

american vedantist

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 It is
there
FOR ALL
TO FIND.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

American Vedantist (AV) is dedicated to developing Vedanta in the West, especially in the United States, and to making The Perennial Philosophy available to people who are not able to reach a Vedanta center. We are also dedicated to developing a closer community among Vedantists.

We are committed to:

- Stimulating inner growth through shared devotion to the ideals and practice of Vedanta
- Encouraging critical discussion among Vedantists about how inner and outer growth can be achieved
- Exploring new ways in which Vedanta can be expressed in a Western cultural context
- Networking through all available means of communication with Vedantists in the United States and other countries, and
- Facilitating the establishment of grass roots Vedanta groups and social service projects.

We invite our readers to join with AV in these endeavors. Please send us articles, poems, songs, letters to the editor, ideas for action programs and other suggestions for achieving our goals.

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truth is one; sages call it variously
e pluribus unum: out of many, one

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Swami Vivekananda in India/Courtesy Vedanta Society of Southern California

Swami Vivekananda's Message to a Friend

"... Herein lies the whole secret of Existence.

Waves may roll over the surface and tempest rage, but deep down there is the stratum of infinite calmness, infinite peace, and infinite bliss...

[W]hen under the load of sorrow, dejection, and despair, the world seems to be cut off from under our feet, and when the whole horizon seems to be nothing but an impenetrable sheet of misery and utter despair... the internal eyes open, light flashes all of a sudden, the dream vanishes, and intuitively we come face to face with the grandest mystery in nature — Existence... that infinite, absolute, ever-blissful Existence per se, that infinite being who is called and worshipped under different names in different climes. Then it is, the shackles that bind the soul down to this hole of misery break, as it were, for a time, and unfettered it rises and rises until it reaches the throne of the Lord, 'Where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest'. Cease not, brother, to send up petitions day and night, cease not to say day and night — THY WILL BE DONE...

May the Lord send you peace is the prayer day and night of — Vivekananda"

*Written from Bombay on 23rd May, 1893 to D. R. Balaji Rao who had just suffered a severe domestic affliction. From **The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda**, Volume 4, p. 355.*

Dear American Vedantist (email ✉ letters from readers) –

Jai Bhagawan and Hari Om

Glad to receive your kind complimentary copy of the *American Vedantist*, disseminating the means of attaining “Peace and Bliss” through the Vedantic teachings of our Holy Trio, and Vedanta in general.

I am located in a small, new center with a few devotees. One Bro[ther] Paul Arney is also staying with me for “catching God,” by spiritualizing our daily lives.

[Regarding Esther Warkov’s call for remembrances of Swami Aseshananda:] Yes, I have met Swami Aseshanandaji in Madras, when I was a student in the 1940s. Also, I stayed with him in the Portland center when I happened to visit all the centers in the USA, during my visit to the States when the great convention in Ganges, Michigan, was organized by Swami Bhashyanandaji in the 1980s. So, in due course, I may write a little about Swami Aseshanandaji. I am now in my 90th year.

Swami Damodarananda
Resident Monk, Vedanta Centre of Perth, Australia
Ramakrishna Mission

I have just received the [V14] No. 1 Summer issue of your magazine. Please let me tell you how very much I like better the format of the magazine. It is truly 100% better! than before... the size, and paper-texture, the wonderful inspiring READABLE articles with many fine pictures. I just love this new issue and the change! Thank you very much. It must have something to do with the Ramakrishna Monastery in Trabuco Canyon, CA. Great new style! I look forward to the 2nd installment of “Letters from Swami Ritajananda,” and I like the Buddha’s picture on the cover with an explanation of what he has in his sack!

Yvonne Upton
San Francisco, CA

Just received [the Summer 2008 issue] and want to congratulate on the new format.

It’s a joy to read.

John Bass
Scottsdale, AZ

Bravo! ...a great editing job. I feel [this] issue of AV is wonderful. I read it from cover to cover and found the articles interesting, entertaining and inspiring. I also liked the artwork and having the table of contents inside.

Bill Davis

Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely

Congratulations on your beautiful summer issue! I think everyone at the Convent enjoyed it much. I sent one copy to Barbara Agee (Jyoti) who now lives in a retirement home in Oregon... I would like to get a two-year gift subscription [for her]...

Pravrajika Akhandaprana

Hollywood (CA) Convent

I like the Summer 2008 issue of the American Vedantist for its new look.

Compared to its previous "text-only" issues, [the new format] — including the photos of Swamiji [Swami Vivekananda], Swami Tadatmananda, and his painting of Swami Prabhavananda, etc. — made the magazine more attractive.

I have been an avid reader of AV since its very first issue, and I agree that "AV is a magazine with considerable promise." But I think what we need today, both in the West and in the East, [is] not only the spiritual/philosophical side of Vedanta, enough about which has already been said during the past 100+ years in books, magazines, lectures, and discourses, but what Vivekananda said — "the secular business part of it. A stirring propaganda must be launched out." [CW, Vol. 5, pp. 52-53] — more on that theme in my future correspondence with AV.*

Amal Gupta

Stoneham, MA

**Editor's note: Mr. Gupta was asked to amplify and explain these interesting suggestions, in time for publication in this issue. His reply follows on page 6. Please let us know what you think about what Mr. Gupta recommends.*

Jagad Hitai Cha – for the welfare of the world, by Amal Gupta

“A young businessman was vacationing in an island resort. Every morning he saw from his hotel window a fisherman from a nearby village sailing to sea in his rickety fishing boat. The fisherman would return in the evening and the villagers would gather around his boat to buy his day’s catch. One morning the businessman couldn’t resist his curiosity and asked the poor fisherman as to how much money he was making by selling the day’s catch. ‘Barely enough to make both ends meet,’ replied the fisherman. So the businessman became enthusiastic and decided to give the poor man a few tips on Business 101. ‘Why don’t you borrow some money from a bank and buy another boat? Then you can hire and train how to fish to a few unemployed men from your village. This way you can catch more fish, and make more money.’ The fisherman intently listened to him and asked: ‘Then?’ ‘Well, once you have saved enough money, you can pay back the loan and you can buy another boat with your remaining savings. Then you catch more fish, make more money, buy a third boat, hire more people, and soon you can become very rich.’ The fisherman asked again, ‘Then?’ ‘Then you relax and enjoy life with your family?’ ‘All that work for just that? I’ll eat, drink, dance, and will have fun tonight when I get back!’ replied the fisherman.”

(Source: A mass emailing over the Internet; author unknown)

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Obviously the poor fisherman in this story has no ambition to improve his life materially nor does he want to help his fellowmen, the poor villagers. Simply put, in the language of Vedanta he is predominantly *tamasic*. (*Bhagavad-Gita*, XIV-8)

Vivekananda would have vehemently criticized the fisherman’s attitude, for he never liked or preached a world-denying, negative philosophy of life. Sri Ramakrishna also said once: “A householder has his duties to discharge, his debts to pay... And his debt to wife and children... Only a monk must not save.” (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 156)

Sister Nivedita most eloquently described Vivekananda’s philosophy of life with these words: “**No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular.** Life is itself a religion... To him, the workshop, the study, the farmyard, and the field are as true and fit scenes for the meeting of God with man as the cell of the monk or the door of the temple. **To him, there is no difference between service of man and worship of God...** But in order to understand this **we must have the theory of Advaita.**” (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 1, pp. xv-xvi)

Vivekananda was an apostle of strength and manliness. “Be strong, my young friends,” he said. “That is my advice to you. You will be nearer to Heaven through football

than through the study of the Gita... You will understand the Gita better with your biceps, your muscles, a little stronger." (*Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 242)

In Vivekananda we find a unique amalgam of spiritual and secular ideas. His teachings on practical Vedanta were so revolutionary that even his brother disciples sometimes failed to understand him and appreciate those ideas. (*Ibid.*, Vol. 6, pp. 477-478)

Vivekananda's secular ideas were the result of his own sufferings just before he started his monastic life. Of all the direct disciples of Ramakrishna, no one suffered as he did. No one. His father's sudden death, followed by a family feud and litigation over his ancestral property, taught him that there could be no spirituality with an empty stomach. In this context, Ramakrishna once said, "Since his father's death Narendra [Vivekananda] had been worried about his worldly affairs. He has a **slightly calculating mind**. How I wish that other youngsters were like Niranjana and Narendra." (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 595)

Ramakrishna knew very well that lofty spiritual idealism alone, without implementing [it] into practice with the help of such a "calculating mind," would not be enough to spread his message. Of all his disciples, he therefore entrusted Vivekananda to spread his message. He inspired Vivekananda not only to renounce the worldly

life but also taught him to practice and teach the principle of "service (*seva*) and *not* compassion (*daya*) for humankind." That teaching culminated in the Ramakrishna Order with its motto "*Atmano Mokshartham; Jagad Hitai Cha* (For one's own salvation and for the welfare of the world)."

By and large Vivekananda's spiritual teachings are reflected in his lectures to his Western audience and in some of his writings. But the letters to his brother disciples and householder followers in India, and his casual conversations with them clearly tell us about his secular ideas. (*Ibid.*, *Epistles*, Vols. 5, 6, 7, and *Conversations and Dialogs*, Vol. 6).

"What I am most afraid of is the worship-room. It is not bad in itself, but there is a tendency in some to make this all in all and set up **that old-fashioned nonsense over again—this is what makes me nervous.**" (*Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 289)

"What my nation [India] wants is pluck and **scientific genius**. So I want Mohin [his younger brother] to be an electrician... **In America alone there is that something in air, which brings out whatever is best in every one... An electrical engineer can make a living in India.**" (*Ibid.*, p. 363) [About a young Indian he met in the U.S., Swamiji wrote;]

"... He is a practical mechanic and his one idea is to see cutlery and other iron manufactories in this country [USA]... I do not know anything about him; **even if he be**

— See For the Welfare on page 43



The Kurukshetra War/Image courtesy Government of Assam,
Directorate of Information & Public Relations

Arjuna's Eunuch Problem and the Gita's Epic Frame

Part 2 of 2 (Introduction repeated for the sake of new readers.)

to the memory of

J.A.B. van Buitenen

Steven F. Walker

The *Bhagavad Gita* is in all likelihood a composite text that grew over time to encompass the eighteen chapters as we know them now, and as they were commented upon by many great Vedantists starting with Shankara. The author of the earliest version of the text must have deliberately embedded his original *Gita* at a well chosen point of the *Mahabharata*, just before the onset of the great battle at Kurukshetra. He must have done his best to create a nearly seamless connection between his text and the preexisting epic text, and by attaching it to the *Mahabharata* must have intended it to reach the widest possible audience—the audience, in fact, of the *Mahabharata* itself, as enormously popular today (witness the wildly successful Indian TV series) as it was throughout the history of India for over two thousand years.

