

## Editorial

### *To Freedom through Work*

Most people work by force of circumstances. One needs a job in order to earn money to pay for food, clothing, shelter, health care. Or: one is expected to earn money in order not to be a burden to others. Or: one works because of social pressure or a need for self-respect. Or: one does unpaid work as part of shared family responsibilities.

On a more subtle level, we work because of inner compulsions. We do actions because we desire this or that. We work not only to satisfy physical and social necessities, but to acquire objects of enjoyment, to gain prestige and power, to fulfil the need for a sense of accomplishment or to create something of beauty.

An important part of spiritual life is transforming our inner and outer activities into means of spiritual growth, to move from compulsion to freedom. We have to work; but we have the liberty to control our attitude toward that work. This is called karma yoga. And this is the special theme of the present issue of *American Vedantist*: how to transmute our actions into spiritual practice, how to move from bondage to liberation through dedicated work.

The Bhagavad Gita teaches: “The world is imprisoned in its own activity, except when actions are performed as worship of God. Therefore you must perform every action sacramentally, and be free from all attachment to results.” The articles that follow describe different methods by which our actions can be sacramentalized, and describe how we can attain spiritual freedom in different theaters of action. Special emphasis is placed on the workplace, as this is where most of us spend the biggest part of our waking hours. But dedicated action in the temple (see “In the Attic”), in politics (“Thoreau and Gandhi”), and by groups and communities (“Toxic Work and the Time Bind”) are also discussed.

In this issue we are also happy to report on the inauguration of The Vedanta Center of Atlanta earlier this year. Appropriately, the majority of our contributors to the present issue are affiliated with the Atlanta Center. We salute this growing focus of vitality in the Vedanta movement in America.

—John Schlenck

# *Practical Vedanta—Atlanta*

**Swami Yogeshananda**

*It was at the Ganges monastery in Michigan that Swami Bhashyananda said to me abruptly one morning, "You will have to go to Atlanta." I had no inclination to go to Atlanta. The work at Ganges, as manager and shopper, cook and gardener, was to my liking and abilities: what need of anything else? But as I saw no very good excuse to avoid this, I went off to muse on the abbot's words and to prepare my mind for moving once again. It was the fall of 1981.*

*My first exposure was to the beautiful "mountains" of north Georgia, where in a state park a retreat was held, to try out the new swami, giving the students an opportunity to know me and me to know them. This was a fine experience and went quite well for all concerned, apparently, and soon I returned to stay in the city and was sharing for some days the quarters of a devotee in a rented house, near the suburb of Tucker. Classes were held in the house and in a larger unused adjacent building. But within a few weeks a more permanent arrangement developed. The Society rented an apartment in what was then a fairly modern complex on LaVista Avenue. It had scope for a shrineroom, a bedroom-cum-office and a living room for meetings.*

*There was an unforgettable induction to this abode. For a few days there would be no furniture as it had to be collected by donation from here and there. It was the week after Christmas, and a freak ice storm hit the city. Atlanta does not prepare for streets filled with snow or ice. Everything shut down. The heating in the apartment had not yet been connected, and for a couple of nights it was necessary to sleep wrapped in blankets on the floor, next to an electric radiant heater. Fortunately the heat came on before the temperature dropped to 2° above zero and all the washing machines in the complex froze. Outside, real beauty! To see the luxuriant trees coated with ice gloves, shining in the winter sunlight, then crackling and dropping as they melted, was delightful. But the projected birthday celebration for Swami Vivekananda could not be held: no one could travel. Eventually all the needed paraphernalia were brought or bought, and we had a respectable little Center with the Lord enshrined and worshiped, lectures and classes in full sway. At this writing it is not possible even to revisit the place in pilgrimage: all the apartments have been demolished, swept away to be replaced by new ones upscale.*

*During the three years of our tenure there Swami Bhashyananda visited once for a day; otherwise there were no phone calls, and not one penny of support from Chicago. This was his method. At the time I thought it harsh. He*

wanted, I think, with all his heart, that his men manifest their independence from him, and that is what I had to learn.

While still getting settled I was made aware of the need for some handout pamphlets to explain our message and meet the questions of the many kinds of persons who were gathering around. In a burst of concentrated thought and writing, the following set of hints on "Practical Vedanta" (here edited and updated) was produced and distributed.

### **Lived Religion**

Some are under the impression that spirituality is a spare-time affair. "If I get time, I'll..." is a phrase which begins many of our best resolutions. "If I'm home early enough this evening, I'll meditate a little before dinner." "I'm going to get myself out of bed earlier in the mornings, so I can do meditation and japa before getting off to work." "I'll be at the meeting on Sunday, if I'm not wiped out by what happens on Saturday."

I have told myself all these things at one time or another, and watched my mind cook up, in very roundabout ways, sometimes, circumstances preventing the execution of my promises. We fool no one but ourselves, probably, and thus become deprived. Often we also take it out on ourselves in the form of negativity or feelings of guilt. We may begin to think we'll never be able to take up spiritual life seriously.

Vedanta, as it is taught in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement, is *lived* religion; this is exactly what the word means. There are not supposed to be any lukewarm Vedantists; either you are practicing or you are not! The question is, how to do it. In the suggestions which follow, the message is that we need to make spiritual practice virtually a twenty-four-hour concern. We need not wait until we "get home," or until we are too tired to meditate, or for the lunch break, or for the stall in highway traffic. Our spiritual practices go on from the moment we wake, throughout the day and even on into our dream life at night. When we wake to this fact it is a welcome sign that our honeymoon with the glamor of spiritual experience is over.

The following remarks are offered as suggestions which have been tried by others and may prove helpful to you. For convenience they have been drawn up in five categories: Practical Vedanta in the Office (School, Hospital, Factory or wherever), for the Homemaker, in Education, in Social Activism<sup>1</sup> and in the Arts.<sup>2</sup>

1. See *American Vedantist*, Vol. VI, No. 1.

2. See *American Vedantist*, Vol. V, No. 2.

## **In the Office**

### **Problems arising from the nature of the work itself**

Is there a vocation or a type of employment that can be clearly labelled unspiritual, which automatically acts against our spiritual impulses and intent? This has been debated throughout the ages. The Buddha made right livelihood the fifth step on his Eightfold Path, and Buddhists have interpreted this specifically as the avoidance of liquor-selling (and of course illegal drugs), pimping and prostitution, trapping animals or anything else involving exploitation or cruelty. On the other hand we read in Swami Vivekananda's *Karma Yoga* the story of the butcher in the village market-place who succeeded in making his work a yoga, a model even for the monk. Indian lore offers stories of cobblers, scavengers and others in trades despised by society, who found their work no barrier. Certainly if you are one who has a strong feeling that the work you are engaged in is immoral, degenerating or anti-social, you have every reason to seek a radical change in your mode of living. This is true also if it compels you constantly to keep your mind or emotions involved in "worldly" affairs, related to the "lower centers" in our nervous system, as Sri Ramakrishna calls them. On the other hand, if you are merely theorizing, wondering if the company you work for may be profiting from the exploitation of miserably paid banana-pickers, or lacking in its protest against ethnic preference—the answer may be less clear. Where will you draw the line? In today's network of world information and mass media it is very difficult to say whose hands are clean. If the sensitivity to such concerns becomes too keen, one may have to give up work altogether! For, as Sri Krishna told Arjuna, just as fire is accompanied by smoke, so all work is attended by some evil.

### **Motivation**

Then what about those, like the butcher in the *Mahabharata* story, who cannot leave their posts or find a living by some other means? The work must be "spiritualized," first by the way we conceive it and look at it. In the Middle Ages when the great cathedrals were being built, one passerby decided as an experiment to question the workmen on the scaffolds. "What is it you are doing here?" he asked the first one. "Well, I'm earning my daily bread," the man grumpily replied. A little further on, he asked another the same question. "Can't you see, man? I'm dressing and laying stones." But a third replied, "Praise God, I'm helping to build this great cathedral in His honor!"

People have discovered that their assumptions make a great difference in their work attitude. No one on this earth is just making a living. On the other hand few of us are privileged to build cathedrals or work directly and

obviously in the realm of spirit. We have to see the positive implications of whatever work we do, its position in the great jigsaw puzzle of public life, its contribution to the web of general welfare, tying together those for whom and with whom we work, including our families and selves. Every little cog that turns on the wheel and every letter punched on the keyboard plays its role in the grand drama we call this universe. One day we have to see the whole cosmic kaleidoscope as the play of the Divine Mother of all. Sri Ramakrishna has explained this outlook of *vijnana* as our highest goal. He assured us that he was *seeing* that it was She who had become everything. We can practice thinking in this way; we achieve it only in slow stages.

### **Bringing devotion into it**

“Work is love made visible,” Gibran tells us in *The Prophet*. And he says that to work with love means that we weave the cloth, we build the house, we sow our seeds as if it were all for “the beloved.” This is how devotion assists the karma yogi, making him or her conscious that all we do is for the Lord. This is what Brother Lawrence achieved—the state in which he felt as blessed to pick up a straw in the monastery kitchen as to go to pray in the chapel, as we find in his celebrated *Practice of the Presence of God*. Sri Krishna prescribes the same thing exactly at the end of the *Gita*: you will reach perfection if you do your duty “as an act of worship to the Lord, who is the source of the universe, prompting all action, everywhere present.”

