

## Editorial

### *Relating Vedanta to the World Around Us*

How does a conscientious spiritual aspirant relate private spiritual practice to the issues faced in the surrounding world? How does one's value system inform decisions about what to do and what not to do?

Some followers of nondualistic Vedanta may think, "Do we want to relate to the world at all? Shouldn't we rather try to overcome the world and be established in the divine Self?" Well, yes and no. We want to overcome the world *as we currently see it*. As Swami Vivekananda said, there is only one existence, seen by the ignorant as matter and by the illumined as spirit. We need to transform the way we *see* the world. And as our "sight" is spiritualized, as we increasingly feel "the other" to be part of "the self," our inner character will increasingly motivate actions which contribute to the welfare of other persons, society and our planet.

To do this we must start from where we are, with regard both to our condition of mind and to our external circumstances. In the Gita, Krishna gives the highest Vedantic teachings to Arjuna, but does not absolve him of social responsibility. Arjuna is a soldier; his duty is to fight for the establishment of right and justice *in addition to* waging his internal battle for self-conquest. Rather, by doing his duty, his *swadharma*, in the right spirit, he *will be* fighting the internal battle for self-conquest.

How can a Vedantist, or any spiritual aspirant, living in today's world perform duties in a way that contributes to personal enlightenment and also to the benefit of society? Or, as Swami Vivekananda said in the motto of the Ramakrishna Order, "For one's own liberation *and* for the good of the world"? How do we bring a spiritual perspective to what is happening in the external world? And how is that perspective reflected in our actions?

The articles which follow take up several issues that confront us at the beginning of the new millennium—the modern scale of evil, the despoiling of the environment, enlightenment and social action, efforts to overcome addiction, the need to achieve harmony and understanding among followers of different religions, the terrible conditions in our burgeoning prisons but also the spiritual opportunities of prison life—and show how some spiritually-minded people have responded to these challenges.

We invite our readers to share their own thoughts and experiences on how to relate spiritual practices and perspectives to the world around us.

—AV Staff

# *Reverencing the Cosmos*

**John Schlenck**

It is sometimes said that the religions of South and East Asia are intrinsically friendly to the environment because they stress the interrelatedness of all life. One might challenge this assertion by pointing to the increasing pollution and environmental degradation of Asia today. A counter argument could be that the present unhappy situation there is the fault of modern technology and exploitive attitudes which originated in the West. Instead of trying to assign either praise or blame, let us rather seek spiritual resources which can help humanity save and restore our threatened planet. What do we find in the Vedantic scriptures that can change our way of looking at the universe and bring us into harmony with and respect for our natural environment?

In the Chandogya Upanishad there is the story of the boy Satyakama who goes to the sage Gautama to be instructed. Gautama gives Satyakama a herd of 400 lean and sickly cattle, saying, "Take good care of these." Serious student that he is, Satyakama tends the cattle for years until they increase to a thousand. Then the bull of the herd says to Satyakama, "We have become a herd of one thousand. Take us to the house of your master and I will teach you one foot of Brahman." When Satyakama agrees, the bull tells him, "The east is a part of Brahman, and so is the west; the south is a part of Brahman, and so is the north. The four cardinal point form a foot of Brahman. Fire will teach you another." Satyakama and the cattle begin their journey the following day. When they stop for the night, Satyakama lights a fire and sits down to worship. The fire says to him, "I will teach you a foot of Brahman. The earth is a portion of Brahman; so are the heavens and so is the ocean. All these form a foot of Brahman. A swan will teach you another." The following evening Satyakama learns from a swan that fire, the moon and lightning form another foot of Brahman and that a loon will teach him further. The following evening he learns from a loon that breath, sight, hearing and mind form another foot of Brahman.

## **Partaking of the Divine Nature**

When Satyakama reaches the home of his master and bows before him, Gautama exclaims, "My son, your face shines like a knower of Brahman. By whom were you taught?" Satyakama answers, "By beings other than men. Now you must teach me, for only the knowledge that the guru imparts will lead to supreme good." Then Gautama teaches him that knowledge and leaves nothing out.

What do we learn here? Through following his teacher's instructions, tending the cattle, making them strong and healthy, Satyakama's heart is purified, and he is open to receiving spiritual teaching through nature—a bull, fire and two birds. Another lesson is reciprocity: Satyakama reverently takes care of animals and in turn is taught by them. We also learn that both external nature—the cardinal points, the earth, the heavens, the elements—and human nature—breath, sight, hearing and mind—are part of God. Not just created by God, but partaking of the divine nature.

