Editorial

Contemplation and Compassion

All major religions emphasize both inner development through contemplation and self-control—and compassion and service toward others. Christianity receives Jesus' summary of his Jewish tradition: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength [Deut. 6: 5];[1] and love your neighbor as yourself [Lev. 19: 18]." Islam also mandates both whole-souled devotion to God and love for fellow human beings; a regular portion of one's income is to be given away to those in need. The Upanishad puts it poetically: "The storm cloud thunders: Be self-controlled! Be charitable! Be compassionate!" A Buddhist formulation is: "Blessed are they who attain Nirvana, above life and death; blessed are they who become an embodiment of truth and loving kindness."

The present issue of AV explores the union of compassion and contemplation. We tend to think of them as distinct, but come to realize them as two sides of the one and only coin. Both are essential, and each aspirant has to approach the Goal according to one's own path, one's own temperament. In one person, emotion is predominant; in another, activity, work; in another, intellect; and in another, psychological analysis. The ways may vary, but the end is one. And all ways are necessary. None may be neglected, and all are to be honored. The important thing is to be inspired to transcend one's limited self. More and more, as we progress, knowledge, love and service move toward integration.

Each way has its own risks if we become one-sided. As Mikele Rauch demonstrates in her article, "Shadows of Compassion," for one to sustain selfless service, one needs the nourishment of introspection and a strong spiritual center. And as Vivekananda observed (see "Ramakrishna's Shocking Words on Compassion), one who follows a contemplative path that has no concern for the welfare of others is not on a true path, but may come to consider the world and other people as impediments to one's progress.

The greatest spiritual teachers, revealing us to ourselves as the truly ideal human beings we secretly are, embody every divine quality. Knowledge, joy, and overflowing compassionate service proceed from their full experience of the Reality. One is no longer concerned with one's own salvation, but with assuaging the grief, misery and bondage of all people. "All consumed are their imperfections, doubts are dispelled, their senses mastered, their every action is wed to the welfare of fellow creatures: Such are the seers who enter Brahman and know Nirvana." [Bhagavad Gita, 5: 25]

—The Editors

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[1] Matthew 22:38 has "mind," but this is due to an error in the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible.

Awakening to Compassion

Charles Birx

How wonderful to read these words of Swami Vivekananda, "At the present time there are men who give up this world to help their own salvation; throw away everything, even your own salvation, and go help others."[2] This is spiritual maturity at its best!

I have been spending a lot of time recently with my two-year-old granddaughter, Elise. One of her favorite sayings is, "It's mine." Over and over again throughout the day whenever she sees something she wants she says, "It's mine." Of course this is appropriate for a two-year-old. It is not appropriate for an adult, especially an adult involved in spiritual practice. However, too often "spirituality" or "spiritual development" becomes something we hope to have as our own. Some people set out to have one spiritual experience after another and proudly proclaim, "It's mine." The spiritual life becomes a *thing* of ownership. Vivekananda says to throw away everything, even *your own* salvation.

From It's Mine to It's Me

In Zen, this throwing away of your own salvation is experienced as wisdom itself. It is the insight that there is no small, limited, separate self who is saved. It is the experience of the limitless and boundless unity and oneness of life. With this insight, we move from the experience of "It's mine" to "It's me." This experience is the root of compassion and compassionate action is its natural result or fruit. When we throw away everything, even our own salvation, then our compassion is purified of self-seeking. There is no intention of reward, merit, gain or fame. Then compassion is not a *thing*, not something to be developed, not a conscious deed, not something done to others. It is the natural expression of wisdom.

My own teacher, Roshi Robert Kennedy, told me that "compassion without wisdom would be sentimental; just as wisdom without compassion would be unthinkable." Wisdom and compassion go together like the foot before and the foot behind in walking.

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[2] Ann Myren & Dorothy Madison, editors, *Living at the Source: Yoga Teachings of Vivekananda*. (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), 100.

This reminds me of an incident that occurred during the pilgrimage of Sri Ramakrishna to Northern India in 1868. One day as he was walking through a village with the wealthy Calcutta landowner, Mathur Nath Biswas, Sri Ramakrishna was moved to tears at the sight of the abject misery of the people. He told Mathur, "You are the steward of the Mother. You must help them. Feed these poor people and give everyone a piece of cloth." Mathur protested that the funds for the pilgrimage might run out if he tried to feed and cloth all the people. Sri Ramakrishna declared bitterly, "I am not going to Benares. I prefer to remain with these helpless people and share their miseries." Sri Ramakrishna was willing to throw away the pilgrimage, Benares, and everything to be with the village people, to help others. Mathur was moved by this display of compassion and ordered clothing and food to be distributed to each person.[3] Wisdom and compassion go together. They are the two wings necessary to enable our spiritual lives to take flight. In the case of Sri Ramakrishna, they enabled him to soar! Mathur received a lesson in what it truly means to be spiritual and compassionate, to see people in need and realize, "It's me."

Hearing the Cries of the Whole World

Compassion is the long labor of spirituality. It is not for our own enlightenment, but for the welfare of all beings. In Buddhism the bodhisattva of compassion is named Kwan-yin. It is said that she hears the cries of the whole world. She is depicted as having a thousand eyes and a thousand hands. Each of her wisdom eyes is our own eye seeing the world coming forward in countless ways and offering us numberless opportunities to be open, generous, gentle, kind, accepting, and loving. Each of her compassionate hands is our own hand offering comfort, support, encouragement and help in the numberless situations that call out to us daily to relieve suffering and bring joy to a world in need.

That this need is so great in our world today is illustrated by the hugging saint, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi. Hour after hour she sits as thousands of ordinary people come forward to receive the touch of her warm human hand. Her smile radiates peace and joy and inspires people to open to their true nature and join her in the compassionate service of others.

Compassionate service to others is the hallmark of Zen. This is illustrated in the tenth and final picture of the Zen ox-herding pictures. These pictures are used to depict ever-deepening levels of spiritual development. The tenth picture

[3] Adapted from Swami Nikhilananda, trans., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942/84), 35.

is entitled, "Entering the Market Place with Helping Hands." Having realized his true nature, the Zen sage enters fully into the hubbub of daily life to live with ordinary people. He is pictured with bare chest and bare feet to illustrate that he does not cling to anything or adorn himself with trinkets or mystical powers—he has thrown them all away. He is natural, whole, and free. A huge laugh streams over his cheeks. His enlightenment is cool, clear, and refreshing; compassion flows from him as naturally and spontaneously as breathing in and out.

Swami Vivekananda, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi, and the Zen sage encourage us not to resist or fear throwing away everything, even our own salvation, for in doing so we experience our own true nature which is itself wisdom and compassion. ❑

The Highest Yoga

His heart is with Brahman,
His eye in all things
Sees only Brahman
Equally present,
Knows his own Atman
In every creature,
And all creation
Within that Atman.

That yogi sees me in all things, and all things within me.
He never loses sight of me, nor I of him.
He is established in union with me, and worships me devoutly in all beings.
That yogi abides in me, no matter what his mode of life.

Who burns with the bliss
And suffers the sorrow
Of every creature
Within his own heart,
Making his own
Each bliss and each sorrow:
Him I hold highest
Of all the yogis.

—Bhagavad Gita VI: 29-32 (Prabhavananda-Isherwood)

Compassion as Spiritual Practice

John Scarborough

Understanding compassion is not about determining who is compassionate and who is not, but is about developing compassion in oneself. Developing and increasing one's capacity for compassion is a spiritual practice. Through compassion we become less self-centered, and more mindful of the needs of others. With declining self-centeredness, there are fewer opportunities for disappointment; consequently we are happier. By becoming more mindful of others' needs, we can mitigate conflict and dissonance. Through practice of compassion, one can be liberated, realizing one's essential identity with Brahman.