We can make God our co-worker, as it were, putting Him in the place of the boss. I knew a man who in World War II was drafted only to end up digging ditches. An intellectual, he felt demeaned and bored by that labor. He told me how he managed to survive the long days. He built up in his mind the fantasy that he lived in a small country having a king of whom he was very proud; all the work assigned him was assigned by the king himself and was being done for his benefit. Thus he “psyched” himself into putting heart into the work. Years later when I came to Vedantic practice I recalled this and thought what the man might have done for himself had he put God where he had put a king! The story is a testimony to our innate understanding of the combination of karma yoga and bhakti yoga.

### **The "lucky" ones...**

The question of the nature of our work sometimes gives trouble in the form of dissatisfaction and envy. We commonly suppose that certain forms of occupation—medicine, nursing, the ministry, teaching or social work—are somehow “nobler” than others. At least those persons who minister directly to others’ visible needs can see the fruits of their labor and taste the joy of consciously lifting their fellow beings. So we think. But they may also taste

the bitterness of thanklessness, of blows given in return for kindness, the gall of apathy and the flatness of futility; disillusionment can easily result. Idealists often envy the monks their privilege of serving directly in the work of the Spirit. There need be no such envy because service is tendered to man and God in ever-so-subtle ways by many who wear no badges or uniforms and to whom life has given no nod of recognition whatsoever. Brother Lawrence, St. Francis, Dadu, Nanak, Jacob Boehme and others are only well-known examples of the hordes of God's humble servants. Who can forget the little chipmunk of the *Ramayana*? When Sri Rama had his troops of workers shovelling soil into the sea to make the bridge to Sri Lanka, here was a little chipmunk dusting, adding the soil with his tail. Rama bent down and blessed him, stroking his back affectionately with two fingers. We see those marks, they say, to this very day.

### **What about the legal profession?**

Here we have a controversial one, indeed. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that lawyers and doctors will have a difficult time growing spiritually, simply because they have to profit by the misfortunes of others. In the case of criminal law, the lawyer may have to defend those he knows to be guilty. Yet Ramakrishna had attorneys and judges among his students, as well as physicians, and he showed all of them the way to denature the selfish aspect of their work and how to make both its method and its goal divine. For many of us the problem is that we wandered into our fields of work in earlier years when, ignorant of what we know now, they seemed to be what we were cut out for. Even if we feel differently now, it may be too late to make a change. Some get around a part of the trouble by working out a method of self-employment. It may be that by scaling down your personal requirements you can get by on "piece-work at home" or a part-time routine which avoids the press and pace of institution and time clock.

### **Mechanical work**

Others have mechanical work to do, demanding only a small portion of their mental energy. Repetitive operations which virtually become reflexes hardly seem likely to inspire a high level of daily thought or a creative work-attitude. Many do their utmost to avoid such occupation. Yet other natures may welcome it. There have been cases of spiritual aspirants actually preferring such employment because of the amount of freedom it gives to the mind. These persons may be heavily into japa, finding ample opportunity here to repeat the name of God or to carry on a kind of mental prayer. I used to use such occasions to memorize and repeat spiritual poetry (of which I was fond) before I had a mantra, and even afterward. Memorizing scripture and

poetry has been found to be a valuable employment of the spare time and energy of the mind.

Ramprasad, saint and composer of Bengal, had been a bookkeeper by trade. God-thought simply filled him, however, and became so precious to him that he began to pour it over into the blank pages of his accounts ledger; when the manager came to examine the books he found the name of the Divine Mother written all over them. Eventually beautiful poems and songs too came from the heart of Ramprasad. Fortunately his employer recognized his genius and arranged for him to give up the bookkeeping, furnished him a life pension and even a place to live where he could devote himself to his compositions and devotions. However unlikely it may seem that this will happen to you, recall Swami Vivekananda's words: "Perhaps a prophet thou, who knows?"

Speaking of using spare time in japa, meditation, mental prayer, music or poetry, we should say that the lunch hour and commute rides by train or bus are obvious opportunities for this. Persons who work downtown in offices used to be able to find the nearest open church or other secluded place to spend the first half of their lunch hour in spiritual practice before giving the body its food. Today fewer and fewer churches are remaining open, and far fewer people are given an hour for lunch, alas. Japa and other internal exercises are not recommended during driving or operating machinery. Many ask how they can remember God while engaged in mind-consuming duties such as typing, writing out reports etc. One of our senior swamis, years ago gave us this answer: "You cannot, but you can offer that piece of work to Him before you begin, and again when you have finished it. And if you can remember to, in the middle you do it also. If you can form even this little habit, it will certainly be a help to your spiritual life."

### **Can we ever find the ideal work situation?**

It very seldom happens in this world of checks and balances. The ideal job opportunity or work environment rarely comes; we have to face this and be prepared to compromise. The mystics have told us that we must adapt ourselves to our environment, not expect it to adapt itself to us. There are situations, no doubt, which prove totally intolerable, where abandonment proves to be the only solution. But today many are trying to take the easy way out and change jobs the minute the shoe pinches. It is sad how many of us resent our work. Often it is only in desperation for lack of work that we come to realize what a therapy and opportunity for evolution it can be. I once saw a young immigrant girl who clearly had secured her first job in America, selling doughnuts across the counter. With what boredom she listened to each customer's request and with what disdain mechanically handed over the right doughnut and made the correct change! The individual customer was of no

interest to her. Contrast this with the alert salespersons you have known: they welcome, thank, chat or banter with you—looking for the personal contact which places spirit in touch with spirit and rewards the extra effort.

If our work-life happens unfortunately to be one distasteful to us, it need not become a monster, haunting our dreams. We can slowly attack the unpleasant angles of it, working patiently on as much as we can bite off at a time, by trying to put into practice some of the above suggestions. It is a great help here to recall Brother Lawrence, who found God a constant Presence in the midst of uncongenial work.

### **Relations with employers, employees and co-workers... Can we maintain our own ethical standards?**

It often happens in the business world that we are asked or forced to tell falsehoods, exaggerating the merits of a product; to conceal its defects, etc. It is fortunate if we are not forced to practice more deceit. Followers of Vedanta, and particularly of Sri Ramakrishna, have to be scrupulous about the practice of truth, and often wonder how to endure such deviations. He was the very embodiment of truth, in life, word and thought, and he used to say, “Adherence to truth is the austerity of the Kali Yuga, the ‘Iron Age.’” Now, we may be prepared for some austerity, but to lose our jobs by refusing to fib or otherwise violate our moral convictions? There is also the possibility of penalties and demotion being laid upon us. However, I knew one young man for whom virtue truly did pay off. He lived in London and was a recent émigré from India, a staunch devotee of Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother. Finding his employment in a city business, he went to the manager as soon as he was hired and informed him that his religious and ethical convictions were such that if the company should ever give him an order requiring him to lie or cheat, he would be unable to comply. He would have to refuse the order. The management, jolted by this firm stand, nevertheless agreed to our friend’s conditions. Respect for him only grew stronger through the years. He was later appointed manager of his division of the company. Our personal character makes its own way through life.

### **Peer pressure**

Sometimes the push toward something which offends our moral sense comes from fellow-workers. One can be under pressure to “join the gang” in surreptitious pilfering of company properties, products or provisions—food, paper, postage etc—or sharing pornography. Then there is the hazard of the annual office-party, where, like it or not, you had better show up and do what others do. All this has become a serious problem for earnest aspirants who understand the importance of mental purity. Purity is an aura. You create it



around yourself by the quality of your own thought and practice. Many have found this to be true and by maintaining for some time a constant watch on their own mind and speech, they have, without prudish preachments, eventually let co-workers understand and respect them.

Will not this isolation lead to loneliness? It may. You may not be able to find on the office floor or hospital ward or in your factory division, anyone else who is trying to put such ideals into practice. The only recourse, then, will be the hours away from work. Holy company has to be sought out and found. This is one of the principal functions of the Vedanta and similar societies, where meetings and classes for like-minded people are held. Seek them out. Both leaders and associates constitute “holy company” and with them you may form a mutually helpful relationship.

### **As an employee**

Needless to say, the spiritual aspirant will give measure for measure in the quality and quantity of his or her work. At the same time, we are not to be cheated ourselves. We should not be conscious or willing accomplices in the defrauding of employees by the management.

Thank your lucky stars if you are not subjected to one of these forms of peer pressure. It is not always easy to avoid such traps without giving offense or appearing peculiar. But then, Vedanta never said this was going to be all sunshine and roses; to be a practical Vedantist means to be something of a hero. In an earlier day when Quakerism was arising in England, these people showed their courage by being very scrupulous, frank and open in all their business dealings. Far from losing trade, they became, before long, what they had never sought to be—wealthy. Everyone wanted to deal with such honest people.

### **Seeing the divine in all**

When our employers or co-workers or employees seem to be veritable demons it is difficult indeed to superimpose divinity on what we see, as Vedanta asks us to do; to tell ourselves convincingly as we look around, “there goes Brahman.” But Swami Vivekananda assures us that by sincere and persistent attempts this *can* be accomplished: that one day we will see Him in everyone and everything. Ask yourself: “Why can’t I see the Divinity in this person? What is blinding me, what is standing in my way? Is He/She not everywhere?” The *Isha Upanishad* begins with this very instruction: “Everything in this universe is to be covered with the Lord. Through that renunciation, enjoy; you need not covet anything of anyone.” The Quaker poet Kenneth Boulding has beautifully portrayed for us this realization, in his *Nayler Sonnets*:

My Lord, Thou art in every breath I take  
And every bite and sup taste firm of Thee.  
With buoyant mercy Thou enfolded me  
And holdest up my foot each step I take.  
Thy sight is all around me when I wake,  
Thy sound I hear, and by Thy light I see  
The world is fresh with Thy divinity  
And all Thy creatures flourish for Thy sake!