The *Gita's* immediate setting or epic “frame” would thus seem to merit attention in its own right, both for what it might have to offer in terms of thematic continuity and also for the way in which it departs significantly from the epic vision of the *Mahabharata*. This did not happen, however, until the eminent Sanskrit scholar J.A. B. van

Buitenen focused attention on the *Gita's* epic frame in his trailblazing book, *The Bhagavadgita in the Mahabharata: a Bilingual Edition* (University of Chicago Press, 1981). But van Buitenen was more of a philologist than an interpreter, and so could only do so much with the question of the *Mahabharata's* thematic relationship with the *Gita*.

Some of what he points out in his excellent introduction is quite suggestive, however. For instance, he notes (17) that “yoga” and the command “to lay on the yokes” (the shout that called for the great war chariots and their horses to be readied for action) both have their etymological origin in the Sanskrit verb root *yuj*—, “to join or link together.” Thus the epic injunction referring to “the yoking of the horses to the war cars, wagons, and other war equipment” is linked with the idea of yoga as “a self-yoking to a particular effort to win a goal.” (17). But van Buitenen has a tendency to overplay the continuity of the epic vision of the happy warrior with the more reflective *Gita's* promotion of spiritual struggle; for him, the *Gita* culminates in Arjuna's “acceptance of ksatriya duty and fate,” (4) although he does add that “there will be no more happy warriors, only resigned ones.” Even with this

qualification, his conclusion seems a bit shaky: would it be fair to call Arjuna “a resigned warrior” (a sadder but wiser bear?) by the end of the *Gita*? I think not.

Too great a sense of the continuity between the epic vision of the *Mahabharata* and the spiritual vision of the *Gita*, however valuable it proves to be initially, can quickly become misleading. The point of this essay is to argue that the *Gita*, as we move into Book II and beyond, quickly transforms the hypermasculine warrior concerns of the epic in order to promote a sublimation of the epic’s *kshatradharma* (warrior ethic) into the *Gita*’s spiritual discipline of yoga, thus substituting for the warrior’s heroic self-assertion on the battlefield the mental fight and selfless activity of the yogi. The warrior ethic’s perspective is centered on the advantages to the individual warrior of either victory or death on the battlefield... (*Editor’s note: Part 2 begins here.*)

Alone among all the great warriors of the *Mahabharata* war, Arjuna proved himself able to challenge the fundamental assumptions of the warrior ethic, namely, that victory is always worth fighting for under any and all circumstances, and that it is the unquestionable duty of the *kshatriya* to fight. He may be seen by Krishna initially as someone who is “thinking like a eunuch,” but it is important to emphasize that Arjuna is also the only one of the great war-

riors who can “think outside of the box.” Although Krishna winds up either dismissing or refuting Arjuna’s heated pacifist arguments in favor of withdrawing from the battlefield, it would be missing the point to claim, as van Buitenen does at one point in his introduction, that Krishna does this simply in order to amass counter-arguments that will persuade Arjuna to backtrack and to accept “the warrior’s fate.” (van Buitenen, 4) By the end of the *Gita* Krishna has convinced Arjuna to be a yogi first and foremost; as regards what he will actually do in battle at Kurukshetra, Krishna, while pointing out (XVIII.59-60) the almost irresistible force of karmic disposition and social duty, nevertheless leaves him full freedom to decide upon his course of action by himself: “Reflect on this knowledge I have propounded to you, this mystery of mysteries, in its entirety, and then do as you are pleased to do: *yathechhasi tatha kuru*. (XVIII.63) Arjuna will fight, of course, because the later addition of the *Gita* cannot change the course of the original epic narrative of the *Mahabharata*; but at this point near the end of the *Gita* it is clear that he is free to decide to fight or not. (Disturbingly, but understandably—the *Gita*, as a text arguably inserted later into a preexisting *Mahabharata* narrative, cannot change the basic plot of the epic, which was already determined—a presumably spiritually transformed Arjuna becomes his old warrior self again in the

following sections of the epic, killing Bhishma through trickery, and generally acting as though he had never listened to Krishna's spiritually uplifting discourses.)

The question then arises: what made Arjuna at the opening of the *Gita* think and act so differently from his brothers, teachers and fellow warriors? What made him capable of thinking "outside of the box" of the warrior's unquestioned assumption that a good fight is always to be welcomed? I suggest that the answer lies in the year he spent as a eunuch teaching Uttara, the daughter of king Virata, and her ladies in the women's quarters, to dance and sing, and generally keeping them entertained and happy. Arjuna's experience of how women talk and behave when they are by themselves would have gone far beyond the experience of his hypermasculine fellow warriors, who would mainly have known only how women talk and behave when they are in the presence of men. (It is important—and the *Mahabharata* makes this clear on several occasions—that Arjuna's relationship with the women of Virata's court was at all times proper and chaste; he knew them as a friend and teacher, not as a man—and so knew them *differently*.) In an aristocratic society where there was a fair amount of gender segregation, Arjuna's inside knowledge of women's ways must have been unique for a man of his standing and position, and I sug-

gest that enough of these feminine modes of thinking and experiencing the world would have rubbed off on him to make him able to fall into a quasi-feminine way of thinking about such things as war, battle, bloodshed, carnage and victory at all costs. From his feminine-influenced perspective, engaging in the approaching battle might readily seem a terrible choice to make: better, as Arjuna says to Krishna, to die than to kill one's relatives and venerable teachers, better to lose everything than to enjoy the bloodstained fruits of battle, better to be killed by the Kauravas than to act out of greed for kingship and pleasures, better to sue for peace than to bring about the inevitable destruction of family and of dharma itself, and so forth and so on. In a word, better to protect and foster life in the family and society, even at the price of humiliating defeat. Of course, I do not imply that all aristocratic women would have felt this way—aristocratic ladies in the epic like Draupadi could be quite bloodthirsty and ferocious in their desire for revenge—but I imagine that some of them at least did not share the hypermasculine warrior's supreme confidence in the desirability of victory at any cost.

Even if Arjuna is depressed and "overcome with [excess of] compassion" (*visidantam... krpaya-vistam*), his words do not lack a kind of passionate eloquence. But for Krishna, eloquent as they may seem, his words are ultimately just

eunuch talk. This is a harsh judgment, however well intended. What are we, as modern readers, to make of Krishna's position? I suggest that C.G. Jung's concept of the "feminine-in-man" (the *anima*), the unconscious contrasexual subpersonality that compensates psychologically for a man's dominant conscious masculinity, provides a way of appreciating the originality of what Arjuna has to say, as well as a way of sensing its ultimate weakness. The *anima*, in Jung's psychology, is both a source of inspiration and of delusion for a man. On the positive side, in providing a man with a bridge that leads to the deeper recesses of the creative unconscious, the *anima* enables him to become inspired and original in his thinking and actions; as Goethe wrote at the end of Faust, it is the Eternal Feminine that draws men ever upwards. Arjuna's ability to abandon the rigid and conventional mindset of the *kshatra-dharma*, to which his fellow warriors cling desperately, even when it is clearly in the process of becoming discredited, can be attributed to the awakening of his *anima* or unconscious feminine side thanks to the unusual education he had received in the ways of feminine modes of thinking and experiencing in the women's quarters of King Virata's palace. Thanks to his somewhat more conscious feminine side, Arjuna no longer thinks as another hypermasculine warrior might think. This means

that he is a much more interesting and challenging person for Krishna to engage with, since he has one of two things essential for a good student: strongly held and original opinions. Krishna would not have been able to argue fruitfully with one of Arjuna's brothers or fellow warriors, as they were intellectually complacent and were satisfied with the conventional answers provided by the warrior ethic; someone who thinks he knows all the answers does not need a teacher, or, at least, will not be up for accepting anyone as a teacher.

Arjuna also has the second thing required for a good student: he realizes on some level of consciousness that he is in a desperate situation and really needs help. Arjuna is not only *inspired* by his *anima* or feminine side; he is also more than a little *overwhelmed* by it in the form of emotions he cannot control. Although Arjuna's "thinking outside the box" provided Krishna with a wonderful opportunity for a vigorous dialog with him, there was also something suspect and unbalanced about it. His compassion was based on almost hysterical emotion, and in this he cannot be said to think like a woman (women when they think can be as clear and calm as men) but rather as "thinking like a man trying to think like a woman," i.e., his *anima* has led him into inappropriate and psychologically ungrounded sentimentality and emotionality. There is something not

quite right about his feminine wisdom, and for Jung this would have to do with the unconscious and unreliable dimensions of a man's inner femininity. For Jung the *anima* contained what he called *eros*, the function of empathic relationship, but in its unmediated *anima* form it tends to be an undeveloped, unrealistic, and strangely unrelated kind of *eros*. Looked at from this perspective, Arjuna's *eros* has lost contact with the reality of the situation: he is facing relatives and teachers who, no doubt, deserve his compassion (however corrupted by money they may be), but he is also facing them as deadly enemies, who would gladly kill him, his immediate family and his allies. So there is something inappropriate about his declarations of compassion; no wonder Krishna is not impressed with them.

