

# *american vedantist*

Volume 14 No. 3 ■ Winter 2009



*... in the darkness shineth  
the everlasting light ...*

## **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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# american vedantist

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

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## Cover image: Jesus Christ

Drawing by the late Swami Tadatmananda

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Vivekananda in South Pasadena (near Los Angeles) in January of 1900

Photo courtesy Vedanta Society of Southern California

*Excerpt from*

## **CHRIST, THE MESSENGER**

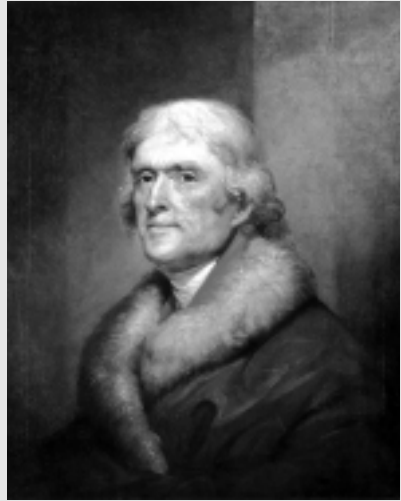
Delivered by Swami Vivekananda at  
Los Angeles, California on January 7, 1900

**T**he vibration of light is everywhere, omnipresent; but we have to strike the light of the lamp before we can see the light. The Omnipresent God of the universe cannot be seen until He is reflected by these giant lamps of the earth — The Prophets, the man-Gods, the Incarnations, the embodiments of God.

We all know that God exists, and yet we do not see Him, we do not understand Him. Take one of these great Messengers of light, compare his character with the highest ideal of God that you ever formed, and you will find that your God falls short of the ideal, and that the character of the Prophet exceeds your conceptions. You cannot even form a higher ideal of God than what the actually embodied have practically realised and set before us as an example. Is it wrong, therefore, to worship these as God? Is it a sin to fall at the feet of these man-Gods and worship them as the only divine beings in the world? If they are really, actually, higher than all our conceptions of God, what harm is there in worshipping them? Not only is there no harm, but it is the only possible and positive way of worship. However much you may try by struggle, by abstraction, by whatsoever method you like, still so long as you are a man in the world of men, your world is human, your religion is human, and your God is human. And that must be so. Who is not practical enough to take up an actually existing thing and give up an idea, which is only an abstraction, which he cannot grasp, and is difficult of approach except through a concrete medium? Therefore, these Incarnations of God have been worshipped in all ages and in all countries.



Philo of Alexandria



Thomas Jefferson

*Seekers with different points of view  
on Jesus, Christ and the Christ Spirit*



Kahlil Gibran



Emmet Fox

# CHRISTMAS AND JESUS CHRIST

A compilation by  
Swami Atmatattwananda

*Was it not wonderful at the  
Holy Season of the year just  
past, to receive pilgrims at the  
hearth of our mind and heart,  
with different points of view  
on Jesus, Christ and the  
Christ Spirit?*

*Indeed, we invited them in,  
some of the world's truth  
seekers...*

## Indian Scriptures

O Lord, dweller within,  
you are the light  
in the heart's lotus.  
Om is your very self,  
Om holiest word and  
source of the scriptures.  
Logic cannot discover you,  
Lord. But the yogis  
know you in meditation.  
In you are all God's faces,  
His forms and aspects.  
— *Aphorism from  
the Upanishads*

For in the midst of the Sun  
is the Light,  
In the midst of the Light  
is truth,  
In the midst of truth  
is the imperishable Being.  
— *say the Vedas*



## Plato

The Great Spirit, single,  
Though its forms  
Be manifold.

**Louis H. Feldman,**  
*on Philo of Alexandria*

*Encyclopædia Britannica,*  
*Vol. 14, pp. 245-6*

(He was) a Jewish contemporary  
of Jesus and the Apostle Paul...  
in a sense he may be regarded as  
the founder of medieval philoso-  
phy – Jewish, Arabic, and, above  
all, Christian...

Philo called the Logos (the  
Word) the first begotten Son of  
God, the man of God, the image  
of God.

From the  
**Gospel According to St. John**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (1:1)

In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness. (1:4-5)

From  
**The Eternal Companion —  
Brahmananda, His Life and  
Teachings**

by *Swami Prabhavananda*  
(*Vedanta Press*, 1947)

One day, in the course of his teaching, Sri Ramakrishna spoke about the manifestation of Brahman as sound — the Logos. Later, when I sat for meditation, I took this as my subject, and it was not long before the sound Brahman was revealed to me.

Sri Ramakrishna one day told me, "Once, while I was meditating in the temple, screen after screen of maya was removed from my consciousness, and I saw a light more brilliant than a million suns. From that light there came forth a spiritual form which again melted away into the formless."

From  
**The Qur'an**  
(*Koran*), 3:42 (et seq.)

... the angels said, "O Mary! See! Allah has chosen you and made you pure, and has preferred

you above (all) the women of creation. O Mary! Be obedient to your Lord, prostrate yourself and bow with those who bow (in worship)..."

(And remember) when the angels said, "Oh Mary! Allah gives you glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, Son of Mary."

From  
**Jesus the Son of Man**  
by *Kahlil Gibran* (1928)

**Anna, the Mother of Mary**

Jesus, the son of my daughter, was born here in Nazareth in the month of January. And the night that Jesus was born, we were visited by men from the East. They were Persians who came to Esdraelon with the caravans of the Midianites on their way to Egypt. And because they did not find rooms at the inn they sought shelter in our house.

And I welcomed them and I said, "My daughter has given birth to a son this night. Surely you will forgive me if I do not serve you as it behooves a hostess." Then they thanked me for giving them shelter. And after they had supped they said to me: "We would see the newborn."

Now the Son of Mary was beautiful to behold, and she too was comely. And when the Persians beheld Mary and her babe, they took gold and silver from their bags, and myrrh and



frankincense, and laid them all at the feet of the child.

Then they fell down and prayed in a strange tongue, which we did not understand. And when I led them to the bedchamber prepared for them they walked as if they were in awe at what they had seen.

When morning was come they left us and followed the road to Egypt. But at parting they spoke to me and said: "The child is but a day old, yet we have seen the light of our God in His eyes and the smile of our God upon His mouth. We bid you protect Him that He may protect you all." And so saying, they mounted their camels and we saw them no more.

Now Mary seemed not so much joyous in her first-born, as full of wonder and surprise. She would look long upon her babe, and then turn her face to the window and gaze far away into the sky as if she saw visions.

And there were valleys between her heart and mine.

And the child grew in body and spirit, and He was different from other children. He was aloof and hard to govern, and I could not lay my hand upon Him.

But He was beloved by everyone in Nazareth, and in my heart I knew why. Oftentimes He would take away our food to give to the passerby. And He would give other children the sweetmeat

I had given Him, before He had tasted it with His own mouth. He would climb the trees of my orchard to get the fruits, but never to eat them Himself.

And He would race with other boys, and sometimes, because He was swifter of foot, He would delay so that they might pass the stake ere He should reach it.

And sometimes when I led Him to His bed He would say, "Tell my mother and the others that only my body will sleep. My mind will be with them till their mind come to my morning."

From

### **The Seven Storey Mountain**

– *the autobiography of*

*Thomas Merton (1948)*

And now for the first time in my life I began to find out something of Who this Person was that men called Christ. It was obscure, but it was a true knowledge of Him, in some sense, truer than I knew and truer than I would admit. But it was in Rome that my conception of Christ was formed. It was there I first saw Him, Whom I now serve as my God and my King, and Who owns and rules my life.

It is the Christ of the Apocalypse, the Christ of the Martyrs, the Christ of the Fathers. It is the Christ of St. John, and of St. Paul, and of St. Augustine and St. Jerome and all the Fathers —

and of the Desert Fathers. It is Christ God, Christ King, “for in Him dwelleth the fullness of the Godhead corporeally, and you are filled in Him, Who is the Head of all principality and power... For in Him were all things created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominations or principalities or powers, all things were created by Him and in Him. And He is before all, and by Him all things consist... because in Him it hath well pleased the Father that all fulness should dwell... Who is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of every creature...”

– Quoted in *Son of Man* by Clint Willis, p. 44 (NY, Thunder Mountain Press, 2002)

### **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

In the belief in Christianity that now prevails ... They will have Christ for a Lord and not for a Brother. (*quoted in ibid., p.vi*)

### **Thomas Jefferson**

My views of the Christian religion are the result of a life of inquiry and reflection... To the corruptors of Christianity I am indeed opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian in the only sense in which he wanted anyone to be: sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others... (*quoted in ibid., p.vi*)

From

### **A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers**

by *Henry David Thoreau*

I trust that some may be as near and dear to Buddha, or Christ, or Swedenborg, who are without the pale of their churches. It is necessary not to be Christian to appreciate the beauty and significance of the life of Christ. I know that some will have hard thoughts of me, when they hear their Christ named beside my Buddha, yet I am sure that I am willing they should love their Christ more than my Buddha, for the love is the main thing...

The reading which I love the best is the scriptures of the several nations, though it happens that I am better acquainted with those of the Hindoos, the Chinese, and the Persians, than of the Hebrews, which I have come to last. Give me one of these bibles, and you have silenced me for a while... Such has been my experience with the New Testament... I have read it over so many times. I should love dearly to read it aloud to my friends, some of whom are seriously inclined; it is so good, and I am sure that they have never heard it, it fits their case exactly, and we should enjoy it so much together—but I instinctively despair of getting their ears...