Sri Ramakrishna describes this goal, this state, in many ways, giving it the name *vijnana*.

### **Facing criticism**

Facing criticism, whether deserved or not, we need to bear in mind that even if we are *not* guilty of the sins in question, we probably are guilty of nursing a case of paranoia. Most of us do. Our own self-image—the picture we cherish of ourselves and would like others to see—is sometimes outlandish. We cannot bear a word of correction or rebuke, because the ego tells us that what we have done is right; our judgment was wise; our memory hasn't failed. As Ramakrishna satirized, "My watch always keeps the right time." When you read *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* through, you are left with the portrait of one whose self-image held no paranoia; who could not think of himself as teacher, guru or master, hardly even as an individual; who said that as long as he lived, he learned. "I am the servant of the servants of the Lord."

But we—how quick we are to judge our critics! They must be prejudiced against us for our race or our sex; they are out to injure us, to put us down and climb over us. Making these assumptions is the easiest thing in the world. We take everything personally. And it is not necessary. Try letting the Brahman in the accuser address the Brahman in the accused; then "we" stand aside. In the work place when blame is heaped upon us, great discrimination is needed. If you actually are at fault, and you know it, it stings, like the dentist's drill; accept it. If you know you are not at fault, pick yourself up and dust yourself off, but hold back on retaliation—to see if you can fathom how this load of refuse happened to be dumped in the wrong yard.

Rather than despair of living like a saint in a world such as ours, try attacking the problem in small pieces. As a child I used to see a few persons whose work seemed perfect, whose presence was a benediction, who never appeared to be thrown for a loss. They were not swamis or anything special, just ordinary persons, and I used to wonder, are they self-made? Is it a case of the sheer grace of the Lord? Were they born that way? What I was feeling is what we have spoken of above: envy of the spiritual sort. We have the privilege of diving deeper into ourselves, to manifest the perfection latent within us. Light your own lamp! Lamp bulbs are of all sizes and shapes; you can only be what you are. But the beauty is in the light, is it not? As Jesus says, "Let your Light so shine before men...." □

# Thoughts on Karma-Yoga in the Gita

## Mataji Bandana Puri Devi

[The setting of the Bhagavad-Gita is the battlefield of Kurukshetra, where the Pandavas (representing good) and the Kauravas (representing evil) face each other on the eve of a great battle.]

The whole world is a big battlefield. The real Kurukshetra is within every person. *Avidya* (Ignorance) is Dhritarashtra, the blind king. The individual soul is Arjuna. The indwelling God, who resides in everyone's heart, is Lord Sri Krishna, Arjuna's charioteer. The body is the chariot. From the organs of the senses come *samskaras* (instincts), *vasanas* (longings), *ragadwesa* (anger and envy), *kama* (desire), jealousy, pride, greed and hypocrisy. These are the enemies.

Sri Krishna speaks from different levels of consciousness.

Human beings are a composite of three fundamental factors: cognition, feeling, and will. Three kinds of temperament also go with these factors: the active temperament with will, the emotional temperament with feeling, and the rational temperament with cognition. So there are three yogas. Jnana yoga is for the person of inquiry and self-analysis (rational temperament), bhakti yoga is for the person of emotional temperament, and karma yoga is for the person of active temperament. One yoga is as efficacious as the other. According to the Gita, there is no conflict among the three. The Gita wonderfully harmonizes the philosophy of knowledge, devotion and action.

Let us focus on action.

## Control of Actions Not Enough

The five organs of action, as taught in the Gita, are *vach* (the organ of speech), *pani* (the hands), *padam* (the feet), *upastha* (the genitals) and *guda* (the anus). They are manifested from the *rajasika* (restless, energetic) portion of the five *tanmatras* (subtle elements). *Vach* (speech) comes from *akasha tanmatra* (ether), *pani* (hands) from the *vayu tanmatra* (air), *padam* (feet) from the *agni tanmatra* (fire), *upastha* (genitals) from *apas tanmatra* (water) and *guda* (the anus) from the *prithvi tanmatra* (earth). That person who, restraining the organs of action, sits revolving in his mind thoughts regarding the objects of the senses, engages in sin. Such a person is self-deluded, a veritable hypocrite.

The organs of action must be controlled, but the thoughts also must be controlled. The mind should be firmly fixed on the Lord. Then only may one

be said to be a yogi; then only has one attained self-realization. In the Gita Sri Krishna instructs Arjuna in the broad sense of karma (action):

Yogasthah kuru karmani / Sangam tyaktva dhananjaya  
Siddhy-asiddhyoh samo bhutva / Samatvam yoga ucyate.<sup>1</sup>

O Dhananjaya, perform action, being steadfast in yoga, abandoning attachment and being balanced in success and failure.

Evenness of mind is called yoga. Dwelling in union with the Divine, perform actions only for God's sake. Success is the attainment of knowledge of the Self through purity of heart by doing works without expectation of the fruits. Failure is the non-attainment of knowledge by doing works with the expectation of fruits and thus having an impure heart.

Work performed with the motive of obtaining fruits can only bind a person. Such work will bring fruits and the performer will have to be born again and again and again in this *samsara* (world) to experience the fruits of his actions. If work is performed with evenness of mind (yoga of wisdom) with the mind resting on the Lord, it will not bind the performer; it will not bring any fruits; it is not work at all. Actions which are of a binding nature lose that nature when performed with equanimity of mind, with poised reason. The Yoga of poised reason attributes all action to the Lord within . □

### **Self-Abnegation: The Meeting Point**

Although a man has not studied a single system of philosophy, although he does not believe in any God, and never has believed, although he has not prayed even once in his whole life, if the simple power of good actions has brought him to that state where he is ready to give up his life and all else for others, he has arrived at the same point to which the religious man will come through his prayers and the philosopher through his knowledge; and so you may find that the philosopher, the worker, and the devotee, all meet at one point, that one point being self-abnegation. However much their systems of philosophy and religion may differ, all mankind stand in reverence and awe before the man who is ready to sacrifice himself for others. Here, it is not at all any question of creed, or doctrine—even men who are very much opposed to all religious ideas, when they see one of these acts of complete self-sacrifice, feel that they must revere it.

—Swami Vivekananda (*Complete Works* I: 86)

1. II: 48.

## *In the Attic*

### **Bhagirath Majmudar**

The occasion was auspicious, joyful, and charged with dynamic tension. Finally we found and founded an official Vedanta Center in Atlanta. Until now we had been quite happy holding our Vedantic activities in a rented house. It seemed, however, that Mother wanted a place of her own, and she gave us the will and the way to get one. Much before we even had a chance to deliberate, both the money and the house got together by Her mercy. Swami Yogeshanandaji cordially invited all of us to gather on a Saturday morning to clean up the new facility, cleanliness being next to Godliness.

On that Saturday morning, as our clean-up crew of devotees knocked on the doors of the center, Swamiji received us with an extremely brief welcome, followed by a work assignment for each one of us. My assignment was to clean up the attic, a task that unmasked my deeper spiritual feelings of work and worship being inseparable. I will be eternally thankful to Swamiji for this assignment of a high spiritual yield.

To go to an attic symbolized upward mobility, which filled my spirits with longing. I did not find, however, any staircase or steps to take me there. “How do you reach the top,” I asked Swamiji with an inherent trust that only he could propel me upward. With a smile, he pulled a string and to my utter surprise, there stood before me a “now you see it, now you don’t” staircase! “The steps are steep and narrow, so do not fall,” he told me, just like he had told us several times in his earlier discourses. I could instantly appreciate that the steps would permit only one person at a time. The ascent would, therefore, be lonely.

### **Balancing Carefully, Ascend to Silence**

With my hands holding a bucket of soapy water, a broom and a rag, and with my feet faltering on treacherous steps, I was reminded of a samsari’s tough act of balance. At the ultimate highest step, I faced some inevitable changes if I wanted to enter the attic. “I have to be on my knees rather than standing stiff and tall; I have to lay aside all the belongings that my hands are holding, and just lower my head,” I told myself. One quantum leap, and I was in the attic which offered only silence and solitude.

Now I saw a clothesline with old rags drying on it. “Once beautiful garments, now they have turned into rags. Does not the Bhagavad-Gita compare death and life with a change of garments,” I thought. But I had come there with a mission in mind. I picked up my broom. The first sweep, and the old dust rose up to create a cloud that obscured my vision. I also

found out that the body, although coming from dust, does not tolerate dust very well. However, a wet mop at once controlled the dust, and the water, having done its job, hurriedly disappeared from the floor. It did not linger to listen to its laurels. Also, I saw that a single sweep was not enough for a thorough cleaning job. Only sustained and repetitive efforts brought the desirable results. Again I remembered Krishna's teaching in the Gita: "Only by constant practice and dispassion can one attain perfection in yoga" (VI: 35). I also learned that it was necessary first to look for dust, cobwebs, and dirty spots in order to remove them. An attic is a dimly lighted space, especially when the windows are not clean. But clear vision needs clean windows. Once the windows were cleansed, I could see that the light outside and the light inside were very much the same. Our visionary saints say that after thousands of years of darkness, a single ray of light instantly illumines a cave. Similarly, a look through the cleaner window showed people outside hustling and bustling, soaked in *rajas*, while it made the dust inside the attic more visible. So I dampened my mop without dampening my spirits.