This thought is expressed through rapturous poetry in the Svetasvatara Upanishad (IV.2-4):

Thou art the fire,  
Thou art the sun,  
Thou art the air,  
Thou art the moon,  
Thou art the starry firmament...  
Thou art the waters—thou,  
The creator of all!

Thou art woman, thou art man,  
Thou art the youth, thou art the maiden,  
Thou art the old man tottering with his staff;  
Thou facest everywhere.

Thou art the dark butterfly,  
Thou art the green parrot with red eyes,  
Thou art the thunder cloud, the seasons, the seas.  
Without beginning art thou,  
Beyond time, beyond space.

### **The Universe as God's Body**

This realization is confirmed in the Bhagavad Gita:

Upon me these worlds are held  
Like pearls strung on a thread.  
I am the essence of the waters,  
The shining of the sun and the moon....  
It is I who resound in the ether  
And am potent in man.  
I am the sacred smell of the earth,  
The light of the fire,  
Life of all lives....  
Know me, eternal seed  
Of everything that grows....(VII.7-10)

I am the heat of the sun; and the heat of the fire am I also:  
Life eternal and death. I let loose the rain, or withhold it.  
Arjuna, I am the cosmos revealed, and its germ that lies  
hidden...(IX.19)

Whatever in this world is powerful, beautiful or glorious,  
That you may know to have come forth  
From a fraction of my power and glory. (X.41)

The universe is God's body. At the climax of the Gita, Krishna says to Arjuna: "This very day you shall behold the whole universe with all things animate and inert made one within this body of mine." (XI.7)

This realization is to meditated upon. As the Isha Upanishad begins, "All this is to be covered with the Lord." We are to practice seeing the presence of God in all things. No doubt this practice is difficult to maintain without having any direct glimpse of the divine presence. But even before having direct vision, we can offer loving reverence and service to God's cosmic form.

### **Inspiration and Responsibility**

There is hardly a person who does not feel moved and elevated in the presence of grand natural scenery. If we can't see God in the little everyday things around us, we can practice seeing the divine presence in the Grand Canyon, the ocean, the star-filled sky or the Himalayas. Even good pictures of sublime naturescapes can stimulate spiritual sensibility. Swami Vivekananda was once asked why the Hindus are so religious. He replied, "We have the Himalayas!"

Going a step further, we can offer active service to God's body by taking personal responsibility and by joining in group efforts to avoid further polluting our endangered planet, to protect unspoiled places, to preserve the earth's natural beauty and healthy functioning, and to restore what we humans have already polluted and despoiled.

Thirty years ago I made my first pilgrimage to India. One thing that struck me was the amount of recycling and the paucity of trash. Newspaper was recycled to make paper bags, tea vendors sold tea in bio-degradable clay cups, food for travel was sometimes wrapped in banana leaves, water was used instead of toilet paper. There were no waste baskets in the guest rooms at the ashramas where I stayed. On departing each ashrama, I would leave behind a mound of trash in the corner of the room, feeling somewhat guilty.

I had also noticed, in my reading, Holy Mother's aversion to waste. On one occasion she expressed disapproval when a basket which had contained fruit was carelessly thrown out on the street. She had it brought in, washed and kept for future use. She would say that left-over food should be given to the poor, what was not fit for human consumption should be given to cattle, what

was not fit even for cattle should be put in ponds for fish. Nothing was to be wasted.

When I first read these things, they seemed old-fashioned. I thought, “Well, when people are poor and resources are scarce, people have to do these things. We have no need for such attitudes in America. Rather, the modern consumer economy depends on constantly buying new things and throwing away what is less than new. Otherwise people will lose their jobs.”

### **A Counsel for the Present and Future**

This was before most Americans were conscious of the great problems of waste disposal and the increasing pollution of the environment. Gradually I have come to see that Holy Mother’s attitude was a counsel for the present and the future and not just a relic of the past. And I began to realize just how wasteful we Americans are. It also has to be said, sadly, that as India industrializes attitudes there are changing. Waste and pollution are increasingly becoming problems there, too. Tea is now likely to be served in non-biodegradable plastic cups.

Again, let us not try to set Asia against the West, but rather derive inspiration and good example wherever we find them.

Vedantic tradition offers abundant resources for friendship, respect and reverence for the environment. It is up to us to draw on these resources. □

On the tray of the sky blaze bright  
The lamps of sun and moon;  
Like diamonds shine the glittering stars  
To deck thy universal form.  
Malaya breezes waft the incense  
Of sandal forests before thy holy face.  
Groves of wild flowers lie as offerings at thy feet.  
Unstruck music is the sound of thy temple drums.  
What wonderful worship is this,  
O slayer of birth, death and fear!  
My mind yearns for thee day and night  
As the honey-bee for the nectar of flowers.  
Shower the waters of thy grace  
On thirsty Nanak;  
May thy hallowed name  
Become his everlasting home!

