

## Editorial

### *The Divine Feminine*

Swami Vivekananda said that only those who have transcended their human nature can think of the real nature of God. Until then, if we think of God at all, our conception will be limited and colored by our human minds. There is nothing wrong with this. As Swamiji said, we grow from truth to truth, not error to truth. The question is, what conceptions, what forms help us to grow spiritually? What excites our imagination, stirs our emotions in deep and positive ways, and provides images that help us to concentrate our minds?

The mother/child relationship is the most primal of all relationships, something every human being experiences, at least until the moment of birth. To extend that experience, that way of relating, to the spiritual domain is natural and, for many people, inevitable. We unconsciously extend the relationship to the world around us; we think of Mother Nature, Mother Earth, Mother of the Universe, Divine Womb of Creation. Even in cultures where the dominant conception of God is masculine, the impulse to think of God as feminine often bubbles up and captures the imagination of the people. In some Catholic countries the festivals, parades and holidays honoring Mary are among the biggest and most enthusiastic observances of the liturgical year. In Jewish mystical tradition, the Shekhinah, the immanent power of divine wisdom, is regarded as feminine. In China, the originally male Bodhisattva Avalokiteshwarawas transformed into the female Kwan Yin, popularly thought of as the Goddess of Mercy, and her worship spread throughout East Asia.

The self-sacrificing Feminine powerfully inspires devotion. The mother thinks first of the welfare of her child, giving up comfort, convenience, even her own life, if necessary, to nurture and protect her child. This is built into the human condition. Without it, our species would not have survived. The mother who thinks only of herself and neglects her children is universally blamed and considered abnormal. The mother forgives, consoles, protects, guides and plays with her child.

But how does the feminine imaging of God relate to our experience of difficulty, danger, suffering and cruelty? There is an ancient and profound tradition of Goddess worship which relates specifically to the dark side of human experience. Expressed through a rich and varied iconography, it is sometimes called The Worship of the Terrible. It is often misunderstood and sometimes denied or avoided. Swami Vivekananda had deep experience of this aspect of spiritual life. Though he did not want to impose his ideas on others, he believed that these sometimes terrifying images and concepts could inspire strength and

heroism. The same Divine Mother who defends, protects and heals also comes in the form of obstacles, fears and suffering. Holy Mother once said, “Misery is the gift of God. It is the symbol of his compassion.” Grace sometimes comes in difficult packages. If we can learn to accept unflinchingly the difficulties and challenges of life, knowing that they also come from God, she gives us the strength and discrimination to fight and conquer our inner demons, to face boldly all the vicissitudes of life, and to oppose injustice, cruelty and oppression. She inspires us to strive to embody her qualities of compassion, acceptance, protection and healing.

—The Editors

## *About the Devimahatmya*

### **Devadatta Kali**

In *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, M. records that one afternoon at Dakshineswar a conversation with some Vedantists caused him to fall into a pensive mood. After they had left, he asked Sri Ramakrishna, “Is the world unreal?”

“Why should it be unreal?” Sri Ramakrishna responded. Later that evening he returned to M.’s question and explained an experience he once had in the shrine of the Kali temple. Everything appeared full of consciousness: the image, the altar, the worship-vessels, the door-sill, the marble floor—all was consciousness. Everything was saturated in the bliss of *sacchidananda*. Even in a wicked man standing outside the temple Thakur saw the power of the Divine Mother vibrating. In that state, he gave the food offering intended for the Divine Mother to a cat, because he clearly perceived that it was the Divine Mother herself who had become everything.

### **Brahman and Shakti**

Sri Ramakrishna taught that Brahman and Shakti are identical. Just as we cannot conceive of the sun’s rays without the sun, or of the sun without its rays, we cannot think of Brahman without its power, he said. Brahman and the Mother, the primal energy, are one. When inactive, it is called Brahman; when busy creating, sustaining and dissolving the relative universe, it is called Shakti. In the same way, water is water, whether it is still or moving.

Without question, Sri Ramakrishna was well versed in Vedantic teaching. In 1865 he had been initiated by the austere monk Tota Puri into the disciplines of

Advaita Vedanta, and in a short while he had attained *nirvikalpa samadhi*, the realization of nondual consciousness. Four years before that, an itinerant holy woman known as the Bhairavi had led him through an intensive course of Tantric sadhana. Still earlier, at the age of nineteen, he had been trained by his older brother Ramkumar in the Mother's worship and in the recitation of the Devimahatmya, more often called the Chandi in Bengal. The essential message of this great scripture is that the Divine Mother is the supreme reality and that she herself has become this universe.

The Devimahatmya (The Glory of the Goddess) is also known as the Sri Durga Saptashati (Seven Hundred Verses to Sri Durga). Who composed it we do not know. We only know that about sixteen centuries ago its author (or authors) created the most sacred of all Shakta texts. Some of the traditions it preserves are inconceivably older than that. For example, the recognition of the Divine Mother in auspicious and terrible forms has endured in Indian religion since prehistoric times. Throughout the ages the tribal cultures and high civilizations that rose and fell on Indian soil left their mark on how devotees viewed the Mother, and much of this survives in the Devimahatmya's thirteen chapters. In turn, this wealth of material was elaborated upon in the Puranas and Tantras, and in the eighteenth century its imagery inspired Ramprasad and Kamalakanta, the Bengali mystics whose devotional songs so often evoked ecstatic moods in Sri Ramakrishna.

The Devimahatmya emphasizes that the Divine Mother's role, like Krishna's in the Bhagavad Gita, is to uphold the moral order of the universe and to lead humankind to liberation through the highest knowledge of the Self. The two scriptures have much else in common. Each is an independent text embedded in a larger work. The Gita belongs to the Mahabharata; the Devimahatmya, to the Markandeya Purana. Each is a synthesis of spiritual and philosophical knowledge drawn from diverse sources. Each begins with the story of one or more human beings in crisis, who will learn from a teacher in human form the way beyond all suffering. And each invokes the battlefield as a metaphor for the field of human consciousness.

### **Beginning in Existential Crisis**

The Devimahatmya begins with King Suratha, plunged into an existential crisis after losing his kingdom in battle and his throne to his once-trusted ministers, who have turned against him. Fearing for his life, he flees into a dense forest and comes upon the ashram of a holy man named Medhas. Here the ordinarily ferocious tiger abides peacefully with the gentle deer, yet even amid the great calm and natural beauty of this retreat, Suratha knows no peace. His mind churns in agony over everything he has lost: his kingdom with its riches and privilege, the loyalty of his subjects, the glory of power. These thoughts torment him ceaselessly.

One day another visitor arrives. His name is Samadhi, and he is every bit as despairing as the king. Once a prosperous merchant, he was cast out by his wife and sons, who conspired to seize his wealth. He is deeply hurt by their betrayal and cannot understand it, being himself a man of good character. Most of all, he cannot understand why he still feels love for those who caused his deep humiliation and pain.

Together, the king and the merchant approach Medhas and ask why they are so miserable. Surely, as men of knowledge they ought to know better.

“You say you are men of knowledge,” Medhas remarks. “Do you know what knowledge is?” He explains that what the king means by knowledge is only the experience of the objective world. He demonstrates how such knowledge is only relative, conditioned by time and space, driven by self-interest and the expectation of results, and ultimately deceptive. The operative principle here is that nothing in this world is as it seems to be. It is not only the king and the merchant who are perplexed, Medhas explains: everyone is, because even the wise are thrown into the whirlpool of delusion by the blessed goddess Mahamaya.

“Who is this Mahamaya?” the king wants to know. “Whatever there is to know about her, all that I wish to learn.”

The story of the king, the merchant and the seer acts as a frame that encloses three mythical accounts of the Divine Mother’s fierce, bloody battles with demons, which Medhas relates to instruct his two disciples. A myth should not be dismissed as a piece of fiction merely because it does not describe a historical event or the world as we know it. Instead, a myth takes us beyond the realm of fact and into the realm of meaning. Through symbols, it plumbs our deeper levels of understanding and brings to light elusive truths that are difficult to convey by ordinary means. The Platonic philosopher Synesius of Cyrene summed it up nicely: “Myths are things that never happened, but always are.”

### **Battlegrounds Representing Our Own Consciousness**

The Devimahatmya’s battlegrounds represent our own human consciousness, and its events symbolize our own life-experiences. The demons stand for all the evils in the world and all that is wrong within our minds and hearts. The Divine Mother is our own true being, and her clashes with the demons symbolize the worldly and spiritual struggles we face daily.