It is remarkable that, notwithstanding the universal favor with which the New Testament is outwardly received... there is no hospitality shown to, there is no appreciation of, the order of truth with which it deals. I know of no book that has so few readers. There is none so truly strange, and heretical, and unpopular. To Christians, no less than Greeks and Jews, it is foolishness and a stumbling-block. There are, indeed, severe things in it, which no man should read aloud more than once. "Seek first the kingdom of heaven." "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth." "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven." "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" – *Quoted in Clint Willis, op. cit. pp. 340, 344-45*

**Emmet Fox**

From sermons quoted in *Diagrams for Living* (NY, Harper & Row, 1968, pp. 178, 113-117, 127)

Said Jesus, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad." Then said the Jews unto him, "Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?" Jesus ended his dissertation, saying, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am." Jesus was giving emphasis to the mystical nature of the I AM. It is

the Cosmic Christ which has always existed but which came to its fullest expression in the person of Jesus. I AM is the eternal self which was never born and will never die.

**What Jesus Taught About Christmas**

*Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord... Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.* Luke 2:10, 11, 14

Christmas is the most beautiful festival of the year. It is not coincidence that is the feast of the Wonder Child, the baby who grew up to change history, for Christmas symbolizes that mystical thing, the incarnation of God in man. With the advent of Jesus love was born into the world... and the thing called true humility... Jesus taught love and compassion. He put these things into the human race and they will never be uprooted...\*

Now, it is true that the Christian people have not always exhibited these things through the... centuries since Jesus came. However, they are in the race mind now, and in the not distant future the people of the world will begin to express them.

---

\* Editor's note: It is a tendency of some devotees to attribute every good thing to their Chosen Ideal (Ishta) alone. AV does not necessarily agree with all the views expressed by its contributors.

We have stepped across the threshold into a new age, and these things will be brought into expression. The human race is going to cease to fear and hate one another. The time is coming... when these great truths that Jesus taught will be expressed all over the world.

To Jesus, divine love was the supreme and vital thing. No other human being has ever loved his fellow men as Jesus loved them. He was not sentimental about it. To him love was the keynote to life, the gateway to peace and harmony and right action. He loved mankind and he demonstrated it...

The personal history of Jesus extends from the manger to the cross, about thirty-three years in all... As we review the Christmas story we must remember that everything in the Bible is allegorical as well as mystical... Everything in the life of Jesus is allegorical as well as mystical. And of course, everything in our lives too is an allegory of our own souls. Everything that you do, everything that happens to you, is a dramatization of something in yourself. And the life of Jesus is a dramatization of the Christed soul, the soul which has chosen the spiritual path. So the life of Jesus furnishes many diagrams for living as we either follow in the Master's footsteps or try to go it alone.

When the Wonder Child arrived, he did not arrive in a royal palace as some thought he would... He was born to a simple family, and in a stable.

The stable is symbolic of our present state of consciousness... It symbolizes the Christ that is born into any one of us the moment that we give our whole hearts to God. That is when the Christ is born, when we make up our minds to put God first in our lives and not second. We feel unworthy, and that our heart is no place for the Christ. People mistakenly try to make themselves worthy. It is a waste of time. But if we turn to God and say, like the Centurion, "I know that I am not worthy that you should enter my house, but because you are Divine Love, in spite of all my faults and shortcomings, you can make me worthy that you should come to me," then the Christ does it. In other words, the Christ comes into a stable, not into a palace, but the Christ sanctifies and glorifies that stable so that it becomes the temple of the living God...

Jesus came to teach compassion and love of one another... If we love one another in thought, word and deed, then we are on our way to the manger, and the Star of the East is going ahead of us to show us the way.

This is the story of the Christmas child.

## Information about those quoted

**Louis H. Feldman** is a scholar and translator. Among his many books are: *Jewish Antiquities*; *Jewish Life and Thought Among Greeks and Romans*; *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions*; and *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism*.

**Plato** was a Classical Greek philosopher, writer of philosophical dialogues, and founder of the Academy in Athens, the first institution of higher learning in the western world. Along with his mentor, Socrates, and his student, Aristotle, Plato helped to lay the foundations of Western philosophy. (*Adapted from Wikipedia biography*)

**Swami Prabhavananda** was born in India. He joined the Ramakrishna Order after graduating from Calcutta University in 1914 and was initiated by Swami Brahmananda. In 1923, the swami was sent to the Vedanta Society of San Francisco. Six years later he moved to Los Angeles and founded the Vedanta Society of Southern California. Swami Prabhavananda was a scholar who authored a number of books on Hindu culture; he died on the bicentennial of America's independence — July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1976. (*Adapted from Wikipedia biography*)

**Kahlil Gibran**, born in Lebanon, was a poet, philosopher,

artist, prophet and writer who became prominent in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His writing has been translated into more than twenty languages and his drawings and paintings have been exhibited in the great capitals of the world. He lived in the United States during the last twenty years of his life.

(*Adapted from several online sources*)

**Thomas Merton** was one of the most influential Catholic authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A Trappist monk of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, in Kentucky, he was an acclaimed spiritual writer, poet, author and social activist. Merton wrote over 60 books, scores of essays and reviews. His career and his life were suddenly cut short when he was 53, due to an accident when he was electrocuted stepping out of his bath. (*Adapted from Wikipedia biography*)

**Ralph Waldo Emerson** was an American essayist, poet, and leader of the Transcendentalist movement in New England during the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He was a friend of Emily Dickinson, and an intellectual influence on Henry David Thoreau and other prominent writers and lecturers of his time. (*Adapted from Wikipedia biography*)

**Thomas Jefferson** was the third President of the United States (1801–1809), the principal author of the Declaration of

Independence (1776), and one of the most influential Founding Fathers for his promotion of the ideals of Republicanism in the United States. Major events during his presidency include the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark Expedition. (*Adapted from Wikipedia biography*)

**Henry David Thoreau** was a 19<sup>th</sup> Century American author, naturalist, transcendentalist, tax resister, development critic, and philosopher who is best known for *Walden*, a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings, and his essay, "Civil Disobedience," an argument for individual resistance to civil government in moral opposition to an unjust state. (*Adapted from Wikipedia biography*)

**Emmet Fox** was born in Ireland and educated in England. He was ordained in the Divine Science branch of New Thought, and in 1931 was selected to become the minister of New York City's Divine Science Church of the Healing Christ. Fox addressed some of the largest audiences ever gathered, during that time, to hear about the spiritual meaning of life. He influenced the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous — his secretary was the mother of a man who worked with AA's co-founder, Bill W. Early AA groups often went to hear Fox; his writing, especially "The Sermon on the Mount," became popular in AA. (*Adapted from Wikipedia biography*)

*american vedantist*

## Love Lifted Me

Vimukta Chaitanya

Christmas eve was beginning to be in evidence in the San Francisco of many, many moons ago, back in the good old days when a Christmas tree was a Christmas tree, not a "holiday tree." Dusk had begun to set in, the daylight was fast fading. The weather was not unusual for a day in late December in this part of the country; it was raw and overcast, with gusts of wind kicking up all-too frequently — a searching wind off the Bay of San Francisco it was, a wind that finds its way quickly to your bones.

Among the people shopping on Chestnut Street in the Marina, a few blocks from the Bay, the spirit of good will that uniquely attends the observance of Christmas, the warm, low-keyed excitement, was pervasive. The honking of horns now and again made a cautionary statement. People were patronizing shops in goodly numbers. Christmas lights, lighting up the goods displayed in the windows of the shops, invested them with cheer, the more so as the daylight waned. Christmas eve, for the faithful, is, of course, always a special occasion. This one, however, by virtue of a

singular occurrence, was out of the ordinary and would be long remembered.

Coming out of a clothing store I stopped in my tracks and listened intently. I thought I heard a man's voice, coming from way down the street, singing — something devotional, it sounded like. Entranced, I stood still and looked down the busy street. The voice, a little louder now, sounded as though it were coming closer. It abruptly stopped; melodious tootling on an alto saxophone promptly replaced it. How sweetly, in that ambiance — darkness descending on a "raw and gusty day," Christmas lights cheerfully aglow in the windows of the shops — it greeted a reverently attentive ear!

Presently there emerged out of the throng of people going up and down the street a blind man. He was slowly wending his sightless way up the street, the people in his way politely stepping aside, some of them slowing up, to get out of his way. A saxophone was suspended from a cord around his neck, he was playing on it as he walked, and was tall, trim, and bareheaded. He looked to be in his late twenties; in that damp, chilly air, it touched me that he didn't look to be dressed warmly enough.

He began singing again, his head held high. I had been won-

dering what he was singing and now it became clear. He was singing, in a tenor voice that came from his heart, the Christian hymn, and a pretty one, entitled "Love Lifted Me."

*Love lifted me! (even me)  
When nothing else could help,  
Love lifted me!*

Presumably, the Love that lifted him, that heard his cry of despair — a love that made its debut in the form of a babe in a manger in a far-off land, ages ago — was now prompting him to pursue, by way of song, this evangelical outreach, this mission to the shopping public.

*Love so mighty and so true  
merits my soul's best songs;  
Faithful, loving service, too,  
to Him belongs...*

It was highly unlikely that this devout minstrel had ever heard of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), "the lion of Vedanta" and the premier national hero in the India of the day. Vivekananda was little known in the United States at the time, yet you had the feeling that, had he heard of him, he would have endorsed the swami's dictum, which the swami backed up with a pure, holy, and dynamic life, "Love for love's sake, just as you breathe to live."