### **Growing Up and Leaving Behind**

It was about time to look into the nooks and corners. There were broken toys, torn gift-wrapping paper and popped balloons. I could hear the heart-felt but transient joys and tears that once were a part of these objects. "God bless those children," I muttered involuntarily, thinking how they would perhaps already be adults by now. They would laugh at themselves for having shouted with joy and cried over these objects at one time!

Finally, I found a hidden nickel in a remote corner. "Quite in the nick of time; the Center can use every penny," I thought as I put the nickel in my pocket. An idea, however, strangely struck my mind like lightning. The nickel—five cents—five senses—I should leave it behind. I followed my inner command and put the coin where it had been hiding anyway.

On my descent, it occurred to me that the steps of the ladder taking you up or down are not different. The descent, however, is much easier than the ascent. I saw a devotee on the ground floor sealing the kitchen windows. "If you keep on working this devotedly," I told her, "you may get an assignment of cleaning an attic in your next life!" I knew that my ego had descended with me to the ground floor. □

## *Toxic Work and the Time Bind: Can Vedanta Help?*

**Beatrice Bruteau**

Work can be dangerous for your health, says Barbara Bailey Reinhold; work can be dangerous for your family, says Arlie Russell Hochschild. There's too much pressure, not enough security, very little allowance for family responsibilities in balance with work commitments, *not enough time and emotional energy to go around.*

Barbara Bailey Reinhold, Ed.D., author of *Toxic Work: How to Overcome Stress, Overload, and Burnout and Revitalize Your Career*, is a specialist in career development, a consultant and trainer for corporations. Her book sympathizes with the many American workers who are finding their work life difficult for a new constellation of reasons: because of "out-sourcing," jobs are simply lost, shipped to third world countries; through "downsizing" (in order to be competitive in a global market with cheaper products), those workers who have not been "de-hired" are now required to work longer hours to make up for those who were discharged; the physical and emotional climate at work may be stressful or unhealthful; the work is too demanding, doesn't leave enough time for home, family, other activities. Home and family are another set of duties, tasks, obligations, cares. How does anyone cover it all? A great many people can't, and they get sick.

### **Capitalism and Family Values**

Arlie Russell Hochschild is a professor of sociology and the author of *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*. Her book is a study of how corporations are dealing with the new situation and how workers are reacting to it. The subtitle alludes to the fact that many people now feel more comfortable and more appreciated, as well as more interested and successful, at work than they do at home. Their selfhood is more developed there and most of their friends are there. On the other hand, home often seems just another set of jobs to be done somehow. "Somehow" is rapidly becoming "paying someone else to do it." There is a whole new thriving market in home and parent substitution: children reared in daycares, homes decorated by professionals, and flash frozen dinners shipped in at your call. Is this family life? Is American capitalism supporting the famous "family values"? Look at our divorce rate; look at our domestic abuse cases; look at our children.

There are values at stake in all this. The corporation may tell you frankly, "Time spent on the job indicates commitment: work more hours." Parents

may assert that daycare—even for babies a few months old—is better than homecare, because they want their child “to be independent,” just as they also claim that their own elderly parents prefer “being on their own.” When you can’t be there for your babies and parents, you can always send them one of the new line of greeting cards saying “Sorry I can’t be there to tuck you in ... to help you ... to spend time with you.”

Some corporations are trying to recover some humanity in the new work world. Task teams, given all that they need to accomplish their tasks and given freedom and authority to organize the work as they see fit, are proving to be more efficient and productive as well as happier. Old assumptions about time, work, and value can be rethought, experimented with. Worktime can be adjusted to include consideration of family time. With our globalized electronic technology, many jobs can be done just as well at home.

### **Daring to Want to Change**

“To make such changes, however,” Hochschild tells us, “we have to dare to want to change. Feeling that we are always late and low on time, trying to adapt as best we can to the confines of our time prisons—these are all symptoms of what has become a self-perpetuating national way of life.” Reinhold says that it’s better to be active rather than passive. Don’t wait for the change to happen. Don’t see the situation as a disaster and change as impossible. See it as a challenge, an opportunity to make things better. Talk to your coworkers and managers, present creative proposals for modest and limited experiments that increase control over both work life and home life, rearrangements that strengthen commitment to both and deepen satisfaction.

Hochschild agrees: “Any successful movement for social change begins with a vision of life as it could be, with the notion that something potential could become real.” One thing we’ve found out so far is that “small groups of people can bring about changes in culture and habit that an individual would not dare to attempt alone.”

Can Vedanta help? An American extension of traditional karma yoga may be an answer. As the Bhagavad Gita says, everyone has to work, so work is a very large part of our sadhana. It’s important for the individual to find and do work that is right for that person, that is a “good fit,” in which one can express, learn, grow, be helpful to others. There ought to be an “ananda aspect” even to our work: a deep spiritual satisfaction, a holy happiness. We should expect it, not believe it inappropriate, and therefore we should seek ways to bring it about.

It is also important to have strong values and to see how our work is consistent with them. The work itself needs to be for a good purpose and everything about it needs to respect the environment from which the product is drawn, the way it is produced, and the people who eventually receive it.



When these values are in place, workers can feel the meaningfulness of what they are doing, and it becomes a yoga, a way of union.

“But vision alone will not be enough,” Hochschild warns. There needs to be change in many of the underlying social conditions. “The rising power of global capitalism, the relative decline of labor unions, and the erosion of civil society” will all test our efforts to heal the world. We need to develop the “jnana dimension” of our karma yoga, studying the situation until we can propose something intelligent, meditating on it until we gain insight into the governing values and the mistaken assumptions, together with creative ideas about how we can initiate progressive improvements.

### **Yoga for Groups, Communities, the World**

Yoga is not only for the individual. There is also a yoga for groups and communities, for the world, and for organized systems in the world process. That is to say, there is a way for these collectivities and emergent unities to move toward better realizations of the Absolute of which they also (as everything that exists) are manifestations. “Realization” has two meanings: one subjective, as when our consciousness becomes deeply and keenly aware; and one objective, meaning making real, true, actual. Just as an individual’s “realization” is both a subjective awareness and an objective way of living and relating to others, so larger scale organized systems run on certain principles or insights or values or motivations, and express these in their large-scale behaviors, the way they affect large numbers of people, animals, plants, the planet, other peer organizations.

When we consider the five-fold *yama* of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras (see *How to Know God*, tr. Sw. Prabhavananda & Christopher Isherwood)—abstention from harming others, from deceit, from theft, from lust, and from greed—we can easily see how such a yoga would be appropriate for industries, commercial enterprises, and financial markets. It is also important for political units of various scales. World peace and ecological responsibility belong in such a yoga context.

All of these are work related concerns. It is because of neglect of such yoga practice that we have “toxic work” and a “time bind,” to say nothing of commercialized health care more responsive to stockholders than to patients, sex and violence for entertainment, and a worldwide economic system that makes unemployment and poverty necessary for its profitable functioning.

Our worklife yoga, therefore, is not just a matter of our individually dedicating our daily grind to the deity of our choice as a way of moving toward our personal liberation. It is also a matter of the work institutions, the businesses, the markets and the nations, coming to practice a way-of-life that is harmless, truthful, honest, pure, and generous. This also is yoga, is *sadhana*

(spiritual practice), the effort to bring the world to realization of its destiny as manifestation of the Divine.

This is an area and a theme not much explored in Vedanta so far, but clearly implied by its basic principles and its overall view. Perhaps the outstanding practitioner of “common good yoga” was Gandhi, who owed much to the vision of Swami Vivekananda. We can give high priority to bringing this issue to the fore and finding ways to promote such a spirituality. Perhaps American Vedanta has a special vocation to develop this kind of sadhana. □

### **Path**

Troubles abound,  
    temptations around.  
All cream and sugar  
    gives indigestion.  
So, what is the path?  
  
Good, bad, one and all,  
    whatever comes.  
Drown everything with love,  
    make this your way!

### **Ocean**

Ocean fog flowing  
    devouring hill top trees  
Stark silhouettes vanishing  
    into amorphous grey  
Cover all disturbances with love  
    continue on your way

—Swami Asitananda

# *Spirituality and Work: A Christian Perspective\**

**Charles Metteer**

Our day-to-day lives are mostly spent doing ordinary, routine activities such as working, sleeping, eating, commuting, doing chores, and maintaining personal hygiene. The few hours, if any, that remain are normally dedicated to family, friends, hobbies, entertainment, and religious pursuits. It is in this last category (religious pursuits) that our Christian culture has usually counseled us to develop our spiritual lives. While practices such as prayer, Scripture reading, fellowship, service, and meditation are vitally important for our Christian experience, they generally are not incorporated into the remainder of our day. Yet if we are to live entirely for God's glory (I Cor. 10: 31, Rom. 12: 1, I Peter 4: 11), then the twenty or so hours we dedicate daily to mundane tasks and demands should be as spiritually significant as our religiously-oriented, discretionary time. Thus, it follows that a fundamental aspect of Christianity is the spirituality of everyday life.