Compassion derives from a Latin word meaning "feeling with," "with feeling," and "shared sensing." It can be an intensely physical experience; it is felt from the heart. An ancient Greek word in the New Testament translated as "having compassion" means, literally, that we "yearn from the bowels [i.e. liver and kidneys]."[1]

Compassion Must Be Coupled with Action

However, if compassion is not coupled with action, it is merely a mood, a modification of mind. Some people have an extraordinary capacity for compassion. Gauri Ma, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, showed even as a child an almost instinctive response to the suffering of both humans and animals. Seeing some monkeys in her village abusing a puppy on a rooftop, she tied a stick to her back, climbed to the rooftop herself, and, when the monkeys met her with bared teeth, she waved her stick at them threateningly, scaring them off. She tied the puppy up in her sari and descended to the ground.[2]

Recent studies of "mirror neurons"—neurons that fire off in our brains when watching someone else execute an action as well as when executing that action

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[1] The Greek word *splagchnizomai,* often translated as 'compassion,' literally means "to yearn from the bowels." Cf. the use of the Hebrew word, *me`ah* (lit., bowels), in the Old Testament, as in Isaiah 63:15: "The yearning of thy heart (*me'ah*) and thy compassion are withheld from me." (*New Oxford Annotated Bible)*

[2] http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/gaurima/209_selflessness_and_compassion.htm

ourselves—suggest that, on the general model of neuronal growth, we can expand our capacity for compassion through practice.[3] They will not fire if we have not already executed the action ourselves. At the physical level this corroborates the Dalai Lama's position, that compassion can be "deliberately developed, and arise through training."[4] This model also supports the idea that our capacity to understand others depends to a large extent on our understanding of ourselves.

The Great Compassion

Our practice of compassion takes us, according to teachings of the Madhyamika path of Tibetan Buddhism, beyond compassion, to *mahakaruna,* the "great compassion," wherein one's desire for liberation is transformed into desire for the liberation of all.[5] Similarly, Sri Ramakrishna, seeing the practice of compassion as a bit presumptuous, chided himself one day: "You wretch, who are you to bestow it! No, no; it is not compassion to beings, but service to them as Shiva." [6] Swami Vivekananda developed this concept as "practical Vedanta," in which by performing all actions as service to the divinity in all purifies the mind for liberation:

> The moment I have realized God sitting in the temple of every human body, the moment I stand in reverence before every human being and see God in him—that moment I am free from bondage, everything that binds vanishes, and I am free.[7]

We will always benefit from the exercise of compassion. The world is a better place for our exercising it, and through practice we can get better at it. ❑

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[3] http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/sciencenow/3204/01-resup.html.

[4] His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Renuka Singh, ed., *Many Ways to Nirvana: Reflections and Advice on Right Living* (Penguin Compass, 2004), 54.

[5] Ibid., 102. See also Nicholas Ribush, ed. *Teachings from Tibet: Guidance from Great Lamas*, passim.

[6] His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1979), Vol.1, 139-40.

[7] "Practical Vedanta II," in *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1976), Vol. 2, 321.

Ramakrishna's Shocking Words on Compassion

John Schlenck

In Swami Saradananda's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga* (translated into English as *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* and *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*), a striking incident that occurred in 1884 is described.

Narendra (later Swami Vivekananda) and other devotees were present. Sri Ramakrishna was discussing various spiritual topics with the devotees. The discussion turned to the Vaishnava religion. The Master summarized it as follows:[1]

> This religion advises its followers to practice these three salient disciplines sincerely: love of God's name, compassion for all living beings, and service of devotees. God and His name are identical. Knowing the Name and the possessor of the Name to be the same, the devotee should always chant His name with love. Knowing God and His devotees, Krishna and the Vaishnavas, to be the same, one should respect, worship, and pay obeisance to monks and devotees. Understanding that this world belongs to Krishna, one should show compassion to all beings.

As he heard himself say "compassion for all beings," the Master suddenly went into *samadhi* (ecstatic union with God). After some time, he came down to a semi-ecstatic state and said:

> Compassion for all beings? How foolish to speak of compassion! Human beings are as insignificant as worms crawling on the earth—and they are to show compassion to others? That's absurd. It must not be compassion, but service to all. Recognize all as manifestations of God and serve them as such.

Narendra's Satori

Among those present, only Narendra grasped the revolutionary implication of these words. Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna, almost like a Zen teacher, shocked Narendra into new insights which were to bear important fruits in his life and work. One can fairly say that the Ramakrishna Mission is built on Narendra's grasp of the import of these words. The *Lilaprasanga* continues:

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1. The English translation of the following quotations is by Swami Chetanananda, in *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play* (The Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2003), 851-53.

> When the Master came to the normal plane of consciousness, Narendra left the room and said to his friends who were present: "What a wonderful light I saw today in those words of the Master... If it's the will of God, I shall proclaim to the world at large the noble truth that I've heard today. I shall preach this wonderful message to all—the wise and the ignorant, the rich and the poor, the Brahmin and the pariah."

In what ways were these words of Ramakrishna revolutionary? Is the Master saying, "Don't be compassionate"? What was the light that Narendra saw? Let us enumerate five dimensions of this light. The words in quotations marks are Narendra's, as recorded in the *Lilaprasanga*.

1. The Master's teaching serves as an antidote to developing spiritual pride. True humility comes through same-sightedness, as Narendra explained to his friends:

> "If people consider every human being to be God, how can they consider themselves to be superior to others and harbor anger, hatred and arrogance—or even compassion—toward them? Their minds will become pure as they serve all beings as God, and soon they will experience themselves as parts of the blissful God—by nature pure, illumined and free."

2. The Master's words bridge the paths of *bhakti* (devotion) and *jnana* (knowledge).

> "How beautifully did [the Master] reconcile the simple, sweet, and refreshing ideal of devotion with the knowledge of Vedanta, which people believe to be dry, difficult and heartless!"

3. This teaching brings Vedanta out of the forest and into the everyday life of the people.

> "What the Master said today in his ecstatic mood is clear: one can bring Vedanta from the forest to the home and practice it in daily life. Let people continue what they are doing; there's no harm in this. People must first believe and understand that God has manifested Himself before them as the world and its creatures. Whomever people come in contact with in every moment of their lives, whomever they treat with love, respect, and compassion—they are all parts of God, God Himself."

4. Sri Ramakrishna's words provide a needed corrective to an unhealthy concept of monastic life.

> "For so long we've heard that anyone who wants to attain nondual knowledge must retire to the forest, shunning family and friends

completely and forcibly uprooting love, devotion, and other sweet sentiments from the heart, driving them away forever. If aspirants who strive to attain that knowledge consider this world and all people within it to be impediments to their spiritual path, they will develop hatred towards them and go astray."

5. They also imply a new emphasis on active service to others.

"Embodied beings cannot remain without activity for even a moment, so their duty is to perform every action as service to God within human beings; thus they will soon reach the goal."

Ideal Human Beings

There are several corollaries to these main points, which Vivekananda later developed:

• They provide a basis for unifying all the yogas so as to create ideal human beings, fully developing and unifying their emotional, intellectual, and active lives.

• They balance the inner and outer aspects of life. The inner life is developed without retreating into self-absorption, while the outer life is given a deep, spiritual basis. Both social life and spiritual life are thus enriched. The development of same-sightedness—seeing the same God in all—deepens and enriches our relationships with our fellow beings. None is to be regarded as superior, none is to be regarded as inferior, for God is present in all. All are to be respected.