The blind man was adept at playing the alto saxophone and al-

though his was not the voice of a professional singer, it was a pleasing voice and it enabled him to get his message across with great sincerity. He attracted the attention of quite a number of people, who looked on him with a kindly eye, and who appeared to understand, and to appreciate, his dedication.

On this early evening on Chestnut Street, with gift-giving the dominant thought in the minds of many, the very air vibrantly alive with the bustling energy of on-the-go last-minute shopping expeditions, he rounded out the scenario by adding a grace note to the song of the shopper, a spiritual accent to the season of giving and receiving.

I stood under an awning outside the store, waiting for a tardy companion to show up, and went on listening to the blind man sing; he walked past me, somewhat un-

certainly, and then on up the street, now singing, now playing his saxophone. Shoppers gradually engulfed him and he was presently out of sight, then out of earshot.

But altogether out of mind he was not — not then, nor even now, all these many years later. He comes to mind when Christmas comes around. Boldly, with here and there a faltering step, the pious minstrel proceeds up the crowded Chestnut Street of a by-gone wintry twilight, the sky cloudy, threatening rain. He delights, with his musical offering, soulful, timely, and on key, the perked up ear of many a passer-by. And he sets the people who share his faith a good example — a resolute, stouthearted Christian soldier, going forward under challenging circumstances (also upward, being Love-lifted), getting out the Word.



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

This site is dedicated to the printing and distribution of work created by our extended Vedanta family.

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Anyone who wishes to be published, please visit us at [www.saradamapress.org](http://www.saradamapress.org) and see what we have to offer.



# NOTES ON A MOUNTAIN RETREAT



During a recent trip to India, I found a resource for pursuing a broader understanding of Advaita. My wife and I spent nearly two weeks at a Sarada Math and Mission retreat center in the Himalayan foothills.

Stafford Smith

**M**ore than a hundred years ago the great Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji) identified the non-dualistic *Advaita* philosophy as the true religion of the future. He viewed it as the one spiritual tradition that could meld successfully the scientific impulse of the West with the mystical insights of the East. Anticipating both Einstein and quantum mechanics, he saw clearly that Western preoccupation with

cataloging diversity on the physical plane would eventually give way to a search for an underlying cosmological unity. Further, this search would necessarily challenge the primacy of surface appearances and the mechanistic causation implicit in naive materialism, leading to the investigation of increasingly subtler phenomena.

And so solid objects have given way to clouds of energy units traveling through space in probabilistic pattern — not

quite indescribable *Brahman*, but inclining in that direction.

Despite the barriers that dualism creates to understanding *Advaita*, Swamiji believed that the scientific movement toward unity would prove to be a compelling historical force; simultaneously, cultural fascination with the pursuit of sensual enjoyment would begin to exhaust itself. These factors, combined with a tendency toward an impersonal concept of divinity within the more progressive religions, would provide the context for the evolution of Western thought toward *Advaita*.

After many years there are signs that the trend toward a wider understanding and acceptance of *Advaita* in the West may indeed be picking up momentum. One signal is an increasing number of books seeking to explain *Advaita* in simple terms, in order to make it accessible to general readers. This includes not only works explicitly devoted to describing the *Advaita* tradition but also popular literature identifying monistic trends in physics and psychology.

I encountered another resource for pursuing a bader understanding of *Advaita* during a recent trip to India, where my wife and I spent nearly two weeks at a retreat center in the Himalayan foothills north of Delhi. The location was Pangot,



Under the leadership of Pravajika Vivekaprana, female monastics of Sarada Math have established a residential facility where students of Vedanta can come to study, discuss and reflect.

a small village about 15 kilometers by gravel road from the resort town of Nainital. Since 2001, a handful of female monastic members of Sarada Math under the leadership of Pravajika Vivekaprana have been working hard to establish a residential facility where students of Vedanta can come to study, discuss and reflect. Since Barbara and I had enjoyed attending a retreat conducted by Pravajika Vivekaprana a few years back at Ridgely Manor in upstate New York, we were eager to visit the new center in the mountains.

The impulse for the retreat center originated in Holland, where in 1989 a group was established to assist Western women who wanted to develop a Vedantic spiritual practice. Funds

were also raised to create a retreat facility somewhere in Europe, but a feasible location was never secured.

So the focus eventually shifted to India, and in 1999 the European resources were donated to Sri Sarada Math and Mission and soon committed to purchasing land for the center at Pangot. In late 2001 Pravajika Vivekaprana and a western devotee moved to Pangot and began planning the project, procuring materials and hiring the necessary labor. By the following spring a new building had been completed and work started on the guest house.

A Sunday School program for local children was initiated in the summer of 2002. Guest house construction was finished in the latter part of 2003, with the center's grand opening celebration held on October 19, 2003. The ceremony was presided over by Pravajika Bhaktiprana, Vice-President of Sarada Math and Mission, and

attended by about 200 guests, including pravajikas, local residents and well-wishers from other parts of India and overseas.

The trip to Pangot begins with taking an overnight train from Delhi north to the end of the rail line at Kathgodam, where one arrives just after dawn. We then took a hired car up a winding road through the canyons to Nainital and beyond. It is about a two-hour ride, punctuated in the middle with tea and breakfast at a roadside outdoor cafe that offers a commanding view of the still misty valleys extending in all directions.

Leaving Kathgodam the change of scenery is abrupt and



A Sunday School program for local children was begun in the summer of 2002. The center's grand opening celebration was held on October 19, 2003.

liberating; the greenery is suddenly lush, untamed rivers cascade

down the hillside and the air is clear and crisp.

While arranging this trip up the mountainside could present an obstacle to a traveler newly arrived in India, left to his or her own devices, happily there was a guide to show the way. Pangot has neither telephone nor internet service, so connecting visitors with the retreat facilities and programs relies on the good offices of a volunteer coordinator who resides just outside of Delhi. She not only schedules retreat times but is also available to suggest travel options. We gratefully took full advantage of this opportunity, and so an otherwise challenging transportation arrangement became simple and pleasant.

The elevation at Pangot is about 6500 feet (2000 meters) above sea level. The retreat literature advises to bring warm clothing and be prepared for rustic living conditions. This includes having to transport baggage over a steep trail to the retreat facilities.

In my imagination I envisioned a dirt road that was rough but one where you could still manage to navigate a wheeled travel bag over the rugged surface, leading uphill to spartan



The path switchbacking up the steep hill from the road is little more than a goat trail. Everything that goes up it is a dead lift – no wheeling or dragging is possible.

living quarters perched in the shadows on the rocky hillside.

As it turns out, I had it just about exactly backwards. The path switchbacking up the steep hill from the road is little more than a goat trail. Everything that goes up it is a dead lift — no wheeling or dragging is possible. Add to that obstacle the inevitable shortness of breath from the altitude change and other personal variables such as age, creaking joints, too many books in the pack and so on.

The good news is that the retreat center retains the services of a robust pair of local young men for landscaping and maintenance work who routinely haul

loads up and down the trail, and for them the additional duty of hefting our baggage was not a major undertaking.

The lodging, on the other hand, greatly exceeded expectations. I knew beforehand that while the women had a dormitory to themselves, the men were shunted off to various outbuildings. So I had conjured up rather spare accommodations some distance removed from the main complex, perhaps in a hayloft hidden behind the cowshed, or in some other obscure place appropriately suited to our more marginal status.

But it wasn't that way at all. I shared a well-lit small house located just downslope from the main complex with a cheerful gentleman from Delhi. It overlooked the valley and came complete with private bath, hot water geyser, small kitchenette and a wood stove in the corner to take the edge off the evening chill. Very nice indeed. And it only took one turn of the daily cycle for the two of us to work out a mutually acceptable domestic routine.

The formal retreat programs typically are scheduled over eight days. But most participants, especially those who have come from outside India, arrive a few days earlier in order to settle in. This also provides an opportunity to explore the hills and woods.

The gravel road network continues into the mountains past the village of Pangot. Numerous trails descend down the canyons to the rivers and streams that thread through the area.

These trails are mainly used by local residents who tend small farms tucked into the wooded hillsides. But they also offer to the visitor entry into a mostly pristine countryside abounding with wildlife. Monkeys and langurs are frequently encountered, as are many varieties of birds. It was not surprising to learn that, in addition to the Sarada Math *ashrama*, a few small hotels now have opened in and about Pangot that feature nature viewing and environmental tourism as primary attractions.

Pravajika Vivekaprana is an *Advaitin* but, more fundamentally, she is a devoted student of the works of Swami Vivekananda. The topic chosen for the retreat was Swamiji's *Raja Yoga*, which is not an *Advaita* text as such, but rather a gloss on Pantanjali's aphorisms on yoga designed to bring them into correspondence with the findings of science. The emphasis of the book is on the nature of the mind and its functions in interpreting sensory stimuli.

The discussion leads inexorably to the conclusion that the only object that the mind can hope to know reliably and exhaustively is

itself. From there it is only a short step to a central premise of *Advaita* — that the content of apparently separate individual minds is in reality the reflection of a single indivisible universal consciousness.

The teaching method of Pravajika Vivekaprana is more Socratic than typically Indian in nature. Rather than simply lecturing she invites her students not only to ask questions but to test and challenge her propositions and arguments. The members of our group brought with them a diversity of experiences and viewpoints, so we were treated to a stimulating cross-fertilization of questions and opinions. The following excerpts from my class notes may provide some sense of the range and tone of the instructional process:

- Freedom is the absence of slavery to matter and thought. What is the value of external freedom if there is internal bondage?
- Focusing on the experience itself creates separation from outer reality. The bondage to outer reality is thus broken — the beginning of freedom. The outer attraction loses its intensity.
- As the mind comes under control, the public component of *maya* shrinks and the private component expands.

