Editorial

Suffering and Transcendence

In our last issue we explored the different ways in which suffering and spirituality are related. We discussed various ways of coping with suffering and how it could deepen our spiritual lives.

One common thread was transcendence. All have to suffer, but the spiritual aspirant can learn to turn suffering to spiritual advantage and rise above it. What is meant by rising above it?

- Allowing it to deepen our understanding of life and of ourselves.
- Allowing it to forge a sense of empathy and kinship with other people, with other living beings, knowing that all life involves suffering.
- Learning to accept what comes to us without blaming others or God.
- Regarding suffering as an opportunity for growth and creativity, a prod to go beyond our present, limited selves.
- Letting it encourage self-forgetfulness through active service of others.

All of these are means of self-transcendence, which after all is the purpose of the spiritual life.

The present issue of *American Vedantist* continues the same theme. Those of us on the *AV* staff were gratified by the response to our request for articles on the subject. We received more submissions than could be published in a single issue.

The greatest human beings, forgetting personal needs, pains, and desires, devote their lives to alleviating the suffering and bondage of others and to bringing joy and wisdom to them. Sri Ramakrishna gives the allegory of four friends who came upon a high wall. Eager to know what was on the other side, they scaled the wall and saw a scene of unimaginable joy and beauty. Three of the friends jumped down without looking back. The fourth, wishing to share his knowledge of the great joy beyond the wall, returned and told other people about it. The Bodhisattva postpones his own entrance into Nirvana until all beings have achieved it. Christians see in the icon of Christ crucified God sharing human pain. Swami Pavitrananda once said that for a soul like Swami Vivekananda, to take on a human body is itself a crucifixion. In spite of this, great souls come again and again, suffering birth, disease, and death so that others may overcome ignorance and fear and achieve spiritual freedom.

—The Editors

Insights of Sages, Saints and Devotees

Gautama Buddha

Now this is the noble truth of suffering: birth is painful, old age is painful, sickness is painful, death is painful, sorrow, lamentation, dejection and despair are painful. not getting what one wishes is painful. All kinds of grasping are painful.

Now this is the noble truth of the cause of suffering: the craving which leads from birth to death to birth, together with greed and desire—the craving for passion, the craving for power, the craving for existence, the craving for non-existence.

Now this is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, the cessation without a remainder of craving: abandonment, forsaking, release, non-attachment.

And this is the noble truth of the way that leads to the cessation of suffering: The noble Eightfold Way: right understanding, right resolve, right speech, right action, right means of livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.[1]

Aeschylus:

God's law it is that he who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.[2]

Swami Vivekananda:

I fervently wish no misery ever came near anyone; yet it is that alone that gives us an insight into the depths of our lives, does it not? In our moments of anguish, gates barred forever seem to open and let in a flood of light.[3]

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[1] From The Sermon at Banaras. Rephrased by John Schlenck from various translations.

[2] From Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, quoted by Edith Hamilton in *The Greek Way* (New York: Norton and Co., 1983), p. 186.

[3] *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama), VIII: 466.

Hadewijch of Antwerp:

When the soul is enlightened by Knowledge
It sees itself called forth by Love.
But when overwhelmed by suffering,
It discovers the true nature of Love.

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Our heart, our strength, our mind
And our will are ruled by Love,
A person must suffer so many things:
Poverty with the poor and needy,
The pangs of death with those defeated,
Sorrow with those taken captive,
And distress with those who love.
The feeling of Love's presence
Keeps the soul in constant wakefulness.
For Love disappears while approaching
And hides at the moment of revealing.
Whoever wishes to be Love's servant
Must suffer more than one death.[4]

Swami Ramakrishnananda:

…if God allots sorrow and suffering to anyone then know for certain that it is His blessing in disguise. What we call misery is in fact His kindness. We forget God in our greed for transient pleasures. So He makes us remember Him by these little miseries. His kindness is expressed through both favorable and unfavorable circumstances. When He adorns our coveted playhouse of life with wife, wealth, friends, fame, and so on—it is the pleasant kindness of God. But when He takes them away one after another, makes us shed tears and drags us forcibly towards Him—it is His unpleasant kindness.[5]

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[4] Dom André Gozier, *Béguine, Ecrivain et Mystique* (Montrouge, France: Nouvelle Cité, 1994), pp. 126-27.

[5] Swami Chetanananda, *God Lived With Them: Life Stories of Sixteen Monastic Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna* (Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 1997), p. 299.

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna:

Harinath: Why is there so much suffering in the world?

Master: The world is the lila [divine play] of God. It is like a game. In this game there are sorrow and joy, virtue and vice, knowledge and ignorance, good and evil. The game cannot continue if sin and suffering are altogether eliminated from creation. . . .

Harinath: But this play of God is our death.

Master: Please tell me who *you* are.[6]

Swami Adbhutananda:

Toward the end of Latu Maharaj's life, a devotee asked him, "Do you feel now that the world is a burden?" He answered, "Look, when you dive deep into the Ganges, though there are thousands of pounds of water above you, you don't feel the weight. Similarly, if you plunge into God's creation yet still hold onto Him, you will not feel its burden. Then the world becomes a place of merriment.[7]

Swami Ranganathananda:

One wrong understanding of the karma theory was the idea that if a person is in distress, it is due to his or her karma and one can remain indifferent. Thus many people remained indifferent towards their fellowmen who were suffering, thinking or believing that such suffering was due to the karma of the unfortunate sufferers, and we need not interfere in that problem. That was the wrong understanding which was not the idea of the teachers who expounded this theory. If it is their karma to suffer, it is our karma to go and help them. That is the meaning of the karma theory.[8]

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[6] Swami Nikhilananda, tr., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York, Ramakrishna Vivekananda Center, 1942), p. 436.

[7] *God Lived with Them*. p. 436.

[8] In *Proceedings of the Question and Answer Session in Chicago*, Vivekananda Vedanta Society, Chicago, 1982.

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi:

[A woman said to her] "Some days ago my young son, who was the earning member of the family, died."

At this, the Mother said: "What sad news, my dear!" Immediately the Mother's eyes became wet. Having sympathy from the Mother, the elderly lady cried out loudly. The Mother sat on her veranda, pressed her head on a pole, and began to cry loudly. Hearing their crying, other women of the household rushed there and watched this pathetic scene silently. Thus some time passed. Later, when their emotion cooled down, the Mother softly asked her woman attendant to bring some coconut oil. The Mother poured that oil on that woman's dry and disheveled hair and rubbed it with her hand. The Mother also tied puffed rice and solid molasses in one corner of her cloth, and while bidding her farewell she said with tearful eyes: "Please come again, my child." Observing the face of that woman, I realized how much consolation she had derived from the Mother's compassionate behavior.[9]

Thomas a Kempis:

"Consider yourself unworthy of God's comfort, but rather deserving of much suffering. When a man is perfectly contrite, this present world becomes grievous and bitter to him. A good man always finds cause for grief and tears; for whether he considers himself or his neighbors, he knows that no man lives without trouble in this life. And the more strictly he examines himself, the more cause he finds for sorrow. Our sins and vices are grounds for rightful sorrow and contrition of heart; for they have such a strong hold on us that we are seldom able to contemplate heavenly things."[10]

Rameshwar Chattopadhyaya:

Sri Ramakrishna's elder brother, Rameshwar, is said to have thought that God hammered so fiercely at His world, trampled it and kneaded it like dough, cast it so often into the blood bath and red hell-heat of the furnace because human nature was still a hard, crude and vile ore which would not otherwise be smelted and shaped.[11] ❑

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[9] From "Reminiscences of Holy Mother" by Swami Chetanananda, in *American Vedantist*, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 8)

[10] *Imitation of Christ* I.2.

[11] *Life of Sri Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1977), p. 25.

Pain and Suffering: A Merger of Medication and Meditation

Bhagirath Majmudar, M.D.