There are three myths, and the Devimahatmya falls into three parts that can be related to the three *gunas*, the basic universal energies or qualities of *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*. The first part tells about the Divine Mother in her dark, *tamasic*, deluding aspect that ensnares humankind in the bonds of ignorance and attachment. It asks us to consider the nature of divinity and explains how the universe and humankind came into existence. The second part presents the Mother as the fiery and active power that vanquishes evil and upholds the moral

order of the universe. It teaches us how to live in this world, where we are torn between good and evil, right and wrong, enjoyment and suffering. The third part reveals the luminous, benevolent form through which the Mother grants enlightenment and liberation. It shows us how to transcend the world of matter through the higher knowledge of the spirit.

Side by side with grisly narratives of bloodshed and slaughter, the Devimahatmya integrates four hymns that are rich in philosophical and theological content. Of surpassing beauty, these hymns are sublime outpourings of devotion. The variety of material in the Devimahatmya is a convenient reminder that overall this text can be approached in more than one way. Its stories can be taken as allegories relating to our own behavior and circumstances; its hymns can inspire us to devotion for the personal forms of God as Mother; and its deeper, philosophical interpretation leads us toward the realization of God as the impersonal supreme reality.

Medhas's first story tells how Mahamaya, the great deluder, tricks the brutish demons Madhu and Kaitabha into bringing about their own destruction. The hymn to Mahamaya, sung by the god Brahma, reveals profound insight into the nature of the cosmos. Although the ideas are expressed in mythological and devotional terms, the concepts are scientific even by today's standards. We learn that creation is a process of manifestation that flows from the One to the many. The Divine Mother is the infinite, nondual consciousness as well as its dynamic creative power; and she is ever present throughout all of creation. Before manifestation, she is the dimensionless, nonlocalized point of concentrated power, pregnant with all possibilities. Let us not forget that the Sanskrit word for "power" is *shakti*.

The Divine Mother gives birth to the universe, supports it, and draws it back into herself in an ever-repeating cycle. In this process, she who is nondual consciousness veils her radiant boundlessness with the limitations of time and space, name and form, cause and effect. Through these limitations she projects the finite world of our experience—a world that is both dark and dazzling, terrifying and enchanting. The Divine Mother is the all-encompassing source of good and evil alike, who expresses herself in every form. Yet beyond this apparent multiplicity, everything—be it spirit, mind, or matter—is ultimately one.

### **How to Live in the World**

There is one more point about the world: we have to live in it. That prompts Medhas to tell another story, in which the Mother in the resplendent form of Durga takes on an ill-tempered buffalo demon named Mahishasura. He represents the power of human anger and greed that threatens to destroy everything it touches.

Under Durga's attacks Mahisha metamorphoses from buffalo to lion to man to elephant, every time eluding her deathblows. But when forced to reveal his true demon form, he is beheaded by Durga's great sword of knowledge. This powerful myth probes the root cause of our existential discontent—the feeling deep down inside that we are limited, separated, and incomplete—and the outward conflicts it gives rise to. We mistakenly identify with the limited ego, when in fact we are the limitless *atman*. Just as Mahishasura is about to perish at Durga's hand, he gets a fleeting glimpse of that truth—that his real identity lies dispassionate and blissful beyond the raging whirlpool of his passions.

Then the Devimahatya's second hymn invites us to reflect on the themes of good and evil, fate and free will, karma and divine grace. It points to an impersonal balancing principle at work in the universe, and the message is that our deeds have consequences. It asks us to consider the question of good and evil. A working definition might go like this: good is that which takes us toward the Divine—toward harmony, love, and unity; evil is that which distances us from the Divine and creates hatred, injury, and disunity in our lives. As for grace, the Mother is protective of her devotees and ever intent on destroying evil. Through this story Medhas teaches that through right endeavor and devotion we can overcome enslavement to our passions and live in virtue and harmony.

### **The Demons: Our All-Too-Human Failings**

Although the Devimahatya's third part begins with the Aparajitastuti—the famous “Ya Devi” hymn that celebrates the divine presence in the world—Medhas's narrative is in fact concerned with realizing our inner perfection beyond the world. This time the cast of characters is much larger, both in terms of the demons and the Divine Mother's many forms. The demons, headed by the brothers Shumbha and Nishumbha, embody a broader range of our all-too-human failings than we've dealt with previously. This complex, imaginative scenario passes through several episodes as we move progressively inward. One after another, the Mother's victories over an array of demons symbolize our own efforts to purify our consciousness of every imperfection and misconceived notion that keep us in bondage. First the narrative turns the mirror on our behavior and motivations. Next it draws us deeper in to observe the mind and its workings, and finally we face the fundamental question of who or what we are. After Shumbha, the demon of ego, is slain and the sense of individuality that conceals our true being vanishes, we experience the ultimate identity—that we are indeed Brahman.

Near the story's end, Medhas sends his two disciples off to the bank of a river to meditate and worship the Mother. After three years she appears to them, pleased with their devotion, and offers each a boon. Suratha, who has unfinished business here in this world, asks for the return of his earthly kingdom, to be followed by an imperishable kingdom in the next life. Samadhi, on the other

hand, has grown wise and dispassionate. He asks for the knowledge that will dissolve the bondage of worldly existence. Each boon is granted, in keeping with the Devimahatmya's teaching that the Divine Mother is "the bestower of worldly enjoyment and liberation."

How conversant Sri Ramakrishna was with the teachings of the Devimahatmya is made clear in a conversation with members of the Brahmo Samaj. He summarized the essential message of the Chandi, saying that bondage and liberation are both the Mother's doing. By her maya people become entangled in lust and greed, and then, through her grace, they attain liberation. He added that there is nothing wrong with being in the world, but that one must direct the mind toward God in order to succeed. It is a matter of doing one's duty with one hand and holding to God with the other. After all duties are fulfilled, then one should hold to God with both hands.

### **Ecstatic Celebration of the Divine Mother's Presence**

On another occasion Sri Ramakrishna said that sometimes he found the universe saturated with divine consciousness, just as the earth is soaked with water in the rainy season. This teaching calls our attention back to the Devimahatmya's third hymn, the Aparajitastuti [Hymn to the Invincible Goddess]. Unlike the other hymns, which are intimately connected to their battle narratives and form a sort of philosophical commentary, this one is an ecstatic celebration of the Divine Mother's presence in the world. It reminds us simply to see divinity everywhere around us, because the Mother abides in all beings as intelligence, order, forgiveness, modesty, peace, beauty, good fortune, compassion, contentment, and in countless other ways. We need only to remember her presence; and as a sign of her grace, she herself is present in us in the form of memory. This beautiful hymn concludes, "To her who pervades this entire world and abides in the form of consciousness, salutation to her, salutation to her, salutation to her, again and again." □

True Kwan Yin! Pure Kwan Yin!  
Infinitely wise Kwan Yin!  
Merciful and filled with pity,  
Ever longed-for and revered! . . .

To the perfection of her merits,  
To the compassion in her glance,  
To the infinitude of her blessings,  
Worshiping, we bow our heads!

—Chinese hymn

# *Cosmic Mother Of The Aztecs Our Lady of Guadalupe*

**Michelle Guerin, O.S.U.**

*[Edited and condensed by Beatrice Bruteau from the original article in Anima, Vol. 15, No. 2]*

Who is this woman who burst forth from the sun, its rays surrounding and crowning her, her cloak alive with the stars and constellations of the Winter Solstice of December 1531, her brocade gown the color of a new dawn, her young body pregnant with new life at the very center of the cosmos, the crescent moon under her feet, and a humble Indian supporting the burden of her presence and the import of her message?

What accounts do we have of the event? Was she a figment of the imagination of Cuauhtlatohuac, the Indian who claimed that he saw her? Was she the anima of the Aztecs, the ruling tribe of Mexico? Did the vision, the sudden apparition, in any way possess a reality of its own? How do art experts and scientists regard the “proof” that she left of her visit: her image painted on the coarse, loosely-woven outer garment worn by Cuauhtlatohuac (also known as Juan Diego)? Most important, what does the apparition say about the power of the feminine spirit over the hearts and minds of human beings as opposed to the masculine spirit of “divide and conquer?”