• The traditional viewpoint—service, worship, and obeisance to monks and devotees, while bestowing compassion on others—subtly implies a hierarchy: monks and devotees are superior, and so are the ones to be served; we are in the middle; while those on whom we bestow compassion are lower. This attitude may lead both to false humility and to arrogance. We feel inferior to some and compensate for this by feeling superior to others. We feel proud that we have given something to a poor homeless person. At the same time we feel we are sinners and hardly capable of spiritual growth and fulfillment. We identify the intrinsic worth of a person with office and function rather than with essence. By contrast, the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda message of serving all as manifestations of God implies (1) that we are capable of doing this—no false humility, no excuses that we are sinners and weak—and (2) that our service and respect should not be limited to monks and devotees.

These truths are vividly illustrated in the life of Holy Mother Sarada. She said, “In the fullness of spiritual realization, a person finds that the God who resides in his heart resides in the hearts of all—the oppressed, the persecuted, the lowly, and the untouchable. This realization makes one truly humble."[2] "As Sarat (Swami Saradananda, a saint and disciple of Ramakrishna) is my son, exactly so is Amjad (a robber whom Holy Mother tamed by her love).”[3] And she expressed this realization through her life of active service to others.

When Swami Gaurishwarananda (Rammay Maharaj) first came to Holy Mother as a child, he expected to see her seated on a nicely decorated throne with ladies fanning her.[4] This was the traditional concept—a holy person sits and is served by others. But what he saw was exactly the opposite. She was herself rendering service to others out of the fullness of her heart, seeing all as her children and as God. Simply dressed, she lived as an ordinary housewife and mother, cooking, cleaning, feeding her "children," cleaning up after them, giving spiritual advice if they asked for it, willingly taking on responsibility for their welfare even when she had to suffer for it.

Falling Down and Getting Up

But what about our own lives? We may have an intellectual grasp of all this, but to what extent can we put these sublime ideas into practice? We don't see God in the homeless person. And we sometimes feel despondent about our spiritual progress, wondering if we will ever be able to reach the goal.

Swami Ramakrishnananda once said, "Every child, when learning to walk, falls down a hundred times but never gives up."[5] By thinking of these great ideals and of the persons who actually embodied them, and by trying, in spite of falling down many times, to practice them, gradually our minds and our lives will be transformed. We begin, as Swami Vivekananda said, with a response of heart and head to the sublime beauty and truth of these words—believing and understanding. However dimly, we sense that this is the true goal, the crowning glory of being human. And so we try, and fall down, and get up and try again and continue in this way, with confidence that because some persons have reached this fulfillment, it is also possible for us to do so, with grace and perseverance. ❑

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[2] Swami Nikhilananda, *The Holy Mother* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1962), 225.

[3] Ibid., 134.

[4] Cf. Swami Gaurishwarananda, “Reminiscences of Holy Mother,” in *American Vedantist*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 1995, p. 3.

[5] Swami Ramakrishnananda, *Consolations* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1970), 17.

A Bridge

Compassion is silence when we want to speak,
And listening to words we preferred were not spoken,
It is a prism to see one point of view divided into
many alternatives.

Compassion is the road from anger into acceptance,
At first we are afraid, then fear dissolves into love,
We start walking towards the trouble making it our own.

Compassion is to become shattered into many pieces,
From these pieces a new form can be shaped,
A bridge is built so others can cross to safety.

Compassion is the fertilizer for the world,
It is the enzyme that decomposes us from hard and
rigid into soft components,
The little ego becomes smaller dust, invisible gas,
evaporates to the universe, to God.

—Mercedes Vendrell

The Shadows of Compassion

Mikele Rauch

[Ms. Rauch speaks from her personal experience as a licensed marriage and family therapist.]

> *"Who taught you all this, Doctor?"*
> *The reply came promptly:*
> *"Suffering."*
> —Albert Camus

Human beings suffer. Often they have no control over the forces of nature or evil or neglect that they experience. Sometimes they are the perpetrators of evil or neglect themselves. But wherever there is suffering, there are those who tend to it, and who live their own lives responding with care or kindness—or simple necessity. Those of us who do such work and are honest with ourselves might admit that we are not saints, nor our purposes completely selfless. We are often as profoundly transformed in the act of care as the ones who receive it. Even if we experience emotional exhaustion in response to those we serve, many of us report feeling inspired by what we have witnessed and done. We are wiser, grateful, connected to life and, hopefully, to our spirit. This might account for the endless hours of work with people whom we may not be able to save or restore, and why we tolerate such difficult conditions, often with little support.

There are many stories about those who deal with the most unimaginable danger, as inspired and enlivened by their experiences, choosing to serve, rather than return to the safety of their 'other' lives.

Forgetting to Stop and Rest

That is why it might be so hard for us as caregivers to remember to stop or rest, or why we have such resistance to taking better care of ourselves. Maybe it is not possible because there is simply too much to do, or perhaps we feel there is no other way to be in the world. "Why do you do this?" We might shrug our shoulders and say, "Well, it's just who I am." It is as much a part of our identity as our innate talent, our gender, our family, or our history. The work may feed or deplete us, but it continues, despite how tired we are.

Occasionally, one might be able point to a darker motive than altruism here. It is difficult to name this shadow in oneself, which might have nothing at all to do with the welfare of the other. Caregiving itself is a noun as much as it is a verb, as much a relationship with the work as with the people we serve. It is

pivotal to our sense of self. It might even define our sense of otherness and, often, our inner life. The experiences that occur in the field could be far more intimate and dangerously seductive than other relationships. The work itself becomes the "beloved."

Chris Hedges speaks about a similar experience as a war journalist (2002). He had come to know first hand that war is a culture of its own which wastes not just the body, but the heart and mind of those who engage with it. Yet war is also seductive in its purposefulness and camaraderie. It creates a sense that one can rise above smallness and divisiveness. And, initially, the selflessness of it mirrors that of love, which is the chief emotion that war destroys.

But unlike love, war gives nothing in return but an ever-deepening dependence, like all narcotics, on the road to self-destruction. War does not affirm but places upon us greater and greater demands. It takes a higher and higher dose to achieve any thrill. Finally, one ingests the war only to remain numb. "The world we once understood and longed to return to stands before us as alien, strange, and beyond our grasp." [1]

Feeding the Myth

Life in war is theater. At a given point, it ennobles the acts of violence, valor, or resistance, even as it inflicts destruction. It feeds the myth that gives purpose to the players as well as their spectators. It also feeds upon itself, for war and the drama surrounding it can make those engaged feel more alive in the process. There is a sense of righteousness and pride; there is often tremendous courage. But there may be secrets held or shared by the recipients of such trauma, or from being perpetrators of dark acts of unimaginable cruelty.

After covering the wars in Central America, Angola, and the Balkans, Chris Hedges, the journalist, left the battlefield. He found himself both horrified by and addicted to the business of war. Though he had become hollowed out by witnessing its ravages, he experienced his life away from the battlefront as vapid and void of purpose. He had become alienated from anything outside of it. When he realized this sordid fact, he had to pull out before his work destroyed him.

For those of us who tend to the care of others, there is a compelling resemblance to being on the battlefield. We may witness acts of violence and pain. We may feel the effects of others' triumphs and traumas, their lives and their losses, the good and the evil of nature and human beings. We are often in treacherous physical or psychological circumstances. Responding to the human condition in this way creates a sense of meaning and vibrancy to life that is unmistakable—and, perhaps, dangerous.

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[1] Chris Hedges, *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. See chapter "Eros and Thanatos." For complete information, see Bibliography.