But without this emotional and anima-driven *eros*, ungrounded and unrealistic as it may be, Arjuna would have been no different from his brothers and teachers, that is, satisfied with the world as the *kshatra-dharma* represented it, and seeing the oncoming battle as a wonderful opportunity to win a kingdom or, failing that, to go to a warrior's heaven. Instead, the imminent battle has provided him with a wonderful opportunity for a life-changing conversation with Krishna, which will extend to him the option to conduct his life from here on as a yogi in a spirit of dispassion and disinterested activ-

ity leading to true peace and freedom. Without the emotional breakdown that elicited Krishna's insult that he was, so to speak, about to act like a eunuch again, Arjuna would not have been open to Krishna's teachings that were in essence the only solution to an impossible conflict of values that had torn him apart. When it is not possible to resolve such a conflict, the only hope is to rise above it, and that is what Krishna has helped Arjuna to do.

Arjuna is thus presented in the *Gita* and its epic frame as a psychologically complex and troubled individual, whose very complexity (his "eunuch problem," I have called it for short) has led him to problems that he could no longer solve either on his own, or by relying on conventional social wisdom. But there is still more to be said that is even more problematic about Arjuna's ultimately happy fall into his inner femininity. In distancing himself from the relatively uncomplicated self-confidence of the happy warriors of his entourage, he had left himself open to a crisis of confidence in himself as a warrior. His openness to feminine modes of feeling, developed during his life as a eunuch in the women's quarters, had made him a more complex individual, whose kshatriya courage and boldness could no longer be accessed as automatically or as spontaneously as before, now that he had cast an eye into the vision of chaos and

destruction that the imminent battle at Kurushetra now afforded him. His hitherto unquestioned complicity with warrior brutality had been brought to consciousness, and had become problematic for him. Krishna's teaching on yoga, however enlightening spiritually it was becoming for him, did not directly address this state of emotional disarray. The way was open for him to become a yogi, but the way to go back to being a warrior as well as a yogi was not so obvious, since his conflicting emotions allowed for no easy resolution on the purely philosophical and spiritual plane. For that he needed an *emotional* shock that would give him back his courage on a higher plane of awareness.

Arjuna, in spite of the intellectual and spiritual enlightenment provided by Krishna's discourses on yoga, can still be imagined in a state of deep emotional confusion and even of emotional trauma. The battlefield of Kurukshetra had come to represent for him death and destruction on an unparalleled scale, and to resume his duty as a kshatriya would require him to participate wholeheartedly in the process of dealing out death and destruction. But how would he be up to this? His feminine sensibility, heightened and sharpened by his stay at Virata's court as the friend, teacher and companion of the court ladies, had enabled him to ask the original questions that challenged Krishna to teach him

the "mystery of mysteries" concerning the ultimate freedom of the soul, but it had also left him in a state where the hypermasculine *kshatriya-dharma* could no longer inspire him emotionally as before. At some point in the composition of the *Gita* the author—or perhaps another and later author—devised a brilliant answer to the dramatic dilemma of an overly sensitive (overly sensitive from the warrior's standpoint, of course) Arjuna unable to countenance the dreadful horror of the killing fields of Kurukshetra. Krishna had given him all the intellectual instruction and spiritual inspiration he needed to become a yogi, but the author—some author—sensed at that point in the elaboration of the text that some crucial element was still missing. His answer was astoundingly original: Arjuna's vision of Krishna as Cosmic Lord and the very embodiment of Death and Destruction as it unfolds in Book XI.

To the best of my knowledge, there is no temple anywhere in India dedicated to this terrible aspect of Krishna, whose description in Book XI remains perhaps unique in the vast iconography of Hinduism. Readers will remember the bloody mouths, the tusks and the sheer horror of devouring death represented without restraint; the father of the atomic bomb J. Robert Oppenheimer remembered "the radiance of a thousand suns" (XI.12) and "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds"



Arjuna's vision of Krishna as Cosmic Lord/Courtesy Karaga.org [Secretary and Board of Director of Vannikula Kshatriya (Thigala) Veerakumarara Sanga]

(a mixture of XI.32 and X.34) at the moment of the first flash that opened the Nuclear Age at the Trinity site in New Mexico on July 16, 1945. But what could be the point of adding such a horrific scene to the otherwise serenely philosophical *Gita*?

I would suggest the following answer: that such a dreadful vision was absolutely necessary for Arjuna to regain, on a higher level of consciousness, his warrior's courage and resolve. The vision contained a nightmarish vision of death and destruction, but it was all the same a vision of a terrible and frightening divine dimension, hitherto unknown to him, of his dear friend and teacher Krishna. But if Death and Destruction ap-

pear in the form of one's dearest friend and teacher, then they can be accepted, however painfully.

There is in the text something else about this vision that I put forward with some hesitation, although it does seem plausible to me. The vision seems to me to be divided into two parts of unequal length that correspond to what Krishna says when he offers to show Arjuna "the entire universe with standing and moving creatures centered here in this body of mine—and whatever else you desire to see." (XI.7) The first part of the vision—the radiance of a thousand suns and the entire universe centered in the body of the divine Krishna—clearly corresponds to the first part of what Krishna promised Arjuna could see: "the entire universe" etc. This part of the vision leaves Arjuna "stunned;" the text goes on to say that "he shivered. He folded his hands and bowed his head" (XI.14). At this point I believe we are asked by the text to visualize Arjuna no longer looking *out* at Krishna and his cosmic form as he did a moment before, but now rather looking *down* at the ground, head bowed, and then seeing *within* himself, in the depth of his inner consciousness, an *inner* vision that corresponds to the second part of what Krishna promised: "and whatever else you desire to see." This second part of the vision is "what Arjuna desired to see," with all the half-conscious yearnings of his deepest need to be

able to see and withstand the vision of the Terrible. By seeing it, he “faces the brute,” to borrow Vivekananda’s expression—as manifested in the form of Krishna himself. This second part of the vision, unlike the first part, is described in *Arjuna’s own words*—appropriately enough, since it is his own personal vision. Arjuna’s description of his apocalyptic vision passes quickly from one fearsome detail to another even more horrific, culminating in Arjuna telling Krishna:

“You are greedily licking your lips to devour

These worlds entire with your flickering mouths:

Your dreadful flames are filled with fire,

And burn to its ends the universe, Visnu.” (XI.30)

At this culminating point Krishna interprets the vision:

“I am Time grown old to destroy the world,

Embarked on the course of world annihilation. (XI.32)

(Jung would have called Arjuna’s vision a *compensatory* vision—compensating, that is, with tremendous emotional force, for the mood of compassion that had overwhelmed him at the opening of the *Gita*, and which, for all its relative value, had made him unfit to function as a warrior.) Then Krishna quickly defines for Arjuna the practical consequences of his vision:

“Slay Drona and Bhisma and Jayadratha
And Karna as well as the other fine warriors—

My victims—destroy them and tarry not!

Wage war! You shall trounce your rivals in battle.” (XI.34)

For many readers this may be the most shocking section of the *Gita*, as Krishna urges upon Arjuna—enthusiastically!—the very murder of teachers and fellow warriors that Arjuna shrank from in Book I. But when one keeps in mind the epic frame that establishes Arjuna as a complex personality of a most unusual sort—with unusual human weaknesses but also unusual spiritual potential—then this compensatory vision of the Terrible in the form of Krishna can be seen as having an essential role to play in the spiritual healing of a wounded warrior who, at the beginning of the *Gita*, had seen more in the way of approaching murder and mayhem than he could stomach. Now that Arjuna has not only seen the sorrow and the pity of life and death, but also its cosmic implacability and its divine grandeur, he can face the brute at last. In the end, his “eunuch problem” has not been so much resolved as transcended. Having seen, thanks to his awakened feminine consciousness, the dark side of the warrior ethic, he has been able to see, thanks to Krishna, the practice of yoga as a sublimation of warrior energies in a spiritual direction. Finally, in Book XI he has also faced the cosmic—as opposed to the personal—dimension of death and destruction. □

Swami Siddheswarananda - Excerpts from his writings and talks, Part 2

As collected by Maude Lallemond, author of
Swami Siddheswarananda et son Temps
(Swami Siddheswarananda and his times)

**Swami Siddheswarananda (1897-1957) was a respected monk
of the Ramakrishna Order.**

Gopal Marar of the Kottiril house or Tharavaad (maternal joint family) of Thrissur, was a prince of the House of Cochin, Kerala, in his pre-monastic days. He was initiated by Swami Brahmananda and popularly called Gopal Maharaj. A charming person, he served as the President of Mysore branch of Ramakrishna Math. During this time, he was instrumental in shaping the career of Puttappa, legendary Kannada poet Kuvempu. He had great regard for Sri Ramana Maharshi. He founded the Ramakrishna Ashrama in Gretz (Centre Vedantique Ramakrichna), France in 1947 and spread the message of Vedanta in the French language. He became well known in France as an author and lecturer. — *Adapted from Wikipedia*

Introduction by Swami Yogeshananda (Vedanta Center of Atlanta)

I've completed my translations from the second volume of *Swami Siddheswarananda et son Temps*. I have taken from the many selections those which I think I will want to use in *Provisions* [the monthly newsletter of the Atlanta Center]. Attached are all the rest, for the use of AV if, and as it chooses. I feel that the Swami was a most unusual one, on many counts. He mingled extraordinarily with European society, and particularly the clergy.

He operated one of only three ashrams of the Order that allowed both men and women (the others being Hollywood and San Francisco). He had an historic career in running from the Nazis. He was on familiar terms with some of Europe's most important people of the era. He was of princely blood, taught at the Sorbonne, was a pupil at the famous Mysore Study Circle and on and on... We find some of the things he says quite extraordinary — all the more reason for interest.

PART 2 of 2 (Introduction above repeated for new readers.)

Gretz, 1952

One day in 1924, Swami Rudrananda smiled when I said, incidentally, at the table, that Thakur was greater than Brahman. At the time,

I did not feel that any more words were needed to explain myself. Nearly thirty years later, the words have come – in an awkward way perhaps – but there they are. In the Vedantic dialectic, one leads *Brahman* to the dentist's chair and all its teeth are pulled out. Brahman, the Absolute (in the etymological sense absolute = *ab solutas*, withdrawn from everything).

If one brings up *maya* (name and form) *shakti*, that is almost equivalent to putting in new teeth, taking Brahman to the dentist. And he/it becomes inactive, no power. Our Thakur wants the Totality in its integrity – *sarvam* – the bel fruit as a whole corresponds in this illustration to Brahman with teeth, i.e., where there is no disturbance between Brahman and *maya*, the wriggling snake and the snake coiled up.

