inevitable feelings and the feelings of others. . . Our friends and loved ones want us to be motivated, and hopefully occasionally overpowered, by feelings; they’d like to think of us as passionate, which they equate with being human. . .”

And what do you do if the spirit is willing but the body is weak?

Expect nothing else. It wants to curl up under the delicious warm blankets and go back to sleep, and you’ll have to haul mercilessly its dead weight out into the cold, ignore its unvarying protests, dress it, attend to its needs and walk it over to the meditation room every morning for the rest of your life.

Glass can make walking to the meditation room sound like the beginning of a great adventure. And that’s not a bad thing to be reminded of. In fact, isn’t that the message of Vedanta? My friend the hermit and my friend the author aren’t so far apart, after all. □

2. Reflections of a Hangdog Vedantist

William Page

This is a response to P. Shneidre's "Why Did Vedanta Retreat?", which I had the privilege of reading in draft form.

I call this a response rather than a rebuttal, because I liked Mr. Shneidre's article and agree with pretty much everything he says.

Mr. Shneidre's criticisms are valid. If an established Vedanta center doesn't have a listed phone number, a sign, a bookstore, or adequate parking, something is wrong somewhere. We are, after all, an organization whose primary purpose, at least in the West, is the dissemination of ideas. You can't disseminate ideas if people can't find you.

It is also true that Buddhism has got the jump on us in terms of recruiting Western followers. In our defense, it can be argued that Buddhism has the Dalai Lama, and we don't. But generally we are fairly shy about promoting our ideas. The reasons for this are both historical and temperamental.

Most readers will be familiar with the anecdote about Swami Ramakrishnananda and the Christian who wanted to convert to Hinduism. Swami Ramakrishnananda advised against it. He used the analogy of a tree. If you uproot a tree from its native soil and replant it someplace else, it will take a good deal of time for it to put down roots and resume normal growth. But if you keep it rooted in its own soil, and just add some water and fertilizer, it will grow much faster and be much healthier.

This story indicates that Vedantists really believe it when we say that all religions are valid paths to God. It is neither wise nor desirable to convert others to our faith if they are perfectly happy in their own. Instead, as Vivekananda suggested, we should help the Christian to be a better Christian, the Hindu to be a better Hindu, the Buddhist to be a better Buddhist.

Historically, Vedanta has a tradition of not proselytizing, and this is one of the reasons why we tend to hide our light under a bushel. In addition, there has always been a tension between two opposing tendencies, which might for the sake of convenience be labeled activism and passivism.

Activism was the attitude of Swami Vivekananda, who seems to have had a horror of inactivity. Given that indolence is one of the banes of monastic life—and that *tamas*, at least in his time, was the predominant *guna* in the web of Indian life—he had a point. He was a whirlwind of focused energy, and an activist par excellence. Up, up, my boys, put your shoulders to the wheel! We want muscles of iron and nerves of steel! Work, work, work!

It makes an old guy like me get tired just thinking about it.

Passivism was the traditional Hindu way of accepting everything as the will of God. If everything happens by the will of God, we don't have to do anything.

God will do his own work, and if we think he needs us to help him, or if we think our efforts will make a blip of difference in the great cosmic scheme of things—why, that is hubris, and best abandoned.

We get a variation of this in the idea that Sri Ramakrishna does his own work, he “catches” the people he wants, and any effort on our part would be superfluous. He can bring droves of people flocking to our gates if he wants to. So we really don't have to do anything.

Needless to say, old guys like me find this attitude very appealing.

Now, there has always been tension between these two extremes. Both of them are easily satirized, and anything that can be so easily satirized is probably wrong. Obviously there is a middle ground which is far more sensible.

We don't have to go out banging on doors and haranguing people on street corners. On the other hand, it might be wise to list our phone number and put out a sign in case some poor wandering soul with an inclination toward Vedanta might pass by. It is perfectly true that Sri Ramakrishna does his own work, that he “catches” the people he wants and draws them to him. But if such a person shows up at our door only to find it locked and barred, Sri Ramakrishna is likely to be just a tad annoyed.

Aside from the historical reasons behind our reluctance to promote our religion, there is a temperamental factor. Many (maybe even most) Western Vedantists are shy, retiring types who are more preoccupied with their own spiritual growth than with revolutionizing the world. We like the “*atmano mokshartham*” (for one's own liberation) part of the Ramakrishna Mission motto, but are not so keen on the “*jagaddhitaya cha*” (for the good of the world) part. Many of us tend to be private people with an aversion to confrontation.