Recently, there has been a flood of professional and spiritual literature about caregivers and compassion fatigue. There are definitions, recipes for self-care and watch-points for detecting the signs of burnout. The act of compassion—the most important component of humanness—has little written about its shadows, the parts of caregiving that have more to do with the giver than the receiver of care.

Compassion is a deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it. It is not the same thing as pity, or even sympathy. In fact there is a distinct difference between sympathy and compassionate empathy, although they are often confused for one another. Sympathy occurs when the witness experiences the feelings of the other as if he or she were the sufferer. It can actually deplete real care and responding to the one in pain because the caregiver is too identified with it. Empathy, on the other hand, is the consideration of the other's feelings and experience, and readiness to respond to their needs…without making the burden one's own.[2] When the gap between experience and thought is bridged, we can be a witness and truly respond without condescension or the interference of our own history of pain. But the work itself can be contaminated by an undigested sense of mission, love or kindness. The shadows—pity, histrionics, over-involvement, loss of perspective, loss of one's own health, over-identification, anger, coldness or cynicism—might be the result of the caregiver's own history or sense of self which has little to do with others.

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue, the emotional residue of exposure from working with the suffering of others, occurs when caregivers experience an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the distress of those they serve. This experience differs from burnout, which brings feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted with one's work. In burnout one loses the ability to feel for others, or to continue to feel competent to do the work. Compassion fatigue, on the other hand, creates toxicity by the amount of exposure the caregiver has to the trauma and pain of others. We can lose perspective about ourselves or about the people who count on us. We may continue to work even when it is toxic, unconsciously reenacting some part of our past, unable to stop to replenish our exhausted reserves.

In Chinese medicine, this process of being overwhelmed or overloaded is called *empty fire*. *Yin* is the water element that nourishes, and *yang* is the "fire" of activity and energy. Yin nourishes, and yang consumes. When nourishment is deficient, the "fire" is not held in check and rages out of control. Because there is a lack of inner resources, activity overcompensates, but there is no real energy.

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[2] An Expert interview with Charles R. Figley, MS, PhD, 10/17/05. http://www.medscape .com/ viewarticle/513615

On a psychological or spiritual level, such an imbalance creates feelings of emptiness and desperation.[3] Such fatigue is often difficult to diagnose and even harder to resolve, because caregivers simply cannot stop long enough to assess the impact of what they are doing on themselves. Besides, in *empty fire,* when the "fire" is raging out of control, the activity even intensifies. Individuals might be too depleted to stop and, paradoxically, move faster. They are going so fast, they lose their ability to imagine any other way to give care, take respite, or to be in the world.

Closet Narcissism

One of the prickliest shadows of caring for others is difficult to name without almost invalidating the essence of compassion itself. It sometimes shows up in patronizing attitudes of condescension or excessive identification with the people we counsel. The caregiver is often not conscious of these feelings, which is why they are so insidious. They manifest as ostentatious humility or piety, or the quality of dramatic selflessness. We might believe that we are essential and that the work cannot go on without our participation. In fact, we may be so identified with the work that we do not know how to *be* without it. Just like the compelling quality of war, the drama of other people's pain may be addictive. In fact, the work might have the capacity to feed the caregiver, but possibly at the recipient's expense. It is an unconscious process that is not only hard to name but difficult to recognize in oneself, an attachment to oneself in the identity of caregiver, to the degree that to recognize any motive other than selfless service is met with shame, or even intense rage. Psychologists have cleverly named this *closet narcissism*, when individuals see or create themselves to be indispensable in their caregiving, and need to be recognized not for their contributions alone, but for their goodness. They may experience themselves as indispensable, and have a fierce attachment to their identity as minister, therapist, or self-sacrificer. They might unconsciously put themselves and their patients, parishioners, or loved ones in a double bind of power and guilt, all the while claiming to be less than the worst, the least, the last. Their need to control the politics of giving creates an inability to see where they fail to care. And their fear of criticism or of being deficient creates an inability to be reflective. In fact, they may mistake self-care and self-vigilance for self-indulgence because it will require that they rest, or eat, or take time away from the work they are dependent upon.

Closet narcissists are so invested in how they do their work that they become quite angry if the receivers are ungrateful or neglectful of how much the givers have endured in order to help them. Givers may become dependent on others' loyalty or dependence on them, which can only sabotage the health and growth of both giver and receiver. Sometimes, in the act of giving, caregivers allow

[3] Ted Kaptchuk, *The Web That Has No Weaver*. See Bibliography.

themselves to be abused and misused, enabling patients or parishioners to cross boundaries or take advantage of the system. This is not humility or self-sacrifice; it is not a spiritual attitude at all. It is a sick and codependent relationship that neither feeds the one in need, nor extends any true quality of compassion, because it does not give either the patient or the caregiver the dignity of empowerment and equality.

If we are truthful, we might admit to some capacity for closet narcissism in ourselves. Recognizing this particular shadow can make the difference between spiritual awareness and arrogance masked as benevolence. It requires a mature and honest assessment of oneself, by noting one's true charism, particular strengths and gifts, as well as what can shadow them. It necessitates time for self-reflection, forgiveness for oneself as imperfect, and a healthy respect for one's limitations. It might also be quite uncomfortable for us to discover how afraid we are to be alone, to be truly intimate or vulnerable with others or with ourselves, or to confront our tendencies toward grandiosity.

Addiction and Burnout

Addiction is another manifestation of exhaustion as compassion's shadow. Addiction is a compulsive response to pain. We can be addicted to stimulants, exercise, food, sex, the Internet, television, alcohol, drugs, work, bad professional or personal relationships, or even religion—not in its most spiritual sense, but in the particular compulsions to practice certain forms and regulations. We can also be addicted to other people's pain, and to the simulacra of their lives, when their life dramas are more interesting or compelling than our own. Addictions like this make it difficult to stop even when we should. And they come at a tremendous psychic and spiritual cost.

Sometimes addictions are the outcome of spiritual burnout, when it has become difficult to grapple with the existence of evil, the problem of God's relationship to evil, the seeming futility of suffering, and the depths of grief and despair, others or our own. We want others to be free from suffering and wish to relieve it. We desire to numb ourselves from the pain of what we witness, from our inability to eradicate the sufferings of others, or from what it triggers in our own memories and lives. We want to be free, and to find the spark that prompted us to meditate or work in the first place.

The truth is that we cannot cover over the suffering of the world, nor can we control it simply by our prayer or our labors. This is the challenge of true spiritual courage: humbly to work as hard as we can for those we serve, to let go of the ego's investment in the outcome, and to remember that the meaning and point of what we do has little to do with us.

In Tibetan Buddhism, there is a method for connecting with the pain of the world and awakening compassion, called *tonglen*. In the practice of tonglen, we

breathe the suffering in, owning instead of avoiding it. Then we breathe out our fear and resistance, sending calm and sustenance to the source of suffering. At first such a practice may feel contrived, and in fact, opposite to how we try to hold ourselves together. It may bring forth tightness, anger, or revulsion, and a resistance to what we wish to avoid. But a practice like this can dissolve our armor of self-protection and fear as we join in compassion with those who share our suffering.

Re-nourishing Ourselves

The ego clings to its own notions of how things should be. Our task—as caregivers, compassionate professionals, and as human beings in relationship with others—is to be mindful and aware of whatever it is that keeps us stuck in paradigms of shame or shame-making, in the shadows that keep us from being fully alive in our work and relationships. It may mean that we seriously assess the impact and cost of the work of compassion, re-nourishing ourselves and our inner lives altogether differently, or at least with both kindness and rigorous truthfulness. It requires a sense of self-deprecating but kindly humor about ourselves and our importance. At some point, we need to be able to untangle ourselves from our cell phones, computers and pagers, our lists, meetings, and appointments. At first, it will seem impossible because our work is important and so many people need our care. But unless we stop once in awhile, stare into space, sing and dance, play—and pray, we will have but the empty fire of our own activity, which will serve nobody.

