

Editorial

Questions to Ponder

This is a good issue for displaying what it is to be a Vedantist in America. We have theoretical discussion (Atman/anatta), history long ago (Lalla) and history recent (Sister Gargi and Stuart Bush), the transforming power of love (Berryman) and the transforming presence of radical social activism (Sarada Math). Then the basic question breaks out again: What is it to be a Western Vedantist? Is it the same as being a convert to Hinduism?

My own view is responsive to what Sister Gayatriprana says on page 30, summarizing Swami Vivekananda's expressed opinion. The God of Vedanta is "both" the noumenal Ground-Reality ("a principle, not a person") and the phenomenal, the showing-reality, including human beings. But these "both" are actually the One Being. The gestures of the Dancer are nothing but the Dancer in motion. The gestures arise and pass away; they are indeed impermanent and in themselves insubstantial. But their substance is that of the Dancer, the only substance there is, (The Buddha of the Theravada, of course, did not say this, because he had abjured all metaphysics, refusing to be distracted from his focused vocation to understand the cause of suffering and the way to release from suffering.)

But Vivekananda enlarges on this idea that the world "is God" and "we ourselves are the personal Gods." Two or three important conclusions follow. We are, says Gayatriprana, "capable of running our lives spiritually without any organization or religious structure." This is a very challenging remark. Does this mean without privileged "castes and priests," without special individuals to whom extraordinary respect is shown, and on whom the devotee depends?

Does it mean that all persons are to be treated with equal respect? And therefore all persons are to be served, liberated socially, politically and economically, educated, healed, and encouraged to express the godness in themselves to their full capacity—and their capacity is not to be judged as less because of sex, race, nationality, class or caste—must we, in fact, do away with such systems of classifying people?

Does it mean that "Vedanta" as a philosophy, a matter of "principle," is not to be identified with any one particular religious culture of language, myth, dress, worship practice, etc.? This could leave open a welcome to many particular ways of expressing consciousness of the Divine or the Good. Or do we hold that "such an empowering worldview could not possibly depend on the traditional paraphernalia of religion"? Is the spiritual quest quite different from "religion"?

Let us meditate further on all these matters.

—Beatrice Bruteau

The Quest for a Common Ground

William Page

“I, . . . O bhikkhus, do not see a soul-theory, in the acceptance of which there would not arise grief, lamentation, suffering, distress, and tribulation. . . O bhikkhus, when neither self nor anything pertaining to self can truly and really be found, this speculative view: ‘The universe is that Atman (Soul): I shall be that after death, permanent, abiding, ever-lasting, unchanging, and I shall exist as such for eternity’—is it not wholly and completely foolish?”¹

With these words, the Buddha sounds the death-knell for any possible doctrinal rapprochement between Buddhism and Vedanta. For, as Dr. Helmuth von Glasenapp observes, “The Atman doctrine of the Vedanta and the Dharma theory of Buddhism exclude each other. The Vedanta tries to establish an Atman as the basis of everything, whilst Buddhism maintains that everything in the empirical world is only a stream of passing Dharmas (impersonal and evanescent processes) which therefore has to be characterized as Anatta, i.e. being without a persisting self, without independent existence.”²

. . . The denial of an imperishable Atman is common ground for all systems of Hinayana [Theravada] as well as Mahayana, and there is, therefore, no reason for the assumption that Buddhist tradition, unanimous on that point, has deviated from the original doctrine of the Buddha. If the Buddha, contrary to the Buddhist tradition, had actually proclaimed a transcendental Atman, a reminiscence of it would have been preserved somehow by one of the older sects. . . He who advocates such a revolutionary conception of the Buddha's teachings, has also the duty to show evidence how such a complete transformation started and grew, suddenly or gradually. But none of those who advocate the Atta-theory [atta = Pali for atman] has taken pains to comply with that demand.”³

The *anatta* (literally, no-soul, no-self) doctrine is one of the central teachings of Buddhism. It is one of the three characteristics of existence: *anicca*, *dukkha*,

1. *Alagaddupama Sutta*, *Majjhima Nikaya*, vol. I, Pali Text Society edition, pp. 137-138. Quoted in Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), pp. 58-59.

2. Helmuth von Glasenapp, *Vedanta and Buddhism*, Wheel Series No. 2 (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1978), p. 4.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

anatta—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, insubstantiality.⁴ When the Buddha analyzes the individual human being, he finds “only a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies, which may be divided into five groups or aggregates”⁵: matter, sensations, perceptions, mental formations (or mental activities, headed by volition), and consciousness.⁶ “They are all impermanent, all constantly changing. . . They are not the same for two consecutive moments. . . They are in a flux of momentary arising and disappearing.”⁷ Nowhere does the Buddha find any kind of permanent self or soul, whether individual or transpersonal.

Consciousness and Self

Vedantists may argue that consciousness is a kind of self. We tend to identify consciousness with Brahman, assuming that it is a unitary matrix or substratum which provides the basis for the world of multiplicity.

But the Buddhist view is quite different. “The Buddha declared in unequivocal terms that consciousness depends on matter, sensation, perception, and mental formations, and that it cannot exist independently of them.”⁸ In Buddhism, consciousness is transitory in nature and plural in form. It would be more accurate to call it “flashes of consciousness.” Each flash of consciousness depends on the sense organ that produced it. So we read of eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, etc.⁹ These “consciousnesses” seem to consist solely of sensations, perceptions, and mental formations, aggregates which the Buddha has already mentioned. To make them a separate category seems redundant.

4. Bhikkhu Khantipalo, *Buddhism Explained* (Bangkok: Mahamakut Rajavidyalaya Press, 1986), p. 74.

5. Rahula, p. 20.

6. Rahula, pp. 20-25, and Narada Mahathera, *The Buddha and His Teachings* (Vajirama, Colombo, 1980), p. 100. No publisher given.

See also Mahasi Sayadaw, *The Great Discourse on Not-Self (Anattalakkhana Sutta)* (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1996), pp. 4, 18, 41-42, 46-48, 56-57. The aggregates (*rupa, vedana, sanna, sankhara, vinnana* in Pali) are translated variously by different sources.

7. Rahula, p. 25.

8. Ibid.

9. Narada, p. 698, and Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translations* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), p. 183.

Now, we may admit that the Buddha denied the existence of any kind of soul, self, or Atman. But why does he think that accepting any sort of soul-theory must necessarily lead to grief, lamentation, and suffering? Obviously he regarded all such theories as false. He may have reasoned that anybody who accepts a false theory is ultimately headed for trouble.

But more than that, even if a soul-theory were true, if a person strongly believes in it, it becomes an object of clinging; and the whole purpose of Buddhism is to eradicate clinging. Why? Because clinging, like grasping, is an adjunct of craving (*tanha*); and craving, according to Buddhism, is the root cause of all suffering.¹⁰

Not Clinging to Views

Buddhism is unique among the world's religions in teaching that we should not cling to views. Indeed, clinging to views—opinions, theories, beliefs, concepts—is regarded as perhaps the most subtle form of clinging. Most remarkably of all, Buddhism insists that one should not cling even to Buddhism. In a famous parable, the Buddha compares his teachings to a raft, which one uses to cross a river but then abandons once he has reached the farther shore.¹¹

It should be clear from the foregoing that Buddhism—and here I am talking only about Theravada Buddhism—is an extremely austere form of *jnana*. In Vedanta, we believe in detachment, but at least our world-view leaves us the concept of the Atman to hang onto. Buddhism strips away even that.

All of this creates a problem for Vedantists. With Swami Vivekananda, we tend to admire the Buddha and believe that he was an Incarnation of God—or at least an enlightened being. If he was enlightened, we reason, his metaphysical beliefs must be true. But we also believe in the Atman. If the Buddha was enlightened, but did not believe in the Atman, then the Atman cannot exist. If the Atman exists, but the Buddha did not believe in it, then the Buddha cannot have been enlightened. So either the Buddha was not enlightened, or the Atman doesn't exist. We can't have it both ways.