When we speak of pain and suffering, pain and pleasure, science and spirituality, are we dealing with different entities? Is it possible that by compartmentalization of these entities, we have needlessly perpetuated a negative image of pain and suffering? Is it possible that by separating science from spirituality, we have denied ourselves a doubly potent healing power for our maladies?

Reviewing the literature on the subject, I found that scientists and sages are only seemingly separate on the subject of pain and suffering. A scientist discovers the truth; a sage uncovers the truth. Neither can claim to have created the truth. Their combined knowledge, experiences and experiments can help us to find a meaningful solution to our suffering. I will accordingly approach the subject at both its periphery (medical science) and its center (spirituality).

Are Pain and Suffering Different?

Pain is generally thought to be physical, originating at the body level, mostly from tissue disruption. Its transient life should end upon the removal of its cause. Suffering, on the contrary, is thought to be at a mental level, often as a reaction to pain. It may continue to survive and thrive even when the source of pain is long gone. One may say that the suffering that follows pain is a choice of will, but many times it is an involuntary choice. Pain is simple by nature and its cure largely within the reach of a physician. Suffering, on the contrary, may linger obstinately, baffling a physician, but may respond to spiritual measures. Nevertheless, pain and suffering can be intertwined in a complex manner.

Pain: Production and Productivity

Any tissue damage provokes the pain receptors that are distributed throughout the body. These receptors are always awake, day and night, in every moment of life. They represent an alarm system for the security of the entire body. Upon sounding an alarm, they communicate with the brain instantly and with unfailing loyalty. The brain sits in a dark, tight cave called the cranium or skull. The brain has never seen the light of the day, but it is capable of giving us both sight and intellectual vision. It perceives all the stimuli arising from the five senses but is itself immune to them. A sophisticated, synchronized communication between the brain and the damaged tissue ensures a prompt and

precise mobilization of healing forces. The process of repair and healing begins in the twinkling of an eye. To regard the pain as a malevolent factor is, therefore, ignorance (tamas), because the pain is bubbling with activities that are beneficial (rajas and sattva). Sequences associated with pain, such as redness, swelling, heat, and loss of function, are the bulwarks of rapid resolution to restore normalcy. Every scar therefore, indicates a triumph of order over disorder.

Considered this way, pain is prudent, shrewd, compassionate, benevolent and indispensable. It is the greatest of all teachers. When understood properly, it instills an invaluable wisdom in body, mind, and spirit.

Perilous Painlessness

There is a medical condition called congenital indifference to pain wherein the patient, a child, does not feel any pain at all. The patient can step on long iron nails that can be driven in the sole of the foot, or have profuse bleeding from the bitten and bleeding tongue, but he will have no cognizance of it. Painlessness in such children can be cruel to the point of being lethal. The child has no pain but the parents do suffer!

Leprosy is another model of painlessness. The patient can get burnt on a stove or scalded by boiling water and not know it! Dr. Paul Brand, a great surgeon and a Christian missionary, who dedicated his life to leprosy patients, wrote a book on their pitiful painlessness called *The Gift of Pain*.

Similarly, a newborn baby does not identify his body as his own until the pain factor instills in him the capacity to distinguish self from non-self.

The Many Shapes of Pain

Although we tend to regard all kinds of pain as a generically single experience of unwelcome nature, their diversity is recognized both scientifically and spiritually.

Physicians distinguish different kinds of pain in order to obtain different kinds of information that lead to diagnosis. Acute and chronic pain, dull, throbbing, stabbing, penetrating pain are some examples of somatic pain. In a spiritual sense, pain is also described as bad or good, or even sacred. Dorothee Soelle employs the term “affliction” when the pain is physical, psychological and social. All these kinds of pain, however, have indistinct boundaries and often merge imperceptibly.

It follows that in cases of acute pain stemming from tissue damage, medicine should be in the forefront, because the remedy has to be prompt and precise, and its cause requires instant attention. A few years ago I was called to see a swami who was acutely ill. He was shivering like a dry leaf due to malaria. There was massive destruction of his red blood cells from malarial parasites, and he needed

immediate anti-malarial treatment. At the same time, I could also see the enormous mental balance he had maintained during this acute condition. Spirituality was his strong support, but it could not be a substitute. On the other hand, when Arjuna was suffering from doubt and confusion at Kurukshetra, Krishna's spiritual message was the only possible remedy. No medicine would have measured up to it.

Can Pain Killers Kill Us?

An abuse of analgesics can create its own set of problems, as in a recently emerging condition called Chronic Pain Syndrome. More and more cases are being registered of patients having this malady. In a substantial number of cases, this arises from our civilization's increasing intolerance of pain. We rush toward a pain remedy with frantically fast speed. We have bestowed on ourselves an inviolable right to remain always free of pain and suffering. But the less we are willing to suffer pain, the more we lose our capacity to endure pain. We have already seen that pain is a partner in our health, and not an adversary to be crushed and killed. Interestingly, the medical literature is bringing out a previous history of abuse, and particularly sexual abuse, in a number of patients with chronic pain syndrome. It substantiates, on a larger spectrum, the association between remote injuries, bodily or mental, that stay alive and subsequently sting unabatedly.

Religious Pain

Religious pain through self-suffering and self-hurting is seen in a number of faiths and cultures. Hindus, Muslims, Native Americans, Jains, Christians have all employed pain as a way to identify with God. Self-hurting may be practiced as a form of penance for sin. Some harsh religious practices are believed to heal sickness of soul. Pain is highly acclaimed in the Urdu literature of India. Most Indians remember the famous lines of the distinguished Muslim poet Mirza Ghalib, that pain exceeding the limit of endurance becomes its own remedy. Mystics often intensify their surface pain until its worldly core is cancelled out. The pain thereafter becomes sacred, opening doors to insightfulness, meaningfulness, and salvation. Ariel Glucklich describes in his book, *Sacred Pain*, several methods of self-suffering employed by different religions.

Pain and Pleasure

Human beings experience both pain and pleasure, coming from sensations in the body and interpreted by the mind. Leonardo da Vinci sketched in his notebook a figure with two torsos, two heads, and four arms, joined at the waist like Siamese twins. He called this "The Allegory of Pleasure and Pain." They are

joined together like inseparable twins; arising from the same trunk implies that they originate from the same source. Saint Augustine said that everywhere greater joy is preceded by greater suffering. A Chinese poet said that those who look for pleasure without pain, happiness without misery, and joy without grief, do not know how things in heaven are intertwined. Pain, therefore, is an inevitable predecessor of joy, the secret of joy lying in the mastery of pain. When received with reverence and wisdom, it may turn into "sacred pain."

Can Pain Set a Limit on Life?

Ordinarily, intense pain inflicts severe restrictions on life. Once we enter the world of spirituality, however, we begin to see many exceptions.

When I think of the pain associated with laryngeal cancer, I am filled with awe at Sri Ramakrishna's accepting attitude toward his own pain. Requested repeatedly by the devotees to ask Mother Kali to let his mouth open for food, he reluctantly asked the Mother to let him eat a little. Pointing to the to gathering of disciples, she replied, "You are eating through so many mouths already." He felt ashamed and remained silent.

In a mythological story, the child Prahlada fearlessly embraced a red-hot pillar to prove God's presence therein. He did not feel any pain but only the divine presence in the hot pillar. Florence Nightingale served a countless number of patients while experiencing excruciating and incapacitating spinal pain. She sanctified her pain through intimate dialogues with God, drew her continued strength from such dialogues, and lived fifty-five years of sickness, but forty-five years of solid service to humanity and God. There are many spiritual teachers who have demonstrated the failure of pain to rule their lives. "True conquest is self-conquest," said Gautama Buddha.

But what about "average" people? My first encounter was with a Christian nurse while I was a medical student. She treated all patients with deep compassion and selfless love. One time, while assisting in surgery, she cut her finger almost to the point of dislodgment. "A little suffering brings me closer to Jesus," she muttered and continued her work. It was no small event for me at that time. "With the help of the thorn in my foot, I spring higher than anyone with sound feet," said Kierkegaard.