## **A Bridge Between Two Cultures and Two Faiths**

The apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe to a conquered and converted Indian in Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) in the sixteenth century occurred only forty years after the discovery of the New World and a bare ten years after the Spanish conquest of Mexico. The apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe seem, on the one hand, to have formed a bridge from the Aztec version of the universal mythology of the Great Mother to the Catholic faith, and on the other hand, to have fostered within the formal boundaries of the latter a vigorous devotion to the Cosmic Mother which had the potential to spread beyond its country of origin. This remarkable cultural adjustment springs from the union in the Virgin of Guadalupe of names and titles belonging to the Aztec Mother Goddess with functions and moral dispositions of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The first consequence of this union was the reconciliation of the conquered people to the religion of their conquerors. According to Aztec belief, the Sun



God had vanquished the ancient Goddess, and the Great Mother had then become a demanding, bloodthirsty deity who promised a plentiful harvest only at the price of human sacrifice, victims for which were obtained by constant intertribal warfare. But shortly after the apparitions, we are told by Antonio Valeriano (author of the earliest scholarly account of the apparitions<sup>1</sup>), the wars were suspended, there was peace among all the tribes, the Catholic faith was beginning to flourish, and a belief in “the true God by whom all live” was becoming universal.<sup>2</sup> This last expression is of particular interest for showing how the bridge from the old faith to the new was formed. The Aztecs had called their Supreme Being Ometeotl, “Mother God, Father God, by whom all live.” And in her first appearance to Juan Diego on the morning of December 9, 1531, the Lady identified herself by the same title:

Know and understand, you, the smallest of all my children, that I am the ever-Virgin Mary, Mother of the true God by whom all live.<sup>3</sup>

### **Love, Healing and Help**

She says “Mother of the true God,” indicating Catholic monotheism, but she uses the Aztec name, Tonantzin, “Mother of the gods.”<sup>4</sup> And what does Tonantzin want now? More war? more blood? more sacrifice? Quite the contrary. She wants to give love, healing, and help:

I ardently desire that a temple be built here so that in it I can show and give all my love, compassion, and help, seeing that I am your holy mother, mother of you and of all those who live together on earth and of all those who love me, who invoke me, and who put their trust in me to hear their cries and heal their miseries, pains and sorrows. And in order to bring about that which my mercy desires, go to the palace of the Bishop of Mexico and tell him how I sent you and that I greatly desire that they build me a temple here in this place.<sup>5</sup>

Could this vision, this conversation, this request, all be a mere hallucination on the part of Juan Diego? Could it be the expression of the anxiety of the collective unconscious of the conquered Aztecs manifested through the mixing of

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1. *Nican Mopohua*, written by scholar Antonio Valeriano, is the earliest authentic account of the “Apparitions.” See Xavier Escalada, S.J., *Maria Tequatlalaupe* (Mexico City: Ideas y Promociones, n.d.), p. 14. Translation by the author.

2. Escalada, *Maria Tequatlalaupe*, p. 15.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

the Indian and Catholic teachings in the mind of the Indian convert, Juan Diego? Was he, were they, running subconsciously to their Great Mother concept to explain their present lot of subjugation, of oppression? Were there no objective proofs of the existential reality of the “Mother of the true God”?

Carl Jung, looking at the phenomena of dreams, visions, images, and symbols as means of spiritual communication, does not deny their independent reality over and above the subjective experience of them.<sup>6</sup> He was willing, June Singer tells us, to take visionary experiences “as though they were palpable realities.”<sup>7</sup> He recognized the importance of imaging what is beyond our knowledge, for it is through our imaginative powers that that reality emerges.

### **Images Pointing Toward Ultimate Meaning**

Symbolic visions are “the best possible formulation of a relatively unknown thing, an archetype which cannot. . . be more clearly. . . represented.” In *Man and His Symbols*, Jung says, “Because there are innumerable things beyond the range of human understanding, we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend.”<sup>8</sup> These mysterious unknowns, especially the great archetypes, says Singer, “become manifest in images which point toward their ultimate meaning.”<sup>9</sup>

In short, visions need not be hallucinations, but rather the external representation of a divine truth or message made manifest in time and space to the seer from the contents of the collective unconscious and within his own particular belief system.

In 1529, two years before the apparitions of Our Lady, Fray Pedro Gante, one of the Franciscans working in Mexico City, wrote:

The common people were like animals without reason whom we could attract neither to the church, nor to catechism classes, nor to sermons.... for three years we could do nothing with them; they simply ran away like savages from the friars as well as from the Spanish (rulers).<sup>10</sup>

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6. June Singer, *Boundaries of the Soul: The Practice of Jung's Psychology* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), p. 43, e.g.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

8. Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), p. 21.

9. Singer, p. 105.

10. Dr. Fidel de Jesus Chauvet, O.F.M., “Juan Diego en Santiago Tlateloco,” in *Historico, Organo del Centro de Estudios Guadalupeños, A.C.* (Mexico City: n.d. Some articles are marked 1985.) Translation by the author.

But between 1531 and 1536 there was a complete change. Father Xavier Escalada, S.J., writes in his study:

From the Hill of Tepeyac, the Virgin did away with the idolatry, the human sacrifices, and the polygamy (of the Aztecs) and brought about in her children the greatest transformation ... ever known throughout the length and breadth of Christendom. Fray Motolinia (another missionary) attested to the conversion of five million adults between 1531 and 1536.... The Virgin of Guadalupe spoke to their hearts and moved them to line up in interminable rows and in such great numbers that the missionaries could hardly attend to them.<sup>11</sup>

### **From Hopelessness to Unbreakable Faith**

In the Commemorative Album published in Mexico in 1981 to honor the 450th anniversary of the apparition, there is a chapter entitled “The Role of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the Spiritual and Intellectual Development of Mexico.” A quotation that could be considered a sub-title translates as follows: “The Virgin of Guadalupe is not decoration, but destiny.” Two excerpts from the chapter emphasize this thesis:

Their secular culture, their institutions, their ruling class, and even their gods having been destroyed, the Indians found themselves ... without roots in a past that had been ruined and with no hope of a better future.... They were perplexed and confused by their spiritual and material misery. . .

[But] from those memorable days of the ninth to the twelfth of December came the transformation of a people without support or hope to a people filled with unbreakable faith which would allow them to overcome their misery and bitterness, their material and moral loss, and to resist the despair [that comes from] exploitation and rejection.<sup>12</sup>

The Great Mother has stepped out of the mist of mythology to reveal herself as the bringer of life and hope!

### **The Remarkable Timing of the Appearance**

The connection between the myth of the Great Mother by which most ancient civilizations regulated their everyday lives and the influence of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the Aztecs of Mexico becomes even more startling when we

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11. Escalada, p. 50.

12. Ernesto de la Torre Villar, “La Virgen de Guadalupe en el desarrollo espiritual e intelectual de Mexico,” in *Album Commemorativo*, pp. 225-26. Translation by the author.

consider the time of her appearance and the manner in which she appeared. As to the time, the final and most important apparition occurred on December 12, 1531 at the very hour that the Winter Solstice took place in Mexico—10:40 a.m.<sup>13</sup> As to the manner, the lady is surrounded by the rays of a fiery sun, yet she is a Night figure: her cloak is alive with stars, her gown is the color of dawn, a crescent moon is beneath her feet. Erich Neumann writes about the significance of the Winter Solstice in the context of the Great Mother:

The winter solstice, when the Great Mother gives birth to the sun, stands at the center of the matriarchal mysteries.<sup>14</sup>

To this he adds:

To the joyful birth of the annual sun there corresponds. . . the joy of the true matriarchal childbirth, the birth of the “new light,” that is, of the new moon.<sup>15</sup>

More to our point is Neumann's reference to the Great Mother as the goddess of destiny:

The symbol in which space and time are archetypally connected is the starry firmament, which since the primordial era has been filled with human projections. . . Each one of these projections was experienced as a part of the life of the Great Mother who bears and encompasses all things. The dependency of all the luminous bodies, of all the heavenly powers and gods, on the Great Mother, their rise and fall, their birth and death, their transformation and renewal, are among the most profound experiences of mankind. . . And accordingly the Great Mother, adorned with the moon and the starry cloak of night, is the goddess of destiny.<sup>16</sup>

The history of the Virgin of Guadalupe is intimately connected with the history of Mexico. . . The year of the apparitions and the beginning of the devotion to her is, historically, the beginning of Mexico as a nation. Devotion to the Virgin and

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13. In the year 1531 the Julian Calendar was still in use and the Winter Solstice took place that year at 4:40 p.m. in Greenwich, England which was 10:40 a.m. in Mexico. See Pbro. Mario Rojas Sanchez and Dr. Juan Romero Hernandez Illescas, "Las Estrellas del Manto de la Virgen de Guadalupe," originally published in Mexico City by Ediciones Francisco Mendez Oteo in 1981, reprinted in *Historico* (cf. n. 16.). Translation by the author.

14. Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother* (Princeton U. P., Bollingen Series XLCII, 1970), p. 313.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

the development of her cult runs parallel to the creation of the Mexican society and the formation of a national conscience.<sup>17</sup>

What Juan Diego saw in his vision on the Hill of Tepeyac had its counterpart in his indigenous religious culture and therefore seemed all the more believable. To “their Mother” and to Her message, the Aztecs would give full credence. Because the revelation of Tonantzin and the manner in which she appeared were in keeping with their cosmological and theological tenets, they were ready for a new way of being, for a transformation.