This dilemma explains why some Vedantists and Vedantic sympathizers have tried to prove, despite massive evidence to the contrary, that the Buddha believed in the Atman. A Sri Lankan authority, Dr. Walpola Rahula, gets so exercised by this effort that he devotes eleven pages to refuting it.¹² The Buddha

10. Narada, p. 322.

11. Khantipalo, pp. 158-159.

12. Rahula, pp. 55-66.

was an extremely articulate individual. If he had believed in the Atman, and especially if he had thought that belief in it was essential for deliverance, he would have told us so.

But there is a solution to the dilemma, and I believe it is in the spirit of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. For people of a certain temperament, like the Buddha and his followers, belief in the Atman may not be essential. Perhaps they can attain deliverance without it; for them it may even be an obstacle. For others, like us, belief in the Atman may be essential. Perhaps it will hasten our deliverance; without it, we may stumble and fall.

It's a little like the difference between jnana yoga and bhakti yoga. They appear to be mutually exclusive, and based on different concepts of the nature of God. But in fact they are designed for different personality types. Despite the conceptual differences, they are simply different paths to the same goal.

“Ah,” the discerning reader will object, “but jnana yoga and bhakti yoga do not lead to the same goal. Jnana yoga leads to the realization of the impersonal Brahman. Bhakti yoga leads to the realization of the personal God. There's a difference.”

Two Ways of Viewing the Same Thing

There is, but Vedanta reconciles the difference by saying that the impersonal Brahman and the personal God are two aspects of the same noumenon. Put a bit differently, they are two ways of viewing the same thing.

In the same way, Vedanta and Buddhism look at the same reality, but they see it in different ways. Vedanta looks at it and sees oneness; Buddhism looks at it and sees multiplicity. Vedanta sees a fullness; Buddhism sees emptiness. Vedanta sees one Self everywhere; Buddhism sees no Self anywhere. Vedanta, at least in its Advaita form, is a monistic absolutism; Buddhism, at least in its Theravada form, is a pluralistic relativism.

These two viewpoints seem irreconcilable. The spiritual ideal is often compared to a mountain peak, which different climbers approach by different paths. The paths may be different, but we expect the climbers to see the same view once they get to the top.

But what if the summit is not a single peak, but a vast tableland? One climber approaches it from one end, and says, “Ah, the summit is rocky. But it stretches off into the distance, and I can't see what it's like beyond my range of vision.” Another climber approaches it from the opposite end, and says, “Ah, the summit is sandy.” But he too can't see the whole picture. A third climber

approaches it from one of the sidepaths, and says, “Ah, the summit is grassy.” Different climbers, different paths, different views of the summit: but it’s all the same summit.

In the same way, the end of the spiritual quest may not be a single point, but a vast continuum.

The Atman and anatta doctrines are opposing concepts which cannot be reconciled. They are imperfect tools which Vedantists and Buddhists use in their struggle to attain a common goal: direct intuitive perception of reality.

Anybody who tries to use concepts to attain intuitive insight is a little like a person who takes a ladder along when he tries to climb a mountain. The ladder weighs the climber down. But it helps him to get over some of the rough spots, and his faith in it may give him the courage he needs to complete the climb.

Again, a well contains water. One man lowers a bucket into the well, and draws up the water. Another lowers a pitcher, and does the same. The water is generous and obliging: it doesn’t care whether you draw it up in a bucket or a pitcher; it conforms itself to the contours of both. Whether you get at it through the Atman or anatta, the water is the same.

So if God is big enough to include all gods, if the tableland is big enough to include rocks and sand and grass, and if the water is kind enough to come up whether you go after it with a bucket or a pitcher, surely valid religious experience can be attained both by those who believe in the Atman and by those who believe in its opposite.

Beyond Concepts

Concepts are not ultimate in spiritual life. They can inspire us and help us to attain our goal, but the goal is always experiential. If they are imperfect tools for attaining insight into reality, they are also imperfect tools for interpreting that reality once we’ve perceived it. When we try to describe that reality, language fails us. We are forced either to refer back to the concepts we’re familiar with, or to invent new ones. These are almost always inadequate, mere dim and distorted reflections of the experience itself. To mistake concepts for the reality they are struggling to express is to mistake the finger for the moon it points to.

Vedanta and Buddhism have opposing concepts and disparate doctrines, but they both urge us to strive for direct experience. It is here that they find a common ground. □

The Convent, Sarada Math

Elva Linnea Nelson

[Excerpted from a forthcoming biography of Swami Akhilananda, founder of the Vedanta Society of Providence (1928) and the Ramakrishna-Vedanta Society of Massachusetts (1941)]

The searching, observing eyes of Swami Vivekananda saw a great deal of America while he was here in the 1890s. He wrote in a letter meant for his brother disciples: “Here you have a wonderful manifestation of grit and power—what strength, what practicality, and what manhood!”¹ Swami Vivekananda couldn’t say enough good things about American women of the late 19th century. “I am really struck to see the women here. How gracious the Divine Mother is on them! Most wonderful women, these!”²

In 1894 he wrote an impassioned letter to one of his brother disciples, Swami Shivananda: “Hence we must first build a Math (convent) for Mother. First Mother and Mother’s daughters, then Father and Father’s sons—can you understand this? . . . To me, Mother’s grace is a hundred thousand times more valuable than Father’s. Mother’s grace, Mother’s blessings are all paramount to me. . .”³

The Unique Greatness of Holy Mother

Swami Vivekananda wanted a convent, a Math, for women. Of all the disciples of Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda was the first to understand the unique greatness of the Holy Mother and how important she was for the regeneration of India and the world. Swami’s idea was that women’s monasticism in modern India would grow with Holy Mother as its center. Men’s monasticism was already growing centered around Ramakrishna.

Interesting is the conversation Swami Vivekananda had, after returning to India, with one of his admirers, Saratchandra Chakravarty, who noted all that was

1. Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, Mayavati memorial ed. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), VI, 272.

2. *Ibid.*, 272. He could also admonish: “Always remember that Sri Ramakrishna came for the good of the world—not for name or fame. Spread only what he came to teach...” warning them not to make a sect out of Ramakrishna. (*Ibid.*, 274)

3. *Ibid.*, VII, 484.

said. Swami Vivekananda felt very free with him and vice versa. The place of their talks was Belur Math and the year, 1901. Swami Vivekananda:

“ . . .with Holy Mother as the centre of inspiration a Math is to be established on the eastern bank of the Ganges.”⁴

Then he went on to say: “It is very difficult to understand why in this country so much difference is made between men and women whereas the Vedanta declares that one and the same conscious Self is present in all beings. You always criticize the women, but say, what have you done for their uplift?

. . . binding them by hard rules, the men have turned the women into mere manufacturing machines! If you do not raise the women who are the living embodiments of the Divine Mother, don't think you have any other way to rise.”⁵

But the disciple had his doubts and his own opinions. It would seem as though women were a snare and a delusion.⁶

Women Needed to Be Raised Up

Swami Vivekananda, however, felt that women were competent for knowledge and devotion. His response was that women were denied access, in a period of degeneration, to the study of the Vedas. This was at a time when the priests considered some other castes incompetent for Vedic knowledge. In the Vedic or Upanishadic age only a few women like Maitreyi, Gargi and others took their places as rishis in discussing about Brahman with great skill and were revered. Vivekananda felt that if such ideal women were entitled to spiritual knowledge, why not the women of today? He also felt that where there was no regard, no appreciation of women, and where they lived in sadness, that family or country couldn't rise in the world. Women needed to be raised up first, so therefore a convent or Math should be started for them which would be ideal in every way.⁷

Finally, after further doubting, the disciple became curious about Vivekananda's plan.