It should be emphasized that the musings set out above are not direct quotations from Pravajika Vivekaprana. They are merely my reflections on the discussion. While they may play off ideas expressed by the Pravajika, the wording (and any egregious philosophical errors) are entirely mine.

For students of Vedanta who are motivated to learn more about *Advaita* philosophy, the new retreat center at Pangot offers a unique resource where inquiry and discussion are actively encouraged. In just a few years the pravajikas of Sarada Math have made remarkable progress in developing an attractive and comfortable facility nestled within a charming natural environment.

Western travelers to India often find that the rewards of pilgrimage are offset by the burdens of having to navigate hot crowded cities choked by congestion and pollution. In pleasant contrast, the Himalayan foothills provide a perfect setting for spiritual study, where the peace and beauty of the surroundings complement the lofty message of the teachings.

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## READER'S FORUM

### Question in Fall Edition

**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.

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

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**Amal Gupta wrote:**

William Page raised a question, which is a profound paradox. Yes, Ramakrishna repeatedly said that God alone is the doer, but he also said:

“There is no doubt that virtue and vice exist in the world; but God himself is unattached to them... The very nature of God’s creation is that good and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness, will always exist in the world.” (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 247)

And again,

“I too think of God sometimes as good and sometimes as bad. He has kept us deluded by His great illusion... One is aware of pleasure and pain, birth and death, disease and grief, as long as one is identified with the body. (*Ibid.*, p. 257)

God or Vedanta’s *Brahman* is Existence-Consciousness-Bliss (*Sat-Chit-Ananda*). There is no ego

in God. Ego or the “I”-ness (*Aham*) appears in the phenomenal universe much later in evolution. Swami Ranganathananda explains this point in *Universal Message of the Bhagavad Gita*, Vol.1, pp.179-186:

“It [ego] is a remarkable datum which has been thrown up in evolution only at the stage of man... It was not there in any animal, it is not there even in a newborn baby. After about two to two-and-half-years, you find a child says ‘I’, ‘I want this, I want that’... and I am glad to find that for the last 50 or 60 years, the West has been turning its attention to this wonderful subject of the ego and its possibilities.”

During the past century the West has come up with many theories as to how ego appeared in evolution as the part of the human psyche. But I like the following simple explanation by Dr. Wayne Dyer:

“In the mechanistic view of nature, everything is an artifact made by a boss who has many different names. In the Western view, the boss is called God... Essentially the universe is a monarchy, God the king and we the subjects. All subjects are considered born with the stain of sin as a part of their nature and are therefore untrustworthy. This theory of nature makes many people feel estranged, creating an attitude of separateness from the boss [God]. The more we feel separated from this God, the more we feel the need to create some way of feeling worthy. **So we create an idea of our importance based on externals and call it “ego.”** Reliance on ego ultimately leads to more separation as life becomes a contest and competition with designated others.” (*Manifest Your Destiny*, p. 21)

In this book, Dr. Dyer presents many characteristics of ego. For example, one’s ego is never satisfied and constantly instructs one to complain and to want more. Ego loves confusion and chaos, hatred and jealousy, authority and power. Ego is conniving to keep us from knowing that we are manifestations of one and the only one God — as Vedanta teaches, “Thou Art That,” and so on.

Obviously, it was not God but man’s ego that committed genocide in the Holocaust, the Cambodian Killing Fields, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur. And finally, the sole objective of a contemplative and spiritual life to practice spiritual disciplines is to minimize the ego.

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**Edith Tipple (Nalini) recalls:**

Swami Prabhavananda used to mention a discussion between Swami Turiyananda, who was a great scholar, and Swami Adbhutananda, who was completely unlettered. When Swami Turiyananda explained the law of karma to Swami Adbhutananda, the latter said, “Brother, did the Lord appoint you as his lawyer to justify His own conduct?”

Swami Prabhavananda would go on to say that we cannot deny any experience, no matter how much anybody might say it is not true. A bad experience in a dream will make our hearts palpitate — but when we wake up, we realize it was a dream. Nevertheless, he would continue, there is an experience which is not contradicted by any other experience but which itself contradicts all other experiences. It is an experience in which there is neither good nor evil, happiness nor suffering. We talk about good and evil, happiness and suffering, when we are caught in the wheel of karma, as long as we remain in ignorance. Our goal and our duty must be to come out of that ignorance.

And then he would quote Swami Brahmananda: “Meditate, meditate, meditate. Find that mine of bliss.” The world will go on as it is, he said. To expect a millennium is to expect the impossible. Individuals have to come out of the world. And there is a way out. As Buddha taught: there is suffering, there is a



cause of suffering, there is a way out of suffering – there is a way of peace. And then he would quote the Chandogya Upanishad: “One who knows, meditates upon, and realizes the truth of the Self — such a one

delights in the Self, revels in the Self, rejoices in the Self. He becomes master of himself, and master of all the worlds.”

What more questioning can there be?

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### Thoughts on God The Monster

*The following is an exchange between Bill Davis and Bill Page*

**Bill Davis:** Paraphrasing your question in AV: “God is the doer. God must be a monster to have committed the holocausts of history. How can we love and worship such a god?”

Some thoughts in answer:

God dwells in us in the form of delusion. (*Chandi*). In delusion, God in the form of man can perform any number of atrocities.

Sri Ramakrishna (having just heard about an atrocity): “Is it possible to understand God’s action and His motive? He creates, He preserves and He destroys. Can we ever understand why He destroys? I say to the Divine Mother: ‘Oh Mother, I do not need to understand. Please give me love for Thy lotus feet.’ The aim of human life is to attain bhakti. As far as other things, the Mother knows best. I have come to the garden to eat the mangoes. What is the use of my calculating the number of trees, branches, and leaves? I only eat the mangoes; I don’t need to know the number of trees and leaves.” (*Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 161.)

The first noble truth of Lord Buddha is that life is suffering.

These atrocities are consistent with the first noble truth. Would anyone seek God if this were a paradise? They say that in heaven, people are so happy that they feel no need for God.

Even in the worst atrocities there is no death. *Gita*: just new sets of clothing.

God’s *lila*: Like a child destroying his sandcastle, He gets pleasure in destroying. I read somewhere that death is a condiment to God. I’ve read that there were many who went their deaths in the Holocaust remembering God.

**Bill Page’s Objection:** The *lila* theory and the *maya* theory both trivialize human suffering by saying none of it matters, it’s all just a game or appearance. All religions admit we can’t fully understand God, and of course that’s true. I don’t expect to understand him fully. All I want to understand is this one vital point. Why, if he is an omnipotent and all-good personal God, does he permit the innocent to suffer? I don’t need to count the mangoes, but I do need to know they’re not poisoned before I eat them.

It seems to me that there are

three possible answers:

1. There is no God, or even any god, so the problem does not arise.

2. God is omnipotent but not all-good. He is morally flawed. He creates us, but then stands idly by while we suffer and die. I don't think such a God could expect us to love him. Morally speaking, he's no better than we are, since we are also morally flawed. If he's like a little kid who enjoys building and smashing sandcastles just for fun, he's not only just as bad as we are, he may be even worse. We might build and smash sandcastles, but at least we know that they're not alive. Are we supposed to love and worship a God who is no better than a sadistic little kid?

3. God is all-good, but his power over matter and the phenomenal world is limited. This is the idea I have come around to, but it has problems. I can conceive of a God who is a spirit, operating solely in the realm of spirit, with little or no power over matter. In that case, his role would be to love and nurture us spiritually, to guide and strengthen us so that we, being composed of both spirit and matter, can effect some improvements in the imperfect world of matter. Such a God is worthy of our love and worship; especially because he makes us his partners in the ongoing struggle to make the world a better place.

The major problem with theory 3 is that we have no objective, empirical evidence for the existence of such a being. But then, we have no really convincing empirical evidence of the existence of Ishwara, or Yahweh, or Allah, either. So we are back to square

one, with the resounding answer, *We Don't Know*.

**Davis' Reply:** But who is suffering? Vedanta teaches that God has become all, and therefore He creates the suffering and suffers it Himself. It's all at His own expense. We think we're suffering but this then creates a motivation to find out who we really are. Back to Buddha's first noble truth. Kali is such a frank representation of the fact that God has two sides, the benign side and the terrible side.

Remember the incident when Holy Mother was told about the terrible carnage going on in WWI? She began to laugh and then her laugh became a cackle, more and more eerie and terrible. With great difficulty her companions finally persuaded her to return to her benign side. Kali enjoys carnage. Why? Who knows? Some worship Her out of fear wanting Her to stay on the benign side. But they say this is not really bhakti. God is the fountain of infinite bliss. I want that bliss, those mangoes, which by definition, cannot be poisonous. How can you worship such a God? Forget about worshipping Him. Just seek His blissful essence.

**Page's Objection:** I understand your arguments, but they fail to satisfy. The bottom line is that I can't love a personal God who lets the innocent suffer even though he has the power to stop their suffering. But I can love a good God who doesn't have the power to stop their suffering but who tries to strengthen and comfort them inwardly. If that means I have to deny his omnipotence, so be it. If it comes to a choice between God's goodness

and his power, I'll go for the goodness.