Before the Apparitions of Our Lady, the power of the Terrible Mother and her thirst for blood to guarantee the harvest of corn were acceded to by the sacrifice of warriors and children. After the Apparitions, the Aztecs, now more willing to open themselves to a religion that honored *Tonantzin*, could turn to Maria Tequatlalupe, “she who drives away those who would devour us.” Her Son is their hope and His sacrifice is accepted in lieu of theirs. The mestiza race of Indian and Spanish blood, the Mexican people, belongs to Her who listens to their cries and cures their miseries.

### **The Devotion of the People**

In Mexico today people from every state, city, and town, from every social class and walk of life, from every trade and form of employment, from the simplest to the most sophisticated, set aside one day each year as their special day to pay homage to the Virgin of Guadalupe, their Mother. For instance, there is Bricklayers' Day, Taxi Drivers' Day, Carpenters' Day, Electricians' Day, as well as a day for, say, the city of Guadalajara or the state of Chihuahua. Thus most days of the year are days of pilgrimage for some group or other to the “Villa,” the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, located in the northern section of Mexico City.

This devotion is not only evidenced in the pilgrimages. In every home, in many places of business, in all types of vehicles, wherever one goes, wherever one looks, one finds the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. To fulfill their obligations as Catholics, most Mexicans go to Mass on Sundays and feastdays. But the real praying is done at home before the shrine of Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe. Hers is the matriarchal mystique that guides the psyche of the Mexican and can never be replaced by the patriarchal persuasion of the Judeo-Christian theology.

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17. Ramon Navarro de Anda, “Efemerides Guadalupanas,” in *Album Commemorativo*, p. 271. Translation by the author.

Our Lady of Guadalupe is the Cosmic Mother of the Aztecs, the woman clothed with the sun and crowned with the stars, their own Tonantzin, who has, in the words of the Book of Proverbs [9:1], “built herself a house” in a new religious culture. As the feminine principle of unity and peace, she brings together the “things of old” and the new “things to come.” (The Wisdom of Solomon 8:8) In her is a miraculous union in which Aztec past and European present may each find a place without conflict.

No doubt the Aztec psyche, with pride in its own ancient empire, rejoices in the title given to Our Lady of Guadalupe at the World Marian Congress in July, 1959—Empress of the Americas. Can the rest of us also welcome this idea of a feminine spirit of reconciliation and creative healing? She came to the Aztecs in a form which they could recognize and to which they could relate. But the question for us is not so much whether we can believe in Our Lady of Guadalupe as whether we can receive the larger Truth of which she is a local manifestation. Could not the recognition of this truth, the underlying oneness of all humanity, help bring together the various tribes, cultures, and nations of today which are so much at enmity? We have entered a new age. Perhaps the Feminine Archetype, be it Sophia, Tonantzin, or Mary, can guide us to the universal goals of justice and peace. □

### **Shekhinah**

God is manifest everywhere—  
in the air I breathe,  
in the thoughts I think,  
in the tears I shed.

Within me and beyond me—  
She hears me, answers me, speaks through me.  
She dwells in the vast spaces between my atoms  
where particles travel like rockets on a sacred mission.

I am saturated with Her.  
Gratefully, gracefully  
I gather Her light  
And She finds solace in me.

She wrote this poem with me.

—Laura Bernstein

# *The Unknown Goddess*

**Beatrice Bruteau**

*[Abridged from the original article in The Goddess Re-Awakening, compiled by Shirley Nicholson (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1989). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.]*

If, like St. Paul in Athens,<sup>1</sup> we walk about the city of our soul, we may well stumble upon an altar inscribed Agnostai Theai, “To the Unknown Goddess.” There may be no worship offered to her there any more, or it may be of so secret a nature that the common people of our city—our everyday thoughts—are quite unaware of it. But the presence of the Goddess herself has never departed from her holy place in our consciousness, and we may sense at any time that the Goddess is somehow making her way back to us.

## **The Way Back**

The “return” of the Goddess is not a new idea. In the ancient world it was a symbol of a deep and powerful event in people’s lives. The *anodos*, or “way back” or “way up,” was told of the Goddess in many of her forms in classical Greece, but the most important of these “returns” was that recounted in the myth of the two Goddesses, Demeter and Persephone.

According to the myth, Demeter (Grain-Mother), who is responsible for the fruitfulness of the earth, has lost her daughter, Persephone, because the latter has been abducted by Hades and carried off to the underworld. In her grief Demeter has neglected the crops and wandered about the earth seeking her daughter. At length she learns that Persephone is in the underworld and finds the “way down” to that realm, where she visits and beholds her daughter. Demeter’s descent is followed by her return, celebrated by the ancients in a magnificent festival. Persephone also is said, in a Homeric hymn, to return to the upper air, riding in the chariot of Hades as Queen of the Other World.<sup>2</sup>

When Demeter and Persephone, who is also called Kore (Maid, Virgin), are reunited, they act as one Goddess; for instance, in their dissemination of the domesticated wheat culture to the world, thus bringing civilization. In many representations of them, it is difficult to tell them apart, and images of a single Goddess are not readily identified as mother or daughter. The fact seems to be that Demeter and Kore are the two faces of a single divinity who is also reported

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1. Cf. Acts 17:23.

2. C. Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*, tr. Ralph Manheim (New York: Bollingen/Pantheon, 1967), pp. 43 44, 146 47, 149.

to undergo multiple transformations. As Jane Ellen Harrison says, “Demeter and Kore are two persons though one god.”<sup>3</sup> The mythological tradition, says C. Kerényi, “permits the soul to hold mother and daughter together and causes them to be identified with one another.”<sup>4</sup>

The real meaning, then, of the *anodos*, which we also are expecting as a “return” of this unknown divinity within ourselves, may actually be the *reunion* of the two aspects of the Goddess, the *finding* of Kore by Demeter. Perhaps it was this reintegration of her being which the Goddess commemorated and celebrated in the mysteries established by her at Eleusis. And perhaps it was because the initiates, who had prepared themselves by fasting and silence even as Demeter had, and like her, had drunk the *kykleon*,<sup>5</sup> also “found” and were reunited with their own lost “Kore,” that the Great Mysteries continued in force for nearly two thousand years without ever betraying their secret.

The secret of Eleusis was not only a secret of which it was forbidden to speak (*aporheton*), but a secret which could not be spoken (*arrheton*). The secret was the Kore herself, the *arrhetos koura*, the “Ineffable Maiden,” the only deity to be so called.

### **Hidden in the Field of Our Own Consciousness**

Is it possible that we can find here a hint as to our own Agnosta Thea, the divine treasure hidden in the field of our own consciousness? Harrison insists that Demeter and Kore are not so much mother and daughter as mother and maiden, two phases of one being, and also notes that Demeter tends to be associated with the things of this world, while Kore belongs to the kingdom of the spirit and is concerned with things “beyond.” The “mother” aspect of the Thea is our everyday world, our “mater-ial” and multiple world, our technical world, our restless world in quest of its “maiden” aspect, integral being and meaning.

Now we can begin to see why the “mother” and the “daughter” are such ambiguous figures. The mother seeks the maiden as her own earlier state, her original being, her source. But as her final integral meaning, the maid is her offspring, her fruit, her goal. (At Eleusis the building in which the mysteries were celebrated was called the Telesterion, from *telos*, “goal.”) For us, the manyness and the oneness of our lives mutually imply one another, as experience and theory, individuals and community, variety of activities expressing one personality, and in many other ways. Especially in our evolutionary view of our

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3. Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1903), pp. 272-74. Cf. Kerényi, p. 30.

4. Kerényi, p. 33.

5. The *kykleon* was a barley "mixture" which may have been somewhat fermented. Kerényi, pp. 177 ff.



world we see development taking place, both in ourselves singly and in the history of our humanity, as periods of integration alternating with periods of exploring and discovering, each giving rise to the one which follows it as it had itself grown out of its predecessor. If we feel that we are again approaching a time of the “return” of the Goddess, it is because the pressure on us to integrate our lives and find a principle of unity to give us a deep and organic meaning has again become urgent. We need to experience our Source.

### Seeking Our Unitary Self

In the Eleusinian image, Kerényi sees Demeter as seeking a part of herself when she searches for her daughter, and he argues that the duality of the “questing one” and the “found one”—the division of the original Goddess into mother and daughter—has opened up a vision of the source and manifestation of life to all of us. We may say that we are all seeking our original virginal, i.e., unitary, self, and are whole when we are reunited with it.

The many gods preside over the many departments of life, giving alternately, as Swinburne says in his *Hymn to Prosperpine*, “labor and slumber,” prototypes of all the finite “pairs of opposites.” But only the unnameable Mistress, the Ineffable Maiden, gives death, that is, the absolute stopping of all the finite forms, thus entrance to the infinite. She is the Queen of the World Beyond.