His reply: “On the other side of the Ganges a big plot of land would be acquired, where unmarried girls or Brahmacharini widows will live; devout married ladies will also be allowed to stay now and then. Men will have no concern with this Math. The elderly Sadhus of the Math will manage the affairs of this Math from a distance.” He continued to elaborate on different aspects of

4. *Talks with Swami Vivekananda*, 2nd ed. (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama 1946), 256.

5. *Ibid.*, 257

6. *Ibid.*, 257.

7. *Ibid.*, 258.

what the Math would be like, the training it would have for the inmates. “Spirituality, sacrifice, and self-control will be the motto of the pupils of this Math, and service. . . the vow of their life. In view of such ideal lives, who will not respect and have faith in them? . . . To what straits the strictures of local usages have reduced the women of this country, rendering them lifeless and inert, you could only understand if you visited the Western countries. You alone are responsible for this miserable condition of the women, and it rests with you also to raise them again. Therefore, I say, get to work.”⁸

What feeling Swami Vivekananda had for the condition of women in India! He knew a high ideal had to be established because in women as in men there is this longing for knowledge and devotion. Dedicated women would be educators, nurses, doctors, etc., and would serve their communities and other women wherever they could. But Swami Vivekananda's vision of a convent for women would have to wait.

“The Chance of a Lifetime”

In 1951 a move was started to realize it. While Swami Akhilananda was returning to the United States from India in early 1951, he stopped at Gretz, France to see his brother disciple, Swami Siddheswarananda. While there he received a letter from Swami Saswatananda, Treasurer of Belur Math, about a piece of land that was for sale, “a nice garden house at Dakshineswar.” The description of the land and the buildings on it showed it to be ideal for a women’s Math. As Swami Saswatananda wrote: “If you could have seen it, you would have given the advance money to purchase (this land) without any hesitation while you were here. Please don’t give the chance of letting it fall into others’ hands. Whoever will see it will tell the same thing. . . It is the chance of a lifetime. . . Let our patrimony be blessed by trying to give status and responsibility and due share to mothers. Sri Sri Thakur (Ramakrishna), Ma and Swamiji, by making you an instrument, have created unimaginably the stone Temple at Belur Math.⁹ Similarly, this work also will be done through you.”¹⁰

At the same time, another senior monk of the Order, Swami Prabodhananda, also wrote to Swami Akhilananda: “This property is very inexpensive. We have to sign an agreement at once; we might lose it if we wait. Please send the cable and reserve it. Saswatananda and I have looked into all the details. My feeling is this—Thakur made you do the granite temple (at Belur) and now he wants you to

8. Ibid., 261-262.

9. Swami Akhilananda’s disciple Helen Rubel had donated nearly one million dollars for the construction of the temple.

10. Swami Saswatananda, letter to Swami Akhilananda, 13 February, 1951.

do the ideal Strimath (women's math), and he will. You are blessed. Please do not delay even for a day; otherwise it can go to someone else. . . Thakur has given us exactly the place we wanted."

"Is Swamiji Inferior to Sankara?"

Swami Akhilananda did not need to be coaxed. He himself was adamant about a math for the women. He writes in a timely letter to Belur Math:

We should certainly start to carry out the plan and wishes of Sri Sri Swamiji regarding women's institutions on the centenary of Sri Sri Holy Mother. The world very badly needs this work.

Yes. Women's Math should be established as Sri Sri Swamiji wanted in his rules for the monks, as women will gain experience in spiritual life, karma yoga, and public relations. Although they need help from the senior leaders of the Math, the three important leaders should be solely responsible for their activities.

The elderly ladies who are disciples of Sri Sri Mother should be given Sannyasa immediately by our revered President. Of course, if he kindly considers that it is better to do so at the time of the Centenary Celebration of the Holy Mother, we must obey his wish and decision as to the matter of time, as he is our leader of the Order.

Brahmacharya and Sannyasa should be given to the deserving trained women devotees who are living the dedicated life in our Mission institutions. I understand some of our Swamis feel that Sannyasa should not be given to women, as Sankara did not give this to them. Is Sri Sri Swamiji inferior to Sankara? It seems to me some of our Swamis are audacious enough to think that we have to follow Sankara's tradition, while Sri Swamiji explicitly wanted that women should be Brahmacharins and Sannyasins, as he wanted to start a women's Math parallel to the Belur Math for the monks. . .

Sri Sri Swamiji explicitly wanted that the women should manage their own institutions. According to Swamiji, monks were asked to manage the women's institutions from a distance until they were in a position to handle their own affairs. I feel women are getting ready to take care of their own institutions. Sri Sri Swamiji could see far ahead of time so he advised the monks to allow the women to work for themselves.¹¹

Swami Akhilananda made everything abundantly clear. He concluded his letter by recalling that Brahmacharya and Sannyasa had been given by Swami Vivekananda and Holy Mother to several women devotees.

11. Undated letter of Swami Akhilananda to Belur Math.

Many letters were written by Swami Saswatananda to Swami Akhilananda, requesting that he send money towards the purchase of this property for the monastic quarters for the women. Other legal questions had to be settled. In a letter of December 31, 1951, Saswatananda wrote: "Hope you are getting better by the grace of the Holy Mother. When you feel better and stronger, please engage yourself whole-heartedly for the responsibility you have undertaken for the welfare of the women—this prayer is coming always from the heart of everyone of us. I'm very much relieved to know from the cable and letter that you are 'out of danger.' When you become active, please jump into the work taking the name of Sri Sri MA. I firmly believe that this work will be done by you."

"Thakur Earmarked You for This Purpose"

Swami Akhilananda sent money from time to time. Swami Saswatananda wrote on December 26, 1952: "I was waiting for your check after I got your cable and the letter. . . It was great that you could send this money. No matter how anxious we are, when the time comes things will happen smoothly and miraculously. Thakur earmarked you for this purpose. He arranged everything for His own huge temple; now how can he cause any problem during Mother's memorial? That will never happen."

From India, letter would follow letter. In one of October 29, 1953 Swami Saswatananda wrote: "I understand you are trying hard for the funds for the Women's Math. . . Pray the 'Four Forces' [Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Swami Vivekananda and Swami Brahmananda] be on your side." Again on the 18th of November, Swami Saswatananda urged Swami Akhilananda to send money for the women's Math. On March 20, 1954 he sent another letter to Swami Akhilananda: "Please get involved a little more intensely now. . . We could not collect money in this country. . . I do not think any swami in America will be of any help." A letter of Swami Saswatananda to Swami Akhilananda, dated May 11, 1954 discloses: "At present that property is listed in your name, Satyan Maharaj's name and Prlya Maharaj's name. . . If we cannot start women's Math this year at least by December, we would let go a unique historic occasion without being able to make a permanent memorial to Holy Mother."

On June 7, 1954 Saswatananda wrote: "Abani Maharaj (Swami Prabhavananda) told us that he will try to get some help for the women's Math." At last, on the 22nd of October, 1954 Saswatananda wrote to Swami Akhilananda: "Finally with your great personal efforts 'Ladies' have a place of their own to stay. Sri Sri Thakur is doing his work through you." Swami Akhilananda was able to send forty thousand dollars (\$40,000.00), the gift of

Miss Esther Harrington of Providence, one of his devotees, for the women's Math.¹²

The consecration ceremony for the new monastic quarters for women was held on December 2nd, 1954.¹³ Sarala Devi was the new head of this women's Math. She had served the Holy Mother. Her new name would be Pravrajika Bharatiprana. Swami Saswatananda wrote on the 21st of July, 1954: "Everybody likes this link of her with the Holy Mother." Many women celebrated the consecration. "About three and one-half thousand women got *prasad*," wrote Swami Saswatananda. "The nuns arranged everything by themselves. . . At present ten of them are living there."