I have to say that some of the answers that Vedanta traditionally gives to these questions strike me as disingenuous—what the Buddha called “eel-wriggling.” So when I complain that people are suffering and God does nothing to help them, Vedanta says, “Oh, but they’re not really suffering. Since God has become everything, it’s God himself who is suffering.”

In that case, what we have is a God who is not so much a monster as a masochist. Besides that, if it’s God who is suffering, why is it man who feels the pain?

**Davis’ Reply:** God is not God if He’s not omnipotent. Let’s face it. God has ordained that man should suffer. Presumably it’s for our own good. It’s the bitter medicine that we have to swallow in order to get well.

I keep a journal of quotes and in it I have a quote from Swami Ramakrishnananda (*God Lived with Them*, p. 299) “God is all-auspicious and all powerful. Whatever He does is for the good of all beings... If God allots sorrow and suffering to anyone then know for certain that it is His blessing in disguise. We forget God in our greed for transient pleasures. So He makes us remember Him by these little miseries. His kindness is expressed through both favorable and unfavorable circumstances.”

**Page’s Objection:** Not wishing to pick a fight with Swami Ramakrishnananda, but if God is omnipotent (and presumably omniscient), he ought to be able to figure

out a better way of making us remember him than visiting “little miseries” (the Holocaust, Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia, etc., etc.) upon us. I don’t mind the little miseries. Presumably they build character. It’s the big ones that bother me—the ones that don’t build character, but merely crush and destroy, like the ones named above. If an omnipotent God is responsible for those, I’ll follow the advice of Confucius: “Honor the gods, but at a distance.”

**Davis’ Reply:** It’s hard for us to understand how the suffering involved in the various holocausts could benefit the victims. To all appearances there is little benefit. These holocausts come like hurricanes out of the blue. I’ve read that miseries inflicted by humans are much more traumatic than those that come from nature, although both can involve great suffering. I sometimes speculate that suffering from holocausts or nature is purifying on an unconscious level. We have no doubt all committed no end of terrible things in our prior lives (if not our current life). This apparently undeserved suffering can help us wipe away, at least to some extent, this load of bad karma. But I come back to Ramakrishna’s statement, “Who can understand why God destroys?” If the Avatar Himself cannot give us an explanation, we are not going to find it. But then Sri Ramakrishna says that we don’t need to understand in order to try to struggle our way to gain a yearning for that infinite ocean of bliss that lies behind this material world full of pleasure and pain.

## Nature Functions: A Reminiscence of Swami Sarvagatananda

Wendell Benway

On a Saturday morning, some 30 years ago,\* I stopped by the Vedanta Center on Deerfield Street as usual, mostly to hang out with Swami Sarvagatananda and whoever else might be there. As I was chatting with Swami, he suggested that I go over to Mrs. Schofield's and mow her lawn. Mrs. Schofield, an elderly devotee whom I barely knew, lived across town. At that time in my life I saw myself as a young executive for whom such an assignment made little sense. When Swami saw my reaction he added, "You will find joy in doing it." I had little choice but to go. Mrs. Schofield was of course surprised and pleased to see me and delighted to have her lawn mowed.

When I had finished mowing and was on my way back to the Center, I discovered that Swami had been right when he told me that I would "find joy." Driving back, I experienced a sense of well-being, a feeling that "all's right with the world." I could not explain it but I knew the feeling was real. I suspect Swami was not surprised that I kept Mrs. Schofield's lawn mowed for the rest of the summer, that she and I became fast friends, or that I more or less looked after her affairs until her death a few years later. The lesson I learned from my lawn mowing experience changed my life more profoundly than any other teaching, either before or since. It

eventually led me into volunteer activities, such as Meals-on-Wheels, which continue to add zest and richness to my life.

On another Saturday morning that same summer, I drove Swami to visit Mrs. Schofield. As we were returning, he quoted what he said were his favorite two verses from the *Bhagavad Gita*: "Nature functions," and "God does not hold merit or demerit for anyone." Because it was Swami who was quoting them, and because the verses expressed his deepest convictions, they were impressed on my mind and became the cornerstones of my belief. Whenever I sought answers to the unanswerable, as at times we all do, these passages were always in my mind, tantalizing me, pointing at profound truths I could never fully grasp. I would cite these verses so frequently that on one occasion a friend, in exasperation, threatened to hit me if I mentioned them again! They eventually led me to an *Advaitic* view of the world as an opportunity to live freely in the dream play that is called life, without attachment and with a sense of amusement at the seeming absurdity of it all.

I shall be forever grateful to Swami for teaching me these Gita truths in such a way, and with such spiritual power, that they remain with me after all these years.

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\* Editor's note: this story was written in 1996, for a book of reminiscences about Swami Sarvagatananda.

# Nontheism

Richard Simonelli

Are you an atheist? Are you agnostic? Do you believe in God? This is one way that questions of spirituality come down to us in the West. But the questions themselves are not really universal questions. They reveal the worldview from which they arise. For one thing, all three questions assume a "God" in terms that presumably everybody accepts. For another, they ignore a further possibility: they are ignorant of *nontheism*.

*Theism* generally refers to belief in a separate, objective supernatural entity authoring all that is, much as a king or emperor might rule a region of land. This "supreme person" is usually called "God." Theism, or perhaps more accurately "monotheism," is very closely tied to the theology of popular Western style religion—Judaism, Christianity or Islam—even though Western religion and Western thought is not consciously connected with the discussion, and even though contemplative Western spirituality has far subtler understandings of "God." Being a "believer" is the more popular way of talking about theism, or more accurately, Christian theism. By contrast, *atheism* denies the existence of a God and carries the added spin of denying a sacred world in any

but humanistic and material terms. *Agnosticism* takes the position that it is impossible to know whether or not God exists.

All three issues are tied to rational, logical, intellectual and humanistic ways of thinking and approaching reality. They are an outcome of the Western worldview, although probably never spoken of in that manner. Nontheism, by contrast, steps entirely out of these three questions by simply pointing away from the notion of "theism" or being a believer. In this case, the prefix "non" does not negate or reject; it simply points away from the entire discussion. By accepting the terms of the discussion (theist or believer, atheist, or agnostic) a person is already caught in unhappy waters because nontheism and other understandings have been left out.

Nontheism allows a sacred world without ever being caught by the dualistic, patriarchal God suggested in these three terms. As a nontheist, I can and do have a profound sense and knowledge of the sacred. I can and do experience the spiritual mystery in the most personal, fluid, and relational terms. I can and do have direct experiences of the immensity of reality without restrictions imposed by theism, atheism or agnosticism. Nontheism is not atheism. It's only when we are bound to dualistic or

separating thought patterns that it might seem so. In Western culture we must become clear about the difference between atheism and nontheism.

The wonders of the world-at-large point to a sacred world. For myself, the “God” part is simply a human idea and a way of speaking of the unspeakableness of this immensity. The wonders of the world point to an *order* pervading all things—an order that may sometimes be quite disorderly. But this can certainly be embraced without having to invoke a specific, objective, or separate achiever or accomplisher—a supreme being or a creator in factual or literal terms. It is a conspiracy of culture that holds us hostage to the God idea in literal terms. As a nontheist I have experienced first-hand the sacredness of the absolute without having to attribute an independently existing creator God. I discover the absolute with a beginner’s mind. Approaching any moment with a beginner’s mind, the sacred texts of all religions become secondary to direct experience. These writings and teachings are respected because they are a record of what others have felt, thought, or

experienced, and that in itself is sacred; but our own *knowing* is the ultimate reference. This may be informed by the weight of tradition, but tradition must not replace the beginner’s mind with an expert’s mind. The weight of tradition and culture can make us deny our *knowing*, and even its sudden occurrence, which is happening all the time.



Jiddu Krishnamurti  
(1895-1986)  
Image courtesy  
Wikipedia Commons  
and U.S. Library  
of Congress

Nontheism shies away from naming the sacred—the spiritual mystery. God is too immense to be taken literally. But at the same time, the sacred manifests personally. World teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti expresses this when he says, *“That which is named is not the unnamable, and by naming we only awaken the conditioned responses. These responses, however noble and pleasant, are not of the real. We respond to stimulants, but reality offers no stimulant: It is.”*<sup>(1)</sup>

As a nontheist living in a culture with a tradition of theism, I allow myself some “naming” when the very act of naming the unnamable will actually provoke direct experience in others. I appreciate such naming by others when it does provoke direct experience. I am uneasy in situations that continually name the sacred, because generally,

then, it is not.

The notion of God, if it is to be useful at all, is about knowing first hand. By continually connecting God with belief we actually make it difficult for a person to have direct experiences of the absolute because a psychological impediment is created. A person will pick up the bias that knowing God directly is only for saints or mystics. In every day talk, the notion of “God” or of “Creator” is at best a pointer, a manner of speaking or a meta-



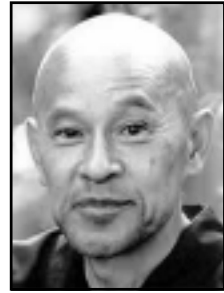
Martin Buber  
(1878-1965)

Image courtesy  
Wikipedia Commons

phor. Martin Buber, the Jewish teacher and philosopher, sums this up when he says, “*In the moment when the name of God is mentioned, most human circles break asunder without knowing it. In that moment the consciousness of thinking—the fact of thinking together—is disrupted. People say ‘God’ without meaning reality, merely as a sublime convention of the cultured person.*”<sup>(2)</sup>

Mainstream Western style religion usually constrains its membership to the kinds of supernatural, dualistic theism that imagines a monotheistic God in literal terms. Most other

spiritualities, even including more subtle understandings within Western religion, make no such mistake. Buddhism is an example of a nontheistic spirituality. Shunryu Suzuki, a Zen Master who taught in the United States for many years, explains Buddhist non-theism when



Shunryu Suzuki,  
Roshi  
(1904 - 1971)  
Image courtesy  
frothfromwalt.  
blogspot.com

he says, “*In Buddhism we do not have any particular idea about a deity. The absolute is the absolute because it is beyond our intellectual or dualistic thinking. We cannot deny this world of the absolute. Many people say that Buddhism is atheism because we have no particular idea of God. We know there is an absolute, but we know it is beyond the limit of our thinking mind, so we don’t have much to say about it.*”<sup>(3)</sup>

Taoism is another nontheistic spirituality. The first entry of the Tao Te Ching says, “*The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.*”

<sup>(4)</sup> (Gia-Fu Feng / Jane English version.) Tao is not a god nor is it God, yet Taoism is one of the

world's great spiritual systems. It is not theistic, atheistic or agnostic, but rather truly a nontheistic and non-dual spirituality.