Both Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda would scold us for this. Sri Ramakrishna criticized cows who lay down passively and showed no grit when you touched their tails; and Swami Vivekananda was continually inveighing against indolence and sloth. Both would see our passivity as a manifestation of *tamas*. They would, most probably, but in politer terms, tell us to get off our duffs and be up and doing.

At the same time, they would probably not want us to go out banging on doors and haranguing people on street corners. We have an ideology that will not appeal to everybody, but will certainly appeal to some. Our job is not to shove it down people's throats, but to let people know it is available, to explain it clearly to those who inquire, and to facilitate deeper involvement for those who show interest.

And for sure we need to list our phone number and hang out a sign. □

Review Essay

“First: Do No Harm.”

Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion after September 11

by Bruce Lincoln

University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London

185 pp. Paperback \$13.00 2003

Steven F. Walker

The great merit of Bruce Lincoln's book is to demonstrate through close textual analysis that the language of religious fundamentalism—

“maximalism” in his terminology—pervades the texts associated with the al Qaeda terrorists and also—somewhat ironically—the responses of the American Christian Right to 9/11, whose “religious ideal” he finds equally maximalist, if Christian rather than Moslem (50). Rejecting the option to consider the matter as purely political, Lincoln asserts that the motives of the 9/11 terrorists “were intensely and profoundly religious,” embracing as they did “an extremely militant reformulation of maximalist currents within Islam.” (16)

In a larger context he goes on to criticize academic commentators who “often regard the religious side of conflicts like those in Sri Lanka or Northern Ireland as relatively unimportant or, alternatively, . . . deplore it as a debasement of all that is properly religious,” ignoring the fact that “all religions sanction, even enjoin, the use of violence under certain circumstances.” (73) He notes that political movements themselves often sanctify the use of violence through the creation of a new religious language suited to their purposes. Thus Robespierre's espousal of the cult of the goddess Reason and the worship of the Supreme Being resulted in a religious discourse that was, for Lincoln, not “accident or hyperbole,” the Reign of Terror being, so to speak, the mother of all modern terrorism. (87)

How Different are Secular and Religious Ideologies?

Indeed, in a tantalizing and teasing footnote Lincoln admits that for him “one of the most difficult of all questions is assessing the extent to which ‘secular’ ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—Marxism, anarchism, psychoanalysis, and the like—are significantly different from religious ideologies and to what extent the undeniable differences between these two modes of ideology are more superficial than substantive.” “These new ideologies,” he writes, “possess powerful mythic, ritual, and soteriological dimensions, whatever their position toward ‘religion’ per se. At the very least, we may thus be justified

in calling them ‘para-religious.’” (note 10, p. 129) He also reminds us, that “the greatest work ever written in the sociology of religions, Emile Durckheim’s *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) is, at its core, a discussion of how nationalism becomes the chief religion of a putatively secular, but only nontheistic modernity.” (63) But he leaves this tantalizing idea about the “para-religious” dimension of politics hanging, and devotes almost all of his attention to the question of the blatantly religious subtext of terrorism.

At this point one might well be moved to sigh, “Ah, religion! What crimes have been committed in thy name!” Unfortunately, that is more or less where Bruce Lincoln leaves us. He pins his hopes on “minimalist” versions of religion, whose eventual triumph he seems to champion without much enthusiasm. His lack of a positive perspective on religion in the future limits the value of his book to its critique of fundamentalist (maximalist) religion—still a most worthy topic, and one that is well executed.

Needed: Constant Reexamination in Depth

But one suspects that many modern people who would, if pressed, type themselves as religious, would find themselves disgruntled if they were then asked whether they were “minimalist” or “maximalist,” since neither the alternative of maximalism (too fanatic and intolerant) nor that of minimalism (too lukewarm and wishy-washy) would have much attraction for them. In fact, I would prefer to such terms the use of “traditionalism” to designate religion that bases itself on an impoverished and partial sense of its own tradition, and “progressive religion” to designate what has always been the characteristic of living faiths, i.e. the constant reexamination of their traditions in depth, in order to adapt them to the needs of the time without surrendering the core spiritual values they enshrine. (U.R. Anantha Murthy’s classic modern novel *Samskara* is a brilliant presentation of the conflict between traditionalist and progressive dimensions of a certain side of Hinduism.) But even “progressive” religion can prove to be a problem, since there is nothing more enthusiastic and expansionist than a “reformed” religion, as history has shown over and over again.

So what to do with religion? What demands should we make of it for the foreseeable future? It is probably reasonable to assume that, like art, politics and taxes, it will always be with us, in one form or another, and that the day will never dawn when everyone in the world will have become an enlightened secularist. I have three suggestions, and they may help give Lincoln’s critical analysis a broader intellectual perspective.