Harmonizing Secular and Spiritual Development

For the Sarada Math, another legal step was needed. *Samvit*, the semi-yearly publication of Sri Sarada Math, #19, March 1989, states: "In 1960 the Trustees of Sri Sarada Math founded the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Association, registered under Act XXI of 1960, with headquarters at Dakshineswar. The General Report of the Sarada Math and Mission states: 'The object of the Mission is to carry on educational, cultural, charitable and similar activities among women and children, irrespective of caste, creed, colour or nationality. Thereby, the Mission is trying to bring about a kind of harmonization between secular and spiritual development, specially among the women of India.'" Since that time, the nuns of the Sarada Math and the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission have expanded their work in India and abroad. They frequently conduct retreats in Europe and the U. S. where they sometimes lecture at Vedanta Centers.

The work and contributions by Swami Akhilananda and other swamis in the West for Sarada Math are not generally known. With smiles all over his face, Swami Akhilananda announced at the annual meeting of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society in Boston in 1955 that money had been collected for a women's convent, Sri Sarada Math, in India. He said several swamis had donated money, but never mentioned what he had sent. It was as his cousin, Shirish Chandra Sanyal, said of him: that he never cared for name and fame, that he was truly detached from the results of his work.

At times during his Sunday lectures Swami Akhilananda would speak of Holy Mother, whom he used to see frequently while going to college in Calcutta. He used to say that if there was anything good in him it was due to those great personalities—Holy Mother, Swami Brahmananda, Swami Premananda, and others whom he had had the privilege to know and serve. □

12. Told by Swami Sarvagatananda to the author.

13. Swami Saswatananda, letter to Swami Akhilananda, Nov. 22.

The Grace of Being in Love

Larry Berryman

We live in an age that wants, in accord with its post-Enlightenment orthodoxy, an arguable, rational exposition of everything. I respect that, as far as it goes, but it only goes so far. Like most of you, I have made that youthful study of one-eyed, two-eyed and even ‘third-eyed’ philosophies—have read Plato and Kant, Wittgenstein and Sartre, Confucius and the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and *How to Get On in the God Business!* Yet even today I meet few fellow Vedantists.

For those with a mind to match, the system of the Vedanta is a philosophy *sans pareil*. It is also a psychology and a variety of practices. But in my experience that counts for less than the personality, the wisdom, the humor and the compassion of its Exemplar: a God-man who lived this wisdom.

How do we talk about our spiritual convictions? They may be shaky; and why not? The lover always feels inadequate beside the love-object. That is the measure of the love. In a 24-carat human love affair, each is overwhelmed by the grace that the beloved condescends to be loved by someone like me, by me.

God’s Love Surprises Us

And isn’t that the strange and elevating experience of each of us: that the Master has, by his grace, stopped his hired carriage not at the biggest house on the street but at our door? The *Gospel* by M. is full of such visits; grand houses, yes, but mean houses too. And can any of us doubt that the Master knows what he is doing? He dusts away our shabby doubts. Just as our human loves surprise us, God’s love surprises us, brings out the best in us and, on sober reflection, must overwhelm us. My house is not worthy of You. But it is. It must be, because here You are. The 17th century English mystic George Herbert (1593-1633) expressed this to perfection in his poem “Love”:

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lacked anything.
“A guest,” I answer’d, “worthy to be here”;
 Love said, “You shall be he.”

“I the unkind, ungrateful? ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.”
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
“Who made the eyes but I?”
“Truth Lord, but I have marr’d them; let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.”
“And know you not,” says Love, “who bore the blame?”
“My dear, then I will serve.”
“You must sit down,” says Love, “and taste My meat.”
So I did sit and eat.

If I am asked why I am a Vedantist, I tactfully fall back on the appeal of the breadth of that Vedantic philosophy; but between you and me, I fell in love. Questions may remain unanswered, doubts be shelved. I picture the Master as M. one night observed him, pacing back and forth like a lion; and I see him eagerly accepting a pice-worth of simple sweets from a penniless devotee. I see him calling out across the rooftops of Kolkata for the disciples he believed would come, and like any parent of a child, or lover of a lover, I ache that he should suffer such unfulfilled longing. We know something of longing. He tells us that not only do we need God's love but that he too longs for our devotion.

We know when we fall in love because the joy is ours unquestionably, but so is the realization that now we are peculiarly vulnerable. We must be worth this newfound love; be careful of his or her reputation; and be bound, like it or not, to suffer every slight or disappointment or real tragedy that befalls him or her. Yet most of all, love demands love from us, and how demanding this is.

The Best in Us Recognizes Itself

I grew up in a tradition which taught me that Christ himself was as sad, long-faced and humorless as the rest of the multitude of saints. The injunction to “love” such painful characters struck me, frankly, as absurd. No doubt the picture I gained of Christ and the saints says more about the warp of human nature of religious biographers and clerics, past and present, but would you want these characters at your table, let alone your party? I knew that I wouldn’t, but I continued into my twenties to read comparative religion and especially the lives of the mystics. When I first encountered *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by M., I simply knew that the looking was over. Love is a word for it—but it only means our capitulation to the most beautiful, the most attractive, the most desirable. The best in us recognizes itself writ large.

The writer and Vedantist Christopher Isherwood admitted the virtual impossibility of making credible and engrossing fiction from the character of a good person or a saint. The devil has all the best tunes. And how often the good

strikes us as dull, banal, priggish and in no way attractive. Something of that is our fault. But here in the *Gospel* is an historically recent life, more incredible and more engrossing than fiction or drama or poetry, even by Goethe, Tolstoy or Balzac.

Perhaps this has been your experience? Perhaps it has also been your experience that in the first flush of enthusiasm you wanted to share it with others? And could it also be our shared experience that some things are better kept close; that it may be best not to wear one's own (or one's Beloved's) heart on one's sleeve? Is this why Vivekananda spread Sri Ramakrishna's message but not his name? Possibly he felt that those who are profoundly moved by these teachings would surely look for their wellspring and rejoice all the more to make what is for each of us a personal discovery.

Not every person is going to be a *bhakta*, but each devotee will want his or her life to exemplify to a greater and greater degree the optimism, compassion, equal-sightedness, detachment, renunciation, dignity and playful good humor. . . the list could go on. . . that in its Supreme Manifestation makes spirituality and "the good life" for once and for all our time absolutely attractive.

Most people who are in love are rather attractive, are better company; even the more angular ones are for the time being a bit nicer to others. We don't need to know the name and address of their lover to register that, and to respond to it. Our devotion must surely be equally transforming, equally likely to touch others' lives. We don't need "to tell it like it is" but to live it and let the music of God's grace be heard by others (as we have heard it) played if only on such instruments as we are ourselves. □

Music of the Gentle Rain

Music of the gentle rain
Has no separate drops at all,
Just falls lightly over the land
And sounds the play of comfort,
As if nature Herself knew our
 unholy day,
And plays for us of Love.
Nothing that went ahead now counts.

—M. G. Corson

Letters of Sister Gargi

(continued from the previous issue)

[Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke) author of the six-volume Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries and other books, passed away in January of last year at the age of 91. Swami Yogeshananda, who heads the Vedanta Center of Atlanta, has given kind permission to American Vedantist to publish excerpts from letters he received from Sr. Gargi over a period of 32 years.]

Feb. 18, 1977

Thanks for your letter, which I do not deserve. You can very truthfully tell Prof. Carl Jackson that from your personal experience Mrs. MLB is a worse correspondent than he ever dreamed of being. Therefore she forgives him out of a deep fellow-feeling. (He and I are certainly going to have a lively correspondence!). . .

April 15, 1979

Belur Math

. . . India is as enchanting and elevating as ever—needless to say. I arrived on Feb. 19 with a cold: but that was the fault of San Francisco, not of India. Now I am in good health and surviving climate, food and everything else, including traveling about. I have been to Lucknow to see Swami Shantaswarupananda, who is fine; then to Rajkot via Delhi and Bombay. (You will have heard all about the goings-on at Rajkot. It was a grand affair.) Then back to Delhi for a quiet visit with a friend, and now back home to Belur Math, where I hope to stay in uninterrupted joy and peace until sometime in May. Then back to work!!!!