We cannot do this alone, nor should we, for one of the most important elements of compassionate care is the recognition and need for a community of mutual respect that makes us equal in the struggle as givers and receivers, and as human beings. We must strive to create a space safe enough to do this, and to accept the compassion of others and ourselves.

Tonglen

I have a talent for sadness.
But you are gifted in other things—
like smiling and sneezing
and stillness
There is noise in my head
I'm losing the memory of the music…
Listen to the snow.
What of the orphans and the pederasts
the women going into combat
the widows in burka?

I'm losing my strength, shoveling the ice…
Did you notice the black branches stacked against the sky?
Think of Terry the homeless guy who froze to death in front of the library
I'm losing my will to feel, to fight, to understand…
This is the long view
Past the black branch
Past the sky
I'm losing my sight
Close your eyes
And look

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I Meet a Friend

Richard Simonelli

Thomas Merton said in 1965, *"How men fear freedom! And how I have learned to fear it myself! I know that in fact, without faith, this would be a different matter, this living alone. But with faith it becomes an eschatological gift. I have never before really seen what it means to live in the new creation and in the Kingdom. Impossible to explain it. If I tried, I would be unfaithful to the grace of it—for I would be setting limits to it. It is limitless, without determination, without definition. It is what you make of it each day, in response to the Holy Spirit!"*[1]

Well, it's all there. The contemplative life is one lived in a humbling freedom. Freedom without rules, but not free of them either. Free of tradition, birthing each moment anew, but within the Holy Spirit. A contemplative is always very much alone, but alone in faith, in its deepest meaning. This *living alone* in the healthiest sense can only take place in the simplicity of faith because the freedom Merton speaks about is found when we live without *fundamental* allegiance to the ordinary life that is all around us.

The Primordial State

Jesus said, *"The Kingdom of Heaven is within you"* in one or more of the four traditional Gospels. In the Gospel of Thomas, #113 he said of the Kingdom, *"It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, 'Look, here it is.' Rather, the father's Kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it."*[2] In the language of the Dzogchen tradition of Central Asia,[3] often connected with Buddhism, this kingdom is called the "primordial state," which is the true

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[1] Thomas Merton, *A Year With Thomas Merton: Daily Meditations from His Journals,* Jonathan Montaldo, ed. (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 206.

[2] Marvin Meyer, *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus,* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 65.

[3] Chogyal Namkhai Norbu, *Dzogchen: The Self-Perfected State, (*Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1996)

abode of contemplation. It is a condition that can be known, but it is not a "thing." It is not something concrete. In the Vedantic tradition,[4] it is called Brahman, Atman or the Self. It is a condition we come to know without definition. Knowing the primordial state is faith in its deepest meaning. When we live in familiarity with the Self—the Kingdom—each moment is a birth, each moment is the true meaning of the creation. Each moment is the new creation. Merton is *there* in this writing. He writes these words from that unspeakable condition as direct experience. Contemplatives from different traditions simply have different language for that which is not explainable.

A Mature Freedom

Contemplative freedom is beyond the limits of morals, ethics, and rules of human behavior, without rejecting them, flaunting them or violating them with ill intent. It is also beyond religiosity or self-improvement efforts. All religions and systems of human development delve into behavioral rules and regulations in the early part of the path of that system. A contemplative usually goes through that kind of training too. But where others spend perhaps an entire life perfecting the details of a particular system, a contemplative recognizes a different calling somewhere along the way and focuses on living in the state of contemplation. One would never find contemplation if one gave primary importance to interpersonal behavior, human interactions or religious formality. A contemplative is likely to have a religious heart and mind rather than religion itself, or the essence of self-clarity without following a particular approach. The freedom of which Merton speaks is an austere, mature freedom, knowing no rules but those recognized at the very boundary of life and death, where contemplation lives.

There is a connection between Jesus' deepest experience and knowledge, as expressed by the Gospel of Thomas; the Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen tradition; and the Advaita (non-dual) Vedanta of the Hindu tradition. Yet, the details of an individual's deepest spiritual realization and experience are always behind a veil. We ***do*** experience, but the moment we try to define that which is limitless and without determination, as Merton says, we discover we really can't. All

[4] Swami Bhashyananda, *From the Unreal to the Real* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2003).

authentic spiritual realizations meet at a single point; that oneness can't be overlooked or denied, because it is the whole. It is real in the deepest sense and could become one basis of ongoing respectful and appreciative interfaith relationship, based on experience and mutual learning rather than on intellectual or emotional opinion. Those of any tradition could share this nonsectarian, interfaith contemplative life.

Each Day Is Ours to Make

"Impossible to explain it," Merton says. "If I tried, I would be unfaithful to the grace of it." Direct experience of the Kingdom is a gift of grace. When you finally come to *know,* there is such freedom. The Native American sage Black Elk said, *"Behold this day, for it is yours to make,"*[5] knowing full well that it would be yours to make within the Great Spirit or Great Mystery. Nicholas Black Elk was both a traditionalist and a Catholic Catechist on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation at Manderson, South Dakota when he spoke these words to John Neihardt in the late 1920s. Taking a cue from the Lakota (Sioux) teachings of Black Elk, we "make" our day when, by effortless grace, we find the Kingdom, the primordial state, or the Self in the course of an ordinary life. This discovery is always inseparable from ourselves. Merton reinforces that by saying, "It is what you make of it each day, in response to the Holy Spirit!" This has been my discovery also.

The contemplative understanding of Christianity, Buddhism, Vedanta, and Native American (indigenous) spirituality meet in a contemplative life. It may be time to share the wordless commonality rather than intellectually-based theological differences. This is the humbling freedom of a contemplative practice—but there's really nothing to practice in a formal sense at all. I meet a friend once again. Amen. ❑

[5] John Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks,* (University of Nebraska Press, 1932, 1979), p. 42.

I Am The River

My water flows ever so swiftly

Into the Ocean

Droplets arise into the sky

I become clouds

Rain falls back to earth

I give life to all living things

My water drains back into the river

I merge again into the ocean

Is it arrogant

For me to say:

I am the rain?

Is it humbling

To say

I am the Ocean?

I AM

—Juliette Seelye Karow

By Means of What?
A Translation of the Kena Upanishad

Luther Askeland

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Introduction

The title of the Kena Upanishad comes from its first word, an interrogative pronoun which means "by means of what or whom?" and its first sentence says, literally, "By whom/what is the mind projected and soars forth?" Robert Ernest Hume gives us such a literal translation, duplicating the phrasing and construction of the original. Such translations are of great value and interested readers should consult them. Yet this is, to our ears, not our language, and while helpful for understanding, cannot reach or grip us. But the Kena's enduring prominence is testimony to the power of its Sanskrit text. I have tried, therefore, in this version, to preserve that life while translating it into English as I know it and might actually use it.

The Kena uses the word *Brahman* (which of course means very many different things in different texts) to point toward the Unsayable, the supremely Real. I have used the English word 'God' as the most "common" denominator among us for the Unsayable, though some might prefer the Ultimate or Ground or Absolute Being or That Which Is or some similar indication. The risk of using the word 'God' is that many people will at once image a Great Person with whom they have a contingent, conditional, even shaky, relationship. That is what the Kena is rejecting. Nevertheless, in a poetic piece such as this Upanishad, the word for the Unsayable is endowed with deliberate ambiguity, so that it slides subtly from Absolute Reality to the Source of all action to a figure almost like one among the other gods. Even so, we must never forget that the primal Reality, though represented in mythic ways, is really the Unsayable.