The spiritualities of traditional, non-assimilated indigenous people worldwide are closer to a non-dual understanding of the sacred than to the dualistic theism of Western religions at the popular level. "Non-dual" here simply means that there is no binary bifurcation or split of the sacred at the level of our deepest meaning. Bill Iron Moccasin, a Lakota traditionalist who was active in the 12 Step Movement, describes his encounter with dualistic theism. He says, "I couldn't accept the Christian concept of God.... The (non-Native American) guys used to tell me, 'If you don't believe in God, you are either an atheist or an agnostic.' And I knew that I was neither. I was fortunate enough to have been born in an era where I experienced the love and caring of my grandparents who grew up in the old style, in the old way of life. ...I grew up with those Elders as my mentors and with people who guided me in my early years. I had a spiritual background, a traditional spiritual background."<sup>(5)</sup>

Hinduism is an example of a

major world religion that uses the term "God" without meaning the theistic creator God of Western religions. The *monism* of the Hindu system expresses a unified reality. As a result, the Hindu-inspired Vedanta taught by Sri Ramakrishna in late 19<sup>th</sup> Century India is not a system of dualistic theism even though theistic sounding *language* abounds in

Ramakrishna's teachings. Ramakrishna Vedanta freely uses theistic terms and phrases such as, Personal and Impersonal God; Real Being; Person; Supreme Being; Supreme Person; and Power behind the universe, to cite a few examples. He says, for example, "*The Impersonal (God) and the Personal (God) are*

*one in the same Being, even as fire and its burning properties are one.*"<sup>(6)</sup> As a nontheist, I personally find the language misleading and too easy to mistake for ordinary Western-style theistic language, whose prevalence made it difficult for me to discover my own faith. I don't use such language unless to reach another person in a sharable context.

But to study Ramakrishna's teaching and intent is to realize that his way of speaking utilizes



Bill Iron Moccasin  
(Lakota)  
(1921-2004)  
Image courtesy  
[www.whitebison.org](http://www.whitebison.org)



poetic, symbolic, metaphoric and personified meanings rather than the literal meanings usually connected to the same words found in Western style religions. Ramakrishna Vedanta is comfortable with terms that to me sound like words used in Western monotheism. But these same terms have non-dual significance in Ramakrishna's presentation.

Likewise, all conversation about Brahman, Atman, or the Self are just an effort to make the profound *unknown* knowable or more comprehensible to the dualistic mind. To me they are not very helpful. Yet to enter Ramakrishna's meaning as personal, direct experience one finds that these terms are simply names for the unnamable. This is an irony which is no irony for him or for the many for whom these are the terms of religious faith, whose profundity is always personal and always behind a veil. Still, ignorance concerning the term "nontheism" cuts very deep.

At a talk in the United States in 2005 the Dalai Lama, leader of Tibetan Buddhists, is reported to have said, "*From the theistic viewpoint, Buddhists are atheists,*"<sup>(7)</sup> reinforcing an unfortunate use of

words. By contrast, when the question was raised whether the Buddha was an atheist, Sri Ramakrishna's words reach us as, "*He was no atheist; only he could not speak out his realizations.*"<sup>(8)</sup>

It is unfortunate that Buddhism and other non-Western spiritualities must reference themselves to dualistic theism in the first place. But given that reality, is it too much to expect a subtler term, *nontheism*, to enter spiritual or religious dialog? Atheism carries the connotative meaning, or spin, of believing only in a materialist, scientific (or "scientific"), rational, literal, secular or profane reality. Krishnamurti's teachings, Buddhism, Taoism, and the understanding at the heart of indigenous (Native) spirituality are neither theistic in the sense Western religions understand the term, nor are they atheistic as it is understood in popular meaning. Advaita (non-dual)

Vedanta is not theistic in the same sense as Western monotheism despite words used in common. Is it not possible that the monotheistic understanding of the Abrahamic (Western) religions might in fact refer to the single unnamable, unified and non-dual



Dalai Lama  
Image courtesy  
Luca Galuzzi -  
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Wikimedia Commons

reality mentioned here, but given an anthropomorphic and literal spin to make it comprehensible in popular life? Might it then be that symbolic language is taken literally (and erroneously) to create dualistic theism? Is it not possible that the artificial squabble over theism, atheism, agnosticism and the “belief in God” might be a red herring that keeps people from doing the hard inner work it takes to live loving, peaceful and tolerant lives?

We are entering a time when we will be able to meet our spirituality in terms and ways that are affirming of a sacred world. Each person will have his or her own understanding of the sacred because an important focus of life will be to find “God as you understand him or her,” as the 12 Step programs say. Each personal and individual affirmation of the sacred will then begin to grow a healthy root system for both human and environmental life on earth.

For some, this may be described as “nontheism” in the sense that true understanding of the spiritual mystery—what many call “God”—cannot be named, codified, conceptualized, or pinned down. For myself, I understand God as no God at all in the theistic sense, *without taking on the spiritual denial usually associated with atheism or agnosticism*. Still others will understand

the many names of the sacred in their own unique ways. And a few will jettison all reliance on theological labels, realizing that reliance on words just obscures the clarity and profundity of what simply is.

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# MEDIA REVIEWS



## Scholar Reading a Book

Painting by Jan Zaremba  
[www.janzaremba.com/sumi-e](http://www.janzaremba.com/sumi-e)

## *Albert Einstein: His Human Side*

Swami Tathagatananda

*The Vedanta Society of New York. Second Enlarged Edition, 2008*

### TWO REVIEWS

Walter S. Gershon, Ph.D.

While some of the content of Swami Tathagatananda's most recent edition on the more personal aspects of Albert Einstein's life has been presented elsewhere, his salient and detailed framing of Einstein-the-man calls the reader's attention to aspects of the scientist's

life that are often overlooked. Of particular interest are connections Tathagatananda makes between Einstein's spirituality, that undergirds much of Einstein's humanitarian and scientific work, his holistic understandings of the nature of art, science, and religion, and his lifelong predilection towards education.

Einstein's spirituality, Tathagatananda reminds us, while Jewish in its roots is universal in its appeal. Similar to many scientists who were his predecessors, Einstein's search for truth through and in science was also a quest for understanding the mystical, spiritual knowledge. Rather than the tensions that often exist in contemporary discussions of either science or religion, Einstein's holistic understanding of the world did not parse one from the other, stating: "Science without religion is lame — religion without science is blind." This conception of the relationship between science and religion is also grounded in his humanism, the need for just treatment of others as a manifestation of moral goodness.

In remembering the depth and breadth of Einstein's contributions to scientific thought and his steadfast calls for moral and humane uses of science, Tathagatananda focuses our attention not only on his successes but also on Einstein's perseverance in the face of rejection, misinterpretation, and lack of understanding. From the severity of needing to leave the country of his birth in order to escape the systematic genocide of Jews that was the holocaust, to the rejections of his work as paradoxically either not scientific enough or too advanced to comprehend, Einstein continued to espouse his convictions in the



Albert Einstein—1931  
Photo by Doris Ullman/  
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potential of people to treat one another with respect. Although Einstein's anti-violence and humane positions are often cited, it is the remarkable nature of these ideas in spite of their constant contestation that Tathagatananda helps us see.

As Swami Tathagatananda makes apparent throughout *Albert Einstein: His Human Side*, Einstein's life was not only one of inquiry but also one of teaching. His personal quest to discover life's truths, be they mystical or scientific, translated into his desire to instill this passion in others. Rather than encouraging students to learn well-established facts and figures, Einstein's teaching was more aligned with Dewey's, centering on facilitation of questions and experience so that students might explore their own senses of wonder.

In sum, Swami Tathagatananda's *Albert Einstein: His Human Side*, is true to its title allowing readers a glimpse into a great man and thinker whose unwavering humanity and morality fueled his spirituality and science. This book will serve as a valuable resource for those looking to build upon their knowledge of Einstein and for those less familiar with the personal life of one of the last century's greatest examples of the humane possibilities of humanity.

Second review of  
*Albert Einstein, His Human Side*

Bill Davis

One of the first things I remember learning about Einstein when I was a child was that he was a slow learner in school, and yet despite this became a genius. This was rather encouraging, since I too was a slow learner.