April 5, 1980

In *The New Yorker* a few weeks ago there was a cartoon of an octogenarian being greeted at the Gates by St. Peter and exclaiming joyfully, “Oh, goody! It looks just like the Exposition of 1893!” I do hope it will.

. . . Mrs. Soulé is bedridden now but still in wonderful spirits—all things considered. A very fine and congenial nurse cares for her 16 hours a day (8 p.m.—12 noon) every day, and the rest of the time one devotee or another feels privileged to pitch in. She will be so glad to get out of her burdensome body! But when she does there will be a very big hole on this side of things!

Feb. 22, 1981

. . . Yes, I think we have exhausted our closing salutations. By now we know that we are one another's in THEM and only in THEM and wholly in THEM. No need to go on saying it. So: Yours, Gargi

June 14, 1982

. . . About the book. One reason I was going to write to you was to tell you that IT IS FINISHED!!!! Can you believe it? Well—don't. It is really just the hard part that is finished. Now come (later in October) discussions with

. . . Swamis in India, adjustments, corrections, rewritings, etc. etc.—everything that will make it press-ready. But I have now written all I want to write. That is like having climbed Mt. Everest and resting a while at the summit. I still have to get back home. The English chapters turned out to be five in number. One for the fall of 1895; two for the spring of 1896; and two for the fall of 1896. I have probably been too long-winded—but there it is. It can be cut, which is easier than enlarging. It is OUR English part—and I hope you will like it.

Mar 9, 1984

. . . It seems that they don't put illustrations in the books that are distributed in India—don't ask me why.

Dec. 19, 1985

. . . Yes, Swamiji uses the word consciousness variously, and it is indeed sometimes confusing. I don't remember if I ever attempted to explain it. Perhaps not, as I have tried to avoid interpreting Swamiji more than absolutely necessary—as God knows, if I understand what he is saying, then anyone can understand it! And if I don't, then the least said the better! However, to explain or not to explain this “consciousness” business also needs further thought. Thanks for pointing it out.

As for the word convent—well, whatever your Catholic friends may say, the word has come (in common usage, not just in the Vedanta movement) to mean a monastery for women, or an establishment of nuns, and there it is. But I shall bear the true meaning in mind when preparing a new edition. Thanks again. Now let me get to your other questions:

Yes, the last published issue of *The Voice of India* was dated November 1946.

In the 1950s (starting in 1953) Swami Ashokananda thought of reviving the magazine and had us (an editorial board) prepare an issue (well over 100 pages) every two months, with a strictly observed deadline (I'll never forget it!) That went on for six years. Because of working on the New Discovery books, I dropped out around 1955 or '56, but the magazine work continued through 1958, when Swami called a halt. He did not think the trial issues came up to the desired standard. There were, however, some good articles in that private project. Yes,

the copies (two copies per issue—no Xerox in those days—five issues a year) are stashed away. We have no plans for them at present. There are also many many pre-*Voice of India* trial issues. I think, all in all, the Society here probably has dozens of well-researched, well-written articles rotting away on aging paper. I don't want to think about it, and even more, I don't want to do anything about it.

Aug. 6, 1988

Just a short note to thank you for your letter and your further report upon various goings-on. How fine it is that people like Carl Jackson and George Williams have an on-going interest in Vedanta. And what a pity that Joseph Campbell never seemed to catch on to it—or did he and keep it a secret? Did you by any chance happen to see his TV series with Bill Moyers? It was called “The Power of Myth” and ran in May and June, I think. It was tremendously popular and created a wild run on the book based on it. The series contained a great deal of Vedanta philosophy, BUT he never once mentioned Sri Ramakrishna or Vivekananda (possibly so as not to seem biased or sectarian). Fussing over this, I ask myself—what if he had mentioned [those two] and had thereby created a demand for Vivekananda's writings—where could anyone find them? . . .

May 10, 1991

. . . Perhaps the very essence of patience is learning to know it is not in my hands. Nothing is. What a relief, really!

May 29, 1991

. . . Swami Chidrupananda is doing all right. He has nursing around the clock, but is not, I think, about to leave us in the very near future. He has Parkinson's disease, which, of course, is progressive, but I do not think it is a terminal disease. It is just a horrible one. But the Swami, I understand, is in a wonderful state of mind and spirit. As how could he not be after the life he has led!!!

April 27, 1992

. . . Swami [Ashokananda] used to say that I should write about him when I had finished all else (when does that time come?!) Anyhow I have had this project in my mind ever since he left us—or since his body left us. You were close to him and dear to him. Can you share with me your memories? You know as well as I the incidents that reveal his love, compassion, greatness, strength—oh, so much!! Things he said that reveal his methods of work, his originality, his ideas. . .

There is no hurry about this, as my plate is currently full. But perhaps time is running out for both of us—which is not (for me) a depressing thought at all—but no doubt the sooner one does things the better (at any age).

Am I asking too much? I only pray that I can fulfil Swami's request to me while I still have some small brain and energy left. God help me! You, please, help me too!!

May 7, 1992

. . . I doubt that that silly ban [that only the lives of the First Disciples may be published] will be lifted in our lifetimes. And when it is lifted, then memoirs and biographical sketches will not be vying for first appearance, just as today they don't do so in regard to the first generation of swamis. It will all be one big feast, prepared by different hands.

. . . It is as though Swami himself were nudging me, no, pushing me, to get going. From now on I shall flatly refuse all requests to do other writing or editing. Once my current jobs are done, I shall start the sorting-out of material, with constant prayers to Swami in my heart. I am starting to pray to him right now!

April 3, 1993

. . . I have come to the conclusion that I will never be able to write a decent, living biography of Swami Ashokananda. But it has come to me that I should let him tell it in his own way—living in the pages. I have so many notes—both my own and those of others. So many notes of talks to intimate groups in the “back office” at the Old Temple, of his talks at Annual Meetings, and so on. He shines through all this material. I think if I just (in my old old age, that is, in a year or two) gather it together with a minimum of editing, it will make an invaluable book. And of course there should be a biographical sketch, and the tributes of devotees, such as you have sent to me. Well, it is a thought.

May 24, 2003

. . . I have been afraid of the judgment on the book [*A Heart Poured Out*] of Swami's other disciples. Invariably their view of Swami is different from mine, and almost invariably there will be contention. But not so in your case, and I am extremely consoled and happy.

I do not think any of us can paint a true (and certainly not a full) picture of Swami. He was so vast and so far beyond the comprehension of even the best of us!

I don't know why he wanted me to write about him, but I feel sure it was for my own good. He said to do it after I had finished my work for Swamiji. I think he wanted to keep me busy. Trying to write about him has done just that, in the best of ways for me and has kept me out of the slough of *tamas*, into which I can so easily fall, given an idle day.

Another book is coming up, consisting of the sporadic journal I kept during my twenty or so years with Swami. It will be a sort of close-up view of him. I'll send you a copy this coming fall. □

Totally Devoted to Vedanta: Stuart Bush (1916–2005)

Swami Shantarupananda

Stuart Bush, President of the Vedanta Society of Portland, Oregon since 1960, passed away sometime before midnight on Friday, April 1, 2005, at the Society building, at the age of 88. A disciple of Swami Aseshananda, the last monastic disciple of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Mr. Bush had lived in the Society's temple since the late 1950s. He became a member of the Society in 1956 and a member of the Society's Board of Directors in 1957.

Mr. Bush was born in Salem, Oregon, on December 18, 1916, in an agnostic family. His childhood was spent in Paris, and he maintained an affection for France, especially Paris, all through his life. Returning to the U.S., he graduated from Tamalpais School for Boys in San Rafael, California and from Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. During the Second World War he served in the United States Navy.

The Bush family had made important contributions to the State of Oregon from its early days. His great great grandmother started the Pacific University in order to give education to the Native Americans. The Bush Museum building stands in Salem, the capital of Oregon.