I give another example. A long-time devotee of Vedanta came to me and whispered to me that he needed my help as he was going to die of brain cancer, which was recently diagnosed. As a physician, I have seen many patterns of reaction when the news of terminal disease is delivered to the patient. One of them is an initial quiet or euphoric reaction, disregarding the impact of a life threatening disease, followed by a complete collapse of character. I thought my

American fellow devotee might belong to this group. I also agonized at the prospect of his having progressively worsening, insufferable pain, as the brain tumor would increasingly demand more space in a rigidly closed cranial cavity. He unhesitatingly permitted his surgeon to give him an experimental treatment in the spirit of "whatever helps somebody in the future is fine with me." I met him several times during his hospitalization. Every time I found him to be quiet and calm, interested only in knowing what we discussed in the Vedanta center at the previous meeting. He never expressed once, even until his death, how insufferable his pain was, or his concerns about himself. Before seeing him I thought of how to console an inconsolable person. He turned out to be my teacher, setting an example of dealing with death from a Vedantic perspective.

Pain and Suffering from Actual or Imagined Death

Vedanta has always denied the ability of death to conquer the soul. One gives up one's body like an old garment, says the Bhagavad-Gita. In spite of this reassurance, people suffer from the fear of death. "I am not afraid of death, but I don't want to be there when it happens," as Woody Allen said.

It is of interest, however, that the medical literature, in its exploration of near death experience (NDE), has uncovered some Vedantic thoughts. Many patients having NDE express a feeling of undisturbed tranquility, calm, and peace, and resent the resuscitative efforts of the medical team. "Do not disturb my privilege of dying peacefully and quietly," they seem to be thinking at that time.

A story narrated by the British explorer, David Livingston, is noteworthy. He was attacked by a lion in East Africa and was then rescued. He wrote later on that he experienced no pain in this life-threatening episode, and more surprisingly, no sense of fear or alarm. On the contrary, he had an extraordinary sense of calm and detachment, which made his harrowing experience so peaceful as to be pleasurable.

Conclusion

One amongst several Sanskrit names for pain is *vedana*, which is derived from Veda or knowledge. Similarly, a common Urdu word is *safar*, pronounced "suffer," which means journey. In our journey (safar) of life, Vedana (Knowledge of Pain and Suffering) are our constant companions. Vedanta draws our attention to their recurring and transient nature and cautions us against *maya* presenting them as real and insurmountable.

In India, a place where two rivers meet is called a holy place, because each river brings with it a distinct and different force and flow. When science and spirituality meet, we can create a holy place of our own.

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Sickness, Old Age and Death

Questions and Answers with Swami Prabhavananda

[Swami Prabhavananda founded the Vedanta Society of Southern California in 1930 and remained its head until his passing away in 1976. The following dialogue was recorded by a member of the Society.]

Q: Swami, how can we prepare ourselves to be able to take old age and disease with cheerfulness instead of depression?

Swami: That's easy. If you make *japam* and meditate when you are well, devote yourself to God and try to be absorbed in Him when you are healthy and young, then old age, disease and death won't mean a thing to you.

When you are sick, you will find that your mind has become subtle and is thinking of God more than at other times. This reminds me of an incident in the life of one of the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, Khoka Maharaj--Swami Subodhananda. He told me he was in Rishikesh practicing austerities, when he suddenly became very sick with a high fever. Then he saw Sri Ramakrishna sitting beside him with his hand over him, who said to him, "Shall I send some rich man to take you to a doctor?"

"No, no, no!" answered Kokha Maharaj.

"Well, what is it you want?"

"I want to be sick like this so you will be seated beside me."

So you see, sickness or old age can be a blessing. And instead of gossiping or growing senile you will be thinking of God. You'll sit in a corner with your beads and make japam.

Q: What is the lesson to be learned from the fact that a holy man like Swami Shivananda had to suffer so much at the end of his life?

Swami: You see, a great soul like Swami Shivananda made no distinction among people, but gave his blessings to everyone—good or bad. Those he blessed had their karmas to work out, and so his karma of suffering was not his, but those of the devotees he helped. Suffering to such great souls means nothing. If you read the teachings of Swami Shivananda, you will find that once when he was very sick, and could hardly move, someone said to him with concern, "Maharaj, how are you?"

"I see that you are asking it of this body. Well, the body is sick, but inwardly I am happy!"

Q: How can we live successfully *in* the world, but not *of* it?

Swami: What are the words of Holy Mother? "Practice japam and meditation and devote yourself to God." You see, everybody has to live in the world. Monks also live in the world. I remember one time a disciple asked Maharaj [Swami Brahmananda]: "Can anybody find God living in the world?"

"Who is not living in the world?" he answered.

The important thing is not to let worldliness stick to you. And it will not if your mind is attracted to something greater, something higher. So, the only possible way of living in the world and not becoming attached to it is to attach yourself to God. Let the hands work, be attentive to your business, but keep a part of your mind in God—knowing He is the only one who is your very own.

You know, while we live in the world we have to convince ourselves that there is only one real object of love, only one being who really loves us, and that His love never falters. He is the Lord and he is our very own. You belong to him. Keep that awareness. Then you can live in the world and nothing will touch you. ❑

To Suffer or Not To Suffer

Margaret A. Nosek

The sign in the entrance to our Vedanta Center in Houston reads "Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional". It's common to look at someone, especially a child, who is deformed, living in poverty, or a victim of violence and feel compassion for the suffering they must be going through. People feel that way when they look at me, but I am the least deserving of their projected misery.

I am not miserable, and most often I am not suffering. Yes, I have a severe physical disability (spinal muscular atrophy); yes, I use a ventilator; yes, I am dependent on many people to get me through each day; but no, most often I am not suffering. When I suffer it's because someone or something has taken away my feeling of being in control of my life. The clearest and most consistent example of that is when I am in the hospital for the all too frequent respiratory infections that befall me. I feel out of control mostly because in those environments it's so difficult to do the things that I know will make me healthy. On several occasions the people in those places have saved my life and for that I am supremely grateful. However, that does not diminish the reality that hospitals are designed for suffering—for relieving it and for inflicting it.

As a rehabilitation researcher, I see both sides of this dilemma. I see people who have bodies that are minimally functional yet they live in a state of vibrant health and, moreover, they're able to maintain equilibrium whenever threats to their well-being arise. I see others who have only a minimal impairment but believe their world has caved in, that they are worthless and have no rightful place in society. The key difference, as I have observed, is the direction in which their thoughts are traveling.

Those whose thoughts are tied to their bodies and the expectations others have for them are doomed to suffer. What makes you miserable is the comparison, either to what you've been in the past, or to others, or to what you think you could be in the future. The body can indeed give much pleasure, but as we all know, life is a mixture of pleasures and pains. Those who respect and accept both seem to suffer less.

It does no good for relieving my suffering to think this is how God wants me to be and just accept it. It helps somewhat in those times when I am miserable to think that this is my sacrifice to the Great Mother. But what helps the most is to think beyond it all, beyond good and evil, justice and injustice, beyond ambition and what might be. Remembering is the best antidote to suffering. Remembering the Mother, remembering Her presence within and through me, remembering what is the only unchanging reality, the Light. ❑

Alive with Spirit: A Sacred Healing Journey

**An interview with Sister Judith Thackray,
Order of Sarada in America, Hermit**

Conducted by Brother Richard Simonelli, OSA

[Continued from the previous issue. Sister Judith Thackray, a student of Swami Bhashyananda, was diagnosed with acute EI/MCS (Environmental Illness/ Multiple Chemical Sensitivities) in 1991; in 1993 she moved to a small cabin in the Indian Peaks Wilderness area of the Colorado Rockies, and established her hermitage at Mother's Rock.]