Outside all Words and Images

Like a handful of other short, concentrated texts—Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*, for example, and Buddhism's Heart Sutra—the Kena poses a formidable initiation which we might sum up as follows: This Place—which we so casually call "reality" or "the world," and with which we feign such easy familiarity—transcends, infinitely, all description, name, and conception. Where we are right now—*This*—is the uncontained, the immeasurable, the unspecifiable. We can begin to awaken to it, attune ourselves to it, and dwell

within it, only be breaking out of that which confines awareness within the specified, the finite, the arbitrary. Consciousness must therefore begin to dwell outside all words and images, outside all "human thought."

Esoteric texts disclose a rare, even deliberately secret, knowledge which supersedes reigning half-truths. The particular half-truth the Kena and its counterparts invite us to leave behind is that remarkable animal faith—more widespread and deep-seated than any particular creed—upon which speech and thought rest. That faith is our assumption—hovering and unsupported—that the linked syllables we utter, and those which flow silently through consciousness, are the key which fits and unlocks This Place. It is our belief that our questions and above all our declarative sentences form a unique, superior class of events capable of addressing, processing, encompassing, and disclosing all other events. It is our failure to consider the possibility that word-events, either spoken or thought, might not be special and magical. All these declarations, these descriptions, these sudden and momentarily perfect formulations, these speculations, these passing absolute certainties! Is it not indeed most likely that they, just like rivers and birch trees, are themselves events in nature, intertwined with all other events, self-contained, full of mystery and the unsayable—perfect in themselves just as they are? Yet sometimes they do point beyond themselves toward something else.

Since these texts assert that both sensory and verbal signs limit and, in this sense, misrepresent the real—for the real, *This*, cannot be specified—they are at odds with conventional religion insofar as that religion claims that it can formulate in words "how things are." In just a few paragraphs, consequently, the Heart Sutra dismantles the entire verbal edifice of Buddhism. Dionysius urges us to move toward God by discarding everything that anyone might think or say about God. And the Kena treats the gods lightly, after declaring that this Reality is not the familiar, personal 'God.'

The Way of Unknowing

If our naïve faith in the magical power of word-events to disclose This Place is the half-truth the Kena encourages us to outgrow, what is the rare and invaluable knowledge it imparts, still by means of words? It is, first, the knowledge that the innermost truth of This Place, its primary reality, its center of gravity, is found in that edgelessness we enter when we pass beyond the boundary at which words and thought end. As in Dionysius, therefore, the path into reality is the way of "unknowing." Second, God is the innermost presence, the heart, of all things and events—all events are, finally, God's actions. Third, the world which the senses and words insinuate is a world of distinctions and change, of constantly shifting multiplicity. But the uncontained and unsayable is, everywhere and always, the uncontained and the unsayable. Of those who know and dwell in God we can therefore say, speaking loosely, that they travel from

place to place and experience now this and now that. We can say that they were born and will die. But to speak more strictly: they remain always in the same place, that is, in God, and they are always experiencing the same thing, God, in the same unchanging moment. Strictly speaking, they were not "born" and they will not "die."

I have said that these short works are at odds with conventional religion insofar as the latter still dreams our instinctive dream about language. Yet it is seldom that we come across anything so "religious" as these texts, anything which carries with it into our seemingly familiar world such a strong, clear scent of that singular, absolutely unspecifiable something else which This Place is. It is rare that it is given us to inhale, as we inhale here, our own innermost, most elusive scent. Within the three traditions I have mentioned, certain individuals—Buddha, Krishna, Christ—are regarded as embodiments of the bodiless, as manifestations of the undivided and unchanging infinite within finitude, multiplicity, and change. Why can there not also be texts which break in upon our habitual miniaturizing of This Place and with a miraculous showing forth of the unimaginable whole? Those wonderful syllables would then not be vehicles of thought, but of the unthinkable. They would not feign to measure out in words "how things are," but like lightning they would all at once surprise us with the Real.

By Means of What?

What sets the mind soaring?

Who drew your first breath?

What trained the ear, who uses the eye?

In this poem's first stirring, what stirred?

* * * * * * *

Having awakened from seeing, hearing, breathing, speech, and thought, those who know God are beyond death.

Their world cannot be seen, described, named, or thought.
It can't be "known."
It can't be "not known."

* * * * * * *

But know this:

What those who still live within sights, sounds, and words call God is not God.

And this:

That to which words cannot allude, but which alludes to all words—

That something which, not thinking thoughts, thinks thought itself—

That which, outside sights and sounds, observes all seeing and hears all hearing—

That which, drawing no air in and breathing no air out,
inhales and exhales our very breathing—

That is God.

* * * * * * *

"Now I understand" and "I am confused" are the thoughts of an awareness still confined within the limited reality of the word-world; it knows God only insofar as God dwells in the "I" and in the gods.

Only within words and thoughts is there "understanding" and "confusion." When one awakens to reality, to God, they vanish.

All comprehending of God is a failure to comprehend God; all understanding misunderstanding, all conception misconception.

God is known by unknowing. To imagine God, stop imagining God.

What is within those who awaken to this unknowing knowing? Strength.
What do they see around them? Not "dying," not "death."

Reality, truth—that is to begin waking up, right now, to where you are. Not to begin—that is the great tragedy, the great waste.

Finding the deathless, finding God in all things, those who know God are themselves deathless.

* * * * * * *

God ordained a victory for the gods. They exulted: "This victory is ours. This greatness is ours." Having observed this, God appeared nearby.
The puzzled gods told Fire:

"Find out what that is."

"Right."

Fire hurried over to God and God said, "Who are you?"

"I am Agni the fire god.

"And what can this Agni do?"

"I can burn anything."

God put some straw on the ground and said, "Burn that."

Agni went at it full tilt, but nothing happened. He returned to the gods and said, "I don't know what that is."

Then the gods told Wind:

"Wind, find out what that is."

"Right."

Wind hurried over to God and God said, "Who are you?"

"I am the wind god, Vayu."

"What can this wind god do?"

"I can blow away anything."

God put straw on the ground and said, "Blow that away."

Vayu went at it full tilt, but nothing happened. He returned and said, "I don't know who that is."

The gods told the great sky God, Indra, "You find out."

"Right."

Indra hurried towards God, but God hid. Instead, Indra found a very beautiful woman named Uma. He asked her about the mysterious being. She said it was God, and that their victory was really God's victory. Indra understood.

Consequently, these gods—Agni, Vayu, and Indra—are greater than the other gods, for they came closest to God, and Indra was the first to begin realizing what God is.

* * * * * * *

Of God this has been said:

"That intimate, mind-breaking something which flashes forth in the lightning's dazzling light, that, greater than all gods, is God.

And within the moving mind,
That which, in thought's unending flow, is recollecting itself—that is It."

* * * * * * *

Reality, truth, God—that is our desire. Seek God, and others will seek you.

Realize that what has come to you in these very lines in this very moment is this: the highest, the most rare truth, holy and secret.

To live within that truth, to become it—
that requires great resolve and struggle, a great work.
There are sacred words which point the way.
Leaving darkness and death behind,
know that reality as home, edgeless and divine. ❑

Apropos of Marie Louise Burke, Raja Ajit Singh of Khetri, and Swami Vivekananda

O. P. Sharma

Many of us know a great deal about the celebrated Vedantist Marie Louise Burke, also known as Sister Gargi, who researched and composed the massive six-volume study, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*. However, less is known, at least in the West (as Marie Louis Burke regretfully observed in her appreciation of Benishanker Sharma's book, *Swami Vivekananda—A Forgotten Chapter of His Life*[1]) about Vivekananda's disciple, Raja Ajit Singh of Khetri, Rajputana—now called Rajasthan—in western India. It was he who played a pivotal role in sending Swami Vivekananda to America to attend the first World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893.