Mr. Bush was known for his noble mind, gentle behavior and deep love for his teacher. He read widely and continually and had great love for Western classical music, biking, and gardening. When I first saw him in Portland in 1991, immediately it flashed in my mind: what a noble soul! And in his dealing with others, known or unknown, he was always a perfect gentleman. He was unfailingly polite and considerate of the feelings of other people. I liked his rather Victorian English; it had its own charm and beauty.

From Logic to Love

In his life I found a great transition from Logic to Love. In the beginning I observed that he was a man of analytical mind, argumentative nature, and scholarly pursuits. He had a wide understanding of Western philosophy and the Christian mystics. He loved to argue. Sri Shankaracharya, the great exponent of non-dualistic Vedanta, was his favorite philosopher-saint. We all observed that most of the time he would be reading—books, newspapers, magazines—in his room, or in the library, or in the kitchen. Every morning I would ask him whether there was any important news item.

After his teacher's passing away in 1996, I noticed he was more and more inclined to love, not so much to logic. He wept bitterly at the time of Swami Aseshananda's passing. That was a sight to see! One day, to my utter surprise, he

asked me, “Swami, is it okay if I meditate on my guru?” I answered in the affirmative, and he was very happy. Towards the end of his life he used to tell me about his love for his guru and for Holy Mother.

After he came to know from his doctor, about six months ago, that he had terminal prostate cancer, he talked to me about it privately, without any hesitation or concern. At the end he shrugged his shoulders—I call it the American *mudra* (gesture)—and remarked, “That’s all right,” as if it were nothing to him. I wondered how he could remain so calm and graceful in that situation!

He loved cooking and serving others. All along he cooked his own meals. Towards the end he could not do it, though he tried, lest he would disturb others. I knew he liked my cooking, so I cooked for him and brought it to him. He would invariably say, “Swami, you know I prefer your food to any other food. I will try to eat it all. But, please, don’t expect me to eat like a young man.” He didn’t want to hurt my feelings.

“This Will Give Me More Spiritual Benefit”

Every Tuesday evening we watch an episode of the Indian TV series, “The Ramayana,” based on the great epic, in our library. On Tuesday, March 29, we were watching as usual. Generally, we watch only one episode. But on that day Mr. Bush, sitting in his wheelchair, requested me, “Swami, at this time of my life this will give me more spiritual benefit. Can we watch another episode?” We all watched until almost 9:30 PM. It was three days before his passing away.

On Wednesday, March 30 I noticed Mr. Bush was walking down the stairs to the first floor from his room on the second floor with great difficulty. I asked him, “Mr. Bush, why don’t you come down just once a day, maybe in the afternoon? Then you can take rest the whole morning. That will be a great relief to your body.” He replied in a very sweet and pleasant voice, “Swami, isn’t it more spiritual to come to the shrine for noon worship?” It was only two days before his death!

He had told me many times, “Swami, I want to die here (meaning at the temple). This is the most spiritual place.” And the Divine Mother fulfilled his wish. He had a very peaceful death right in his room at the temple, in full consciousness. On that day in the afternoon an attendant brought some food for him in his room, and asked if he would like to eat. Immediately he replied, “I have not come here for food.”

Mr. Bush was staying in the room next to my bedroom. Surprisingly, on Friday night one sentence was continually ringing in my ears: “Gone with his guru, Gone with his guru, Gone with his guru.” And the next morning we found him really gone with his guru to the Eternal Abode, leaving behind his mortal frame in a very peaceful, serene, prayerful position right in his room on his bed. Can there be a more graceful death than this? □

The Alarm of Silence in the Ear of Nothing: A Monologue Based on Lalla of Kashmir

by P. Shneidre

Introduction

Lalla, also known as Laleshwari or Lal Ded, was born into a Brahmin family of Kashmir in the 1300s. She was married as a young girl but left her husband in her twenties to seek truth. She studied with both Hindu and Muslim teachers, Islam having recently arrived in the Kashmir Valley in the pure form of Sufism. Lalla is said to have reached enlightenment quickly due to her complete abandonment of all other interests.

Thereafter, singing to God and renouncing everything including her clothing, Lalla wandered the forests of Kashmir as a holy woman. Though she probably knew Sanskrit from her Brahmin upbringing, she chose to cast her songs in colloquial Kashmiri instead. Her ideas and the example of her renunciation had such an impact on the populace that her idiosyncratic version of the language became the national vernacular.

Various historical and geographic forces made the Kashmir Valley a laboratory of comparative religion in Lalla's time. There were Shaivites, Tantric Buddhists on their way to Tibet, Muslim Rishis, Dervishes, Vaishnavas (whom Ramanuja traveled all the way from South India to Kashmir to defend from the Shaivites!)—and a tomb rumored to be the final resting place of Jesus. Today, in a world threatened by various forms of fundamentalist terrorism, it's encouraging to note that Lalla attracted students across all these faiths with her simple life and words. Perhaps her sweet but unsentimental formula of devotion, nonviolence and renunciation could save the world today, if the world could find it.

What follows is the text for a one-woman theater piece based on Lalla's songs. I have taken some license in rendering her words; readers who want to encounter Lalla in stricter but still poetic translations are urged to look for recent editions by Coleman Barks and Jaishree Odin.

Improvised music is heard in the background: drone, drums, flutes, bird calls.

I looked in a window and saw starvation
throw away a perfectly good man.
Next door, I saw another hungry man
but this one was yelling at his cook
get the spice right!
Since then, I can't wait for my love
of this place to leave

Those desires—are they
the best you can do,
O my mind?
Where are you in all this?
All you seem to be able to do
is imagine

You are the night air.
All things are seen
through your eyes

Those flowers on an altar—
someone must have borrowed them.
Is there anything I could offer
that isn't yours already?

What you really want is nearby.
But don't bother to look for it:
it's too big to see,
O my mind

It takes awhile, but your desires
get worn down to nothing
—and they were all you had,
O mind

This river called time is quick
but before you go
there is something to know

If you know it all,
you might as well forget it.
Do you have good eyesight?
Then narrow your eyes and try again.
Do you hear me? Shhh,

don't answer. And
whenever anyone says anything,
agree with somebody else.
None of this could lead to less truth
than you have now,
O my mind

There are no religions
or kinds of reality
beyond awareness,
and God isn't beyond
anything

My big sickness
has a small name:
the world.
And the name of the cure
is even smaller:
you

I built my house of hope
on a foundation of nothing,
because that's what I trusted.
Instead of trusting,
I drank the wine of words.
Drunk on that, I held
the darkness inside me
tenderly. And tenderly
I crushed it

All those sounds
that stick like pollen
to the idea of you -
Shiva, Vishnu, Messiah, Buddha—
are nicknames.
Your real name is You

I'm not greedy.
I was lucky
to hear one truth

You are tired,
and you sigh.
I know that sound,
O tired push
of air that makes
the world go 'round,
O my mind

Dance, Lalla,
wearing only air.
Could clothes ever be so holy?
I hope not, because
I laid mine on the shore
while stepping into a lake
of bliss, and they're still there

After I rinsed my mind,
the self stared out of me

Whatever I tried to read, I became.
I dragged a lion through the forest
by his fur, like a rug.
I preached what I practiced,
no more.
I practiced what I preached,
no less.
It was all very simple,
but wisdom itself
started to ask me what to do.
Whatever work I did
became worship.
All my words were mantras.

Whatever my body felt was tantra.
At the end of this path,
with his back to me, was Shiva.
When I walked around to take a look,
I was no longer there

No home could ever hold me,
so I was never home.
Trying to hold me, dear husband,
you were pouring water
into a broken cup

You have no idea
how I pity you.
You haven't convinced me
that you mean well
but I'll cry for you anyway,
O my mind

You're helpless,
caught by the world
like a rabbit in a pot,
O my mind

You're so popular
with all the shadows
you cling to.
They must love you so.
Oops, now you're going to die.
Look, you can't even hold
the shadows close!
What a wretch.
Why, why, why
didn't you forget yourself
more, my dear mind

I traveled here
on a fine highway
I was never on

It's a little late
for your pockets
to be so full
of poverty.
How will you pay
to get home?