## **Taking the Everyday for Granted**

If this is true, why do so many of us overlook this down-to-earth spirituality and seek spiritual nourishment only in the little free time we have each day? One possible reason is our propensity to take everyday activities for granted because of their sameness and repetition. In general, the everyday is ignored until it becomes a problem. Since we find nothing remarkable in the ordinary, we conclude that it has no spiritual value. As a result, many of us seek out extraordinary experiences in our limited free moments. But in doing so, we too readily place our religious experience into the category of the unusual and thereby lose the valuable spiritual dimension of everyday life.

Fortunately, our everyday affairs have the inherent capacity to reveal the transcendent. Yet to discover God's immanent presence, we must move beyond merely going through the motions of daily life. Approaching life mechanically and mindlessly produces a dullness of heart that interferes with our spiritual perception and discernment. Our challenge is to pay reverent attention to daily life with the full assurance that God will meet us in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary. Our common, routine activities and situations can then act as sacraments that reveal the mystery of God. Over time, as we gain in our ability to find God in the pleasures and problems of

\* Originally published in *Spirit and Life*, July-August 2000. Republished by permission of the publisher and the author.

everyday life—and not simply in overtly religious events—we may gain a deep love and respect for God, creation, and our own concrete existence.

### **The Workplace as Dominant Reality**

From the beginning of the Hebrew Bible, work is portrayed as a divine ordinance for humanity (Gen. 1:26-28). This charge was carried out so judiciously by the Hebrews that they were eventually instructed to rest periodically rather than work longer or harder (Ex. 20:9-10). In like manner, our modern society places a great emphasis on careers. For many of us, the workplace is the dominant reality. More energy goes into our occupations than our home life. More status is accorded to what we do at work than any other factor. We ascribe more significance to our occupation than any other activity and, as a result, generally worry more about it than our health, family, and friends.

Finally, more time is put into our work than anything else we do. The average, gainfully employed adult in the United States will spend approximately 88,000 hours in the workplace from his or her first full day of employment until retirement. When this statistic is measured against the mere 8,000 or so hours most of us spend over a lifetime in church meetings and church-related activities, we can readily see why it is necessary to seek God's presence in the marketplace and not merely at church. Indeed, if we endure our jobs simply so that we may engage in spiritual pursuits in our leisure time, then we have a right to feel cheated and jealous of religious figures such as the Desert Fathers and Mothers who generally freely meditated on God while engaged in simple tasks. But if the spirituality of work includes recognizing the sacred in our ordinary occupations, then everyone—biblical patriarchs, ancient monks, and modern adults—has an equal opportunity to grow spiritually.

### **Closing the Sacred/Secular Split**

Although work is the dominant reality in our waking lives, it is given little spiritual reflection. How often do we seriously consider the purpose and meaning of our work? What, apart from financial remuneration, do we receive for our efforts? How does work contribute to our personal lives and communities? Is something “more” going on when we work? If we view work as wholly practical, rooted in the necessity to provide for self and family, then we may conclude that there is nothing “larger” at work when we work. Work and spirituality now appear as opposites. The latter is ethereal and generally irrelevant to this major component of our lives. On another level, some connection between the two is possible either by recalling meaningful moments or by hoping for future encounters with God while at

work. Yet rumination and anticipation never focus our attention on the here-and-now spirituality inherent in our daily affairs. The former practice is inadequate because it relegates the spirituality of work to past memories, whereas the latter practice is deficient since it prohibits us from discerning anything spiritual in our work until the next transcendent phenomenon appears.

### **Ghettoizing the Holy**

Unfortunately, in our hesitation or unwillingness to seek spiritual meaning in our immediate tasks and duties, we ghettoize the holy by restricting it to the religious arena. This sacred/secular orientation has made it difficult for many of us to integrate our ordinary work with Christ's charge to put the kingdom of God first in our lives (Mt. 6:33). In addition, we may fault certain clergy and monks for making an artificial distinction between "secular" manual labor and "sacred" religious practices, yet we tend to do the same in principle when we look for spiritual relevance in "Christian" endeavors rather than in everyday work. While a people-helping profession such as social work, education, or health care is the answer for some people, many of us believe that "ministry" begins only when we perform some type of church-related work or, better yet, when we are "divinely summoned" into full-time, paid ministry in the church.<sup>1</sup> This conviction inevitably forces us into a kind of spiritual or intellectual schizophrenia, in which our everyday, active life is disconnected from our spiritual life. As a result, "Christian work" and private devotions are seen as all the more necessary if we are to mature spiritually. This perspective is one of the major causes for the under-investment in work among Christians.

In light of this false dichotomy, how can we make our daily work a less secular experience? We could take an extreme approach and forsake our daily affairs for church-related or monastic pursuits. More feasibly, we could step back periodically from family, occupation, and community obligations in order to reconnect with God. Yet while the practice of "work and retreat" is a legitimate spiritual regimen (a busy Jesus withdrew at times for prayer, e.g., Lk. 5:16, 6:12, 9:18, 11: 1; Mk. 1:35, 6:46; Mt. 14:23), it does little to help us overcome the artificial distinction between sacred and secular

1. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin vividly points out, this hierarchical understanding of the spirituality of work is widespread among Christians: "I don't think I am exaggerating when I say that nine out of ten practicing Christians feel that man's work is always at the level of a spiritual encumbrance. In spite of the practice of right intentions, and the day offered every morning to God, the general run of the faithful dimly feel that the time spent at the office or the studio, in the fields or in the factory, is time spent away from prayer and adoration." Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 65.

activities. Nor can we find the basic answer in thinking that we bring the presence of God into our workplace. This type of spirituality is inevitably patronizing. In this scenario, we look inwardly for the divine presence as we go about our daily activities since God is not found in our everyday tasks as much as God is brought to remembrance in all that we do. Although this is also a commendable spiritual practice, it does not deal directly with the sacredness of ordinary activities.

### **Focusing on the Present Moment with Reverence**

Ultimately, the key is to find God *in* our everyday affairs, and not apart from them. To this end, we need to show reverent attentiveness to the task at hand rather than practice an ancient monastic abstraction from it. By carefully focusing on the present moment, we can not only deeply engage the activity on a sensory level,<sup>2</sup> but also see and hear through it to the even more fundamental reality underlying it. Now, in the midst of our routine chores and special tasks, we can find the qualities, ethos, and values of the kingdom of God without withdrawing our hearts and minds for prayer and meditation.

Several ideas correlate with this heightened awareness. To live and work in the present moment, we must believe that there is nothing more important than the here and now. It is not easy, though, to remain focused on what is before us. Our mind keeps pulling us away from the immediate issue. If we are to overcome this inclination, we must develop an ongoing disposition that enables us to view our work within a larger framework as we submit ourselves to God's will moment by moment. Two and one-half centuries ago, the Jesuit priest Jean-Pierre de Caussade made the point:

The present moment is like a desert in which simple souls see and rejoice only in God, being solely concerned to do what he asks of them. All the rest is left behind, forgotten and surrendered to him.<sup>3</sup>

De Caussade implied that those of us who rest in the present moment are like ascetics who renounce everything for God (specifically those who dedicate their lives to contemplation and, to this end, practice rigorous self-denial). We, too, forsake all distractions concerning the past and future that might divert us from obeying God's immediate will. For example, by

2. Even in the midst of the most physically and mentally taxing activities, we can learn to discern God's presence by reverently using our five senses. This orientation, however, does not come naturally, particularly when work is laborious, repetitious, and atomized. Yet over time, we may come to recognize God tantalizing us with clues about the divine purposes and character in the seemingly unconnected events of our work.

3. Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, trans. Kitty Muggeridge (Glasgow: William Collins, 1981; San Francisco: Harper, 1989), p. 10.

reverently attending to our tasks, we can overcome the desire to escape our daily lot. When work seems overwhelming, destructive, futile, or of little value, we are to trust that, with God's help, we can make some sense of the situation, work to create new possibilities, and mature spiritually in the process. Finally, this here-and-now spirituality provides a useful corrective to desert monastic and Marxist thought on work. Rather than contemplating God *as* we work (à la the Desert Fathers and Mothers), or contemplating ourselves in the works of our hands (à la Marx), we can find God *in* our work.

### **Asceticism and the Spirituality of Work**

The sacredness of the present moment is a truth that is seldom realized quickly. Only slowly does it move from a pious idea into a reality that is recognized in our every action. It is discovered through spiritual disciplines, one of the best of which is so ordinary that it is generally overlooked—work. If we live even in a minimally conscious way, we soon realize that life offers us numerous opportunities for self-denial. Accordingly, we begin not with the monastic practices of fasting, vigils, and austere work practices, but with reverent attention to our ordinary activities. When we focus entirely on the classic ascetical disciplines, we fail to see that the primary place of asceticism is in our everyday activities. Indeed, if we never exercised self-denial at work, we would become the constant plaything of our whims and latent tendencies, and do real harm to others. What if mothers fed their infants only when it was convenient, or fathers changed diapers when nothing interesting was on television? We can see where this would lead family life. Likewise, employees who long to tell their bosses that they are making life miserable for them, will exercise an ascetic self-denial for the sake of their job or a possible promotion.