—Vesper hymn sung daily in Sikh temples

## *The Rainbow Covenant: An Ecological Spirituality*

**Beatrice Bruteau**

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." And God said, "This is a sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the rainbow is in the clouds, I will look upon it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between me and all flesh that is upon the earth."

Genesis 9:8-17

Actually, there isn't any guarantee that our planet will not suffer some large-scale disaster in the future. We may be hit by an off-course asteroid. We already know that we are suffering from global warming. We may find ourselves again in an ice-age. Our own pollution may catch up with us. We may try, with limited knowledge, to manage the environment and only cause further trouble. Or, we may elect to do nothing and things will get worse on their own.

But that God has a covenantal relationship with "every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" is worth saying. It says that God is involved, that God is present. It also says that the "creatures" are important to God and have a significant role in "God's life," so to speak. All the creatures are "partners with God in the creation." This is parallel to Dogen's realization that all beings can be called "sentient beings," and as such, all beings are Buddha nature. All creatures are God's "glory," and "the world is charged with the grandeur of God," as Gerard Manley Hopkins said. Isaac Bashevis Singer said, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "God speaks in deeds and

his vocabulary is the universe.” A magnificent image for this insight is, of course, the dancing Shiva. And I’ve called the cosmos “God’s ecstasy.”

So, there is a “worldly” spirituality for us now, an ecological spirituality. We may think of it as living in appreciation of the universe as an expression of the divine. We may speak of world as the Cosmic Incarnation. We need to strive for an ongoing sense of the natural world as rooted in a covenant with God, a covenant that says that the world is intended to be an expression of God in the terms of nature and that the natural creatures are to help fulfill it. This means that there is value and meaningfulness permeating the world's chaotic, complex, unpredictable, sometimes surviving, sometimes perishing, temporal reality. It means that we, who have no choice about whether we perform acts that affect other portions of the natural world—for we necessarily and inevitably do so—must perform those acts in a spirit of reverence and awareness of the expressive presence of God. This is our acknowledgement of the *divine* nature of the world.

### **The Cosmos As God’s Incarnation**

But the world has also a *physical* nature. The spirituality that deals with this aspect is more difficult. What exactly are we to do and to avoid doing? Clearly the first thing to do is to learn how nature works—the cycles of nutrients, the fluctuations of populations, the conditions for resisting change and the conditions for achieving change. Especially, we must learn the conditions for living together that allow many populations to flourish.

We know that food must come in and wastes must go out. Fortunately, most wastes are welcomed elsewhere for some protective or constructive purpose. Some are not: radioactive materials, for instance. We must either find or create a new “elsewhere” (outer space has been proposed), or stop generating the toxic materials, or modify them in such a way as to render them harmless and useful. And some of our new materials are not biodegradable so that they can be available for other purposes; perhaps we should undertake to degrade them ourselves, since we synthesized them. And then we have questions of concentrations of certain chemicals, interference with biological cycles, and destruction of habitat. All difficult issues.

It would seem obvious that healthful living should take precedence over commercial success, but our present culture does not support this view. Indeed, we do not support some aspects of it, ourselves. Cars pollute, but we all drive cars. Animals suffer when bred for food or for laboratories, but most of us eat meat and use medicines and toiletries. What would be right? We need to come to some understanding of the trade-offs involved and the ethical principles that apply. A lot of discussion will be required. These are not easy questions.

But even when we have a view on some of the more extreme issues—which are thereby easier to decide—many of us doubt that we can really do anything effective about them. We can recycle our little plastic bags and newspapers, but what about the big polluters? What about acid rain, cancer alleys from chemical plants, destruction of rain forests, over-fishing, and many other large-scale problems? What can the individual do against the corporation and the nation?

### **Sabbath-Consciousness and Social Justice**

Michael Lerner, writing about “Ecological Religion,” declares boldly that we need a “massive change in the way we do business,” and he points to the ancient tradition of the sabbatical year mandated by Exodus 23:11, during which the Earth itself was supposed to rest, debts were to be cancelled, and the polarity of the rich and the poor reduced. Ecological righteousness, he points out, is tied in with social justice issues worldwide and redistribution of Earth's goods “so that poverty no longer generates abuse of the environment.” Systemic change is required and this calls for shifts in public opinion and public practice. This is where Sabbath-consciousness is helpful, says Lerner. It lets us experience unpressured living, together with hope. We the People are not powerless, and we need to have confidence in our own capacity to participate in the transformation of lifestyles, political and economic structures that are not good for people and other living creatures.