I have insisted likewise on an idea dear to Abani Maharaj (*Swami Prabhavananda*). We should not go against public opinion! Thakur till now has been presented as an "Incarnation!" He always referred to himself as "the one who dwells here"; indicating his own body. Thakur is the Mother *in person*. When Muthu (Swami Rudrananda) passed through Gretz on his way to India and Fiji, his smile came again to mind and I recalled it to him, adding that "Thakur is greater than Brahman" were Maharaj's words, when he gave me initiation in 1917, the same day that Suresh Maharaj (Swami

Yatiswara-nanda) got his *sannyasa*. Today, these words to me as a boy of eighteen, open to me now a view which comprehends the meaning of the greatest Upanishad and its *Karika*. Expressed in Vedantic terms, the religious language "Thakur is the Mother Herself" translates into "the knower of Brahman becomes Brahman."

My intention never was to amend an introduction for a book already prefaced by Dinesh Maharaj (Swami Nikhilananda) and V.S. Iyer, but when I began acknowledging certain thanks, the ideas came without being asked and everything ended up in forty mimeographed pages of close print.

In my monthly talks at the University I expound on the *Mandukya* and the *Karika*. Five years or even more will be necessary to exhaust the subject, I am still on only the second verse. The whole of last year I have spoken on the metaphysical, psychological and logical significance of Vedantic illustrations.

Gretz,
October 1952

In the search for security by means of consolation, we *attach* ourselves to a system of beliefs, or better, we force ourselves to attain them or seize them, whereas on the road to Faith (which is one with the Truth of truths) we must abandon all the proofs which our

personal opinions have been able to provide us. It is a "letting go."

As the number of those who can "let go" is minimal, rare are the students who seek Knowledge. Troubled by their state of insecurity in life, people throw themselves toward the various forms of protection they can find, and all the religions without exception offer the creeds and dogmas essential for building their refuge; it is the guaranty of security which makes us take our refuge in this way, in the various religions. The foundation of knowledge is extrareligious, for knowledge bears witness to Truth and it is the domain of the universal. In contrast, the desire for salvation or refuge belongs to the domain of the particular, since it is the "I" who seeks refuge in God; the "I" is not satisfied in knowing its allegiance to NATURE, to the TOTALITY, the ALL; but in Knowledge, to attain to Nature, the All, is essential.

No conflict arises between these two attitudes in India. In the tradition of the Vedas, the teaching is found which addresses the aspirants of faith by the religious way, and that which is for the seekers of knowledge, by the way of wisdom.

A strict dogmatism comes from the confusion of the terms "faith" and "belief." All the beliefs are varied expressions of faith, a faith which expresses itself, and by that fact, transforms itself into a



Swami Siddheswarananda

belief. Faith is one with metaphysical reality: in faith, heart and mind are in perfect harmony. A confrontation of beliefs from different religions is a vain endeavor if the certainty has not been established that each belief is an expression of the faith. From this point of view, all the beliefs are equally valid and no hierarchy is imposed.

Faith, we repeat, is *one with metaphysical reality*. It is what holds things together, it is dharma (from the root *dhr*, to hold together). The whole of the cosmos is held together by the fundamental element called *akasha*, which is identical to consciousness. Professor Theodore von Karman, one of the true masters of modern science, calls that fundamental element which upholds matter "empty space," and matter he calls "condensation of empty space." This void is the *Sunyata* or *tathata*, "suchness," of Mahayana Buddhism or Brahman of Vedanta. In several Upanishads, Brahman and akasha are given as equivalent terms. □

APPLIED VEDANTA, ACTIVISM, & MOTHER

Jayanti Hoye

In recent years I have been engaged as a political activist. Remembering a time when the political world seemed very unappealing, I could never have imagined that politics would capture my interest, much less be a means of spiritual practice.

Because of my disability, I was invited to sit on my first government advisory committee soon after I graduated from college. I took my responsibilities seriously. It seemed that my commitment to truth, fairness, and reason were appreciated, even in demand, as requests for my service kept coming. Values were always important to me, but I naively connected them with results. Like the child who learns that rewards come from being good, I thought that “right outcomes” came from being principled. I worked hard to try to make certain these outcomes came about without realizing that I was being driven by my own expectations, however selfless they may have been. The more these efforts failed, the more confused and helpless I felt. It seemed that my values had failed me. Thus I found refuge in Vedanta, which taught that we have values for their own sake. I welcomed this as my first lesson. Something in me wanted to hold onto my values and Vedanta reassured me. Since it was the world that failed me, not my values, I assumed I had permission to “give up” being politically aware or involved in any way.

I think many of us come world-

worn to Vedanta, hear the sublime teachings that the world is not real, and think, “Wow!” We begin throwing off past connections that have given us the most trouble and say, “Good riddance!” As spiritual aspirants, we may need to distance ourselves from a situation in order to gain new skills and perspective. I certainly needed to withdraw and was in no hurry to “get back into the thick of it.” I hadn’t yet realized that I could be involved in a different and more effective way.

So you may imagine my surprise when, several years later, a swami told me that I had to vote because it was my duty as a citizen to do so. As “my duty as a citizen” has continued to broaden and feel more and more natural, I see the positive effects of 20 years in Vedanta. First and foremost, I no longer carry the burden of success. After participating in one effort, I can move on to the next. Activism calls for this kind of shifting of attention and readiness to act.

Usually I have cited Swami Vivekananda’s teachings about karma yoga to explain how I can hope to make political involvement a spiritual practice. However, when a brother devotee told me recently, “I don’t get involved in political

concerns. They will be resolved by the will of the Lord," I found myself thinking not of Swamiji, but of Holy Mother.

"Everything, no doubt, happens by God's will," said Mother, "yet one must work because God expresses his will through man's actions. Do not relax your spiritual practices."

Vedanta proclaims that we are divine in nature and that in our interaction with the world around us we are much like actors on a stage. We are called to play our roles purposefully, with the truest intentions, while always being aware that we act in a broader production. This gives us the ability to mentally step back in the midst of acting and enjoy the show just as an audience at a stage play is entertained. The more we are able to see ourselves as actors in a divine production, the less we are disturbed by the success or failure of our actions. Hence Holy Mother adds in the quotation above, "Do not relax your spiritual practices," in order that we may lessen our attachments and eventually realize, for ourselves, God as the doer of all action.

I have been asked by devotees, "If all is God's will, how can you take a particular position on anything?" I believe we must be committed to doing the best we can, with the purest motives we can muster, just as the stage actor plays his or her part well. The stage actor knows how the play ends, but most likely had no part in writing it. We do not know the outcomes.



Holy Mother by Rori Schneidre

This is where faith enters in.

Mother spoke against various injustices and encouraged action by others. "If you don't protest against such heinous action," she asked a disciple, "who will do so?" It appears from this that Mother preferred activism to indifference.

An activist mentor of mine likes the statement: "Who says activism can't be fun?" Vedanta affirms that it most certainly should be! For at the heart of being able to have fun is the gentle Vedantic reminder that we are not to take our actions and the outcomes too, too seriously.

IN MOTHER'S WORDS: "It is essential that one work. It is through work alone that one may break asunder the bonds of karma; only then is one free from desires. One shouldn't be without work even for a moment." □

LETTERS FROM SWAMI RITAJANANDA

William Page

Part 2 of 4 (Most of Mr. Page's introduction is repeated, for new readers.)

Swami Ritajananda was a prolific letter writer. He and I corresponded for several years. I saved all the letters we exchanged—the originals of his and carbon copies of mine—from the time I arrived in Thailand in May 1986 till he passed away in 1994.

Most of these letters dealt with personal matters—his travels, the things that were going on in Gretz at the time. He was very much interested in finding out more about Thai Buddhism, especially its spiritual practices and life in the monasteries; and I told him whatever I could and also sent him some books...

In the excerpts that follow, I omit things that are not likely to be of interest to the general reader. Several ideas come out clearly in these letters. First, Swami Ritajananda had the idea that real religion is universal; it is not narrow or parochial; and a truly religious person will transcend a narrow attachment to his own religion and be able to appreciate the religions of others. He himself read deeply and widely in the scriptures of the various religions, and he was always eager to learn more. Since I was living in a Buddhist country, his letters to me often dealt with Buddhism.

Second, he regarded religion as realization, and did not think it was of much use if it did not produce results. He thought that the essence of religion was a transforming experience that would change a person's character. He also thought it was possible to expand the parameters of the mind and attain

what he called in one letter an "egoless condition."

Third, he was pessimistic about the ability of the average person to really go into religion deeply. A recurring theme in his letters was the feeling that all the talks and lectures he was giving were probably not having much effect. People might appreciate his ideas intellectually, but the number of people who would actually put them into practice was relatively few.

Fourth, he had been away from India so long and had read about so many different religions that he found it difficult to communicate his ideas even to his fellow Indians in terms that they could understand. As he remarked in one letter, he "felt like a lone wolf!"

In one of my early letters I asked about the relationship of the individual soul to Brahman. He replied that this was an eternal relationship that could never be bro-

ken. It was usually obscured, but it was always there. I remember being very much impressed by this answer. Unfortunately I have lost that letter — or maybe I received it before I came to Thailand — so I cannot quote it directly...

BEGINNING OF LETTERS, PART 2
18 Dec. 1987

“What you say about the religious organizations involving into social activities, and finally this will take up the whole attention of them, to me is true. But as days roll on, I find that one in a million is really prepared and fit to go deeper into the religious ideal. All sorts of difficulties crop up — the body, unmanifested desires, intellectualism, which may analyse all higher ideals and find that they are not worth trying, influence of the world around, etc. I find it is not possible to talk to many people of the necessity of seeing what the masters have exactly taught. For example, Buddha’s ideal was Nirvana. It has to be realised, first, because we come for that. Sri Ramakrishna said, realise God first, and then go into the world. These two teachers did not mention the way we take up. As I see around me, it is not easy for people to get a deep, very deep and unshakable conviction — that there is a necessity to attain this before plunging into activities. Though they may say Nirvana or God-realisation is the ideal, in the life it does not give that impression. Much time should

first be given to this inner work, before doing the worldly helpful work...