Work is its own asceticism. Choosing to stay late at work to help a peer complete a project, telling the truth when our job is at stake, studying for a test instead of talking on the phone with a friend, shuttling the kids around town all afternoon so that they can participate in sports or take music lessons, focusing on a particular task so that it is done with excellence, volunteering to deliver meals to the homebound once a week in place of playing golf—these acts of self-denial are basic expressions of Christian spirituality. This point brings out a key difference between an ancient, monastically-based asceticism and a modern, work-based asceticism. The desert monks would purposely orchestrate situations in which they used simple, non-distracting forms of manual labor to free their hearts and minds for meditation. This approach was adopted because they believed that routine, everyday activities generally blocked communion with God and, thus, spiritual development. We, on the other hand, can use the ordinary, day-to-day demands and frustrations of work as opportunities to exercise self-denial. As such, they are the sandpaper of our sanctification and a cornerstone of the spirituality of work. □

## In Memoriam

### *Swami Bhadrananda*

Swami Bhadrananda, a senior monk at the Vedanta Society of Southern California, passed away peacefully at the Ramakrishna Monastery, Trabuco Canyon, on Saturday, August 26, of heart disease. He was nearly 83, and had been ailing for the last three years.

Born James Worton in Stanton Hill, England, in 1917, the swami worked in the coal mines from his fourteenth to his eighteenth year. Subsequently he joined the British Army Medical Corps and was posted to Hong Kong as a male nurse. During the Second World War he was captured by the Japanese forces, narrowly escaped execution, and was interned in a Japanese prison camp for nearly four years. After the war he returned to England, then moved to Canada where he worked as a nurse.

In 1956 Bhadrananda moved to California and made contact with Swami Prabhavananda in Hollywood. He undertook a pilgrimage to India in 1958. That same year he joined the Order at Trabuco and was initiated by Swami Prabhavananda. He went to India again in 1971, to take final vows from Swami Vireswarananda, then President of the Order.

Over the next 15 years, Bhadrananda served at Trabuco, Hollywood, and Santa Barbara, returning to Trabuco for good in 1986. He associated intimately with a number of the senior and pioneering swamis of the Western work, serving them during their sometimes extended visits to Southern California: Swamis Pavitrananda, Vividishananda, and Satprakashananda, and also Swami Vandanananda, long-time assistant to Swami Prabhavananda. He served Swami Prabhavananda for two years during the latter's last illness.

Swami Bhadrananda, though somewhat reserved on the surface, was cheerful and warm-hearted by nature. He was especially devoted to Christ, and was very regular in his spiritual practices. He was known for his common sense and British humor. He faced his long illness and the relentless decay of his body with patient resignation, maintaining his good cheer to the end. A pillar of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, he is sorely missed by many monks, nuns, friends, and admirers.

A memorial service was held on Saturday, September 16, at the Trabuco monastery.

—The Brothers of Ramakrishna Monastery



# *Thoreau and Gandhi: A Critical Comparative Analysis*

**Uma Majmudar**

*[In the winter 2000 issue of AV in the second installment of our “East-West Connection” series, we discussed the impact of Vedanta and Indian philosophy on prominent American transcendentalists. Toward the end of that article we saw how Thoreau had even experimented in living like an Indian yogi and practiced Vedanta in the “utter silence and serenity of the Walden woods.” Apart from his being deeply influenced by Vedanta, Thoreau was also a highly original thinker and a writer par excellence whose revolutionary essay on “Civil Disobedience” had inspired Mahatma Gandhi and his “Satyagraha” based on truth and nonviolence.]*

Was it only a coincidence that Thoreau was deeply drawn to Vedanta and Mahatma Gandhi was inspired by Thoreau and his essay on “Civil Disobedience”? Probably not. Human history testifies that a powerful idea or insight may strike anyone, anytime, anywhere, or as Theodore Parker put it, “inspiration is limited to no sect, age or nation, for it is as wide as the world and as common as God” (in Versluis, p. 12). Further, my research shows that each, Thoreau and Gandhi, had in him some of the same characteristics that attracted him to the other’s ideas and culture. Let us first compare and contrast Thoreau and Gandhi and examine to what extent Gandhi’s *Satyagraha* was influenced by Thoreau’s essay on “Civil Disobedience.”

## **Parallels**

Both Thoreau and Gandhi were trailblazers and revolutionary thinkers in their own time and place. Not only did they think differently from others but also lived accordingly. Far ahead of their time, both were visionaries and at the same time pragmatic men of action. Confirmed non-conformists, they took a moral stand on controversial issues—Thoreau opposed slavery, and Gandhi not only opposed untouchability but also worked hard for its removal. Both were incorruptible men who put their principles above everything—their families, their safety, security and even above their own lives. Thoreau and Gandhi knew that principles had a heavy price-tag, but they were prepared to pay the price—whether it meant going to jail or to the gallows! Nothing deterred them from practicing their principles—neither danger, nor defamation, nor even death.

## As Revolutionaries

Thoreau and Gandhi rebelled against unjust government, defied authority and waged a “moral equivalent of war” against their governments’ usurpation of human rights and dignity. Let me illustrate. In mid-19th century America, many states held Africans in slavery, and the United States had invaded Mexico in a war to gain territory. Thoreau understood that taxes supported the latter and that compliant payment also implied acceptance of the former. Thoreau had the moral courage to refuse to pay a poll-tax—and to go to jail in consequence—in order to make a public gesture of protest.

Similarly, in the early 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi, another champion of human rights and a great leader, displayed rare moral courage to resist the racist government of South Africa. He fought nonviolently not only for himself but for all his fellow Indians whom he led into a mass nonviolent protest called *satyagraha* (*satya*: truth, and *agraha*: insistence). We may note here that Gandhi was not the first Indian to suffer from racial discrimination in South Africa; long before him Indians had routinely suffered all kinds of insults and injustices. They did not mind, however, as long as they made money. Besides, they lacked education as well as moral courage to organize a nonviolent campaign. Then came Gandhi like a messenger of God—who later reminisced in his book *Satyagraha in South Africa*: “in that God-forsaken country I found my God!” We all know what happened to Gandhi at the Maritzburg railway station in South Africa where, thrown out of his first-class compartment, he went through an agonizing moral crisis—whether to return to India or to stay and fight! History was made in that single moment when the otherwise shy young Indian barrister decided to stay and fight and later launched his first satyagraha in South Africa. After returning to India in 1915, through a series of satyagrahas, Gandhi battled with the world’s mightiest empire and won; it was not only a political victory over the British but a triumph of the human spirit fighting with no other power but that of truth, nonviolence and voluntary self-suffering.

## As Believers in the Higher Law of Conscience

A student of the classics, Thoreau was an admirer of the Greek concept of liberty. He was moved by his reading of Sophocles’ *Antigone* which, according to Joseph Schiffman, was “a dramatization of private conscience versus public ukase. . . . In this conflict, Thoreau discerned a higher law at work” (in *New Approaches to Thoreau: A Symposium*, p. 59). In his essay on “Civil Disobedience,” he put it boldly that his only obligation was to do what he thought to be right. And “to be right,” he said, “was more honorable than to be law-abiding.” Was this a brash statement of an unlawful citizen? Far from it. It was rather a deeply meditated response of an awakened

individual conscience; it was a testament to the tremendous moral power residing in every human soul which Thoreau believed to be higher than any temporal power or man-made law.

To Thoreau, as to Gandhi, the law of the conscience—when clear and clean and pure—was more sacrosanct than man-made law. A deeply religious man, Gandhi believed in his “still small voice,” which he equated with the voice of God or Truth. Not only did he believe in it, but he depended on it in all the difficult situations of his life; in the silent chamber of his soul, he waited to listen to God’s voice before making any major decisions—whether about observing abstinence (*brahmacharya*) or leading a mass-scale “Salt-satyagraha” in India (1930) against the British salt monopoly.

### **Against Materialism and Against Machinery**

“Simplify, simplify, simplify,” said Thoreau in *Walden* and followed his own precept. A man of few wants and minimum needs, he refused to live “a life of quiet desperation” like the rest of his fellowmen in the 19th century. Lured by creature-comforts and awed by railways, his fellow-Americans were hopelessly lost in the newly emerging world of industrialization and mechanization. As Schiffman observed (in *New Approaches To Thoreau*), “attempting to convey the menace of the machine, he seized upon the most exciting invention of his time, the railroad, and inverted its familiar role: ‘we do not ride on the rail-road; it rides upon us’” (p. 58).

Thoreau’s Indian counterpart, Mahatma Gandhi, also believed in reducing his wants to a minimum and providing for his own needs. “The half-naked fakir of India” (as Churchill called him) was the greatest proponent and practitioner of manual labor. The Mahatma spun daily and took pride in wearing his own hand-woven, coarse *khaddar dhoti* (trousers) instead of wearing the soft fabric produced by textile mills. Like Thoreau, Gandhi, too, detested railways. He wrote in his book *Hindswaraj*, “railways are a most dangerous institution. Owing to them, man has gone further away from his Maker” (p. 62). He considered machinery to be “an evil” instead of “a boon” because it impoverished his country and starved millions of his countrymen and women.