Demeter/Kore is the image of creative manifestation and return to unity, the eternal communion of the Many and the One. When the restless wandering has achieved its goal and been reunited with its own source, then the one and the many and the whole marvelous movement between them can be summarized in the single ear of wheat shown the initiates in silence at the conclusion of the Great Mysteries. □

She is more beautiful than the sun,  
And excels every constellation of the stars.

Compared with the Sun’s light she is found to be superior,  
For it is succeeded by the night;  
But against Wisdom evil does not prevail.

She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other,  
and orders all things well.

—The Wisdom of Solomon 7: 29, 30; 8: 1

## *Review Essay*

**In Praise of the Goddess: The Devimahatmya and Its Meaning**  
**Devadatta Kali, translator and commentator**

**Nicolas-Hayes, Inc., Berwick, Maine**

**382 pp. Paperback \$22.95 2003**

### **Sister Gayatriprana**

I was first exposed to a reading of the Devimahatmya in the Fall of 1978. The members of the group to which I belonged would take turns reading out from Swami Jagadishwarananda's translation, then passing the book to the next reader, often at a particularly exciting point in the drama, while the rest of us sat on the edge of our chairs in total suspense. At that time I had been devoted to Shri Ramakrishna's Mother Kali for nearly ten years and had built up my own image of who she is and what she means, but I was totally unprepared for the impact of the Chandi, as the Devimahatmya is known in Bengal. Here we encountered the goddess in a dazzling, even confusing array of forms and moods, engaged in a cosmic struggle where heads literally rolled and no holds were barred in the goddess's encounter with armies of demons, coming in all possible shapes, sizes and flavors, endless as the convolutions of the human mind itself.

As Fall succeeded Fall, we opened the Chandi and went through the primal drama in its pages. I began to look forward to this "home movie." which provided as much, if not more, entertainment and instruction, as, say, *The Lord of the Rings* or some other great epic allegory. Here I have to say that the entertainment sometimes lay as much in the language being used, for Swami Jagadishwarananda's English was very quaint and at times inaccessible, necessitating a consultation with the English dictionary—a ritual that became an adjunct of our reading and which we carried out with due solemnity and at times quite a bit of laughter. We did not, however, consult the Sanskrit dictionary to plumb the welter of Sanskrit names with which this text is loaded, and so the palpable and entirely fascinating drama of the exploits of the goddess as seen through sixth century eyes took place essentially in an esoteric space to which we did not have full access.

### **The Great Mother Archetype**

I now learn from the introduction to Devadatta's *In Praise of the Goddess* that in addition to several recent Indian translations there are three by native English speakers, all of which have doubtless made the work more accessible to Western readers. The very number of translations seems to bespeak the growing interest in the great mother archetype in the West, which we also gather from the

burgeoning Maryism in the Catholic Church as well as the growing devotion to her even in Protestantism, and even the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code*, the plot of which turns in a very dramatic way on European myths of the Divine Feminine. In tackling the Chandi, however, Westerners are up against an esoteric Oriental tradition, obscure even to many Indians, and definitely based on a worldview quite other than the dominant rationalistic-scientific paradigm we call normal in the West. It is, therefore, rather surprising that the three previous Western translations have not provided commentaries on the text. We have much cause for gratitude to Devadatta's eight-year labor of love in providing us with a commentary based on his own research and backed up by the authority of scholars of the Ramakrishna Order as well as the devotion and work of several Western devotees steeped in the goddess tradition.

In thus bringing to us a commentary which unlocks the text to enable us to encounter the goddess more fully, Devadatta has by no means fallen short from a scholarly standpoint. *In Praise of the Goddess* provides us with not only an English translation of the Devimahatmya, but also the full text in Devanagari script, transliterated Sanskrit, the text of the five traditional *angas* or auxiliary texts in Devanagari and English, a glossary, pronunciation guide, bibliography and index. The impression I had on looking through the book is that, if the Chandi we read in the nineteen seventies and eighties was the "silent movie," I now had in my hands a "DVD" with innumerable tools to enhance our understanding and enjoyment of it.

### **The Importance of Commentary**

Devadatta himself emphasizes the importance of the commentary, and I must agree that this part of the book is indeed a major piece of work. Every single verse of the main text has an explanatory comment, covering not only the Shakta or goddess-tradition aspects so visible on the surface, but also the Vedic, Epic, Sankhya, Vedantic, Puranic, and mainstream Tantric traditions, with here and there the views of Shri Ramakrishna, himself an authoritative Shakta, and occasionally even quantum mechanics to bring out the contemporary significance of the philosophical view the text is propounding. In short, we get an incredibly rich, in-depth study of the text and its auxiliary literature, which contains, among others, the Vedic Devi Sukta, the core text of the goddess tradition and the text which Swami Vivekananda himself used when introducing the goddess to the West.<sup>1</sup> Here I would remark that, although Swami Vivekananda was intensely

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1. Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama) Vol.6, p.146, "Mother-Worship." Marie-Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West*, Vol. 2 (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1984), Appendix C: The Women of India, p.412; Chapter 9: The Eastern Tour I, p.75. Sister Nivedita, *The Master as I Saw Him* (Kolkata: Udbodhan Office, 2004), Appendix D: The Worship of the Divine Mother, p.xix.

devoted to the goddess, he basically does not figure in this text, and I refer to his views as I go along to supplement the text and provide a link to our contemporary world.

I would like to mention a few features of the commentary that I found especially interesting and helpful. First is the provision of the meaning of the name of each protagonist in this almost overwhelming drama. If we know that the name Mahishasura (the second demon the goddess dispatches) is the buffalo demon, standing for brute force, incomprehension and homicidal anger, surrounded by Gaping-mouth, Arrogance, Oppression, Moral-blindness, Foul-mouth and Brutally-strong, we get a much better understanding of the goddess's form as Durga, the *rajasic* or proactively destructive aspect of the goddess dealing with the violent and angry tendencies of our minds.

### **Explanation of the Iconography**

Devadatta also provides us with a detailed and organized explanation of the goddess's iconography—her color, weapons, vehicle and modus operandi. Kali, for example, is black, with bloodshot eyes and streaming hair, gaping mouth, lolling tongue with which she drinks up blood, and a skull-topped staff with which she grinds her enemies to a pulp. She and other related terrifying goddesses tend to come on the stage as the three battles contained in the book reach their most ferocious point and, as the reader has already guessed, the action is at its most primal. Although we may not care to contemplate the divine in such mode, these may be said to be facts of spiritual life, contained, I would surmise, in the Christian stations of the cross, and from which even the pre-eminently rational Swami Vivekananda did not shrink. We find him expounding exactly the same iconography for contemporary would-be warriors of Mother in his talks at Thousand Island Park in 1895.<sup>2</sup>

Another very important point that Devadatta draws our attention to is the capacity of the goddess to hold within herself—without any conflict whatsoever—the benign as well as the terrible, light as well as dark, salvation as well as destruction. Even the terrifying Kali is at heart a loving mother. Her fearsome action is intended to eradicate our deep-rooted complexes and delusions and to carry us on to enlightenment. The more benign forms of the goddess perform the same functions—but, as we gather from their appearance largely at the beginning and ending of the battles, in a more “civilized” (i.e., verbal or persuasive) way. If, however, these benign mothers find their adversaries unrepentant and irredeemable by tender persuasion, they rapidly take up increasingly more terrible forms, ending at the almost unspeakable Chamunda, who grinds her victims in her teeth, reveling in the streams of gore gushing to the ground.

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2. *CW*, Vol. 7: Inspired Talks, June 19, pp. 5-6; July 1, p.23; July 2, p.27; July 5, p.32.

## **Nondualism Embracing Both the Dark and the Light**

All this is highly counterintuitive to those brought up in the purely devotional dualistic religions of East as well as West. Devadatta brings out rather well the underlying nondualism that can embrace the dark as well as the light and unify it in the undivided Ground from which the countless forms of the goddess emerge to work their works. This, I feel, is an extremely important point which in my opinion lies at the heart of the Vedanta bequeathed to us by Shri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda's "worship of the Terrible" is a call to embrace precisely this worldview, balanced by the assurance that in and through our battles, Mother is a living power permeating all that we do and carrying us on to liberation.<sup>3</sup>

Lest we think we are entering a chaotic world when we open the Devimahatmya, we also note that it is organized in a quite specific way. There are three battles, each presided over by a different form of the goddess pitted against demons of increasing complexity of power and specificity. Here again Devadatta provides a reliable guide, as we contemplate first Mahakali, the rather primal goddess deluding the archetypally evil Madhu and Kaitabha by her all-pervading maya and leading them into a trap whereby the god Vishnu becomes the means of their dispatch. The second battle is presided over by Mahalakshmi, an outwardly sweeter, more attractive and benign goddess pitted against the angry demon Mahishasura, and finally the third battle brings us to Mahasaraswati, an exquisitely beautiful, serene and wise goddess who faces the twin demons Shumbha and Nishumbha, the embodiments of human ego and attachment, and therefore much more "subtle," at least in their import, than their predecessors in the drama.