Holy books disappeared,
leaving only the mantra.
When that went too,
my mind was with it

Always we existed,
always we will.
We travel back and forth
through the present.
We will always have birth
and death,
rising and setting
like the one sun
rising and setting
all over the world

[to be continued]

Discussion: Are Western Vedantists Hindus?

Am I a Vedantist or a Hindu? Guidelines from Vivekananda

Sister Gayatriprana

[continued from the previous issue]

2. Swami Vivekananda Defines Hinduism and Vedanta in the West

Introduction

In the last issue of *American Vedantist* I looked at how Swami Vivekananda chose, in the West, to entitle his major presentations of what he stood for and concluded that he preferred to use the word Vedanta rather than Hinduism. Here I will take a closer look at those presentations to see if we can get any guidelines from the founder of our movement as to the meanings he gave to these key words.

Chicago, September 1893

In his “Paper on Hinduism,” on September 19, 1893, Swami Vivekananda naturally spoke of Hinduism and Hindus. Given a chance to speak on behalf of his native religion, to arouse empathy with it and at the same time generalize its content so that the intellectually oriented West could understand it and benefit from many of its discoveries, he gave a brief presentation of what he regarded as the three pillars defining Hinduism: the Vedas, the soul and reincarnation, and also a defense of image worship, one of the features of Hinduism as it is popularly practiced. His main stress, however, is on realization as crucial to the Hindu religion, a fact he was to emphasize again and again in the West, which had forgotten its own indigenous practices. Moreover, realization is not of a God “out there,” but of divinity which lives in all of us and indeed permeates the universe. In that light, he envisioned a universal religion which included (but by implication was not limited to) Hinduism and embraced all sincere spiritual effort, under any name whatsoever.

It is, I think, quite clear that Swami Vivekananda was speaking from a very general point of view and that his defense of Hinduism was less for its own sake than to support his central conviction that all religious forms are valid. The Hindus had, no doubt, suffered at the hands of Westerners, and it was but right and proper that their religion should be dignified and placed alongside the other world religions, but I do not think that Swami Vivekananda was in any way

suggesting that Hinduism as a set of traditional forms either contains the whole truth or is applicable to all people. One can go further here and say that the terms in which he justified Hinduism to the West were, in fact, borrowed from the West itself. Human divinity was a major focus of German Romanticism, the inner Self as the center of spiritual effort and ultimate salvation was a major gift of the Theosophists, and spiritual evolution particularly of the American Transcendentalists. Finally, harmonial or universal religion was in the air in the West and indeed was the moving force behind the Parliament of Religions itself. Swami Vivekananda in many ways was pressing into service the language already current in the West, and enlivening it by his towering realization, which made possible a synthesis and integration that could combine Hindu realization with Western concept.

Brooklyn, December 1894

When we turn to Swami Vivekananda's address on the Religions of India at the end of 1894, we find that his emphasis has shifted from what we might call his Chicago manifesto to a blueprint for practice. He called on Westerners to show their divinity, to expand and not contract their understanding, to know "We ourselves are He,"¹ to become divine, realizing "more from day to day in an endless progress."¹ He mentions that such a system of practice (based on what he now overtly calls Vedanta philosophy) had enabled Hindus historically to accept all religions and share in their worship. In this address we are more focused on the needs of Americans and also finding ourselves entering the domain of Vedanta per se.

Cambridge, Mass., March 1896

In March of 1896, Swami Vivekananda spoke at Harvard University, quite openly and deliberately on The Vedanta Philosophy. As the swami was speaking to advanced philosophers, his presentation dealt with technicalities such as Sankhya philosophy and the non-dual² Vedanta of Shankaracharya. We still find, however, the idea of human divinity³, practice, now as a universal morality based on the vision of divinity everywhere³, the need to transcend selfish individuality, which he here discusses as the technical subject of maya, and the evolutionary significance of the living free, those who have transcended human limitation and can see the world in its totality and rise above destructive behavior completely. I

1. Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama) I, 330-332.

2. *CW*: I, 364

3. *Ibid.*

think we can say that Swami Vivekananda's core message is being expressed here in an intellectual key, but basically unchanged from the two previous presentations. In his subsequent discussion with the professors⁴, Swami Vivekananda stresses again and again the Hindu contribution of emphasizing the realization of principles, but refrains from mentioning specific Hindu cult forms, including Sri Ramakrishna.

London, November 1896

In London of November 1896, Swami Vivekananda unfolds a massive vision of how the insights of Vedanta can be considered practical. Contrary to how we usually think of practical, his addresses deal with the issue of being absorbed in the ideal, and having realized it, letting it express itself through one's life. Most of his remarks are based on the ancient Chandogya Upanishad, with its central mantra, "You are That." He dwells on how such subtle truths can express themselves through what we ordinarily regard as secular activity, and urges us never to lower the idea or our devotion to it. A central part of Practical Vedanta is the emphasis on the impersonal God, in Swami Vivekananda's mind the mandate for a universal ethics: I love and serve others and treat them with dignity because they are my Self.

In these lectures we get one of his few public criticisms of Hinduism in the West. He refers to Hindu fundamentalism about scripture⁵ and the stunting of spiritual growth in India by authority based on unthinking acceptance of tradition. These remarks were actually just a part of his wider critique of the limitations of dualism and his advocacy of the non-dual realization of God as the core of who we are, and the oneness of all forms of the universe. I believe that here we find Swami Vivekananda speaking to the very soul of the West, urging it to follow its own highest ideals and rejecting the fundamentalism that had scarred not only its past, but also that of Hinduism: "All these ratiocinations of logic, all these bundles of metaphysics, all these theologies and ceremonies may have been good in their own time, but let us try to make things simpler and bring about the golden days when every one will be a worshipper, and the Reality in everyone will be the object of our worship."⁶

San Francisco, April 1900

"Is Vedanta the Future Religion?", the defining lecture at the end of Swami Vivekananda's Western work, is a meditation on the question: Can Vedanta

4. *CW*: V, 297. Questions and Answers.

5. *CW*: II, 336. Practical Vedanta III.

6. *CW*: II, 358. Practical Vedanta IV.

become a popular religion? He explicitly states that because India cannot relinquish the idea of God as a king ruling the earth, Vedanta cannot become the religion of India.⁷ He said, “There is a chance of Vedanta being the religion of your country (the US) because of democracy.”⁸ With that idea came the caveat: “But it can become so only if you can and do clearly understand it, if you become real men and women, not people with vague ideas and superstitions in your brains, and if you want to be truly spiritual, since Vedanta is concerned only with spirituality.”⁹

Here we get a quite clear statement that Swami Vivekananda saw the Western work as centered on nondual Vedanta rather than theistic Hinduism. He made this point elsewhere also, but his and our main interest here is in how he defined the spirituality he expected the West to build its religious future on: We first have to learn that the world is not bad—“it is God himself, if you know it.”¹⁰ He plainly said, “The God of Vedanta is. . . principle, not person.”¹¹ We ourselves are the personal Gods¹², capable of running our lives spiritually without any organization or religious structure. Worship is no longer a matter of religious observance—it is a matter of worshipping the world by serving it.¹³ Such an empowering worldview could not possibly depend on the traditional paraphernalia of religion—images, castes, priests, etc.—which, Swami Vivekananda remarked, India was full of, despite the fact that Vedanta had always been known there. Moreover, as if to suppress Vedanta completely, orthodox Hindus had objected strongly to his preaching it in the West.¹⁴

A Radical Redefinition

He then returned to what he had defined in 1893 as the pillars of Hinduism and redefined them radically in terms that the West, convinced of the reality of matter, could understand: The Vedas are not simply the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times¹⁵, they are all

7. *CW*: VIII, 126.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *CW*: VIII, 129.