“Very soon, we shall have the house full of guests. Some are already come, but they may not stay, because the new ones will come after they go. As usual, this month is a busy period for the Centre. The winter is already here, though for the last few days, it has begun to rain and temperature has come up from -10 degrees C or -4 degrees C to +14 degrees C. I do my walk anyway. The legs are so far not very bad. Sometimes I think of going to India for a few weeks in February. But I am not sure. The body is old, the legs are not strong and I depend upon a companion when travelling, all these facts stand against. But there is also a necessity to go. Let us see what happens. The decision has to be made in two or three weeks.”

4 April 1988

“I spent five weeks in India and visited five places: Bombay, Belur Math, Lucknow, Hardwar (Kankhal) and Delhi. I spent ten days in Belur Math, because that was a busy festival period. The climate was very pleasant, not very hot nor cold. Generally I stayed in the Ashram and very rarely went out, because it is difficult for me to move about and I have no particular interest in seeing this or that. Big cities have no attraction. I went with three others from here, and they went out to see whatever

drew their interest. I came back on the 15th March and [am] keeping fairly good health....

“I am trying to explain what I feel about spirituality. First of all, let us remember, we are all conditioned by religion. [It] make[s] strong impressions on us, what is right and what is wrong. It is not easy to get out of this. Intellectually, you may come to a greater understanding of what is spirituality, like seeing God in all, but the conditioning puts difficulties. Love everybody as your own, say the ideals, but we find and as you found, the emotions, already set in a particular way, will not easily bend. Let us know, anyway, rules are not absolute. A spiritual man is above all rules, because he knows that every person has come to the school of the world to learn the lessons for his evolution, and one day or other he will surely reach the highest. Worldly desires and attachments will not last long. They all fall away. When there is desire for bhoga, I shall say have it. One day, that person must lose his taste. By forcing it cannot work. Sri Ramakrishna’s way of teaching was like that. When there is an interest in spiritual life, it will work itself out more and more. The man, when he feels that he is becoming attached to things, which he does not like, he should use discrimination, or look at his pleasure, with some spiritual association. This has helped many of his devotees. So, remembering these, I leave people

to discover what is good for them. As you said, repression does not solve. Really, everybody will change. The highest is, of course, not easily understood by most people, and we cannot teach. Consequently, we have more clear-cut ideas of what we want to achieve in this world and work towards it. This is, in one sense, our particular way. It may not be universal, i.e., all may not like to go that way. Our body and our mind [have] to take one way, though we may accept ideas from others. You may ask, where will this lead to? I shall say, to a state of mind or consciousness, you feel really very peaceful that you cannot be violently disturbed by anything or anybody. You feel at the same time sympathy for all. I do not know whether I make any sense, but I am expressing what is true to me and what gives me entire satisfaction.”

4 July 1988

“You went for a Buddhist meditation retreat. How was it? [Are] there any methods one can learn, even through letters? I am always hunting for techniques. Perhaps, I read not fully convinced. I do not know, I have not mastered anything sufficiently to see the result. That is important to me. But it is also very difficult. Many ask to stop thinking. I can never do it. I do not know how to do it. Anyway I am curious to know what you learnt during that one-week’s course. Some say ‘focus your atten-

tions on the breath.' That is for me bad. It creates all sorts of difficulties, because it interferes with my normal unconscious breathing...

"I have not touched on the subject of spirituality, which is so dear to me, though I cannot say, where I am exactly. So, sometimes doubts come, and I ask myself, how far my ideas are correct? Any way, I am totally convinced one can master the mind and thus get out of the clutches of wrong thinking and direct everything in the proper way."

1 Aug. 1988

"I have read about Annapana Satti [anapanasati meditation: "mindfulness with breathing" — the standard Theravada Buddhist type of meditation; same as vipassana], many times and wanted to learn the technique, of watching the breath. I could not go on long. It is true that is a bit boring. But I find it needs more one-pointed concentration. I shall try again. Perhaps that needs a group practice. Since I spend about 90 or 100 minutes in the morning meditation, I can go on trying from 5 minutes onwards.

"Second interesting point is food. I know all the monks of the Theravadins do not eat solid food after the mid-day. But I find they look healthy and some even fat. Probably the one solid meal may be heavier than that of the people who eat twice or more. I have seen one man [who] ate only one meal a day, but the quantity was a lot.

In liquid food, as you say, they get nourishment. Do they drink milk? In many countries, milk is often considered to be children's food. I have heard also that in monasteries of Thailand there is every day confession to the superior of all the members. [Actually, individual monks confess their offenses before an assembly of monks on Uposatha Day, which occurs about every two weeks.] That can help the monks a lot from suffering a guilty conscience. On the whole, they seem to have a disciplined life, though it is flexible and renunciation is not made very rigid, leaving it to the individual. When people get old, they may naturally renounce a lot; and if their ideal is held fast they may come to a great perfection. We in India have the idea [that] the supreme Buddhist ideal is compassion. Another one, I think there must also come self-mastery. The path may be difficult. But it is very necessary even for an ordinary life...

"One fact I discovered is: The Hindus have priests and also monks. The monk is not a priest. He does not do any religious ceremony in people's homes. The priest has to do religious ceremonies, marriage, funerals, etc. In societies where there is no such a class, the monks act also as priests. They participate in the religious life of the society. First, when I saw this in Sri Lanka, where I learnt a lot about Theravada Buddhism, I felt that is the only way, because there is no priest class."

21 Sept. 1988

“Just now I am reading a book on Dalai Lama, wherein he talks about himself, Tibet and Buddhism. Buddhism, whatever may be the school, turns around the point that the life on earth gives a lot of pain, and there is no lasting happiness, and that Buddhism can bring the highest happiness. This we read in Hinduism also. On looking at life of people, everywhere, I think mostly people are not searching for the higher happiness, and sorrows are not permanent for them. They may weep for months, but forget everything afterwards. So, it is not all people [who] search for a spiritual realisation. There are very, very few, who take spirituality very seriously. Many have an intellectual interest, but do not go deeply to see what is Jivan Mukti, what is Nirvana, etc...

“I do not find around me [people] who are seriously interested in trying these ideas. I have conclusions on these spiritual realisations, but I do not meet anyone. The expanded ego-less consciousness, I wish it [were] demonstrated in all fields of our daily life. The only person I could think of was Vivekananda. He demonstrated this a lot. Unfortunately, he died young. People ask me why such a great yogi did not cure himself. Perhaps we ask questions from our own level!! Although the ideas I have are mostly intellectual, I feel a great thrill on thinking of them or talking to people about these,

that I am absolutely convinced, th[at] my ideas are not Utopian.

“The individual confession might have been a wrong statement of a visitor to Thailand. But to confess before all other people is already a big step. Cleaning the mind, analysing all thoughts, pushing away the wrong thoughts, all indicate how serious the searcher of truth must be. Surely there are people of this kind everywhere, but do they all have a universal attitude, coming out of their identity with their personal religion — the religion in which they were born and grew up — is a big question. I test this on myself. To look on all religions as means for the same supreme ideal, as Ramakrishna told, we do not see much.”

21 Nov. 1988

“I went to Greece for about three weeks and had some pleasant days, more warm than in Gretz. My friends have a house in the suburb of Athens, which is a very quiet place. People came for meditations and classes but not many. These are not at all publicised, and so the people who came to know about these gatherings alone came. Of course there are many yoga schools and all sorts of organizations as everywhere. Yet some felt drawn to Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, by the few books in Greek. This is the first time a Ramakrishna Swami spent so many days and that too with a Greek family. I went out a little, saw a couple of museums, went on a

small excursion to [Cape] Sunion, and to the beaches for walks. So the trips and stay were all good, because the climate was favorable. I knew some people for some time, and now I have added a few more to that number. Greece always attracted so now I know a little more than before...

"When...extraordinary experience happens, they cling on. I am not at all psychic and have no experience of any kind, though I am capable of visualising, people, images, and landscapes with beautiful colours. Some say that they cannot at all visualise. It seems strange to me, because, I had the impression all people can visualise. Anyway my meditations go on well; the conviction of the transformation is still my madness!!"

19 May 1989

"Do they [Chinese Buddhists] talk of any person who has attained the realisation of his Buddhature, which you think is Atman? Of course in India they talk of our true nature, 'I' is Atman. The realisation of this Atman means that one gives up his or her identity with body and mind and lives always conscious of his or her true nature..."

11 Sept. 1989

Note from Swami Vidyatmananda, together with a photocopy of a letter sent to Archie and Eleanor Stark, informing me that Swami Ritajananda "had an angina pectoris followed by a stroke." In

the letter to the Starks, he noted, "Swami is in good spirits and as sweet and positive as ever. The body is somewhat stronger; he can walk for a few minutes in the hall outside his room, and twice on sunny days he was carried downstairs. We have a comfortable wheel chair, seated in which he made a tour of the vegetable garden.

"Swami's memory is returning, although there is some confusion between the thought and its expression. Reading and writing normally present some difficulties, but he is making a strenuous effort to overcome these handicaps, with the aid of some of us who work with him on this effort.

"Visits to swami are limited to brief pranams and a few words, but each day after lunch we arrange a 'darshan' when all people here can go upstairs and salute Swami, seated in his armchair, from the open door of his room."

3 October 1989

Circular letter from Swami Vidyatmananda on Swami Ritajananda's health: "In the last two weeks Swami has become considerably better. He is still not allowed to climb stairs, so we continue to transport him up and down the one flight in the palanquin two times a day — after lunch so that he is able to greet the devotees and take a turn of the park in his rubber-tired wheel chair; and at evening so that he may attend the arati.

"The difficulty in reading has

lessened, but he does not write much. Once in a while he will dictate a short letter, which he signs. He is agreeable to seeing devotees but does not care to enter much into conversation. Physically he is fairly well but tires easily. Memory in certain areas is still impaired, but is

improving. Swami regrets that he is unable to 'do any work' — but says that inwardly he is happy. He is his usual smiling self." □

[Editor's note: Parts 3 & 4 of Swami Ritajananda's letters to William Page will be published in later editions.]