Mother is many-sided, but there is also a "hierarchy," at least from one point of view, and it is up to us to call on the goddess who responds to our need. If we are serene and sweet, we will see the sattwic goddess; if we are restless and disturbed, the more forceful rajasic goddess can be expected to intervene. Again, if we permit ourselves to fall apart in chaos and confusion, we can fully expect an encounter with the *tamasic*, black and terrible Kali or one of her close sisters. But whichever "level" we insert ourselves into, Mother has only one purpose—to inspire us, to energize us to self-transcendence.

Here we come to another major point brought out repeatedly by Devadatta. In the Devimahatmya and the tradition it stands for, the goddess is the source and repository of everything. Although she is again and again represented in the story as emerging from one or more of the gods, this does not mean that she is a derivative from the masculine—on the contrary, it is she who animates the gods

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3. CW, Vol.2: "Unity in Diversity," p.184.

and chooses to focus all her energies to defeat the demonic power of the human mind. This is a very radical worldview, turning the male-oriented Eastern and Western traditions on their heads—but it does have a very powerful appeal of its own, which, as I mentioned earlier, seems to be getting a response in many quarters of the contemporary West.

### **Defeating the Demonic Power of the Human Mind**

What we have not really had in living memory, however, is worship of the terrible aspect of the goddess. In the Devimahatmya we encounter her foursquare and have to face the challenge of understanding the struggle we must go through to attain to liberation from our unregenerate minds and lower propensities. Face to face with such a radical challenge, I believe it is helpful to understand that the goddesses of the Devimahatmya are not just medieval fantasies, but archetypes rooted in an immemorial tradition going back to Vedic times, when the first glimmering of its spiritual insights was recorded. This is another service Devadatta renders us as over and over he shows the continuity and the development of the goddess tradition from Vedic times to the present day—a period of possibly four to five thousand years. Bringing this tradition up to contemporary times, Shri Ramakrishna’s vision was that “the whole universe is the manifestation of Mother,” and the worship of all of her forms, high or low, male or female, good or bad, was his spiritual practice.<sup>4</sup> In the life of Swami Vivekananda we find that behind his magisterial accomplishments was none other than her power. At the end of his life his attitude was: “I come! Mother, I come! In your warm bosom, floating wherever you take me, I come—a spectator, no more an actor!”<sup>5</sup>

This is a large book, not one we would snuggle up with to relax before bedtime. Like Mother herself, it demands attention, devotion and quite a bit of discipline to work through. But its uplifting message and the tremendous work of Devadatta ensure that, as we go through its labyrinth, we do have a reliable guide as well as the assurance of a happy and fulfilling ending. With so much to be grateful for, I hesitate to make further suggestions, but I do feel that, if the cost of the book would not become prohibitive, it really would enhance it to include a map of the places mentioned in the introduction and also some images of the various forms of the goddess appearing in the story. Finally—and this is, I know, pushing it—it would be wonderful to have a movie of the story. Of late the West has absorbed such esoteric fare as *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Matrix*, and even *Harry Potter*. Why not bring the goddess on stage and let her message spread through this most direct and rapid method of communication? □

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4. CW, Vol.4: “My Master,” pp. 165-175.

5. CW, Vol.6: Letter to Josephine MacLeod, Alameda, April 18, 1900, pp.431-432.

## *Discussion: Are Western Vedantists Hindus?*

### *Vedanta's Realm is Universal*

#### **Linda Prugh**

My own enthusiastic conviction is that Vedanta, though it is the basis of Hinduism, is simply too broad and too deep to be confined to Hinduism or any one religion. Its realm is universal and embraces all spiritual law, all spiritual striving, and all spiritual discovery. Vedanta, it seems to me, is just about religion and the spiritual quest—whatever that means for any particular individual anywhere in the world. I have long feared that some Westerners who might really take to Vedanta are frightened away by the idea that they might have to take up a Hindu lifestyle in order to get anything out of coming to a Vedanta Society. There are many wonderful aspects of Indian culture that appeal to me, and many Hindu spiritual practices that I find very helpful. But there are some non-Hindu practices that I also find helpful. More and more, Vedanta has helped me to see that there is so much beauty in the world's various religions, because Vedanta is *at the heart* of every religion. Vedanta cannot be exclusive. It is open and free, and it makes us open and free!

I am very grateful that Swami Vivekananda called the first two organized centers “Vedanta Societies.” If he had used the term “Hindu,” the public would likely have had preconceived associations with that term. Some would have been attracted and some would have been repelled, but in either case they would have had *expectations*. With “Vedanta,” newcomers often have no preconceived ideas and come to it fresh. Vedanta truly is universal, and newcomers seem to be pleasantly surprised at the deep respect Vedanta has for the world's various faiths, prophets, and teachers and its genuine belief in the harmony of religions. Those with a faith background and those with none whatsoever are all welcome. Hopefully no one is ever made to feel left out or unwelcome at any Vedanta Society.

#### **The Heart of Religion**

Sister Gargi wrote in *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries* (2:388) regarding the swami's using the term “Vedanta Society”: “In doing so, he not only ensured the purity of its principles, but made it possible for anyone to follow those principles without first attaching himself to a specific creed and burdening himself with forms and ceremonials not necessary to him. One could, in short, become a ‘Vedantin’ and go straight to the heart of religion itself.”

I see Christ as a Vedantist, but not as a Hindu. Ramakrishna, born a Hindu, embodied all religions, making him a true Vedantist. This is surely the reason devotees of various paths, including Christianity, each considered him as belonging to their particular faith.

### *Vedanta: A Different Ball Game*

#### **Thomas Rea**

I am a Western Vedantist. I have never called or thought of myself as a Hindu. I don't mean for the distinction to sound esoteric. To me the word "Hindu" in English connotes a vast array of Hindu sects, none of which I wish to be included in. Not out of contempt or disregard, but mainly because of cultural upbringing and lack of exposure. In fact, I believe many early Ramakrishna Mission swamis in the West saw their mission as bringing Vivekananda's message to Westerners.

There is now a large diaspora of Indian people in the West and therefore all varieties of Hindu philosophies and sects are flourishing here, often with only Indian-born devotees. That seems like an entirely different ball game than the Vedanta I found a haven in. I have known Indian immigrants in the West who have confided in me that they were better able to practice Vedanta as they met it in the West than at home in India. Apparently, even some Indians have unpleasant associations with Hinduism as they knew it in their upbringing amidst Indian culture. That is definitely similar to many Christians who find in Vedanta a safe spiritual refuge from some alienating experiences they had with some types of Christian practice. In my view the early swamis saw the wisdom of focusing on the needs and approaches most relevant to Westerners. Therefore, I have been most comfortable calling myself a Vedantist. In fact, it is a proud term to me.

#### **We don't need to take up sitars and tablas.**

I hope that the Ramakrishna movement will eventually iron out how much of Vedanta is to be considered Indian culture and therefore unnecessary for Westerners, and what is universal. Are Hanuman and Ganesha helpful to Western seekers initially, for example? I found them a barrier and totally alien to my culture; I still do, but that does not interfere with my seeking and practice. Another example: I love Indian music of all sorts, but that is with many years of learning to appreciate it. Western Vedanta is evolving its own musical expression as time passes. Although Indian culture is rich and wonderful, Western



Vedantists do not have to become immersed in it to be Vedantists. We don't need to take up sitars and tablas.

Not to be facetious, but I am told that the first thing some Hindu converts to Christianity used to do in India was to go out and buy a Western suit and eat a hamburger! Likewise in the U.S. we have seen many barefoot, red-headed American girls dressed in saffron saris who are vegetarian followers of Krishna. Are Hindu diet and dress, music, and stylized behavior or custom intrinsically necessary to find universal truth? It is all humorous and, one hopes, harmless. Of course, their Christian mothers are quite alarmed at their sons and daughters!

Personally, I have mixed feelings about *puja* and flower offerings. It is a quandary. How shall Westerners practice our concepts in culturally meaningful ways without awkwardness? May we keep our shoes on? Our climates and cities are not barefoot friendly. Do you see my point, dear friends? I have also heard discussions and explanations of higher concepts of caste, but that too is not something I find helpful in modern circumstances or relevant to my experiences of life. Yet we now have internet services in the U.S.A. for people seeking mates of their own caste. That alone makes me prefer to call myself a Vedantist, not a Hindu, and God bless us all according to our own ideas.