An Example of True Discipleship

Raja Ajit Singh, who first met the swami in Mt. Abu in 1891 when the latter was but a penniless, wandering monk, instantly recognized his spiritual and intellectual genius and prevailed upon him to accompany him to his principality, Khetri, which to about 650 kilometers from Mt. Abu. There he became his disciple, learned many things from him, and eventually sponsored his visit to the USA to participate in the aforesaid conference by paying his first-class fare and helping him in various other ways. He even induced him to change his name from the tongue-twisting and not-quite-fit Vividishananda—which means a seeker of knowledge from various quarters—to Vivekananda—which implies a knower, not just a seeker, one who "revels in his sense of discrimination between the real and the unreal." Marie Louis Burke writes in her appreciation that Raja Ajit Singh's "devotion to Swamiji is certainly a wonderful example of true discipleship." She goes on to opine that "the details of this historic friendship" between the guru and the disciple are not so well known—"in America at least"—as one would have wished them to be. Hence, all of us, Americans and the rest, stand to gain a lot by the effusion of the new light thrown by the book on

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[1] Benishanker Sharma, *Swami Vivekananda—A Forgotten Chapter Of His Life* (Calcutta: Sharman Publishers, 1982), 231. See also p. v of the Preface by Swami Sambuddhananda where he gives an extract from the speech delivered by Swami Vivekananda in Khetri on December 17, 1897. It reads: "Whatever little I have done for the uplift of India would not have been possible had I not met the Raja of Khetri." He goes on, "Certain men are born in certain periods to perform certain actions in combination. Ajit Singh and myself are two souls born to help each other in a big work for the good of mankind.... We are as supplement and complement" (108).

the lives of the two hallowed personalities, as well as others connected with the story, "for the more knowledge we have of the great Swami and of those associated with him, the richer our own lives will be..."[2]

Now for an interesting and enlightening incident in the life of Marie Louise Burke herself, which, too, ought to be better known than it is. It occurred about thirty-five years ago, if memory serves me right, in the Khetri Ashrama of the Ramakrishna Mission.

Swami Mukhyananda, who now lives in retirement in Belur Math, was then the Secretary of the center, which is appropriately called Swami Vivekananda Smriti Mandir (viz., "a temple dedicated to the memory of Swami Vivekananda," who passed a long time there in the company of Raja Ajit Singh).

An Unexpected Visitor

One fine morning at 5 a.m. the swami in question opened the doors of the uppermost storey of the ashrama, only to find an elderly Western lady huddled up in a corner outside (it was a very cold night).

"Who are you," Swami Mukhyananda asked her, and was somewhat startled to hear the reply, " I am Marie Louise Burke."

"Oh, then what are you doing here?" he further enquired, whereupon Ms. Burke explained that she had started by bus from Delhi in the afternoon the previous day, hoping to reach Khetri before evening, but somehow the vehicle got delayed on the way and she reached the place only after 9 p.m. On noticing a sign on the premises which said that the ashrama closes at 9 p.m. and reopens at 5 a.m., she chose not to disturb anybody and decided to pass the night there.

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed Swami Mukhyanandaji in a tone of exasperation. "That sign was not meant for you who have come from so far! You could have just rung the bell."

"Please don't worry, Swamiji," said Marie Louis Burke, and continued most unexpectedly, "You see, as an American I think I have just atoned for what Swami Vivekananda had to undergo in my country before the opening of the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. As you know, at that time he had to pass a bitterly cold night in a big box in that city's railyard."

That was Gargi, the enlightened one, with her exquisite sense of humor based on profound, practical spirituality! ❑

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[2] Ibid.

Exploring Contemplative Life

Sister Judith Thackray, OSAH

When I talk to people who are discovering that they have a contemplative temperament, I usually suggest some things for them to consider trying. It is really like a "coming out"—you do need to find some good supports for yourself; there is a need for people who understand what you are going through. A counselor who has a spiritual background can be very helpful, as well as a contemplative advisor.

I am in contact with many people who have entered the Eastern nondual religions, as well as Jews and Christians in various communities. Those who have entered the Eastern nondual religions have followed a path of meditation and yoga of one kind or another. As Western people, however, all of us have available in our own backgrounds some mystical dimensions as foundation for a contemplative life.

Some of us may begin to experience a feeling of something missing in our active Jewish or Christian community. And some of us may have left the community (or never entered it), in order to explore the Eastern ways to truth. We may be following an Eastern path or a Western path, when an intuition arises, telling us that what we are now seeking is a deeply contemplative way of life.

From Conflict to Permission

When we discover the contemplative dimension of our being once again, or maybe for the first time, we may also begin to feel considerable conflict arising. Indeed, many may feel, for example, that they need to leave their practice center, practice community, or faith community, in order to find themselves as contemplatives.

Eastern and Western practice centers and communities are frequently places where there is a lot of "activity" going on, where relating with many others in a service orientation is necessarily the way of life. Activity, even this wonderfully good and selfless activity, can suddenly seem distracting for one who is seeking silence and solitude in order to explore the contemplative aspect of being. Therefore, sometimes we may feel we just have to “leave” the all-too-familiar things for a while. We may have been seeking a new understanding of ourselves in the old context, and this may or may not be possible.

I try to describe what I think are the "permissions" one is seeking as a contemplative in our modern society. One of the most important is the *permission* to be private and solitary in our practice. This is not to say that we are recluses, but contemplatives tend to be private in their devotions and spiritual lives.

Contemplatives often feel the most "connected" with others in real solitude. Our solitude is our way of contributing to society. We continue to relate to our *sangha*, or group practice, or religious community, but maybe from a different and more suitable place for ourselves. This new contemplative relationship takes time to develop; we have to experiment and explore and find a new balance that is more nurturing for the contemplative vocation we have entered.

Contemplation does take time to develop, and most often begins to call us in our more mature years, sometimes after decades of following a certain path or faith tradition. Even though we feel ourselves turning to a new life direction, our contemplation is really a maturing, a fruition of our path.

By faithfully following our paths, we have found many tools and disciplines which have helped us to develop our contemplative capacity. Eventually, after a period of exploration, we do finally find a way to integrate our past practices with our new contemplative vocation. During this time, however, what we are doing may seem strange and even unnecessary to the other members of our *sangha* or group, and to our close friends and family.

Being Patient with Ourselves

I advise people to find good counseling, and, in addition, to be very patient with themselves during this transition to a more contemplative life. We may feel ourselves stepping outside the very familiar and previously comfortable boundaries of our faith and practice paths. We begin to search for different ways to acknowledge and nurture our deepening self-discovery as contemplatives.

Today, there are contemplative outreach organizations and centers, often connected with Fr. Thomas Keating's work in contemplative renewal; finding one of these can give us the second *permission*, which is to begin to explore other resources that can nourish us as contemplatives. Usually, these contemplative groups are Christian and Catholic, but they openly welcome persons from all the faith traditions. Often they are connected with a Catholic retreat center, which can be a very good place for us to go in order to explore further the integrated, contemplative understanding of ourselves that we are seeking, as well as to find others who share the contemplative calling.

Another *permission* that we may need to feel is to become nonsectarian or interfaith; contemplation belongs to all the paths, and is indeed the center or core of all the traditions. When we begin to consider contemplative life seriously, we become less interested in upholding or proclaiming any one way, and more interested in touching the center, core, or mystical basis of all the paths. We seek more than anything to know intimately and have this "core experience"—to feel and celebrate when we are "there" in this contemplative knowing. Contemplative advisement, adjustment counseling, solitude, solitary retreat, non-sectarianism, and interfaith relationships can all help us to reconnect with something that we begin to feel is very important to our spiritual well-being.