Part Two: Yearning for Wholeness

Brother Richard: Does your weaving, "Garment of Peace," carry a description analogous to the yogic system in going from top to bottom of the dress? Is there a connection with the Four Yogas of Vedanta?

Sister Judith: Yes. I'd already gone into Vedanta as a very young person to try to find a way back to Spirit and had taken formal initiation. I had found the Four Yogas: Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga, Raja Yoga, and Jnana Yoga. These are the Sanskrit names for the emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of life. As I worked with the yogas, I wanted to find a way to put them back together into one garment.

A Linking of Two Visions

For me, yoga needs to be an integrative process in which all four of these aspects of being work into an integrative whole. So this weaving was a kind of linking of these two visions. Native American understanding is that humans have these four aspects of being that need to be carefully balanced at all times for life to be an integrated whole. They seem to have that instinctive understanding. With our Western minds, we often have to take apart all four aspects before we can let them come back together and be the whole that they are. So I was quite pleased that what had happened to me with the yogas came together in this instinctive, intuitive feeling-form in that weaving It was a confirmation of my own interfaith journey. I came from a Cherokee-Christian background and had found peace with interfaith being through Sarada-Ramakrishna Vedanta. This was now expressed in the "Garment of Peace."

BR: Were you actually thinking in terms of bringing these two ways together as you did this, or did that come later?

SJ: Well, you know, we artists don't think. We just let our souls express these yearnings. And I think my yearning was very deep—to have my Eastern orientation join with my Christian background in the heart and become a whole in my Native American soul. So it wasn't something I sat down and planned on a piece of paper, saying I will create this thing. It literally sprang from my soul's yearning to be whole again.

BR: How did you feel later on after these weavings were done? Did you feel they accomplished something important?

SJ: Tremendously so. These are living symbols, the way that Native Americans understand symbols. They are alive. Every time I look at them they speak to me. They speak to me from Spirit. And they say, *"Yes, my daughter, you are here. This is true."* So they are not just weavings to me; they are alive with spirit, and I am profoundly glad to have them in my life. I think it was very important for my spiritual yearning to take Native American forms, because they are of life and symbolize my coming back to life.

BR: So in a way, are these symbols of your getting ready to leave some of your illness behind?

SJ: I believe so. It was as though I was being given a new voice, if not a new body, because my illness was so devastating to me. I had discovered a new way of being in life. After I finished them, I felt my illness journey had a real reason and a divine purpose. I knew consciously that I was on a sacred healing journey.

BR: Where do you see yourself going? Where do you see your illness now? You've spoken of the fact that you are better, but this illness is not over and maybe never will be in terms of a complete cure.

Deep Self-Acceptance

SJ: After 15 years of dealing with illness recovery, I accept that I am disabled with chemical illness. It will never go out of my life. My body has adapted probably as far as it possibly can. I have gone through a long journey, a spiritual journey into a dark night and back out into the light. I'm definitely coming out with a wounded wing. I entered the tunnel with both wings and I'm coming out with a wounded wing. So a deep self-acceptance arises from that. A self-acceptance that I might never have been able to get without this journey. What that means to me as a person on the spiritual path is worth gold—to be able to accept oneself as having full disability and still be a creative, loving, positive human being is almost a divine state. It's a very, very precious opportunity. I am definitely not there yet! But I see even greater potential being presented to me as I now adapt to being a disabled person.

BR: Somewhere in the middle of the suffering of this dark night you founded the Contemplative Vedanta Support Network (CVSN) and the Order of Sarada in America (OSA). Could you say a little bit about where these fit in and what the goal of the CVSN and the OSA are and what they mean to you?

SJ: As I dealt with chronic illness, I had to discover, invent, and find out things that people don't normally have to find out. I had to figure out things for myself. I've been contemplative for most of my life. I was born with a contemplative temperament—a very serious person in spiritual life suddenly finding myself unable to attend groups, unable to go to retreats, unable to do anything that would make me feel connected with spiritual community. A Catholic sister said to me at one point, *"Does what you need spiritually now exist?"* And I said, *"NO, I can't even get out of my house!"* She said, *"Well, then, create it!"* I sat down and thought about that and I said to myself, *"She is absolutely right. I need to create what I need spiritually right now as a vital part of my life."* I can't lead the spiritual aspect of my life the way I used to. I used to go on retreats. I used to connect with things and people. And it can't be done any more. I am also a contemplative, so what do I need?

A Need for Vows

It came to me over a period of time and deep prayer, as I reflected and meditated, that I needed to found a contemplative order. And I needed to take vows in that order for myself so that my dedication to the spiritual life would continue. The continuity would remain no matter how sick I got and no matter what I had to go through with my chemical illness. So I founded the Order of Sarada so that I had what I needed, and I took formal vows as a Hermit of Sarada. Then, as I began to talk to people and to relate to other people, I realized I had founded something that might well be something that would help others as well—other people who may have different circumstances but need to have a spiritual life that is oriented toward their own unique circumstances in life. Therefore, I also founded the CVSN. Both the OSA and the CVSN provide for interfaith dialog as well as support the contemplative life.

BR: What is the contemplative temperament? What are the goals of the Order of Sarada that help serve the contemplative temperament, and how is that different from the practice orientation of many spiritual communities?

SJ: The thing I found out about myself during the illness journey was just how contemplative I am. This is something I thought made me different in the past even when I was a well person. I thought I was rather strange because I had this contemplative temperament. Even when I would go to retreats or be with practice communities, I'd be invariably off on my own. I was a born contemplative and I hadn't really faced that in myself until I became a homebound, disabled person because of the chemical illness. I had to realize that

I had within me all the resources I needed to bring forth everything in my life. And that's the hallmark of contemplatives. They are very independent; they are very resourceful people. It's not that they don't *need* other people; it's just that they have a lot to work with inside themselves. And that describes me and many other people I have met, from different spiritual backgrounds, as contemplatives.

When I established the Order, it actually gave me an outlet for my contemplative being. It allowed me to see myself more and more as a contemplative person. I think in our culture today this is not an easy task. To be able to accept yourself as a contemplative, to see yourself as a contemplative, and to allow *others* to witness and experience you as a contemplative is not something that is easily done in our very active, externally oriented culture today—especially in the West.

An Interfaith Contemplative Order

I felt as time went on that the Order would be able to help others *allow* themselves to be the contemplatives they are, and feel that affirmation which might have been missing for them in the past as they encountered groups that were spiritual but maybe not contemplative in their orientation. As I began to dialog, especially in an interfaith way, I found that people of many different paths were contemplative.

My own background is extremely interfaith, and I feel our world is becoming an interfaith world. The contemplative today is more than likely someone who has had exposure to various spiritual paths. That certainly is true my case. But the core or kernel of my experience spiritually was this necessary self-acceptance, and I felt that many others with a contemplative temperament might be dealing with this very problem. That is to say, feeling a lack of self-acceptance because they are not fitting into various communities or various structured situations, and not understanding why, and then turning on themselves and feeling there was something not quite right about them. No. The problem is a matter of finding self-acceptance so that wherever you are, whoever you are, you are authentic as a contemplative. And that has been my spiritual journey.

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The Cup

Swami Tapasananda

Swami Vivekananda (hereafter, Swamiji) wrote the following poem for his Irish disciple, Sister Nivedita. I find it helpful to carry as a road map while traversing the spiritual path.

> This is your cup—the cup assigned
> to you from the beginning.
>
> Nay, My child, I know how much
> of that dark drink is your own brew
> Of fault and passion, ages long ago,
> In the deep years of yesterday, I know.
>
> This is your road—a painful road and drear.
> I made the stones that never give you rest.
> I set your friend in pleasant ways and clear,
> And he shall come like you, unto My breast.
> But you, My child, must travel here.
>
> This is your task. It has no joy nor grace,
> But it is not meant for any other hand,
> And in My universe hath measured place;
> Take it. I do not bid you understand.
> I bid you close your eyes to see My face.[1]

At the start, there is—inescapably—t he Given, that dark drink that we have ourselves brewed. At birth we open our eyes to a future whose broad outlines and tendencies are anything but a clean slate.