The West will make of Vedanta what it chooses even as India will take up what it chooses of Western values, technologies and philosophical thought and make it Indian. And as we can see in history, Vedanta has found a new garden in which to grow in the West that will produce its own cultural milieu that we can't now predict. After all, Christianity initially was a tiny sect in Judaism of "Jesus Jews" until it married the Roman Empire. India and the West are rapidly exchanging gifts, and tomorrow will be a different world for both. These are just my personal thoughts. Regardless, I have deep affection and respect for my Indian sisters and brothers.

### *Am I a Vedantist or a Hindu? Guidelines from Vivekananda*

**Sister Gayatriprana**

*(continued from the previous issue)*

#### 3. What Can Westerners Learn from Swami Vivekananda's Statements in India?

##### **Introduction**

We have now looked at what Swami Vivekananda said in the West on the subject of Hinduism and Vedanta. These were very central topics in his Indian work, as we would well imagine, and there is a plethora of such materials, from

which we get several insights which are not so developed in his Western remarks. I believe it is worth going through his Indian work from this point of view, but there is so much material that it is not possible to get into detail in a short review like this. I am, therefore, going to take somewhat of a bird's-eye view of the content of what seem like his major Indian materials, with special emphasis on how the West ties in with his thoughts for India.

I have pinpointed five main sources which, as in the West, are sorts of “manifestos” at the major turning points of his work. The first is Notes Taken Down in Madras, 1892-93, the second The Reply to the Madras Address, written in September, 1894, the third the many lectures on Vedanta given during his tour from the South of India to Calcutta in early 1897. The fourth period, I believe, falls at the end of 1897, when he gave a major lecture in Lahore entitled “The Vedanta.” At the end of his life in India in 1901, he expressed himself in print in his newly founded journals and also in two lectures in East Bengal, entitled, “What I Have Learned?” and “The Religion We Are Born In.” I will draw on the materials from these sources in the summary I am about to present.

### **Hinduism Explained in Terms of Vedanta**

What immediately comes to our notice is that Swami Vivekananda does not use the word Hindu or Hinduism in any of these titles. However, he freely refers to Hinduism throughout, which would be expected in lectures given to predominately Hindu audiences. What is of interest is how he defines Hindu. There is no doubt that his emphasis lies on non-dual Vedanta, and that it becomes stronger and stronger as time passes. He clearly saw that it was this element in the galaxy of Hinduism that was most crucial to reconciling the ideals of East and West, a prime object of his mission. By the time of his Indian tour in 1897, he explicitly said, “I would not use the word Hindu.”<sup>1</sup> The reason he gave was that the word had been applied by non-Hindus as a mere label for people living East of the Indus river at a time when there was cultural and religious uniformity there. In subsequent epochs, however, the multicultural, multireligious development of India had rendered the word meaningless, even though the Hindus had themselves adopted it during Muslim times.

### **Swami Vivekananda's Definitions of Vedanta in India**

Swami Vivekananda's goal was to throw off medieval norms and return to the source of what is now called Hinduism—the principles of Vedanta as found in the Vedas and Upanishads, going back several millennia before the Common

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1. *CW*, Vol.3: “Vedantism,” p.118.

Era. This was justified, in his view, because of their discovery of the superconscious state and the development of a culture in which that state was considered the norm.<sup>2</sup> To emphasize this fact, he preferred the word Vaidika, following the Vedas, or better still, Vedantists, followers of the Vedanta.<sup>3</sup> Here again, he did not mean primarily the schools of Vedanta developed in the medieval period, but the living, contemporary commentary on the Upanishads by Sri Ramakrishna and his demonstration of what Vedanta means in practice. On the basis of that life, Swami Vivekananda arrived at certain key principles, which we can use to assess where we stand in relation to the Vedanta he taught:

1. The Vedanta applied to the various ethnic customs and creeds of India, is Hinduism.<sup>4</sup>

2. Hinduism is to be thoroughly modernized through a renaissance triggered by its interaction with the West, including the challenge of materialism, natural science and democracy.<sup>5</sup>

3. Certain aspects of Hinduism stand in the way of such radical and necessary changes—dualistic adherence to the Hindu pantheon, rituals and scholastic dogmas.<sup>6</sup> Socially, its investment in caste, gender, ethnic and spiritual hierarchy must go—because in Vedanta all are the divine Self.<sup>7</sup> Such attitudes had led to suppression of dissent, individual freedom and opportunity to develop physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually,<sup>8</sup> as well as to historic exploitation of women and the laboring classes—a direct cause, in his opinion, of the conquest of India by Westerners.<sup>9</sup>

4. Vedanta already exists in three forms—dualism, qualified non-dualism and non-dualism—all of which are valid and express different aspects of every individual mind.<sup>10</sup> Each is appropriate and suitable for different circumstances, and contemporary Vedanta accepts them as a whole, integrated with each other in the divine Ground within

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2. *CW*, Vol.6: “Hinduism and Sri Ramakrishna,” p.181.

3. *CW*.3.118.

4. *CW*, Vol.5: Letter to Alasinga, May 6, 1895, p.82.

5. *CW*, Vol.6: Notes Taken Down in Madras, pp.105, 113, 115.

6. *CW*, Vol.3: The Vedanta in All Its Phases, p.333 and The Vedanta, p.411.

7. *CW*, Vol.3: The Mission of the Vedanta, p.192 and The Vedanta, p.431.

8. *CW*, vol.3: The Vedanta, pp.414, 429, 432.

9. *CW*, Vol.4: Modern India, pp.444-445.

10. *CW*, Vol.3: The Vedanta, p.395.

each human heart.<sup>11</sup> All forms, philosophical or concrete, are relevant to the extent that they support the core of what it is to be a human being and their development is merely as an adjunct to the unfolding of the spiritual potential of humanity. All human beings are priceless because they all have the capability of unfolding from within themselves the qualities of avatars, incarnations and prophets.<sup>12</sup>

5. The ultimate goal of such Vedanta is to create a culture where the vision of the whole and the superconscious experience that makes such vision possible are central to all we do. The insights of the Vedas and Upanishads are extremely important in developing our capacity to get that vision, but as we grow, we come to appreciate that matter and Spirit are but different manifestations of the same, underlying Reality and that Western natural science, when approached from a Vedantic standpoint, is as valid and as meaningful as the Vedas themselves.<sup>13</sup> Both can work together to create a much freer, more rational, and empowered future for all of us.

### **Generosity, Openness and Facts, Not Preconceived Dogma**

Is this form of “Hinduism” something Westerners can relate to? In my opinion, most definitely. Here there is a generosity, openness and a willingness to deal with facts as they are—not according to some preconceived dogma—that appeals to Western minds. Any Indian who lived up to this mandate would, I believe, prove true the words of Rudyard Kipling who, after opening, “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, Till earth and sky stand presently at God’s great judgment seat,” added the significant words: “But there is neither East nor West, border, nor breed, nor birth, When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!” What Swami Vivekananda was aiming to create in India was surely such “strong men and women” who live by principle and stand on their own inner strength, working within their own cultural orbit, but able to recognize and salute the Self in the “strong men and women” of the West. This is what the Vedanta he spoke of can accomplish. But we cannot compromise with fundamentalism—either of the West or of the East—if we are to call ourselves Vedantists in the sense developed by Swami Vivekananda on the basis of Sri Ramakrishna’s life and teachings.

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11. CW, Vol.3: The Vedanta, p.397.

12. CW, Vol.3: The Vedanta, p.407.

13. CW, Vol.3: the Vedanta, p.423.

## **In Memoriam**

### *Swami Ranganathananda (1908—2005)*

#### **John Schlenck**

Swami Ranganathananda, the 13th President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, passed away in Calcutta on April 25 at the age of 96. The swami, who had served the Order as its President since 1998, was well known to Vedantists in the West from his frequent and extended trips to America, Europe and Australia from the sixties to the late eighties. Indeed, he was the Order's premier global spokesman during that period. Through his fluent yet scholarly presentations, he probably communicated Vedanta to more people than anyone since Swami Vivekananda. Indeed, his aim, as he admitted, was simply to express Vivekananda's ideas in modern language. This he did with skill, grace and ease.

I still remember my amazement at the combination of relaxation and concentration in his speaking style on the day I first met him. It was at Sri Sarada Ashrama, the country retreat of the Boston Vedanta Society, in the summer of 1968. The swami was engaged in a year and a half lecture tour that took him all over North and South America as well as to Europe. I calculated that on that day in August he spoke for a total of six hours, giving classes and answering questions. It didn't seem to tire him at all. At that time he was nearly 60 years old and had been traveling for months. On top of that he had a stringently restricted diet due to digestive problems.