It was interesting to learn from this book that rather than this being a handicap that he had to overcome; Einstein actually attributed to his slow development the fact that he was the one to discover relativity. To quote Einstein: *When I ask myself why it should have been me, rather than anyone else, who discovered the relativity theory, I think that this was due to the following circumstance: An adult does not reflect on the space-time problems. Anything that needs reflection of this matter he believes he did in his early childhood. I, on the other hand, developed so slowly that I only began to reflect about space and time when I was a grown-up. Naturally I then penetrated more deeply into these problems than an ordinary child would.* (Pg. 97, quoted from Gary F. Moring, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Einstein*, Pg. 128.)

Although in many ways he was a slow learner, in others — of which I had been unaware — he was quite remarkable. When he encountered the Pythagorean theorem as a schoolboy (age not given) he was entranced. To quote: *The theorem's simplicity and elegance so fascinated*

*him that for his own pleasure he painstakingly found his own way of proving it.* (Pg. 25, citation not given).

In 1905, at the age of 26 while holding a six-day a week full-time job in the Swiss Patent Office, Einstein submitted three papers (at intervals of less than 2 months) that “shook the foundations of science.” In these papers he presented his special theory of relativity. This was the beginning of his incredible output. His fame in scientific circles steadily increased and in 1919, he became known to the general public with a front-page newspaper headline: “Revolution in Science, Newtonian Principles Overthrown.” From then on he was besieged by the press and was now world famous (see chapter 5).

You might think that Einstein would have become haughty after all the adulation he received. But in fact we learn from this book what a kind and humble man he was: *According to a collaborator of Einstein in his later years, Dr. Banesh Hoffman, “He never tried to show you how clever he was. He always made you feel comfortable.” Dr. Hoffman recalls arriving for his first meeting with Einstein in 1936. He remembered standing for a moment before Einstein's door, his heart beating rapidly. As he raised his hand slowly to knock on the door, he was surprised by a gentle voice saying, “Come in.” Casually dressed and smoking his pipe, Einstein was sitting in his chair and writing on a pad over his crossed knees. When Dr. Hoffman ventured to discuss certain*

*mathematical ideas, Einstein surprised him again by saying, "Will you please put your equations on the board? Please go slowly – I don't understand things quickly." "I lost all fear," Dr. Hoffman recalled. "As the interview went on, he asked all sorts of questions. His remarks were never critical. He made it a joint project. We were on the same side." (Pgs. 107, 108, citation not given, but probably from Banesh Hoffman and Helen Dukas, Albert Einstein, Creator and Rebel).*

"Einstein" long ago became a household word. When I was fretting to my guru, Swami Pavitananda, about my lack of professional accomplishment, he consoled me by saying, "Not everyone can be an Einstein." No other scientist that I'm aware of has received the degree of public fame that Einstein received in his own lifetime, from the age of 41 to his death at 76, in 1955. Ironically, Einstein seemed to have no desire for fame. To quote Swami Tathagatananda: *Gazing down from the balcony of his hotel in Tokyo (during his 1922 lecture tour) he saw a thousand people cheering and calling his name. They had been standing there the entire night, hoping he would come out to gaze at the sunrise, as he indeed did. This vigil in his honor moved his heart. "No living person deserves this sort of reception," he said. (Pg. 110, apparently quoted from Ronald W. Clark, Einstein. The Life and Times.)*

He did not want to be fussed over and was also very simple in

his needs. Swami Tathagatananda describes an incident in 1919 when he was traveling by train from Prague to Vienna to give a lecture: *When he arrived in Vienna, a crowd of three thousand scientists and curious onlookers awaited him by the first class car, but Einstein did not step down there. The crowd rushed from car to car, all the way to second-class, looking for the great scientist who was nowhere to be found. At last, they saw him approaching them at a relaxed pace, violin in hand. No wandering musician ever looked as happy as he. To his embarrassed host he offered these words of consolation: "You know, I like traveling first, but my face is becoming too well known. I am less bothered in third class." (Pg. 109, quoted from Walter Isaacson, Einstein. His Life and Universe, Pg. 274).*

Another quote from Einstein: *The only way to escape this personal corruption of praise is to go on working... The only thing to do is to turn away and go on working hard. (Pg. 111, citation not given).*

His lack of desire for name and fame is also conveyed by his wishes with regard to the treatment of his remains. Einstein wanted no funeral service or any marked grave or monument. He was cremated and his ashes were consigned to the Delaware River. Swami Tathagatananda writes, *Centuries earlier the world had openly mourned Sir Isaac Newton as his body lay in state on his bier in Westminster Abbey. His pallbearers includ-*

ed the lord high chancellor, two dukes and three earls. Einstein craved none of these displays. He did not want to leave any image after his death through which he might be venerated or worshipped. (Pgs. 75, 76.)

Another example of the simplicity of his needs is given by an incident when he arrived in 1933 at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton. To quote: *He was invited by Abraham Flexner... to state his own salary. Einstein suggested what he considered a reasonable sum — \$3000 a year — adding, "Could I live on less?" A stupefied Flexner, consulting with Mrs. Einstein, decided that Einstein would be paid \$16,000 a year.* (Pg. 113, citation not given).

He was adamant that he had no fear of death. In 1917, when he had lost 56 pounds in two months, the wife of German physicist Max Born visited Einstein in the hospital. She asked if he feared death. He replied, *"Why should I? I feel such solidarity with all living people that it is a matter of indifference to me where the individual begins and where he ceases."* (Pg. 56, quoted from Roger Highfield and Paul Carter, *The Private Lives of Albert Einstein*, Pg.184). My understanding of this is that he appears to have entered psychologically into an impersonal realm. His relationship with his own ego was impersonal. Certainly this is a state to be envied by the spiritual aspirant. A year before his death (at the age of 76) Einstein wrote: *It is quite clear to me that the religious paradise*

*of youth... was a first effort to free myself from the chains of the 'merely personal,' from an existence which is dominated by wishes, hopes and primitive feelings.* (Pg. 25, quoted from *The Private Lives of Albert Einstein*, Pg. 14). This attitude was related to his scientific mode of being. In 1913, when he was facing severe marital difficulties with Mileva, his first wife, he stated to Elsa, who was to become his second wife, *"The love of science thrives under these circumstances, for it lifts me impersonally from the vale of tears into peaceful spheres."* (Pg. 85, quoted from *Einstein. His Life and Universe*, Pg.183.)

I was surprised to find out that Einstein had an intense belief in morality. He wrote: *The most important endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life... To make this a living force and bring it to clear consciousness, is perhaps the foremost task of education.* (Pg. 36, quoted from *Einstein. His Life and Universe*, Pg. 393) He also said, *"Only a life lived for others, is a life worthwhile."* (Pg. 36, citation not given). As he was about to depart for Japan in 1922, he told his step-daughters, *"Use for yourself little but give to others much."* (Pg. 109, quoted from *Einstein. His Life and Universe*, Pg. 306).

Reading this book, one gets a picture of the extent of anti-Semitism in Germany prior to Hitler. As

a schoolboy (he was six in 1885) Einstein faced ostracism and even physical assault on account of his being Jewish (the only Jewish child among 70 students). On his way to school he would be taunted and at times violently attacked. (Pg. 23, citation not clear but probably from *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Einstein*).

By 1920 the Nazi party was on the rise in Germany and Einstein's work was attacked at large public rallies by prominent German anti-Semitic physicists (one of whom had previously written admiring letters to Einstein). (Pg. 58, cited from *Einstein. His Life and Universe*, Pg. 285).

The last topic I will take up is Einstein's mystic attitude about science. Einstein is one of the few scientists who would talk about God in a scientific context. "*To Einstein God was a metaphor for the transcendent Unity.*" (Pg. 98, citation not given). As an introduction to his chapter on "Albert Einstein — The Mystic," Swami Tathagatananda gives the following quote: *The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out-candle. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly: this is religiousness. In this sense, and*

*in this sense only, I am a devoutly religious man.* (Pg. 95 "What I Believe" quoted from *Einstein. His Life and Universe*, Pg. 387). What a beautiful description of the relationship between phenomena and that reality which lies behind.

Einstein is trying to penetrate to that reality, a reality that Vedanta calls Brahman. However, rather than trying to gain a direct perception of that Brahman through spiritual practice, Einstein sought to find out the inner secret relationships of phenomena that can be revealed through careful external observation and intuitive speculation on their relationships. Further Einstein wrote, "*The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility... The fact that it is comprehensible is a miracle.*" (ibid, Pg. 98, Pg. 462). This last conviction gives a hint as to why Einstein found it so difficult to accept quantum mechanical theory, which posits an incomprehensible randomness.

Many other interesting aspects of Einstein's life are discussed in this book, which I won't touch upon: his family life, his intellectual evolution from childhood, his relationship with his teachers, his love of music, his use of his fame to promote world peace, his hatred of authoritarian methods, the evolution of his fame, his many professorships, his renunciation of German citizenship, his role in the development of the atomic bomb, his relations with other prominent scientists and many other topics.



## The MATRIX Movies: A Bird's-Eye View – Part 2\*

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*, 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*:

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\*Editor's note: For the benefit of new readers, several paragraphs of the introduction have been repeated. Part 1 can be downloaded at [www.vedantawest.org/](http://www.vedantawest.org/) american vedantist

*A Space Odyssey...* (*The Matrix* is projected into the year 2199, when human "energy-cells" (who feed the system) are held in "pods" and pacified by cyber-participation in a computer program (this program is *The Matrix*) that simulates "normal" life in 1999...