During this time of growing contemplative awareness, the daily experience of nature can also be very healing. Some place during our busy days, if we can find a way to touch and be touched by the natural world of beauty and harmony, we can begin to comprehend the very natural occurrence of the contemplative state of mind and being: contemplative mind is "natural mind." We can start to recognize and understand this natural state of mind in ourselves more and more. As we do so, we will begin to feel the restful peace that is a part of deepening contemplation.

The full rediscovery and reintegration of our contemplative soul is a wonderfully healing journey, worth all the temporary confusion and sacrifice as our trust slowly deepens. ❑

Letters

In our tradition we reserve the responsibility of teaching to those who have experienced all they teach. We also encourage “holy company.” In our modern circumstances, some are far from the feet of their teacher and far from fellow seekers and must turn to holy company through electronic technology. There we find support and comfort and the encouragement by the sharing of thoughts and aspirations. Thank you so much for *American Vedantist*. Thankfully, Vedanta is open to unorthodox views. Truth can stand up to any challenge knowing that we all must start from wherever we are. Much clarification can come to the writers in attempting to interpret in a personal idiom the great truths of our experienced teachers. Corresponding with each other, both as readers and as writers, helps to clarify and, on occasion, to inspire each other. Reading what fellow aspirants have written in *AV* has been a taste of manna. Thanks for everyone’s efforts. “Wherever several gather in my name, there am I also.” Please accept my attempts in this latter tradition of fellow seeker, trying to put into an American idiom some of the great truths of Vedanta.

—Tom Rea

Book Reviews

They Lived With God: Life Stories of Some Devotees of Sri Ramakrishna (2nd edition)
by Swami Chetanananda
The Vedanta Society of St. Louis
495 pp. cloth 2006 $29.95

I love this book. I loved it when it first came out in 1989 and I loved reading it again now in its new edition. This book predated and is a companion book to the author's wonderful book, *God Lived With Them*, which gives the life stories of Sri Ramakrishna's monastic disciples. *They Lived With God* depicts the lives of the main lay disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. However, the "lay" status is sometimes borderline. Many of the women disciples are widows living the lives of monastics. Gauri-Ma was not a layperson at all but had taken monastic vows prior to meeting Sri Ramakrishna.

These two books are a wonderful expansion of a long out-of-print book called *Disciples of Ramakrishna*, published by Advaita Ashrama, which came out in a revised edition in 1955. *They Lived With God* contains many more disciples and much more information. Plus the writing is beautiful. Swami Chetanananda has ransacked the Bengali literature to bring into English much information previously unknown about the disciples. Over and over again one encounters very moving episodes which cast light on Sri Ramakrishna, on the disciple, and on spiritual life. Swami Chetanananda is utterly unapologetic about presenting Sri Ramakrishna as God incarnate—this is implied in the title of the book. I find the author's boldness invigorating. The content documents Sri Ramakrishna's superhuman personality.

Interesting New Material

The first edition is now out of print. The contents of the two editions are basically the same but there are many changes in the second edition that make it a better book. The type is larger; the paper is of better quality and as a consequence the photos are sharper; there are more photos; the binding is better; the index at the end is now readable (you needed a magnifying glass for the first edition); three disciples have been added including Bhavanath and the younger Naren, both well-known to readers of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna; and new interesting material has been added to the chapters on Girish Ghosh and Navagopal and Nisterini Ghosh. The story is told of an attempt on Girish's life by someone who was supposed to be a friend. Incidentally, Swami Chetanananda is now working on a full-length biography of Girish. I am eagerly awaiting its publication. Altogether there are 31 chapters covering 32 main disciples, but

other disciples are mentioned along the way. The book begins with Rani Rasmani and ends with Purna. My favorite chapters were those on Lakshmi, M., and Girish. Hazra is vividly presented. What an annoying personality! Yet it is interesting to learn that in the end he too is redeemed.

The method that Swami Chetanananda follows is to devote a chapter to each disciple. First the disciple is depicted prior to meeting Sri Ramakrishna. Then the meeting and subsequent association is portrayed, describing the transformation in the disciple. Finally we learn about their lives after Sri Ramakrishna passed away (except Adhar, who died first) until their own deaths, which were often very uplifting to learn about.

Meticulous Documentation

One feature Westerners will like is that the sources for the information in the book are meticulously documented. Most of the sources are in Bengali. However he also often cites the English translations of Swami Saradananda's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*: *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* and, in the three new chapters, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, his own excellent new translation. Swami Saradananda, though he is known to have been very careful about his sources, unfortunately does not give many of them.

The author's literary approach is, at the beginning of each chapter, to make a generalization about spiritual life that the life of the particular disciple illustrates. He also gives a vivid incident in the disciple's life as an introduction. Throughout the chapters incidents are often introduced by creating a spiritual context that underscores the significance of the incident. To present an example of this, I opened the book at random and, in the chapter on Balaram Bose, found a paragraph that begins, "Obstacles in spiritual life make a devotee strong. For those who surrender themselves to God, God removes all obstacles and makes everything favorable" (147). The author then goes on to tell of an incident known to readers of *The Great Master* in which Balaram was very anxious about his cousin, who controlled the family finances and who had become very upset upon learning that Balaram and his family had deep devotion to a mere temple priest. Sri Ramakrishna divined the trouble and was able to change the cousin's mind about him, thus relieving Balaram's anxiety.

To read this book is to enjoy holy company—the company of those whose lives were set spiritually aflame by their contact with Sri Ramakrishna. I found it inspiring to spend this time in their holy company.

—William Davis

American Pilgrimage: Sacred Journeys and Spiritual Destinations
by Mark Ogilbee and Jana Riess
Paraclete Press. Brewster, MA
xxi + 207 pp. paperback $16.95 2006

Americans are not given to engaging in pilgrimages to sacred shrines. Canada has its frequently visited shrine of St. Anne-de-Beaupre and France its Lourdes. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* features the stories of pilgrims on their way to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury. The Ogilbee-Riess volume lists a number of frequently visited places within the borders of the United States. Some qualify as standard shrines that are frequently visited, such as St. Jude's Shrine in South Chicago and the California shrine of St. Peregrine at San Juan Capistrano, famous for the annual return of its migrating swallows.

The authors call attention to unofficial shrines, places frequently visited by the devout, such as the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, made famous by Thomas Merton. One would not think of Sedona's Oak Creek Canyon as a shrine, but the authors present the wild beauty of the canyon as a place to be reverently visited and revisited for the uplifting experience the area imparts.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the famous Buddhist monk and writer, has several American branches of his Plum Village motherhouse in France. The public park in Fountain Valley, California has no buildings. It is simply a place where the famous monk meets with those who are eager to see him in person and hear his encouraging words.

Not surprisingly, Ogilbee and Riess can't resist the temptation to include Graceland, the one-time residence of Elvis Presley visited by 600,000 people a year, some of them half expecting a second coming of the pop singer. To complete the selection of unusual shrines, the book winds up with a description of Billy Graham's Crusades. People attend what the authors call a "traveling pilgrimage." You don't go to Billy Graham's home in North Carolina, but he brings his Crusade to the pilgrims who travel to the stadium or theater where he speaks and encourages sinners to step forward and be born again by accepting Jesus as their personal Savior.

American Pilgrimage is informative and entertaining, a good read for those unlikely to go on pilgrimage to any shrine beyond the dinner table.

—James M. Somerville

Contributors

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