The first I borrow from the Hippocratic oath (or at least from what has been traditionally regarded as an oath originating with the Greek physician Hippocrates), whose most famous injunction is “first, do no harm” (in the Latin formulation, *primum non nocere*). Now, if religion may be considered as a form of healing, as a kind of spiritual therapy, both for society and the individual, it

would seem reasonable to apply to it the same injunction. Given that the long list of the crimes committed by religions and in religion's name over the centuries constitutes a discouraging illustration of how the noblest ideals can be brought to serve the basest impulses, we need to feel that we have a right to demand that religion today forswear the violence associated with crusades, inquisitions, jihads, communalism and bigoted intolerance. It is not too much to ask—not in an age when weapons of mass destruction are everywhere and easily available and will be increasingly so. Humanity has enough problems without fanning the flames of world destruction with rabidly intolerant religious enthusiasm. Thus the message for all sincerely religious people should be this: be enthusiastic (literally, let the divine manifest in you); feel deeply about your religion; but, first and foremost, *do no harm*. All human beings are your brothers and sisters; do no harm to them in the name of religion.

Progressive and Reforming Trends

If Bruce Lincoln's book suffers from the lack of a positive intellectual perspective on the problem of rethinking religion after September, 2001, it is perhaps because he seems to have ignored or underestimated progressive and reforming trends in India and particularly within Hinduism. He makes no mention of Gandhi, Badshah Khan, Vinoba Bhave, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi and many others who contributed to what one should not be too modest to call the most far-reaching reformulation and renovation of traditional religion anywhere in the modern world. But what is astonishing in this progressive and broadminded reformulation of religion, which is perhaps India's single greatest gift to the modern world, is the absence in it of sectarian intolerance and intellectual bigotry. Behind it lay the idea of the absolute rightness at the core of all sincere and intelligent religious struggle, and I believe that this idea is needed as a standard to which one must hold religion now and in the future. It involves not mere tolerance (often mixed with condescension or indifference), but positive acceptance of the essential truth of all ways of approaching the divine. Phrased colloquially in Ramakrishna's Bengali as "*jato mat, tato path*," it could be translated as "there are as many paths to the divine as there are human minds." This positive acceptance would extend not only to established faiths but also should include—and this is most important in the modern world where faith in the ultimate value of the individual should never be surrendered—the willingness to grant all our fellow human beings the right to approach the divine in their own (and often, to us, peculiar) ways. Of course, the first injunction still stands and serves as a caution: on condition that they do no harm to others.

Finally, a positive perspective on religion today must insist on what William James called "the varieties of religious experience" in a book of that title which ought to be seen along with Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (also published

in 1900) as the great intellectual event of the opening of the last century. Religion is not merely about how people think; it is also about what they experience. In James' formulation the great nineteenth century battle between science and religion has been replaced with a concern for the validity of experience and the validation of experience through experimentation in the area of religion as well. (The title of Gandhi's book *My Experiments With Truth* is, for all its simplicity, sophisticatedly modern when put in this perspective.) Is religion thus "scientific"? That is beside the point—so much in religious faith can neither be proved nor disproved. But what can be put to the test is the effect that religion has on people, and that can be studied scientifically, whether it makes them into crazy fanatics or into more compassionate and concerned world citizens. What people believe, in this perspective, is much less important than how they act—on whether their particular variety of religious experience, whatever it might be, has transformed them into compassionate individuals more deeply concerned with the well-being of all. This is the third standard to which we can hold religion—after September 11. □

All Have Their Relative Value

Replying to someone who asked if there is any truth in image worship, Holy Mother replied:

From time immemorial innumerable people have worshiped images and thereby attained spiritual knowledge. Do you want to deny this fact? Sri Ramakrishna never cherished any such parochial and one-sided view. Brahman exists everywhere. The prophets and incarnations are born to show the way to a benighted humanity. They give different instructions suited to different temperaments. There are many ways to realize the Truth. Therefore all these instructions have their relative value. Take, for instance, birds perched on the branches of a tree. They have different colors—white, black, yellow, red, etc. Their sounds are also different. But we say that these are the sounds of birds. We never designate a particular sound as that of birds and refuse to acknowledge the other sounds as such.

—*The Gospel of the Holy Mother* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1982), p. 20.

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Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely is a branch center of the Vedanta Society of Southern California and is part of the Ramakrishna Math & Mission, founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1897, with international headquarters at Belur Math, Kolkata, India.

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