READER'S FORUM for Fall

Question submitted by William Page

Sri Ramakrishna states repeatedly that God alone is the Doer, God alone does everything, and everything happens by the will of God. (See the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, pp. 236, 379, 609, 616, 648, 699, 783, 791.) Given the amount of evil in the world, this

doctrine makes God a monster. It means that God, rather than man, committed genocide in the Holocaust, the Cambodian Killing Fields, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur.

How can we be expected to love and worship such a god?

Please limit your answer to 300 words. Mail to American Vedantist, PO Box 237041, New York, NY 10023, or email a Microsoft Word or SimpleText file to VedWestCom@gmail.com. Serious responses will be published in our Winter issue.



Sarada Ma Publishing is a department of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. We recently added a sister website called **Sarada Ma Press**.

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In search of historical truth: Father Jean-François Six on St. Therese of Lisieux



Saint Therese as a member of the Carmelite Community/Image courtesy Wikipedia Commons



Father Jean-François Six speaking at an ecclesiastical conference

Karl Whitmarsh

Part 2 of 2 (Introduction is repeated for new readers.)

There was a young Frenchwoman of the 19th century that a pope declared to be the greatest saint of modern times. The pope was Pius XII, and the woman's name was Therese Martin, better know as St. Therese of Lisieux. She wrote an autobiography, which we know under the title of *The Story of a Soul*. Many years ago I came across a beautiful old translation of this book and have not succeeded in shaking St. Therese from my thoughts ever since.

Were it not for that one book, immensely popular in its day, I would not know the first thing about her, nor would any of us. Therese was, after all, a cloistered Carmelite nun from the age of fifteen till her death at age twenty-four.

The Story of a Soul, published soon after Therese's death in 1897, reveals a young woman of rare intellect and remarkable passion. A young woman at

once profoundly reflective and rapturously devoted to Jesus. Her language is simple, vivid, poetic and stirring. Her autobiography quickly sold millions of copies, and made Therese of Lisieux a household name among the Catholic faithful.

But eventually it came to light that what had been accepted as Therese's autobiography, though inspiring, was not entirely genuine. It had, in fact, been liberally edited by her sisters, themselves Carmelite nuns. Fearing she would be misunderstood, they had quietly taken it upon themselves to excise, edit and add to Therese's original writings. In 1947 the Abbé Andre Combes, working in Lisieux to compile an anthology of Therese's letters, suddenly realized that the documents he had been given access to were retouched. He dug deeper. He discovered not only were Therese's letters compromised, but even the most prized part of her legacy, the *Story of a Soul*.

Abbé Combes began in earnest to request and collect the authentic texts of Therese. With the help of Jean-Francois Six and others, the Abbé gradually brought to light the genuine writings – and voice – of Therese.

Editor's note: In January of 2008, Karl Whitmarsh spoke with Father Six about St. Therese of Lisieux. Karl's translation of their conversation follows.

I welcome you to discover for yourselves the probing and provocative writings of Father Six on St. Therese. In the meantime, I hope that the conversation I was privileged to hold with him, translated and reproduced here, will be of interest to you.

I met Father Jean-Francois Six at his lodgings in the Latin Quarter of Paris in early January 2008. He was waiting for me at the door, and received me warmly and with genuine interest. As he approaches his eightieth year, Father Six continues his public ministry, especially his outreach to non-believers in the form of frequent conferences and colloquies.

He received me in his simple but tastefully appointed office, which overflowed copiously with papers and books. These are a fitting symbol of his own prodigious output, for Father Six is the author of numerous books on Therese and Charles de Foucauld, and on other subjects besides. Always enthusiastic and attentive, he would interrupt our interview to exclaim from time to time "But have you seen [such and such a book that he had written]?" and when I answered no, he would immediately exit the room and bring back one of his books that I had never seen or even heard of before. At the end of our meeting, quite a treasure of his work had piled up in front of me atop his desk.

What follows are excerpts of

our conversation, as best as I have been able to reconstitute them from my notes and from my memory. At times I have revised my own remarks slightly for the sake of clarity.

KW: I really like your writings on Therese because you are frank. Other authors are not always so frank – for instance when it comes to the subject of her “dark night of the soul” or, as it’s sometimes put, her “temptation against faith.”

Therese was constantly engaged in a search for truth. On the very day of her death, she is reported to have said, “It seems to me that I have never looked for anything but the Truth,” even when this search led her, as during her dark night of the soul, to the verge of skepticism and disbelief. So likewise, if we dedicate ourselves to uncovering the historical and authentic St. Therese, we have already found an excellent way of penetrating to the depths of her teachings. And that’s exactly what you’ve been doing.

Please tell me how you came to your studies of Therese, and to your vocation as a priest.

JFS: At sixteen I had my degree in history. I was studying original texts. I had left the faith. In my parish people talked about Therese, but to my taste, she was rather sappy. Like the Abbé Combes, whom I met at that time, I was a “chartist.”¹ The Abbé said to me, “The Story of a Soul is not genuine.”

Combes brought me to Lisieux. I saw Mother Agnes behind the grill — she was prioress at the time. An insufferable woman. She was forced to agree to restore the original manuscripts [of Therese]. But [she would not allow it] before her own death. Quite a few people at Lisieux were upset with Abbé Combes, and they showed him the door.

KW: But I’ve observed that people don’t always know what they’re doing, really. As Jesus put it, forgive them Father . . .

JFS: . . . they know not what they do. That’s right.

KW: It’s not that their intentions were malicious. Mother Agnes and Sister Genevieve (Celine) wanted to protect Therese. They didn’t want others to see what were, in their opinion, examples of Therese’s childishness.

JFS: Yes, that’s true. I constantly feel Therese’s presence. She’s like an older sister.

KW: An older sister? I know what you mean, she seems to me [also] like a sister too, but I am not sure whether she’s older or younger. After all, she did always want to occupy the last place [cf. Luke 14:10], and since she talks about “loving her littleness” next to Jesus, I sometimes look on her a younger sister.

JFS: But I always knew she outstripped me, so there was no doubt but that she was an older sister. Just as [Blessed] Charles de Foucauld is

my elder brother, and likewise Louis Massignon, whom I knew and who knew Foucauld in turn.

What's really remarkable about Therese is her own rapid personal evolution. It's amazing what she managed to comprehend during her short life. You see, she had deep powers of discrimination. She would have succeeded brilliantly at whatever she put her mind to, no matter what, even if she hadn't gone into the convent. You may remember that she compared herself — when talking about her role as assistant novice mistress — to a little hunt-dog who picks up the scent of rabbit, who knows where to find them — that's the kind of intelligence she used in watching over the novices under her care.

KW: Yes, she attained to incredible depths of thought — I wouldn't manage to attain such depths even after five human lifetimes, if such a thing were possible. She strikes me as a bottomless well — you can draw from it unendingly, and never exhaust it.

JFS: Yes, that's exactly it!

KW: So at that time you were still an agnostic. Tell me something about your background and training. How did your conversion come about? How did you come to your vocation?

JFS: It wasn't a sudden and thunderous conversion, like that of Paul Claudel. It happened gradually. I was quite skeptical. At the

time I was a professor in Beirut.

I was born in a Jewish family. We had just been suffering from the shocks of the second world war, of the internments in the concentration camps, of Hiroshima. We had lost many in the family. So all that drove me to agnosticism. As a result, my conversion to Catholicism was very gradual. I ended up with a Christianity that was simpler and more human than that which I had known earlier.

KW: And how did you come to look on Therese?

JFS: I always turned away from the feverishness [of mysticism]. Therese never had ecstasies, nor did Charles de Foucauld. So they are my exemplars, as is the Christ of the Gospels. I see a normal man in Christ. His love was human and simple. At the same time I rejected the Jansenism of my grandmother.

As I mentioned, at the beginning of my studies of Therese, I was an agnostic. But remarkable things would happen that I couldn't explain. And those I attribute to her presence. For example, when everyone thought that the letters from Charles de Foucauld to the Abbé Huvelin were lost, I paid a visit to the Abbé's lodgings. The landlord told me that there was nothing there. But I insisted, they looked, and sure enough the letters were there.

It was her presence that allowed me to find the letters — but I'm not saying that it was her

presence exactly that was guiding me.

You see, it's never the "exalted" ones that have touched my heart. It's rather the simple ones, the ones with heart. For Therese, for Charles de Foucauld, it's especially about love.

KW: Father, as I've already mentioned to you, I'm not a Catholic. It makes me sad sometimes that I can't take Communion in the Catholic church, the Church of Therese herself. Of course, I've thought of converting — but I can't repudiate [those of] my beliefs that lie outside the pale of Catholic doctrine, nor can I declare my belief in doctrines in which I don't totally believe. It's always irked me to recite a creed. I can accept lots of things that some people consider miraculous, for "to God, all is possible" — the incarnation of the Word as flesh, for example. These things are already part of my beliefs. But there are some things I can't admit as true — that Jesus is the "filium dei unigenitum" (the only-begotten son of God), for instance. I can accept ninety percent, but not a hundred percent.

JFS: But in reality no one can accept a hundred percent. I can't accept a hundred percent! It isn't necessary.

You see, dogmas are good. They prick us to force us to go forward. For fifty years I tried to understand the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. And I can't say that I've yet

managed to understand it completely. But little by little I am coming to realize what Therese discovered, that the Trinity is in the heart and not in the heavens. For you, it's actually stimulating not to participate in Communion. You're unhappy about it, of course, but it's stimulating you to think, and that's the most important thing. Rites are not important. You're in the church, you're participating in your heart, and that's what counts.

I'm in dialogue with non-believers, even with freemasons. In 1964 the Church named me consultant to the secretariat for non-believers for the Vatican II council, and subsequently, in charge of the French secretariat for non-believers. For some years, I have ceased any formal activity, but I'm still involved, I give seminars. And I talk to the non-believers the same way I would talk to you or to the bishops. It's always the same words of welcome. Jesus commanded us not to judge.

KW: What do you think of the religions of the Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc.?

JFS: Those are paths. In every path He is present. But wherever there is fanaticism, God is not present!