In many ways Thoreau and Gandhi seemed to be cut out of the same fabric. Both loved walking and could walk for miles and miles; the 78-year-old Mahatma walked so fast in his marches that even young people could not keep pace with him. Both were vegetarians, Gandhi by birth, and Thoreau by choice. Both abstained from alcohol, and from sex (Gandhi was married, but gave up sex at age 35). Men of austere habits, each experimented in simple living, in naturopathy and dieting, sometimes existing on fruits or nuts or grains alone. Gandhi even fasted for health and for spiritual discipline.

## Differences

The similarities between Thoreau and Gandhi are so striking that we tend to overlook the few dissimilarities between them. Thoreau was a social recluse who delighted in the company of nature rather than men. Gandhi, on the contrary, was a mass-leader who was rarely alone; he lived and worked in the midst of people rather than nature. Thoreau, “to some extent and at rare intervals,” was a forest-dwelling yogi in the *Upanishadic* sense; Gandhi, however, to a large extent and most of the time, was a *karma-yogi* who, like his ideal of *ssthitaprahnya* (the equipoised man) in the *Bhagavad Gita*, performed actions in the world but with no attachment, ego or expectations of results. Thoreau was a poet and a nature-lover like Rabindranath Tagore. Gandhi, on the other hand, was indifferent to poetry or nature; spiritually, he was an heir of Swami Vivekananda, and like him, Gandhi also identified with the poor, the suffering and the exploited and saw in their faces the compassionate face of his God, the *Daridra-Narayana*. (Daridra: poor; Narayana: God).

Although both were nonconformists who took a moral stand against controversial issues—Thoreau against slavery, Gandhi against untouchability—their styles and ultimate aims were vastly different. What Thoreau did at an individual level, Gandhi did at the mass level. Like Gandhi, Thoreau believed in suffering the consequences for his civil disobedience, but unlike Gandhi, he did not make “self-suffering” an essential ingredient or a prerequisite in his principled protest. Both Thoreau and Gandhi went to jail—Thoreau, for twenty-four hours, and Gandhi for almost all his adult life. However, how long they stayed in jail is not as important as how each felt about it. The free-spirited Thoreau told Emerson, who visited him in jail, that he “did not for a moment feel confined.” Why? Because they could imprison his body, not his soul. Gandhi went even further and actually looked forward to going to jail. He felt not only “not confined,” but elated and uplifted; going to jail was as sacred to him as going to a temple. According to Nissim Ezekeil, “this is a special feature of Gandhian thought—its exultation in suffering and its insistence on transforming suffering into joy” (in *Studies and Commentaries*, p. 141). The fiercely independent Thoreau was an aesthetic man with strong ascetic-mystical tendencies, whereas the ascetic-activist Mahatma was primarily *a man of faith and prayer, a seeker after Truth* to whom politics was only “a vehicle of *moksha*,” as Bhikkhu Parekh put it (in *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy*).

### “Satyagraha” and “Civil Disobedience”

It is an undisputed fact that Gandhi’s “*Satyagraha*” not only matched Thoreau’s famous essay in its fiery spirit of rebellion against injustice but

also echoed its language and some of the well-known phrases. Does this mean that Gandhi stole Thoreau's ideas and even his language? Let us examine.

Gandhi admired Thoreau and openly acknowledged his debt to him, but only as a teacher whose revolutionary ideas gave moral confirmation to his own convictions. He is quoted to have said (in *All Men Are Brothers*) to President Roosevelt in 1942: "You have given me a great teacher in Thoreau who furnished me, through his essay on the duty of "Civil Disobedience," a scientific confirmation of what I was doing in South Africa" (p. 48). Similarly, he had enjoyed reading Emerson, Ruskin and Tolstoy, whose writings had significantly contributed to his own spiritual self development and public career. However, as Sujit Mukherjee observed in "Thoreau and India," one must remember that "neither Tolstoy nor Thoreau went to the extent that Gandhi did in pitting his own convictions against the law of the land" (in *Thoreau Abroad*, p. 161). Let us take another example. Gandhi himself admitted that the principles of "*satya* and *ahimsa*," which he used in satyagraha, were "as old as the hills." This is true, but it is also true that no one before Gandhi had attempted to lift those metaphysical concepts out of the scriptures and bring them down to ethical grounds; no one except for Gandhi had *actualized* those ideas into his own life or into a social-political context. What does it prove? That Gandhi had both the courage and the creativity to think differently, to stretch meanings, to revive ideas and to reinterpret age-old principles, but above all, he had the rare integrity to put those principles into practice. As Louis Fischer put it, "millions had read Thoreau. But Gandhi took words and ideas seriously, and when he accepted an idea in principle, he felt that not to practice it was dishonest" (*The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 89).

### **Was Satyagraha Derived from *Civil Disobedience*?**

What did Gandhi say about the widespread notion that he derived his idea of satyagraha from Thoreau's essay? He wrote to his friend and critic, P. Kodanda Rao (September 10, 1935 in Fischer, p. 87):

The statement that I derived my idea of civil disobedience from the writings of Thoreau is wrong. The resistance to authority in South Africa was well advanced before I got the essay of Thoreau on Civil Disobedience. But the movement was then known as passive resistance. . . . When I saw the title of Thoreau's great essay, I began to use his phrase to explain our struggle to the English readers.

Gandhi's statement can be verified by those who were present at the time or who participated in satyagraha. According to Gandhi's English friend and associate, H. L. S. Polak, Gandhi had already begun his nonviolent campaign in South Africa in 1906, which, for lack of a better name, he initially called

“passive resistance.” Later, however, when the South African whites labeled it “a weapon of the weak or the feeble-hearted,” he began his search for a better name which could correctly convey the full meaning of “*ahimsa*” as an active principle of love and nonviolent resistance. Until he found the right name, he adopted Thoreau’s phrase “Civil Disobedience.” That, too, did not help. Finally, after long search and research, he approved of the name “satyagraha” or “truth-force,” based on the principles of truth, nonviolence and voluntary self-suffering.

As Nissim Ezekiel points out, Polak’s document also verifies that Thoreau’s essay came into Gandhi’s hand when he was in the middle of conducting his program of “passive resistance,” and that “he (Gandhi) felt greatly encouraged by Thoreau’s argument that ‘a man must obey his own conscience. . .and be ready to undergo imprisonment in consequence—for after all, it was his body and not his spirit which was in custody’” (in *Henry David Thoreau: Studies and Commentaries*, p. 138).

Gopinath Dhwan, in his book *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi* (1946), supports Polak’s evidence that, although Thoreau’s essay provided an early inspiration to Gandhi during his first nonviolent struggle in South Africa, Gandhi “proceeded to elaborate the technique of mass-struggle—which he called satyagraha.” Not only that, but he continued to evolve satyagraha into “constructive programs” such as the removal of untouchability, educational projects, village industries and others.

### **Principled Rebellion and Self-Transformation**

The most striking difference, however, between Thoreau’s essay and the Gandhian style of satyagraha is this: the former reflects the fiercely independent, non-conformist personality of its author and his New England culture of principled rebellion against authority; whereas satyagraha, although bearing a close resemblance to “Civil Disobedience,” reflects the deeply spiritual character of the Mahatma and can be used as much by a single individual for inner self-transformation as by the masses for social-political change.

Gandhi and Thoreau have a great deal in common as two uncommon men of rare courage who did not conform to man-made laws but rather to the law of conscience. Their spiritual affinities were greater than their differences. However, one must never forget that each was steeped in his own tradition which is reflected in the style, intent and outcome of his works. Unquestionably, Gandhi was inspired by Thoreau, and his satyagraha echoed at times the ideas and phrases of the essay on “Civil Disobedience.” However, if we read Gandhi’s autobiography and other writings, we would tend to agree with Nissim Ezekiel that “the seeds of the Indian non-violent revolution (as also of his *Satyagraha* in South Africa) were not planted in

America but belong to the Indian ethical and spiritual tradition” (from his article “Thoreau-Gandhi Syndrome” in *Henry David Thoreau: Studies and Commentaries*, p. 136).

And was it not the Indian ethical and spiritual tradition of the Vedas and Vedanta that attracted Thoreau, and was it not the American Yankee’s fiery idealism and moral defiance that inspired the Indian Mahatma? Coming back to our thesis, each great man, Thoreau and Gandhi, had in him some of the same traits or tendencies that attracted him to the other’s ideas and culture. As Louis Fischer put it:

Thoreau, the New England rebel, borrowed from distant India and repaid the debt by throwing ideas into the world pool of thought; ripples reached the Indian lawyer-politician in South Africa.

### References

- Dhawan, Gopinath. 1946. *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*. Bombay: Popular Book Depot.
- Ezekiel, Nissim. 1972. “The Thoreau-Gandhi Syndrome,” in *Henry David Thoreau: Studies and Commentaries* (Eds. Walter Harding, George Brenner, and Paul A. Doyle). Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses.
- Fischer, Louis. 1950. *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publications.
- Gandhi, M. K. 1958. *All Men Are Brothers: Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi As Told In His Own Words*. Unesco: Columbia University Press..
- Gandhi, M. K. 1938. *Hind Swaraj or The Indian Home Rule*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan.
- Gandhi, M. K. 1928. *Satyagraha in South Africa*. Translation from Gujarati by Valji Govindji Desai. Stanford: California
- Mukherjee, Sujit. 1971. “Thoreau in India,” in *Thoreau Abroad: Twelve Bibliographical Essays* (Editor: Eugene F. Timpe). Hamden, Connecticut: The Shoe String Press, Inc.
- Parekh, Bhikkhu. 1989. *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy: Critical Examination*. London: The Macmillan Press.
- Schiffman, Joseph. 1969. “Walden and Civil Disobedience: Critical Analyses,” in *New Approaches to Thoreau: A Symposium* (Editor: William Bysshe Stein). Hartford: Transcendental Books.
- Versluis, Arthur. 1993. *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. □

## **The End Is the Same**

The yoga of action, say the ignorant,  
Is different from the yoga of knowledge of Brahman.