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... Morpheus, abducts Neo and 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 Neo is the One, the human being chosen to resolve the issues raised by the Matrix, and to lead his fellows to freedom. (*Part 2 begins here.*)

We sit through endless ritualized and computerized battles, with volleys of bullets — no doubt to suit the computer-games crowd (which duly got their spin-off, needless to say!), and in doing so begin to see Neo acquiring a deeper assurance about himself as he performs almost superhuman feats. This, we gather, is his process of self-transformation, in which he

has to get into the trenches like any World War I grunt and fight to the finish. And finish it nearly is, as Agent Smith blasts him with one of the endless futuristic weapons that appear at a moment's notice, presumably courtesy of the Matrix — or more accurately, knowing the right program to produce them.

Neo is mortally wounded, and it almost seems as if his career as the One has been aborted. But at this critical juncture yet another traditional human motif arises: the daring female sidekick of Morpheus kisses Neo and expresses the love that has been growing for him as he matures spiritually and begins to assume the characteristics of a leader. This kiss brings Neo back to "life" and infuses him with a renewed sense of purpose and invincibility, which expresses itself in the last frames of the movie by his soaring into the air, totally defying gravity and Agent Smith's bullets. Reviewers of *The Matrix* have seen in it an almost unlimited number of motifs, symbols, signs from several different traditions; but this bringing back to life with a kiss strikes me as particularly interesting, being an integral part of European myth. There are several stories of handsome princes bringing back to life a beautiful heroine, usually one who has been severely mistreated. And, of course, living happily ever after. Surely this is a symbol of spiritual self-transcendence — otherwise, how could there be perpetual happiness afterwards? For me, at least,

that is the significance of Trinity's kiss: she sees Neo as a spiritual being and confers on him a sort of blessing that helps him jump over the last hurdle to his self-awareness as a liberator or savior. What is extremely interesting is that it is a woman who "initiates" or "liberates" a man, a reversal of the traditional roles. But of course the whole movie is about reversal of roles: The Oracle is an African American woman, and across the board the heroes and leaders are people of color or women, while the villains are uniformly white males.

*The Matrix Reloaded* moves the story forward by revealing more of who Agent Smith is and also the choices Neo is going to have to make if he is indeed to be worthy of being the One. Neo goes through several desperate encounters with Agent Smith, who is ever on the verge of drawing him in and digesting him. We see Agent Smith morph several people into replicas of himself, most shockingly, the Oracle herself, resulting in a veritable army of increasingly empowered Agent Smiths for Neo to face and battle with. However, despite his apparent gaining of ground against Neo, Agent Smith becomes more and more agitated and hysterical, finally blurting out to Neo that his real identity is as Neo's alter ego. This is delivered almost as an aside, but of course raises one of the most interesting questions in the whole series: just what is Agent Smith's role in the drama? Certainly to peg Neo and his friends to the

unreal, even to draw one of them (Cipher) back into virtual reality, betraying Morpheus in doing so. Certainly to thwart and obstruct Neo at every turn he makes, and even to threaten to absorb him into the unreal identity of Agent Smith himself. It is clear that one of Neo's primary tasks is to master or neutralize this powerful contrary image of himself, operating in the unreal world.

Neo also learns from (the white male!) Architect at the center of the Matrix that other One-s like himself struggled against the previous versions of the Matrix and ended up by choosing to "reboot" the Matrix system in its upgraded form, i.e. keeping humans more thoroughly under control by creating a more "believable" unreality to live in. Neo himself has arrived at his own moment of choice. He is invited to go through one of two doors: one will reboot the system, and the other will let him intervene in a desperate fight going on between Trinity and Agent Smith, who has nearly overpowered her with his doppelgangers. The Architect, of course, expects Neo to go for the much more sophisticated, technological "fix", but Neo, as much in love with Trinity as she with him, opts to crash through the door and save her from the clutches of the Matrix mafia.

The message here seems rather clear: how a "real" person finds meaning and purpose primarily from loving another human being. We learn that the previous leaders

had no such "entanglements" and were, therefore, perfect instruments of the Matrix itself, opting to keep it going. Neo's greatness is to have gone beyond the purely mechanical and to have tapped into love, a rather scarce commodity in the movie, as indeed in the experience of most of us. His decision to save Trinity is epoch-making and sets him and his whole group on a collision course, not only with Agent Smith and his clones but also with the intelligent machines, which control the whole show through the computer program. It is, therefore, no surprise to learn that the machines are launching an all-out attack on the outposts of Zion, the "real world," with a view to extirpating it completely.

Faced, in *The Matrix Revolutions*, with an overpowering army of Smiths and an equally threatening attack from the machines, Neo is forced to think through his situation. He realizes that Smith is the greatest threat to the survival, not only of the humans, but also of the machines, because of his ability to disrupt and ultimately crash the Matrix in a devastating and chaotic way. As the sentinels, squid-like machines, come swarming toward Zion, Neo announces that he will travel alone to the land of the machines and bargain with them to stop the attack. Not willing simply to reboot the whole system, but in accordance with his other "deviant" behavior with other plans, Neo sets off — but not alone, as he had wished. Trinity, bound to him

through thick and thin, insists on coming with him on his desperate mission. There are, of course, hair-raising threats and encounters on the way, during one of which Trinity is killed and Neo is left alone to complete the mission.

At this point all the lineaments of the hero's journey are firmly in place, with Neo facing all alone the gravest threat to human survival and freedom. Crashing into the center of the machine world, he informs the leader, Deus ex Machina, of the threat posed by Agent Smith alike to the Matrix, humans, machines, as also their common Source, and offers to bring it to an end in exchange for stopping the machines' attack on humans. He is given permission to proceed and in his last battle with Smith he is himself assimilated into the Smith clone/program, the last one remaining in the totally crashing system, which Deus ex Machina then goes ahead and deletes. Thereafter, all who were possessed by Smith — programs, humans, and the Oracle — return to normal, but with the stipulation that humans who in future want to be unplugged from the Matrix will be permitted to do so. Neo's self-sacrifice has, therefore, accomplished a degree of improvement in the system. A more-human friendly upgrade you might say (unlike the "real life" program Vista!)

What does all of this add up to? Apart from the conceit of all taking place within a computer program, the heavy-duty computer

generated visuals, the almost total reversal of roles of the masculine/feminine and white/colored, the almost crushingly mechanical "characters", who enunciate and declaim rather than emote (even including the "love" between Neo and Trinity), and the overall darkness and threat of the whole show, this is an old-fashioned (or is it new-fashioned?) tale of a hero. He awakes to the artificiality of "ordinary life", goes through the arduous training to overcome it, attains self-transcendence through tapping into his deeper reality, understands the whole picture of what he is dealing with, and makes the final self-sacrifice in order to make changes that will benefit others. We have seen this story again and again, in different guises in different periods. What particularly exercises me is: Why does it have to be so dark, so ugly, so violent? I had a conversation with a movie director recently, who aspired to making "spiritual" movies. I asked him why the Matrix movies are so dark and dreary, and he replied without a moment's hesitation, "That is the only way you can sell ideas nowadays — sell anything, actually."

Clearly, the popular image of humanity right now is as a humorless, devitalized, mechanical being completely under the control of physical laws, nowadays — particularly those of the computer. An early movie in which this fact was terrifyingly clear in "real" life is *The Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl's documentary of Hitler's 1934

Nuremberg rally. There we see a self-satisfied, slightly plump Hitler, who never so much as cracks a smile, reviewing a seemingly endless column of grim, leather clad killers-in-training, their eyes vacant and their faces expressionless, goose-stepping to perfection like wonderfully crafted robots. It is not that far to *The Matrix*, the humorless, leather-clad and utterly mechanized world that seems to be spawned when we choose to give machines power over us. What is heartening, however, is that a traditional tale of salvation should somehow appear through a crack — or is it a computer anomaly? — like a primrose blooming in the otherwise metallic, mechanical world we have chosen to make our own of late. Who knows what comes next? Maybe humanity is not yet completely dead and will indeed delete all conformity to Matrix systems, at least for the foreseeable future. Perhaps, too, the “Smith program” is merely our unexamined thinking (as in science, commerce, religion, etc.), which has this way of crashing the system — don’t you think? But it is also amenable to correction, if we realized what is going on and learn the “program” to correct it. More, maybe we shall indeed discover that, at the center of our idolized world of machines the “boss” is indeed *Deus ex Machina*, in Latin, *the God from the machine*, by definition not a machine itself, but an entity with the power to delete the whole system and recreate it in any form it chooses. Maybe looking into that

might brighten up our lives a little and get us out of this or any other matrix. And maybe — maybe — we will find out more about the Source, which seems to play the most important role of all, considering it supports not only the Matrix, but also its increasing anomalies, human and Smithian, and finally its deletion and rebooting!

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## READER'S FORUM

### Question for this Issue

Robert Samples in his book *The Metaphoric Mind* describes a radio talk show where an author, speaking about his intuitive sense of a larger wholeness, asked anyone in the listening audience who had such an experience to call in and share it.

Finally the phone rang, and a woman began to describe a powerful and spontaneous experience of the interconnectedness and unity of all life. When she tried to share this understanding with her family, their response was disappointing... She had simply stopped talking about her experience then, although she could remember it vividly and felt profoundly changed by it...

Samples said... “All at once the board lit up. It became apparent that such glimpses are commonplace... normal... (D)ozens of people were willing to call in and talk about it.”—*From My Grandfather's Blessings by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.*

**Q: Have you had such an insight or experience of unity?** Write or email us your story at the address on the inside front cover.

## Contributors' Notes

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*NB: A Contributor's Note for Mr. Benway was not available at press time. It will appear in AV's Spring (April) edition.*

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