As for me, I very much like Taoism. It's helped me to understand Christianity better.

KW: I've told you I'm not Catholic, that I follow the teachings of Hinduism. So in view of

Therese's wish always to be seated at the table of the sinners, surely we, the non-Christians, will also be included!

JFS: But of course!

I have been twice denounced at Rome. Yes, I've often been denounced, but never condemned. I met Teilhard de Chardin in 1947². And I said to him, I may get to the point of being denounced, but I'm going to try to avoid being condemned. It's a line that I always make an effort not to go over.

KW: But why did the Church denounce you?

JFS: For example, I've said that Therese's father, Louis Martin, was lazy.

KW: He was lazy!?

JFS: Yes, he was a dreamer. He had his trade as watchmaker, but he never did much with it. His wife worked hard. She was afflicted with feelings of insecurity. She managed workers who made Alencon lace at home, lace that was highly prized by the nobility of Paris. So as he liked to travel, he would present her lace in Paris.

KW: I always felt an attraction to the Church, even to the life of a priest or a Catholic monk – but the dogma! I would always have felt imprisoned in a box, as it were – no room to move around. But obviously you feel quite free. You don't seem at all bothered. You seem happy.

JFS: Yes, I am. I've learned

how to behave. For example, each year I give about two months to Rome. I bring them news about my dialogues with the non-believers.

Following the English custom, I lift my glass [in toast] to the Pope and to my conscience – but above all, to my conscience! This is the way I've followed my interests and my passions – the commission on the Rights of Man, and my work with non-believers.

And mediation. You see this book on mediation – Veronique Mussaud wrote it with me. She's an atheist. And two prime ministers wrote the introduction – Raymond Barre and Michel Rocard – you know them ? They're from opposite parties.

KW: Father, something bothers me – quite honestly, I don't know how to behave when confronted with it. At Lisieux, and other places as well, I often find myself ill at ease among Catholics. Everything goes along just fine as long as no one knows I'm not a Catholic. But sometimes, inevitably, I mention the fact. At such times I'll say I'm Anglican, which is true, I still consider myself one, though I follow the philosophy of the Hindus – but I can't tell people all that, it's too much to explain! Anyway, I tell my Catholic listeners that there's very little difference between what Anglicans and Catholics believe. And they mainly nod in agreement and we continue to chat. But once in particular I was

quite distressed. I was seated at breakfast with four Englishmen and women, one of whom, excuse me for saying it, was rather fanatical. "No, it's not at all the same thing," she said, "because you don't recognize the authority of the Holy Father!" And she violently argued every point I brought up trying to show similarities between the two faiths, shouting out things like "no, that's wrong too!" When she had regained her calm and was ready to leave, she said to me "I'll be praying for you."

JFS: Now you know how I feel!

Really, you're all right in your own faith. Changing your beliefs — it's not necessary. (*I found his words of advice very reassuring.*)

KW: What do you think of Mother Marie de Gonzague, the prioress of [Therese's monastery]? In your book *Vie de Thérèse de Lisieux* (Life of Therese of Lisieux, 1975), you described incidents revealing her weaknesses — for example, when she lent the convent's money to a relative, or how she set up another close relative in the lodgings of the lay sisters, or how she was inordinately attached to her cat. At that time you appeared to accept the prevailing, orthodox view, which Mother Agnes had represented, that Mother Marie de Gonzague was authoritarian, impulsive and corrupt. On the other hand, in *Thérèse de Lisieux: Son combat spirituel, sa voie* (Therese of Lisieux: Her spiritual struggle

and path, 1998), you appear rather to have changed your opinion of the two prioresses — you've come to look on Mother Agnes less favorably, and Mother Marie more so. What do you think nowadays of Mother Marie de Gonzague?

JFS: You see, that [earlier] book *Vie de Thérèse de Lisieux* is above all a historical work. The more recent book is more concerned with the *interpretation* of historical events. (*And Father Six gave me to understand that the ability to interpret facts of history does not generally emerge immediately when one first finds them out, but oftentimes only after many years of reflection. It's rather like scientific work, where one rejects a hypothesis definitively after gaining new information, and then labors to rebuild the intellectual edifice slowly, brick by brick.*)

You see, the important thing to remember is that Mother Marie de Gonzague was the more human of the two prioresses. Mother Agnes considered herself the more proper of the two, but she herself didn't always follow the rules. For example, she allowed Sister Genevieve to introduce cameras into the convent, which had been forbidden. Mother Agnes was rigid and stubborn, up to and including her falsification of Therese's writings. Without doubt Mother Marie de Gonzague had her faults, but often sinners understand [the essence of religion] better than the just.

I have twice refused to become

bishop. In that way I'm more free. Some bishops ask me, but doesn't that unsettle your faith, spending so much time around non-believers? And I answer them: I find it much better for my faith to spend time around non-believers than around Christians!

KW: You have so many responsibilities — writing, holding seminars — and you're also head of the brotherhood of Charles de Foucauld!

JFS: But these are my brothers and sisters. It's nothing!

KW: And such variety! You've done many different things: studies of St. Therese, works on mediation, the rights of man, the secretariat for non-believers.

JFS: But it's all tied together. It's all a unity! (*Editor's note: Interview ends here.*)

When I left, Father Six refused to autograph any of the half-dozen of his books I had brought with me (and also those which he had given me), saying that he, as author, was not important, it was only Therese who mattered. But he did consent to bless me in the traditional manner, making the sign of the cross on my forehead. □

About Father Six

Father Six is a member of the French National Commission on the Rights of Man (as enunciated by the United Nations) to the office of the prime minister. He is deeply

Charles de Foucauld:

Ordained a priest in 1901, at age 43, he left for the Sahara Desert, living among the Tuaregs of the Hoggar. He wanted to be among those who were "the furthest removed, the most abandoned." His desire was to "shout the Gospel with his life." "I would like to be sufficiently good that people would say, "If such is the servant, what must the Master be like?"



interested as well in the conciliatory power of mediation.

In addition to his numerous books on Therese, Father Six has written extensively on blessed Charles de Foucauld, the visionary French priest martyred in the Sahara in 1916 and who, like Therese, lived intensely in the love of God though virtually hidden from the world. Father Six has for some years been the head of the worldwide religious order (*sodalité*) founded by Charles de Foucauld.

Footnotes

¹ A graduate of a particular school in France dedicated to branches of knowledge ancillary to the study of history, e.g., geography.

² At this time the Vatican forbade de Chardin to teach or write on philosophical subjects. In 1962 the Church effectively condemned his writings by issuing a *monitum* (warning).

READER'S FORUM

In our Summer Edition, readers were invited to answer this question:

The opening lines of "Breaker of this World's Chain"
by Swami Vivekananda read:

*Breaker of this world's chain,
We adore Thee, whom all men love...*

How are we to understand the phrase, "whom all men love"? On the face of it, Vivekananda's statement seems to contradict our everyday experience of the world we live in.

Bill Davis responded:

1. Sri Ramakrishna is none other than the supreme Brahman.
2. Everything in this world is dear because of and only because of Brahman. E.g. "It is not for the sake of the husband, my beloved, that the husband is dear, but for the sake of the Self."

— *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*

3. Therefore everyone is unconsciously loving Brahman.
4. If Brahman is being loved, Sri Ramakrishna is being loved because of the identity of Brahman and Sri Ramakrishna.

Amal Gupta wrote:

In Swami Vivekananda's rendering of the vesper hymn (CW, Vol. 4, p. 504), the phrase "whom all men love" is "adored of the world (*Jaga Bandana*)."

Dictionary meaning of "love" is: deep tender feeling of affection and solicitude towards a person; feeling of intense desire and attraction; passion, etc. Depending on the context, love also means many different things, for example, love of family or

children, love of wealth or power, love of art or music love of country. In the path of *Bhakti*, however, "love" means "*prema*." Sri Ramakrishna said:

Nishtha (firm faith or trust) leads to *bhakti* (devotion); *bhakti*, when mature, becomes *bhava* (emotion or sentiment), *bhava* when concentrated, becomes *mahabhava* (super-consciousness); and last of all is *prema* (love)... An ordinary man at best can achieve *bhava*. — *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 680.

For this discussion, the correct word, therefore, is "prema," which "love" cannot fully represent. Indeed "prema", or "the kind of love" we are talking about is rare.

Considering Vivekananda's version, the dictionary meaning of "adore" is: "to worship as God or a god; to regard with deep often rapturous love; to revere, etc. Vivekananda composed the vesper as adoration to Ramakrishna. So the phrase "all men love" wouldn't be contradictory if

we simply substitute “love” with “adore.”

Not everyone adores, or even is expected to adore Rama-krishna. But most people worldwide including all primitive tribes (excluding 4% atheists as per Google search), do adore someone or something—Christians adore Jesus Christ, Buddhists adore Buddha, Moslems adore Muhammad, and Hindus adore Rama, Krishna, Shiva, Ganesh, and other deities. So, as Vedantists, if we accept that all people (96 % worldwide) adore God in some form or the other, there should not be any objection to “all”.

I find, however, “all men” inappropriate. What about “all women?” Instead, Vivekananda’s rendering “adored of the world, (*Jaga Bandana*) seems to be more appropriate.

SWAMI VIJNANANANDA
4th President of the Ramakrishna Order
By the Editors of *Vedanta and the West*, Vol. 112, March-April 1955

HARI PRASANNA Chattopadhyaya, later known as Swami Vijnanananda, was born **October 28, 1868**, a few miles from Dakshineswar near Calcutta. He was a schoolboy when he met Sri Ramakrishna, three years before the latter’s death. The influence of the relatively few meetings with his master left such a lasting mark on Hari Prasanna’s life that he was to

american vedantist

Julie Erickson replied:

I am a member of the Hollywood temple. I would like to give you my take on Vivekananda’s quote. I am responding to the two lines in front of me: “*Breaker of this world’s chain, We adore Thee, whom all men love...*” and I have not read further into Vivekananda’s passage to get a larger context.

The meaning of Vivekananda’s words jumped out at me. I believe that he is referring to the MOTHER of us all.