We are, to a great extent, a composite of what we are and what we have already been—in this life and in previous lives. Just as we are now creating our future life (or lives) with our thoughts and actions, so the lot given to us at the beginning of this life has been, in large measure, the creation of our previous incarnations. With, of course, God as co-creator. We see the initial conditions of the universe as God's problem until we realize that "He" or "She" is only provisionally real, ultimately to be merged into the ONE.

Although at the end of the Vedantic path we find that "I" and "God" are not two, that “my face” is really “My Face,” at the beginning of the journey, maintaining a distinction between human and divine is both necessary and helpful. But bringing God into the equation creates a timeless problem, theodicy:

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[1] *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama), IV: 148.

why would Absolute Bliss, Absolute Truth and Absolute Consciousness have allowed demon pain to slip in under the door?

"I made the stones that never give you rest." There is the rub—the conundrum of theodicy! Swamiji said, in anguish, after learning that his sister had committed suicide, that he himself could have created a better world. "God should be sought out and thrashed!" he exclaimed.

But, with experience and time, Swamiji's understanding tempered and matured, so that he could say, in London, "There is a glory in happiness, there is a glory in suffering. If I may dare to say so, there is a utility in evil too."[2] According to Swamiji. we have to account for the 'dross' of life if we want an accurate tally of the full measure of experience. False optimism is just false:

> Evil exists—and there is no shirking the fact. The universe is a fact; and if a fact, it is a huge composite of good and evil. Whoever rules must rule over good and evil. If that power makes us live, the same makes us die. Laughter and tears are kin and there are more tears than laughter in this world. Who made flowers, who made the Himalayas?—a very good God. Who made my sins and weaknesses—Karma, Satan, self? The result is a lame, one-legged universe, and naturally, the God of that universe is a one-legged God.[3]

Facing and Overcoming Evil

The Buddha faced this squarely: "There is pain. There is a cause of pain. There is an end of pain. There is a way leading to the end of pain." According to Buddhist tradition, it took Gautama countless incarnations of struggle and challenge to build up the spiritual power to see directly these four simple truths. The previous births of Gautama Sakyamuni were all for the purpose of fighting fire with fire. Evil was encountered and overcome, with a resulting increase of spiritual power, just as a weight lifter works to capacity and then beyond and as a result the biceps grow and increase their strength. In many births, Devadatta, the cousin/nemesis of Gautama, plays in the birth stories the role of Buddha's Satan—with this enormous difference: whereas Devadatta does suffer in hell for a limited time for his misdeeds, he is thereafter reborn as a "private Buddha," and finally enters Nirvana! The biblical Satan, according to Origen of Alexandria [2nd-3rd century Church Father], is also ultimately saved, “so that God may be all and in all,” much to the discomfiture of the orthodox of succeeding centuries.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus says, "When men persecute you and revile you, rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in Heaven." Evil when

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[2] Ibid., II:147.

[3] Ibid., VI: 147-48.

experienced [but not practiced] also has, as Swamiji says, a utility. It is like a cleansing agent when skillfully employed.

Sannyasini Gauri Mata, founder of Sri Sri Saradeshwari Ashram in 1895, was a woman monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. It was he who gave her the ochre cloth and he who arranged for her *sannyasa* ceremony. She had met Sri Ramakrishna as a young girl, was blessed by him to attain devotion, and for some years led the classic life of renunciation. After running away from an arranged marriage, saying "I will marry only Him who is Eternal," she wandered alone all over India as a mendicant, suffering as a solitary, penniless woman in a man's world. When her brother disciple and cousin, Balaram Bose, saw her in an exalted state, he tried to bring her to Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. But Gauri Mata said, "I have seen too many holy men. If he wants to see me, let him pull me there." When she finally came to Dakshineswar, she saw Ramakrishna winding up a ball of string. She instantly recognized him as the saint who had blessed her as a child. Astonished, she asked, "Why did you let me wander, suffering, for 25 years?"

Ramakrishna replied with a smile, "You needed to do great *tapasya* (austerity) to build up power for the work I am giving you. You must work to uplift the women of India."

Burning the Dross

Tapasya literally means "burning." Austerity and other spiritual practices burn the dross from the ore, like the smelting of gold. "Our Lord is a refiner's fire," says the Bible. What we call adversity can, if seen from this angle, serve to cleanse the mind and reveal the God within.

"Those who have not experienced suffering are thumb-sucking babies," said Swamiji upon returning from the West.

> Things have got to come round—the seed must die underground to come up as the tree. The last two years were the underground rotting. I never had a struggle in the jaws of death, but it meant a tremendous upheaval of the whole life. One such brought me to Ramakrishna, another sent me to the US, this has been the greatest of all. It is gone—I am so calm it astonishes me...![4]

Suffering is the common experience of saint and sinner, and for both it has a cleansing quality. The ordinary soul laments and struggles to avoid suffering; the spiritual aspirant tries to endure it without complaint and to look upon it as a stiff but excellent brush for cleansing the mirror of the soul.

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[4] Ibid., VI: 430-31.

Suffering or *tapasya*? It is for us to see the same experience as one or the other.

> Break the harp! Forward, with the ocean's cry!
> Drink tears, pledge even life—let the body fall.
> Awake, O hero! Shake off thy vain dreams,
> Death stands at thy head—does fear become thee?
> A load of misery, true though it is—This Becoming—know this to be thy God!
> His temple—the cremation-ground among corpses
> And funeral pyres; unending battle—
> That verily is His sacred worship; Constant defeat—let that not unnerve thee;
> Shattered be little self, hope, name, and fame;
> Set up a pyre of them and make thy heart
> A burning-ground.
> And let Shyâmâ (The Dark One) dance there.
>
> —from Swamiji's poem, "And Let Shyâmâ Dance There"[5] ❑

Spirituality and Suffering

Juliette Seelye Karow

How does spirituality raise us above suffering? I will give one small example:

I went to Arizona to attend a Buddhist meditation retreat conducted by the Venerable Joan Halifax. The day before the retreat began I fell and hurt my left foot. (Two weeks later I got an x-ray and found out a bone was broken). I was in intense pain, but due to my Scotch-English ancestry, I would not let anything prevent me from attending the retreat. I suffered trying to sit properly. Doing walking meditation out in the bumpy desert was almost impossible. My thoughts went as follows: "Why is God doing this to me? Am I not supposed to be here? After all, Buddhism is like Vedanta. What sin have I committed to have to suffer like this? What meaning does this have for my spiritual life?" My one split second flash of illumination came on the last day of the retreat. I realized how much I had benefited by the retreat. I had learned. I had been surrounded by love from teacher and pupils. Yes, I was in terrible pain, but it was not suffering. For one short moment I had a higher perspective. ❑

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[5] Ibid., IV: 510

In Memoriam

Swami Sarveshananda

Born William Allen Winslow on September 20, 1916, Swami Sarveshananda came in touch with Vedanta during the Second World War, when he was performing alternate service as a conscientious objector. His family came from New England, where one ancestor served as Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He grew up in Albany, New York, the son of professional musicians, and received training in piano and cello. Summers were spent working on his grandparents' farm in New Hampshire. An outstanding student, he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in his junior year at Wesleyan University, where he majored in science.

At college, he was attracted to Quakerism because of its commitment to pacifism, and was active in anti-war groups on campus. In 1941 he refused to sign draft registration forms and spent 18 months in jail. Some of this time was spent in solitary confinement, partly for refusing to observe rules of racial segregation. On release from prison he spent the remainder of the war doing alternative service in an Oregon forestry program. It was during this time that he came into contact with Vedanta, and at war's end he moved to New York to live at the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, where he became a student of Swami Nikhilananda. He entered Cornell Medical School in 1946 and afterward practiced medicine along with Vedantic spiritual discipline. He successfully conquered his own medical problems, including severe depression which he attributed to the pressure of his prison experience.