11. *CW*: VIII, 133.

12. *CW*: VIII, 134.

13. *CW*: VIII, 135.

14. *CW*: VIII, 136.

15. *CW*: I, 7. Paper on Hinduism.

forms of knowledge, for “Knowledge is God Himself.”¹⁶ In India “we go down on our knees before someone who reads the [scriptural] Vedas, and we do not care for those who are studying physics.”¹⁷ However, in Swami Vivekananda's Vedanta, “That is superstition —it is not Vedanta at all. It is utter materialism. With God every knowledge is sacred. Knowledge is God.”¹⁸ Again, the Soul of which he spoke in Chicago was no longer simply an ideal or a goal. It had become such a burning reality that “You are incarnations of God, all of you.”¹⁹ Finally, the idea of reincarnation, which he worked so hard to introduce at the beginning of his work in the West was now something taken for granted, and transmuted into a process of discovering innate divinity through which all—including the murderer and someone who had been lynched—were moving. The burning issue now was: “That which we do ignorantly, we ought to do knowingly and better.”²⁰

A Deeply Democratic Western Vision

Clearly, Swami Vivekananda had burst out of even the very liberal interpretation of Hinduism he had given in 1893 and was forging forward to a vision of divine humanity, where sacred and secular were but manifestations of a tremendous Principle radiating through all human activity. This, I submit, is a deeply democratic Western vision, molded, no doubt, by the swami's intense awareness of the minds and needs of his free-spirited California audiences.

As at the end of all his addresses, Swami Vivekananda concluded with the theme of universal religion, which he now located in “the eternal temple of God, in the souls of all beings, from the lowest to the highest—that infinite unselfishness, infinite sacrifice, infinite compulsion to go back to unity.”²¹ Then came his definitive statement on Vedanta: “Vedanta—the consciousness that all is one Spirit.”²² He was convinced that, if such understanding spread, “the whole of humanity will become spiritual.”²³ But he also knew how everywhere—if not especially in India—everyone prefers to cling to old forms and superstitions.²⁴ He himself had started two experiments in India—one was

16. *CW*: VIII, 137.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. *CW*: VIII, 138

22. *CW*: VIII, 139.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

in Calcutta, with all the old paraphernalia—“images and temples in the name of God and the Vedas, of the Bible, and Christ and Buddha.” In the Himalayas, however, he had begun a center under an English couple to train up people to understand that God is a Spirit and should be worshipped “in Spirit and in truth.” [Gospel of St. John, 4.24]²⁵ Everyone was to be looked on as Spirit.²⁶ He made it clear that he regarded this experiment as something radically new.²⁷ Referring to Sri Ramakrishna as the authorization for this work, he remarked that “the teachings of Vedanta. . . were never really experimented with before. . . [they have] always been mixed up with superstitions and everything else.”²⁸

Departing from Hinduism As It Had Existed Previously

Here I feel that it is inescapable that Swami Vivekananda saw his Vedanta as a radical departure from Hinduism as it had existed previously. It is surely significant that, in “worship of the Spirit in spirit and in truth,” he chose to define it in terms attributed to Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of the Westerners. Yet, in bringing this radical lecture to a close, he totally deconstructed the notion of Christ as a savior. The tendency for people to repudiate their own responsibility and cling to gods, avatars and saviors as vicarious atoners for their weaknesses and sins was to him but “kindergarten religion,” productive of little good.²⁹ Swami Vivekananda spoke directly to the West, which had proven its human potential in unleashing and controlling the powers of nature, while remaining firmly in the saddle of human nature itself: The time has come to guide yourselves by the tremendous power within, to spiritualize this universe and see it as an undivided whole. His concluding statement is surely a guideline for us in deciding if and how we can combine what he called Vedanta with specific religious forms such as Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, etc.: “The hour comes when the great shall arise and cast off these kindergartens of religion and shall make vivid and powerful the true religion, the worship of the Spirit by the Spirit.”³⁰

Are we Westerners ready to, and capable of responding to this call?

(to be continued)

25. CW: VIII, 140.

26. Ibid.

27. CW: VIII, 141.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

Who Defines the Terms?

John Schlenck

Coming from a humanist family with off-and-on attendance at the local Unitarian church, I never identified with Christianity in any religious sense. True, we had a Christmas tree every year and even had a crèche underneath it with figures of the Madonna and Child, shepherds, wise men and animals. But these were no more than a cultural inheritance, rather like Handel's *Messiah* and great religious paintings in museums. Our family never prayed, never even talked about God, although my parents were highly ethical people. Christian doctrines were regarded as outworn superstitions. We prided ourselves on our rationality.

It was only after coming to Vedanta in my early twenties that I began to identify with *any* religious ideas and practices. I liked Vedanta because of its combination of liberality and depth, something hard to come by in any form of Christianity I knew of. I was also intrigued by the richness and variety of Vedanta/Hinduism as I plunged into the Bhagavad-Gita and the lives and teachings of Ramakrishna and his disciples. I very much liked that I was not required to believe anything, only to try to put into practice what rang true to me. After several years I took initiation and began regular spiritual practice.

By the time of my first trip to India, in my mid-thirties, I was prepared to call myself a Hindu. After a brief middle of the night stop in New Delhi, I landed in Madras and thought it rather nice that all these short, black porters were my co-religionists. I had already been warned that some orthodox temples did not admit Westerners, and didn't think much about it. I even thought it was perhaps good for me—a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) to have some experience of racial discrimination. It was only after some time that I realized that many orthodox people didn't consider me to be Hindu at all. Then I began to wonder, what is a Hindu? Maybe it's not the right word to describe me. Perhaps it's too tied up with an ethnic and cultural identity I don't share. And so the matter rested without much further thought. It's sufficient to be a Vedantist, a devotee of Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Vivekananda. Never mind Hindu.

Recently I have begun to have further thoughts, especially after reading and thinking about the discussion in *AV*'s last issue, "Are Western Vedantists Hindus?", particularly William Page's entry. Page is quite generous to the orthodox old lady who was a strict vegetarian and didn't even want to look at him. Well and good. *But why should the orthodox define the terms?* To define Hinduism in terms of eating habits, rituals and ethnic identity demeans a great

and noble tradition. If a person accepts a Hindu world-view, has been initiated into and regularly practices Hindu spiritual disciplines and tries to mold his/her life according to the Upanishads, the Gita and the teachings of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda, why shouldn't that person be considered a Hindu?

Protesting Discrimination

Isn't it rather like the orthodox rabbis in Israel, who refuse to consider marriages performed by Reform or Conservative rabbis authentically Jewish? Non-orthodox Jews have every right to protest this discrimination.

But, you may object, the word "Hinduism" itself is unfortunate. It originally had a geographical rather than a religious meaning and was given by the Persians. Better to use a word given by the Hindus themselves, such as *Sanatana Dharma* (the eternal path of righteousness), or, indeed, *Vedanta*, as redefined by Swami Vivekananda. The problem is, these words are not general coinage. Many words are unfortunate or accidental in their origins. But over centuries they have come to mean something different and specific and have been generally accepted. Hinduism is one such word. Nowadays it is the word most widely used by Hindus themselves to describe their religious beliefs and practices.

Granting all that, many Western Vedantists will still have justifiable reservations about calling themselves Hindus. Some still identify with aspects of Christianity or Judaism. And "Hindu," like "Jew," *does* carry ethnic overtones. On the other hand, when non-Jews convert to Judaism, they consider themselves Jews, even though they were not born Jewish.

Well, you may object, at least there should be some form of conversion ritual. Converts to Judaism undergo a purificatory bath. There are analogous rituals for converting to Hinduism. Have I undergone any such thing? Well, not exactly. But I received a mantra from a Hindu teacher—certainly a pivotal event in my life. Doesn't that count for something?

I don't claim to have all the answers; indeed, I haven't entirely resolved the issue in my own mind. But I am not prepared to let the orthodox define my religious identity. □

Contributors

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