#### **Exemplar of Same-Sightedness**

Later on that same lecture tour, he was our guest at the Vedanta Society of New York. Having been in charge of the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama in New Delhi for many years and also as a famous and popular speaker, he was well-known to many high officials in the Indian government. Mme. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Nehru's sister and India's Ambassador to the United Nations, came to visit him at our Center. A day or two later I was deputed to take him by taxi to the United Nations for a tour. On our return trip, the young taxi driver was curious to know who the swami was. They struck up a conversation and Swamiji invited him to come to his lecture at our center the following Sunday. On that day, just as the swami came down the stairs and entered the chapel, the young taxi driver entered the front door. Remembering him, the swami patted him on the shoulder and welcomed him. What struck me was that the swami behaved with him in the same quiet, friendly way as he had with Mme. Pandit.

Some years later, I witnessed a similar thing at the airport in Kolkata. By chance we were traveling on the same plane to Kolkata. He was coming from Hyderabad and I got on at Bhuvanewar. It was an uncrowded flight and I was able to sit next to him. When we reached Kolkata, he invited me to go with him in the car which Belur Math had sent for him. As we were ready to leave the airport, some beggars approached the car and asked for something through the window. The swami, with the same friendliness I had seen before, gave them the food he had with him which he hadn't eaten, saying, "This will do you good."

He was never effusive in his language or expression. He had a natural simplicity combined with respect and cordiality. One had the feeling that here was an example of true same-sightedness, with no perception of high or low, special friend or foe. I never heard him raise his voice. From the platform, he had complete mastery over his subject and held the attention of his audience, but there were no histrionics. Once I heard him being scolded by a swami senior to him. His response was quiet and respectful, but not obsequious.

### **Blessings of Swami Shivananda**

Swami Ranganathananda was born in a village in the South Indian state of Kerala in 1908. His family was well off, owning considerable farm land. The young boy was a good swimmer and loved adventure. He was also liberal minded and did not hesitate to eat from the hands of those considered untouchable. When he was fifteen, a friend gave him a copy of *The Gospel of Ramakrishna* (in English), which he read with great intensity. This quickly led to several volumes of Vivekananda's *Complete Works* and other Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature. Very soon he resolved to join the Ramakrishna Order. At only seventeen, he was permitted to join the Order at its center in Mysore. On the way from Kerala to Mysore, he had the blessing of meeting Swami Shivananda, who was staying at Ootacamund, and taking initiation from him. The Mysore center was then headed by Swami Siddheswarananda who was afterward sent to France, where he founded the Centre Vedantique Ramakrishna at Gretz.

During his six years at the Mysore ashrama, the young monk led a busy life, combining work, meditation and study. He cooked, washed dishes, gardened, collected donations for the ashrama, and looked after a hostel for students. He had had very little formal education, but was an avid learner and in his years at Mysore mastered Sanskrit, studied the scriptures and memorized the Gita. He also engaged in sports, particularly wrestling and volleyball. He began to give classes on the Gita to inmates at the Mysore Jail. His work with prisoners continued during his three-year posting at the Bangalore center.

He received brahmacharya (novitiate) vows from Swami Shivananda in 1929 at Belur Math, and sannyasa (final) vows and the name Swami Ranganathananda from him in 1933, again at Belur Math. But Swami Shivananda had given

permission for the young monk to wear the ochre clothes of final renunciation only a few months after he joined the Order.

In addition to growth in inner life and scholarship, Ranganathananda was developing qualities of leadership which were recognized by the senior monks. Shortly after receiving sannyasa, he was sent to Burma (Myanmar) to work in the Order's center in Rangoon (Yangon), doubling as secretary and librarian. His eloquence as a speaker developed here through classes and lectures, and he began to draw large audiences. In 1939 he organized flood relief operations, and soon afterward, at age 31, was appointed head of the Rangoon center. A hospital was also founded there, which became popular and well-respected. With the Japanese invasion in 1942, the work of the center had to be stopped. Thousands of people fled on foot to India amid great privation. The swami could have been evacuated more comfortably, but elected to share the hardship of the overland exodus. In spite of the suffering, he spoke afterward of the "rich experience" he gained during the journey. By the time he reached India his weight was reduced to 80 pounds, and he required months of rest and recuperation.

Later that same year he was appointed to Karachi (now in Pakistan), where he arranged for a large amount of food aid to be shipped to Kolkata during the terrible Bengal famine of 1943. Along with other work, Ranganathananda resumed lecturing and was soon drawing large crowds. Swami Madhavananda, then General Secretary of the Order, on hearing Ranganathananda speak, commented to another monk, "Taking Shankar on his lap, Thakur (Sri Ramakrishna) is playing." After the subcontinent was partitioned, it became impossible for the center in Karachi to continue operating and the monks there had to be evacuated to India.

### **To New Delhi and to the World**

After a year's leave, Ranganathananda was posted to New Delhi, where he headed the center there until 1962. During his tenure large libraries for the public and for university students were built on the ashrama campus, as well as a large lecture hall and a beautiful temple. He also gave popular discourses at Delhi University. His Sunday evening lectures at the ashrama's auditorium, sometimes drawing over 2,000 people, became an outstanding feature of the capital's cultural life, attracting a cosmopolitan audience which included the American ambassador.

The swami's renown as a speaker spread rapidly, and he undertook lecture tours throughout India and to other Asian countries. In 1961 he made his first tour of Europe, lecturing in 17 countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain in a space of four months. That same year he was elected a trustee of the Ramakrishna Math and a member of the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission. In 1962 he was appointed head of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of

Culture in Kolkata, and in 1973, President of the newly affiliated Ramakrishna Math in Hyderabad, a post he retained until 1993. Meanwhile, in 1989, he was elected a Vice-President of the Order, and from that time began to initiate disciples.

Many who knew Swami Ranganathananda recount instances of his generosity, kindness and encouragement. Others recall that he never criticized anyone, to his face or otherwise. This may have been related to his intense devotion to Holy Mother, less well known than his devotion to Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. He was an exemplary monk, never carrying money with him and hardly any luggage, relying only on God. (To those wishing to know more about the swami, we will be glad to send by e-mail a short, unpublished biography compiled by several swamis at Ramakrishna Math headquarters at Belur. E-mail: [VedWestCom@aol.com](mailto:VedWestCom@aol.com).) □

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

**P. Shneidre**

*[Continued from the previous issue. Based on the sayings of Lal Ded or Lalleshwari, a religious ascetic who roamed the forests of Kashmir in the 14th century. When this is recited as a performance, improvised music is heard in the background: drone, drums, flutes, bird calls.]*

Why do you bother  
with someone who's not your love?  
You whisper so softly  
in the sweet ear of nothing.  
That's not how to stop  
coming and going,  
O my soul

---

You'll never make  
a rope of sand.  
And the rope you don't make  
won't tow your boat,  
which you also won't have

---



God is one poet you can't edit

---

All those seeds you planted  
are taller than you now,  
you fool. You're stuck  
with the harvest,  
O my mind

---

You've tanned your own hide—  
stretched tight  
on the rigid pegs of desire

---

The right time to die  
is now, while you live.  
Wait till the last minute,  
and you'll miss it

---

I could blow out the southern clouds  
or drain the sea  
before I could convince you  
to die for me.  
And that's because you're an idiot,  
O my mind

---

For their praise and blame  
I pay a good-quality blank stare  
and then count the change they give me:  
a lot of cheap little stares

---

No need to kill your demons.  
Feed them bite-size pieces  
of self-control and discrimination  
and they'll choke in hell,  
O my mind

---

God and desire  
travel away from you  
down different roads.  
If you hurry, you can catch up  
with one of them

---

Rub two words together  
to start a fire.  
Or never put them  
together—then there's no fire  
and nobody gets burned

---

The voice from within  
doesn't get blown out.  
One lamp burns steadily  
and is never silenced

---

I long to have no shame.  
I long for the spittle that comes my way  
to roll off.  
What keeps me from what I want?  
Wanting it

---

First, in my mind, I wrestled  
a hungry jackal away from a fresh lion.  
Then, something a little more difficult:  
I pulled myself away from your warm,  
loving arms, O world

---

You are a little bit dead  
if your desires are still alive

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*[to be continued]*

## *Contributors*

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JOHN SCHLENCK, resident member and Secretary of the Vedanta Society of New York, is a composer of music. He is also Secretary-Treasurer of Vedanta West Communications.

P. SHNEIDRE, a member of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, has created theater pieces on the lives of religious innovators including Buddha, Jesus, Vivekananda and others. He is presently writing a screenplay about Sister Nivedita.