He joined the monastery of the Vivekananda Vedanta Center of Chicago in 1967, under Swami Bhashyananda. He went to India in 1973, where he took final vows in 1975. He served as a doctor for nine years, first at the Mayavati Charitable Hospital and then at Ranchi Tuberculosis Sanatorium. Brother monks observed the care and compassion with which he looked after patients. Returning to America in 1982, he wanted to live at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society in Boston with Swami Sarvagatananda, for whom he had special reverence, but he had to return to Chicago where his services were needed. Nevertheless, he spent time at the Boston Center and its retreat at Marshfield every summer until the very end if his life. Except for two years at the Chicago Center's sub-center in West Palm Beach, he remained mostly in Chicago until his last months, which were spent in a nursing home in Boston. During his final years he was working on a history of the Vedanta Centers in the United States and accumulated a great deal of information. His love of music continued, and he used to provide piano accompaniment for the annual singing of Christmas carols at the Chicago Center. He also formed several Vedanta choirs.

It was Swami Sarveshananda who first had the idea of a Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago on the centenary of the original World Parliament of Religions in 1893, which brought Swami Vivekananda to the West. With fellow monks and devotees of the Chicago Center, Sarveshananda was very active in the early planning stages, reaching out to and meeting with representatives of the different religions. These meetings grew into a large and successful event in August 1993, lasting for two weeks and drawing 6,000 delegates and religious leaders from around the world.

Those who knew Swami Sarveshananda were especially impressed by his consistent cheerfulness, humility and endurance. He never complained about his increasing disability during his last years, flying to Boston every summer without an attendant in order to have the companionship of Swami Sarvagatananda and to spend time at the Center's retreat in Marshfield. Even when he was practically crawling, he continued to make the trip. He was absolutely regular in attending morning and evening *arati* services wherever he was. Those who were with him during his last years were amazed at his continuing cheerfulness and humor even during physical suffering and inconvenience. In the nursing home at the end, when he was hardly able to speak and had to share a room with four other men who often shouted and grunted, he assured friends and relatives that he was happy, and even engaged in self-deprecating humor.

Swami Sarveshananda passed away on November 8, 2005. Memorial services were held for the swami at both the Chicago and Boston Centers. Monks, devotees and relatives spoke of their love and admiration for him. At the Boston service, a devoted niece, who knew his special love for the Brahms *Requiem*, read lines from Psalm 84 which forms part of the text, "How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts! My soul longeth, yea fainteth for the courts of the Lord; my soul and body crieth out, yea, for the living God." She felt that he was truly one who yearned for the courts of the Lord.

—John Schlenck

Holy Mother

Whether we see you or not,
your lowered eyes,
your mother's eyes beckon us.
Through turbulent journey,
your unending love, our safe harbor,
your faithfulness, our haven of rest,
the coast we follow home.
Your sweetness feeds our hearts—
All honeyed tones of love
Fall short, Mother—

No sweetness can compare.
Your name, Sarada Devi. Om.

Whether we see them or not,
your modest eyes betray it:
divine love, O love divine.
Have not our hearts cried out
Through endless lives for you?
In joyful bliss, let us behold you in our heart.
In darkest night, be guiding star,
in lonely thoughts, be all our joy.

You alone be beacon unto our lives.
You alone be shore we break upon.
You alone, Mother, be very world to all.

Whether we hear it or not,
your breath whispers,
"Come home, sail home to shore."
Our lips ever repeat your name—
your humble heart give us ever.

Whether we know it or not,
your shining eyes beckon all.
Divine one, soul of our souls,
your hidden glance let all understand.
In life's journey, your love always our home,
Your faithfulness, our rope
to pull, ever pull to shore.
In dreams, none could have imagined you.
The glint of light flashing from your eyes—
divine light—
absorbed, let us in Mother's sunlight be.

Wherever now our eyes search
Your modest face alone be all we see.
Whether we dare touch them or not—
your divine feet be close enough.
We bow to touch head upon the ground
whereon you walk,
Mother Sarada, our love we offer thee.

—Thomas W. Rea

Stepping Stones or Stumbling Blocks?

A Devotee

Often unexpected thoughts come into our minds when we're immersed in prayer or meditation. Sometimes we get the feeling that these thoughts would never have surfaced if we hadn't been praying or meditating. A contemplative mood seems to be a prerequisite for their occurrence.

Such thoughts raise two questions: Should we heed them? And what degree of authority should we ascribe to them? As for heeding them, we must do as we do for every other aspect of spiritual life—use our brains. If a thought is uplifting and beneficial, if it represents an advance over our earlier thinking, if it inspires us to do good, obviously we should cherish it and act in accordance with it. The key whereby we may recognize a good thought is this: those thoughts which are highest are always richest in love and mercy.

So, for instance, we may think, "God hates those who do not love and worship him." Or we may think, "God loves everyone, even those who hate and reject him." It doesn't take a brain of transcendent genius to determine which of these two thoughts is higher.

New and higher thoughts can be signs of spiritual progress. We should not regard them as ultimate, but as milestones on the way. They may be valid only for the stage we happen to be in. Later, other thoughts may occur that will be higher still, and the new thoughts will supersede the old.

It is through this process that aspirants sometimes move from dualism, through qualified nondualism, to nondualism. It is through the same process that monotheistic aspirants may move from a hatred of image worship to the realization that God is also present in the image. And it is through this process that aspirants may move from a belief that God could possibly hate any part of his creation to a belief that God loves everything and everyone, the evil as well as the good.

Once we decide that certain thoughts that have occurred to us in prayer or meditation are beneficial and will raise us higher, we then face the question of what degree of authority we should ascribe to them.

Here we get into dangerous waters. These thoughts can turn out to be stepping stones or stumbling blocks: they can lead us higher or drag us lower. It all depends on how we regard them.

Since they almost always assume the form of spiritual insights, it would be all too easy to attribute them to divine inspiration. Because they occur during prayer or meditation, too, they have a numinous quality that is powerfully affecting. It lends them an air of authority that they may not deserve.

So we must exercise great caution. In one of the Buddhist scriptures, the Buddha is supposed to have said something like this: "When a wonderful thought arises in your mind, do not suppose that, because it is wonderful, it must have been implanted by some supernatural being." There is also the wise advice he gave his disciple Ananda, in a different context: "Keep wide awake, Ananda."

In spiritual life, we must always be vigilant to spot the workings of the ego. The ego is a tricky fellow with many weapons at his command. Of all the weapons he wields, the most insidious is pride. Many an aspirant has fallen from the spiritual path because he got ideas into his head that he presumed to come straight from the mouth of God. Megalomania, alas, is not unknown in the history of religious thought.

No matter how elevating such thoughts may be, it is always best to assume that they come from the very place they appear to have come from; namely, one's own autonomous and highly fallible brain. To presume more is to fall victim to hubris. And we all know where that leads. ❑

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

by 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, birdcalls.]

Imagine, oneness turned me
into nothingness. Me! Me!
What an empty sound this is now

———————

He has no particular color or shape;
he is all of them.
But you have to find him first;
until then, he's shapeless
and colorless

———————

Don't allow anger and hate—
be angry with all that.
That should keep you busy.
All of a sudden he'll stand there

———————

My body has nine gates, all closed.
Behind them my Lord lives

———————

I urged my heart toward him
as a bell of truth started ringing

———————

I knew my body. Who you were,
who I was, I didn't know.
Now, it's my body
I sometimes don't know

———————

I've come unlatched
from the wheel of death,
so I can't be born anymore.
What could the world
possibly do to me?