The wise see knowledge and action as one:

They see truly.  
Take either path  
And tread it to the end:  
The end is the same.  
There the followers of action  
Meet the seekers of knowledge  
In equal freedom.

It is hard to renounce action  
Without following the yoga of action.  
This yoga purifies  
The man of meditation,  
Bringing him soon to Brahman.

When the heart is made pure by that yoga,  
When the body is obedient,  
When the senses are mastered,  
When one knows that one's own self  
Is the self in all creatures,  
Then one can act,  
Untainted by action.

—Bhagavad-Gita, V: 4-7

## *Report*

### **Inauguration in Atlanta**

The formal inauguration of The Eternal Quest's "Vedanta Center of Atlanta" took place over the weekend of April 15th and 16th, 2000, in Atlanta, Georgia.

The program began Saturday afternoon with an Interfaith Celebration. Members of the interfaith coalitions of Atlanta, and of DeKalb County, came



at the invitation of Swami Yogeshananda to participate in a joint ceremony. The honoring of all faiths is something the Swami has constantly encouraged for many years. Each participant held an object or a text, vital to his/her faith and spoke about it appropriately. Swami Swahananda, Head of the Vedanta Society of Southern California and Chief Guest, added some words of his own to the occasion. Music from various traditions and refreshments concluded the afternoon.

Sunday morning found the Center completely filled as the inaugural puja began at 10:30. It was conducted by Swamis Swahananda and Yogeshananda and ended with an infusion of spiritual energy and a profusion of flowers. Swami Swahananda then spoke to an overflow crowd (video transmission had to be set up in a second room) with words of spiritual support and encouragement. His depth, warmth and sense of humor were appreciated by all. A *prasad* lunch followed, featuring a truly international array of food.

What began many years ago as a vision for Vedanta has become a reality. The core of this group began even before 1970 to envision and invest in a permanent center here. It was achieved in the ideal Vedantic way—many hands, minds and hearts working together to accomplish a mutual goal—a spiritual home. A vision accomplished by the grace of the Lord, with more to come as “Vedanta in Atlanta” puts down more roots and begins to put forth more blossoms.

—Lotus Vangen

## *Book Reviews*

### **God in Concord: Ralph Waldo Emerson's Awakening to the Infinite**

**by Richard G. Geldard**

**Larson, Burdett, NY**

**191 pp. hard cover \$23.95 1999**

Among the leading New England Transcendentalists of the mid-nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson was among the first to introduce American readers to Eastern ideas. Born almost two centuries ago in 1803 in Boston, he is considered at home and abroad as perhaps the preeminent American essayist and poet. Aside from his major works, such as *Nature*, the two volumes of his *Essays*, and his poetry, most high school students will have been introduced to “Self-Reliance,” a work which calls for men and women to wake up and think for themselves rather than have their ideas and lives dictated to them by moribund institutional dogmatism. It is also an appeal to be guided by the inner light of God which comes to us through the Oversoul.

Richard G. Geldard's book assumes that the reader is familiar with the main outline of Emerson's life, so the author concentrates on Emerson's relation to God and his opening to the infinite. As early as 1832 he was experiencing a crisis. Having resigned his position as minister in the Unitarian Church, he was preparing to leave the Church itself and, ultimately, most sectarian forms of Christianity. All this was in the background leading up to his July 15, 1838, "Address at Divinity College," Harvard. Present were only six graduates of the divinity school, along with faculty members and friends. If Emerson was seeking a way to have himself become persona non grata at Harvard for the next thirty years, he couldn't have chosen a better way. Sickened by the banality of the Unitarianism he had been living with, he went beyond complaining about it, by declaring outright, "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou thinkest as I now think" (p. 24).

What was back of this was not self-adulation but a refusal to believe in the unique divinity of Christ. Emerson's devotion to Jesus was profound, but, while honoring his luminous humanity, he refused to limit participation in divinity to Jesus alone. The Address won Emerson the lasting enmity of many academic theologians and the admiration of not a few young disciples.

### **Intuition of the Immanent God**

Emerson, a lover of Nature in all its forms, sensed "intuitively" that there is but a single divine principle that illumines every human being coming into the world of illusion, or maya. It corresponds roughly to the Hindu Atman, where "Atman is Brahman." Speaking of the attributes of God, Emerson could see the divine goodness and beauty in a stone or a flower or a human heart. He was determined to avoid any kind of naive pantheism, since the "Platonic" source of divine attributes transcends all their embodiments. Emerson lived long enough to engage in a literary battle against slavery and to embrace the main lines of Darwinian evolution. Well read himself, he was also read by leading intellectuals in Britain, some of whom he was able to visit in his several trips abroad. These included Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Thomas Carlyle. What he introduced to American letters was an early exposure to Eastern religious categories. His influence on Thoreau and Whitman is well established.

Twice married, Ralph Waldo Emerson suffered greatly from the premature death of his first wife, Ellen Louisa Tucker, after only two years of marriage, from the early death of two brothers, and the death of his son Waldo at the age of six.

"God," said Emerson, "is the universal mind," or cosmic consciousness. This is a God beyond personality into which we are absorbed when we die. He could not conceive of our individual thoughts and memories surviving the

dissolution of the material organism. Neither could he conceive of the extinction of the conscious self. Geldard's book offers a scholarly insight into Emerson's vision of God. In the bargain, we will also learn that Emerson's prose can at times be rather more involved than the concepts he is unfolding seem to warrant.

—James M. Somerville

**Chronology of Swami Vivekananda in the West**  
**Compiled by Terrance D. Hohner and Carolyn B. Kenny**  
**Prana Press, Portland, OR**  
**180 pp. notebook cover \$19.95 2000**

Based on Marie Louise Burke's six volume *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, this day-by-day chronology of Swamiji's Western movements and doings, as far as they have been ascertained, should be of lasting value to Vivekananda scholars as well as a continuing fascination for the interested lay reader. Starting from arrival in the West, Vancouver, B.C., on July 25, 1893 to final return to Belur Math, December 9, 1900, we see the swami's Western *lila* unfold under headings: year, month, day, city, state, country, lodging, hosts, lectures/talks/classes (time/location), letters written, special events, important persons, additional information and source in the *New Discoveries* volumes. To quote Ms. Burke's own Foreword to this work:

There are of course some blank spots, which some day, if we are lucky, may be filled, or which, if the trail grows dim, may remain forever Swamiji's secret.

Indeed, one note tells us that Vivekananda "saw play 'Charley's Aunt' again, accompanied by J. J. Goodwin and Swami Abhedananda." I searched to find who had taken the swami to this Victorian comedy in the first place to no avail. Perhaps it will "remain forever Swamiji's secret."

To further quote Burke:

The compilers of this handsome and helpful book have taken great pains to guide us aright. They have even supplied an abundance of photographs to help us visualize the world as Swami Vivekananda saw it one hundred years ago.

Also there is a series of maps which locate the stops the swami made and the dates he made them. All in all, this chronology is an amazing accomplishment. One only hopes that a similar work on Swamiji in Asia will someday be forthcoming.

—Erik Johns

## *Contributors*

SWAMI ASITANANDA, an engineer by training and a poet by avocation, has been a member of the Vedanta Society of Northern California since 1947.

MATAJI BANDANA PURI DEVI is President of Sri Sri Saradeshwari Ashrama of Calcutta, the school for girls and the monastic order started by Sri Ramakrishna's disciple Gauri Ma. She has lived at the Ashrama from the age of six and was initiated by and received monastic vows from Gauri Ma herself.

BEATRICE BRUTEAU, founder of Fellowship of the Holy Trinity, an ecumenical monastic community, writes and speaks on philosophical and spiritual themes. She lives in North Carolina and is a member of The Vedanta Center of Atlanta.

ERIK JOHNS, a writer and artist, has been a member of the Vedanta Society of New York since 1955. He lives in Carmel, New York.

BHAGIRATH MAJMUDAR, a member of the Vedanta Center of Atlanta, is a physician on the staff of Emory University and Grady Municipal Hospital. He also serves as priest at Hindu weddings and other community functions.

UMA MAJMUDAR, a writer and teacher of English composition at Mercer University, is a member of the Vedanta Center of Atlanta.

CHARLES METTEER is Senior Pastor at City Vineyard Christian Church of Chicago.

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

JAMES SOMERVILLE is a retired philosophy professor associated with the Vedanta Center of Atlanta.

LOTUS VANGEN, an artist and psychological counselor, is a member of the Vedanta Center of Atlanta.

SWAMI YOGESHANANDA became a monastic member of the Vedanta Society of Northern California in 1945. At present he is working in Atlanta with a group started by the Chicago Vedanta Center. It now has its own premises and is known as the Vedanta Center of Atlanta.