Paramahansa Madhavanand

(*M. Wirthensohn, Berlin, Germany*) said:

Not everything what a master says is true — if it would be so, it’s too easy for pupils to shift responsibility. Sometimes pupils take this in order not to tackle with a content the master says. What can the pupil do? Nothing else than what s/he did so far.

become one of his foremost monastic disciples and a spiritual force in the Ramakrishna Order...

After a period... as a wandering monk, Swami Vijnanananda settled in Allahabad in 1900. He established a permanent center of the Ramakrishna Mission there and also founded a monastery at Muthigunj...

Although he was temperamentally inclined toward a life of meditation and retirement... from March 1937 until his death in April

— See Vijnanananda on page 40

MEDIA REVIEWS



Scholar Reading a Book

Painting by Jan Zaremba
www.janzaremba.com/sumi-e

Relief of Tension, Depression and Anxiety Through Spiritual Living

By Swami Tathagatananda

Vedanta Society of New York Paperback, 240 Pages \$10-12 2007

T. N. Bhargava, Ph.D.

Swami Tathagatananda brings to us mortal beings a treatise representing ages of spiritual wisdom on what many call *stress relief devices*. In the simplest possible terms, stress is an everyday phenomenon, which if negative, can cause a great deal of anxiety and

tension, resulting in an unpleasant interruption of one's well-being. Humans resort to drugs prescribed by psychiatrists which often result in various side effects which themselves present new problems. Swamiji, with his usual scholarly manner and impressive

— Continues on following page

Book Review: *Relief of Tension, Depression and Anxiety*

—Continued from page 39

research, points out to us that the real solution comes from within the spiritual self.

Basic principles of our existence consist of human life as a union of soul and nature—of spirit and matter, as Swamiji points out so eloquently as he digs deep into the divine nature of our minds. Tension and depression set in when one pursues material wealth and earthly pleasures with no regard to the ideal of selfless service to one's spiritual duty to improve the mind through Karma.

Relief of Tension, Depression and Anxiety Through Spiritual Living is well written and well documented

and is another demonstration of Swamiji's mastery of the subject and his unique intellect. It is a must-read book for all those who seek inner peace in a relatively simple and personal manner, through a holistic approach to one's well-being.

The chapter entitled 'Practical Spiritual Principles to Alleviate Stress' is a true gem, with lists of *basic self-deceptions* and of *practical effective spiritual principles*, with a discussion of placebo and nocebo effects. Finally the last chapter containing the conclusions is worth reading again and again and sharing with one's family and friends.

REVERED SWAMI VIJNANANANDA

—Continued from page 38

1938, [he served as President] of the Ramakrishna Order... His brother disciples recognized Swami Vijnanananda's spiritual greatness and qualifications as a teacher... Swami Brahmananda... remarked that Swami Vijnanananda's devotion to Sri Ramakrishna was next to Swami Ramakrishnananda's... To illustrate his point he told [this] story:

"When I was in Allahabad with Vijnan, a young college student came to me and asked for spiritual instructions. I told him, 'I am a guest here. Go to Swami Vijnanananda, the abbot of this

monastery.' But Vijnan sent the boy back to me. I asked him again to go to Vijnan who alone could give spiritual advice in this monastery. And the poor boy was sent back to me once more.

When I made him go to Vijnan for a third time, the latter said, 'All right, Maharaj wants me to teach you, so I will. Wait a minute!' He opened a trunk, took out a photograph of me, gave it to the boy, and said, 'Pray every day before this picture and ask for guidance. If you do, you will attain your goal. This is the greatest truth I know.'"

The MATRIX Movies: A Bird's-Eye View – Part 1

Sister Gayatriprana

When the movie *The Matrix* came out in 1999 it was hailed as a breakthrough, particularly on account of its dazzling (and then unusual) computer-generated effects. It also drew attention as a serious questioning about reality, prompting an ongoing discussion which included the book *Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*,¹ where various academic authors found that the movie resonated with philosophers as far apart as Plato, Kant, Sartre and the post-modernists. There have been innumerable points of view about the Matrix movies (for the original movie was followed in 2003 by two sequels, *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*), perhaps an indication of their originality - or even obscurity! Whatever the reasons for their impact, it cannot be denied that these are visually stunning movies, deeply harrowing in many ways and also extremely thought-provoking. This article is another view, more or less from a bird's-eye perspective, of what these epochal movies might be about.

For me, these are computer-anxiety movies, in the lineage of Stanley Kubrick's 1968 *2001: A Space Odyssey*, dealing with the possibility that a computer could completely take over and maliciously and systematically destroy a space mission. There a computer is permitted to have emotions; but in *The Matrix* the reality of artifi-

cial intelligence is (more realistically in our time and space) the centerpiece, but projected into the year 2199. What is difficult to understand — at least in terms of “how they dun it,” is that the artificially intelligent machines have somehow plugged humans into “pods,” from which they draw off their energy through a series of tubes and pipes to fuel their machine world. These human “energy-cells” are held in place and pacified by cyber-participation in a computer program (The Matrix) that simulates “normal” life in 1999, where people rush through metropolises, use sophisticated machinery, eat, drink, make love — all the usual stuff, as most of us would think at the moment. We learn that there have been six such set-ups prior to the one featured in the movie, all of which were not sufficiently appealing to hold the humans in their pods nor to keep under control the “anomalous proliferation” of subprograms such as Agent Smith, one of the central characters and prime movers in the story. Agent Smith and his clones play the role of enforcers of the Matrix, bringing down any humans who try to defy the system and trying to thwart the One, the human being related to each version of The Matrix, who by his superior skill and knowledge is empowered to reset the Matrix as and when it (inevitably) crashes, brought down by human intransigence and the cancerous multiplication of the “Smith program.”

From one standpoint this is a rather nice computer interpretation of the human condition: we are being run by forces we cannot understand, held in place by destinies or karmas we cannot control, and inevitably facing annihilation as “subprograms” running out of control and destroying the system, and as we go to our doom, “enjoying” life, which means eating, drinking and procreating. It is, of course, very mechanistic, as befits a scenario conceived of by a computer, which is, after all, only a machine. It also fits rather well with the Vedantic theory of maya, which more or less words its content in the same way, and traditionally held out very little hope for humanity to escape, other than through prodigious intellectual gymnastics.

Into this situation comes Neo, a computer programmer and hacker who is deeply ill at ease with his life and troubled by deep questions to which he can find no answer. This inner disquiet brings him to the attention of Morpheus, belonging to Zion (the community of humans who are free of the Matrix), while it also attracts the attention of Agent Smith, whose job it is to suppress any such questioning. Neo is an anomaly in the program and must be dealt with. Morpheus, however, succeeds in abducting Neo and taking him to his hovercraft, the *Nebuchadnezzar*, from which, in an utterly revolting sequence he extracts him from his pod, thus releasing him from the Matrix. He also informs him that the Oracle, the more or less mystical guide of Zion, has determined that he is the One, the human being cho-

american vedantist

sen to resolve the issues raised by the Matrix, and to lead his fellows to freedom. Neo is not at all prepared for this news, and puts up quite a bit of resistance. But Morpheus sets about training him in the kind of battle he will have to engage with in the struggle with Smith, while introducing him to the technology of entering and moving through the Matrix while his “real” body and mind are in a chair in the hovercraft, plugged electronically into the Matrix. — *Stay tuned for Part 2 in our Winter issue!*

**Remembrances of
Swami Aseshananda —
a request by Esther Warkov**

Heartfelt thanks to everyone who responded to my previous call for remembrances of Swami Aseshananda, [who was] the last living disciple of Sri Sarada Devi. Because each contribution is important and unique, I’ve extended the final call for contributions to Oct. 31st, with a two-week extension for submissions promised by Oct. 31st.

For further information on this project, please contact Esther Warkov at esther_warkov@comcast.net, or 971-255-0388 (I’m on West Coast time). For anyone who wishes to remain anonymous, contributions can be mailed to 3626 NE 16th Ave., Portland OR 97212. Phone interviews are also welcome, in addition to written remembrances.

Editors note: Esther Warkov, an ethnomusicologist and retired music teacher, was initiated by Swami Aseshananda while a college student. She has lived in Portland since 2006.

For the Welfare of the World

— continued from page 7

a rogue, I like very much to foster this sort of adventurous spirit among my countrymen.” (*Ibid.*, p. 361)

Rudyard Kipling was totally wrong when he wrote, “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” The economic-socio-political world events of the last few decades force us to believe that the “twain *must* meet,” sooner the better the world will be.

Colonialism, lack of freedom, injustice, poverty, hunger, and diseases were some of the main problems worldwide during Vivekananda’s time. While colonialism has disappeared from the face of the earth, and some of the diseases have been either eradicated or controlled during the last century, poverty, hunger, and injustice are still rampant. At the same time, other problems — terrorism, fundamentalism, corporate crimes, drug trafficking, school-shootings, AIDs epidemic, breakdown of the traditional family, to name a few, have cropped up worldwide. This shows that the problems of the world can never be solved. A perfect world is a myth. “The world is like a dog’s curly tail, and people have been striving to straighten it out for hundreds of years; but when they let go, it has curled up again. (*Ibid.* Vol. 1, p. 79) Yet, Vivekananda had a dream for a better world, a free and a strong world, a well-nourished, well-clothed, and well sheltered

world, that would be simultaneously guided by the Vedantic principles and Western science and technology.

A lot of work has been done worldwide during the past 100+ years by organization such as the Ramakrishna Order and by individuals as well since Vivekananda’s passing away to make his dream come true. But more work will need to be done during this century in today’s “flat world,” which is passing through a critical yet a very interesting time. It can never be done by any government—democratic or socialist, right or left, developed or developing, new world or the third world, or any one organization single-handed. It’s a monumental task. An aggressive grass-roots movement will be the only answer to world’s current problems. *American Vedantist* and its parent organization *Vedanta West Communication* seem to be well positioned for this movement. But in the words of Vivekananda, **“We must electrify society, electrify the world. Idle gossip and ceremonials won’t do.”** (*Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 293)

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Subhamoy Ghosh photo

Durga Puja (2007) at Belur Math (Ramakrishna Order's Headquarters)

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