———————

You fill up all shapes.
Your breath makes everything flutter.
All creation murmurs
so as not to disturb you

———————

Seeing everything in two's,
in nights and days,
and me's and you's,
doesn't get us a glimpse
of God who is one,
O my mind

———————

The whole universe goes
into meditation.
A little water splashes into the water.
The void wears away.
But it takes practice

_____

There's a place without word or thought.
To take a vow of silence there
would be like barking back at a dog.
Mudras are obscene there.
That place has a waiting list
that even Shiva and Shakti are on.
And it's the only thing
worth knowing

_____

In the middle of the marketplace
I left my shop unlocked.
I got as thin as a drawn bow.
My guru's silence was salt in my wound
A lot of lost sheep,
thinking I was their shepherdess,
tried to call me daughter, wife, mother.
Those were their words, not mine.
Mine they ignored

_____

Even when they covered my eyes and ears,
something was tickling me deep inside.
God wouldn't let me forget.
A little lamp flickered and flared
even in a storm

_____

Even at home I yearn to go home

_____

I gave up everything,
becoming Lalla for everyone

_____

I took the word Om with me
wherever I went. I studied it.
I tucked it in.
I sang to it

_____

Rewrite the books!
I must've asked my guru a thousand times,
What's the name of the one called nothing?
And suddenly, something came out of that

_____

Not even when you laugh
sneeze cough or yawn
does he go anywhere.
And that's about as long as it takes
to see him if you'll look
carefully enough

_____

There was a commotion,
people streaming
through the marketplace
towards a house. I went in.
It was my body and the guru
was inside

_____

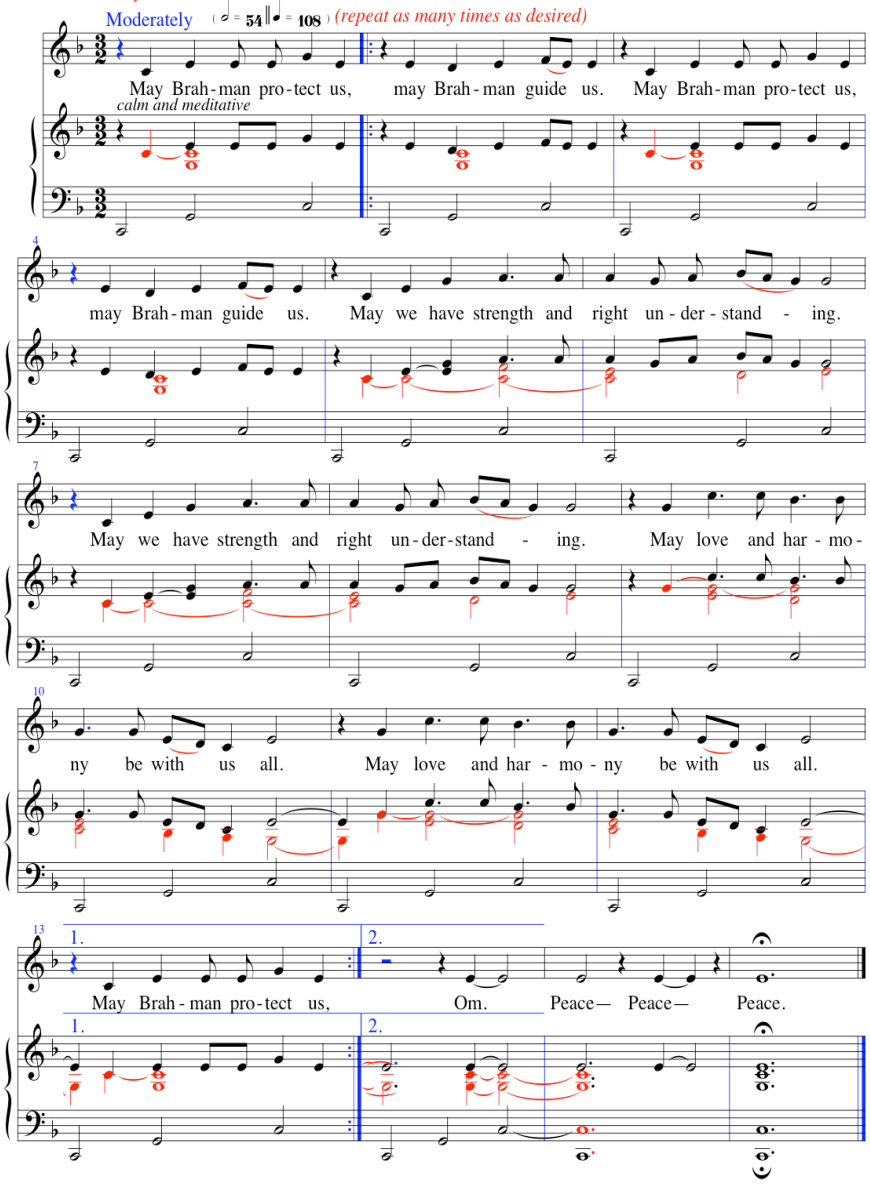
I turned myself upside down.
Out poured yesterday
and tomorrow.
Now, time can't pass

[Conclusion]

May Love and Harmony

Shantipatha to Katha Upanishad,
based on trans. by Prabhavananda/Manchester

John Schlenck



American Vedantist 30 Vol. 12, No. 2—Summer 2006

All God

A Meditation on *Where God Begins to Be: A Woman's Journey Into Solitude*, by Karen Karper
Published by iUniverse Inc., Lincoln, NE, www.iuniverse.com
130 pages paperback $12.95 2004,

Richard Simonelli

It is *all God,* but you only come to *know* that, once God begins to be. The sacred mystery is everywhere and everywhen, but that is a discovery each and every one of us must make, either as grace-given direct experience, or by a process of transcendental self-knowledge. What is discovered contains an element of paradox or irony because the moment we realize *all is sacred* we let go. To open her deeply calming book *Where God Begins to Be,* author Karen Karper quotes Meister Eckhart: "There where clinging to things ends, there God begins to be."

Where God Begins to Be is the story of a contemplative life lived in solitary retreat, or hermitage, for six years in voluntary poverty and simplicity. It demonstrates how a person's commitment to contemplation may be stabilized by periods of intentional retreat. But it also reveals how hermitage is never the stereotypical isolation or reclusivity that persists in the popular understanding. Ms. Karper's story embraces interaction with her neighbors and with the Christian religious community in which she previously lived for so many years, as well as with the local church community in the rural West Virginia community of her hermitage. The story reveals how a life of contemplation includes formal religious practices but also goes far beyond religiosity to the meaning at the heart of any spiritual tradition.

What is this "God" that begins to be? "God" is a word pointing to the nonspeakable. It is a cipher for something way too personal, and then beyond personal, to define. It is sacred metaphor. Everyone's "God" is different because it is part and parcel of him or her. The particular word "God" carries the legacy of Western style religion with the distinct overtones of something *out there*. But for a mystic or a contemplative, God is so completely right here that the name vanishes.

In *Where God Begins to Be,* Christian contemplative Karen Karper reports on her direct experience of the sacred and unutterable. "One day," she says, "as I wandered a deer path through a springtime woods, I turned a corner and confronted a flame azalea in full bloom. It blazed in shimmering orange where sunrays touched its blossoms. Though no voice thundered, I removed my shoes, for assuredly I was standing on Holy Ground. In the awesome silence, I could

hear a rustling among the fallen leaves behind me, but I did not turn. I knew I had found a place where even the deer knelt to pray."

Suddenly, we realize our true condition. Suddenly, we round a corner and meet "ourselves" in a startling, revealing moment. I say "ourselves" in quotations marks because it is not the separate, ego-self, personality or persona that is revealed at a special moment like this. Moses had his encounter in the shape of a burning bush. Did he understand it as an encounter with himself? Ms. Karper's flame azalea placed her into the awesome silence of discovery.

Once the astounding breakthrough is made for the first time it is not necessary for the "…begins to be" part to happen over and over again. It already happened, leaving an indelible quality of *knowing* with us, which is much more than memory. Only clinging and attachment to interior doubt can obscure the simple truth discovered at that gateway experience. And such clinging does indeed happen all the time. A brand new moment of practice, prayer or worship can often cut through doubt on the spot. For me, such prayer can be my presence on the land (in nature), communion with a special friend, or even an act of writing. The writer's life can facilitate a moment of union, which for me is inevitably followed by a feeling of irony. I needed union only until I realized once again what always is: we are always completely unified whether we know it or not. This is what Eastern traditions call *non-duality*—not two. That which the word "God" points to, and I, are not two. But I often have to release my endless clinging on a moment-to-moment basis before I really feel the non-duality of God. The experience of non-duality puts an end to the need for union because I am what I sought. But once again, what I find is the "big I," not the narcissistic "ego-I."

Karen Karper's book describes and demonstrates contemplation and the life of a contemplative through the very story itself. She probably uses the word "God" fewer times in the whole book than I have here. The truth of God as *reality* is too awesome to be bandied about as a religious or philosophical concept. She does neither. The story reveals how the author realized her true estate when she dared cross a trestle bridge leading to a wilderness sanctuary while walking near her first hermitage in the southern Appalachians. She renewed the discovery when she walked into that glen with the flaming azalea at her West Virginia home. There is a comparable moment and situation for each of us. All we have to do is accept it when it occurs.

[Karen Karper lives in the mountains of North Carolina where she engages in fabric art and writing in collaboration with her husband, Paul Fredette. They publish ***Raven's Bread—Food for Those in Solitude*****,** a quarterly magazine for those interested in the eremitical life.] ❑

Book Reviews

Strength in the Storm: Creating Calm in Difficult Times
by Eknath Easwaran, with lntroductions by Christine Easwaran
Nilgiri Press, The Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, Tomales, CA
183 pp. paperback 2005 $14.00

Eknath Easwaran, the Fulbright Professor of English Literature who became the founder of The Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, is not unknown to AV readers. His life work of bringing the wisdom of Vedanta and other spiritual traditions to practical application in contemporary American life has been mentioned before. His twenty-six books have been translated into twenty-four languages and have helped grateful practitioners around the world. This book is the first to be published since his death in 1999 and has been most ably focused and introduced by his wife of forty years, Christine Easwaran. (Actually, "Eknath" is the family name, "Easwaran" being his personal name, but some bureaucratic mix-up on his entering this country from India has left us with this curious reversal, affecting Christine as well.)

The book consists of six chapters, drawn from recordings of Easwaran's informal talks to relatively small classes (30 to 50) of earnest seekers. I myself lived in their house and participated in these classes in the mid-60s. There were a number of us live-in students and we followed the whole program, including meditation, walking with mantram, meals, work, etc. As a person, Easwaran was extraordinarily peaceful, but lively and good-humored, making us laugh a lot, using comedy as well as profundity in his presentations. He was also quite humble, attributing whatever was being accomplished there to the grace of his grandmother, his spiritual teacher.

The topics treated here are the stresses of life and how to meet them with a calm mind and a generous heart. Each piece is introduced by Christine, placing the particular teaching in the general context of the whole spiritual practice and giving examples of the program at work in individuals' lives. The main talk by Easwaran is followed by a relevant real life story contributed by a student, a summary of points made, a section on appropriate practices and a poem or prayer (that can be memorized and used as meditation text). Easwaran typically illustrates his teaching with examples from people's lives, including his own. This book starts with his telling of his early discoveries in struggles with "severe blows" from the circumstances of life.

Easwaran is known for his Eight-Point Program: meditation, mantram, slowing down, giving one-pointed attention, training the senses, putting others first, engaging in spiritual companionship, and reading the works of mystics of all traditions. The foundation is Vedantic, but he deliberately and successfully draws material from other world religions and non-religious resources. It may be

worth mentioning that there was never any occasion to make a distinction between monastic and householder aspirants. His students married and founded families, some of them living on the large property, which the Center bought. There was also provision made for the elderly.

Easwaran's particular style of meditation practice consists of memorizing inspirational passages from various sources and reciting them silently and slowly without distraction. Eventually our concentration will hold steady in the Self at our core, and will shine in the empty spaces *between the words*, releasing our neighbor-love and our joy-in-life energy without impediment. Japa is practiced outside of the meditation period proper, while walking, working, waiting, falling asleep, or in any case of stress or fear.

The teaching is deep but simple and practical. There are many illustrations and examples. Instruction is explicit and clear. Easwaran's stories and style always include smiles and humor. The physical design of the book is professional, attractive and helpful, with boxed summaries and listed steps, highlights and sidebars. Further resources are described at the end. The Blue Mountain Center of Meditation invites us to visit www.easwaran.org and to contact them by e-mail: info@easwaran.org.

—Beatrice Bruteau

Choosing Mercy: A Mother of Murder Victims Pleads to End the Death Penalty
by Antoinette Bosco
Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY
239 pp. paperback $17.00 2001

The death penalty was abolished in 1972 and restored four years later in 1976. In the years between 1976 and 2000, 650 men and women were put to death by gassing, electrocution, or lethal injection. Since everything in Texas is big, the Lone Star State leads the nation in the number of executions it carries out each year.

There has been a ground swell of late opposing the death penalty. Pope John Paul II and the American Catholic bishops have spoken against it, and two books in particular have made the news, both of them opposing legalized executions. Sister Helen Prejean's, *Dead Men Walking* has been made into a movie starring Sean Penn. And Antoinette Bosco's *Choosing Mercy* has brought her national acclaim not only because her book is a powerful, well-documented plea for the abolition of the death penalty but also because Joe and Nancy Bosco, her own son and daughter-in law, were brutally murdered in their home in Montana. Toni Bosco's first reaction upon hearing the tragic news by a phone call from Sheriff Joe Geldrich was the desire to "kill the killer," whoever it was. But then she had

to realize that she had been opposing the death penalty for years in published articles, editorials, and seminars.

Choosing Mercy tells the story of how a youth who lived next door to her son's house entered through an open window, climbed to the second floor of the house, and shot Joe and Nancy Bosco in their bed "for no apparent reason." When the youth was caught, he could not or would not explain his action. Joseph Shadow Clark, the murderer, was a disturbed eighteen-year-old college student who had been on drugs, had had dreams of killing people, and finally acted out his delusion.

Mrs. Bosco was no stranger to death. Her youngest son Peter suffered from schizophrenia and the pain was so great that, in the midst of a successful career, he killed himself. That was just two years and a half before Joe and Nancy were murdered. One wonders how a professional woman and writer could continue to carry on after two such tragedies. Instead of cursing God or fate, she turned her sorrow into a ministry to others whose lives had been devastated by violence. She joined a group in Connecticut, where she makes her home, called Survivors of Homicide, and began to offer help and consolation to parents and spouses whose lives had been turned upside down by murder and rape. Her message has since been carried in newspaper editorials, and on radio and television shows.

Bosco understands and can sympathize with people who feel they cannot write closure until the one who murdered their dear one suffers the ultimate penalty of death. She also recognizes that there are murderers who should be locked up for life since they are a menace to society. What pains her is the not untypical case of a mother whose daughter was murdered twenty-one years previously by a man still on death row, and who for all of those twenty-one years could only carry in her heart the vengeful thought of having her daughter's assailant killed. That is a common reaction of many victims who cannot easily forgive.

Who can fathom the mystery of the human brain and what aberrations many criminals suffer from? Maybe it is too facile to bandy about the idea that murderers and rapists are victims of mental disorders or childhood abuse. But there is something unhealthy when the injured parent or spouse insists on carrying murderous thoughts of revenge until the killer is juridically murdered.

We must be understanding with those who feel that way. But there has to be a better way, and our author has provided a compelling lesson based as much on Christian forgiveness as on sound psychology. For Jesus said, if you want to be forgiven, you must forgive. This is just another way of rephrasing his daunting injunction: Love your enemies; do good to those who injure you. No doubt, he would find a way to forgive those who cannot forgive.

—James M. Somerville

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