### **Moral Force of the People**

In this connection we can recall that most of the people Jesus was addressing were “peasants”—not the power class in their society but nevertheless collectively powerful. They were the spiritual heirs of the Children of Israel freed from slavery in Egypt and resistant to any domination. Several times the evangelists remark that the rulers did not make some move because “they feared the people.” And indeed on a number of occasions the masses of Jewish peasants had demonstrated with such moral force that even the Romans were obliged to back down. The message is: Powerless individuals, bound together in common conviction and with some concerted action, can bring about social change.

A prime example of this is the revolution Gandhi effected in India. Through his twin concepts of *satyagraha* (truth force) and *harijan* (his name for the so-called untouchable, which means “child of God”), he united formerly powerless people into a moral force that overcame the domination of a world empire. By renaming the powerless and giving them a new self-realization in the political order, great changes can be achieved.



Discussing the ethical principles until we decide what to do, and then strategizing until we have decided how to go about it, become in this context religious activities. Involving large numbers seems to be the effective aspect. Letter-writing campaigns are good, and a discriminating use of purchasing power may be even better. Whatever we can do to set good example and to encourage one another helps. Perhaps Internet facilities can be brought to bear. Some degree of organization to unify the effort and coordinate the activities seems almost necessary. We can dedicate modern communication technology to protecting, healing, developing God's creation.

We are in the covenant. We, too, can look at the rainbow and remember that we are party to a great enterprise. Our half of the covenant is that we are to mend and heal and promote and beautify and protect and nurture and enjoy this marvelous world. Partners with God in creation. A great work, a holy calling, a supreme privilege. □

## *Hindu Ecology*

**Swami Yogeshananda**

*[from a talk given at a meeting of the Faith and Environment Connection in Atlanta in 1999.]*

Gerald Barney, in an eloquent speech, gave the name “Global 2000 Revisited” to his proposal at the Parliament of Religions Centenary in Chicago in 1993. It was one of the central features of the Parliament; that we, Faith representatives, were asked the following severe and serious questions:

- What are the traditional teachings within your faith on how to meet the legitimate needs of the growing human community without destroying the ability of Earth to support the community of all life?
- What are the traditional teachings within your faith tradition on the meaning of “progress” and how it is to be achieved?
- What are the traditional teachings within your faith tradition concerning a proper relationship with those who differ in race or gender (conditions one cannot change), or culture, politics, or faith?

Let me attempt to reply to the first by citing ancient traditions of the Hindu people, then we shall move on to historical times and end with the profound analytical conclusions of the Vedanta philosophy.

When living in India I one day asked my abbot, “Why is it that you (pl.) never seem to throw anything away, even when it is clearly of no more use?”

“Where is ‘away’?” he asked in reply. “There’s no such place.” This consciousness is the hallmark of the Vedantic *darshan*. The Vedic culture of India looked upon the universe as a seamless garment—the garment of Brahman, Universal Spirit. There was a law, a pattern, discernible in its fabric: it was called *rita* (with which our words right and rite are cognate), and it manifested itself in every movement of the physical world and in every relationship. Here is a verse from the Atharva Veda addressed to the earth:

Whatever I dig up of you, O Earth,  
may you have quick replenishment of that!  
O Purifying One, may my thrust never reach  
right into your vital points, your heart.  
May your dwellings, O Earth, free from sickness and wasting,  
flourish for us!  
Through a long life watchful,  
may we always offer to you our tribute.

### **All Life Is Connected**

For these Vedic Aryans the sun was the eye of the world, the mountains the abode of the gods and the symbol of spiritual ascent, the river was the all-purifying facilitator, the Ganges supreme among them all. Lakes were all sacred, surrounded by invisible powers of holiness; plants were scrutinized, nurtured, set apart; phases of the moon were calculators not only of seasons but of the destinies of men: the new, the full, the eclipsed, all fraught with significance, as were the solstice and the equinox. Fire being the centerpiece of all ritual, offerings were made into fire for the nurturing and protecting of vegetable, animal and human life. There was special regard for animals, and as you know, certain of these were sanctified. Veterinary science was strong, and crimes against animals severely punished. So the interconnectedness of all life was obvious to them, and above all they saw man as the universe in miniature, a “hologram” of it, if you will.

We must move now to the middle period of our survey, the age of the Bhagavad Gita. The message here is once again of sacrifice, the practice of rendering one's activity in the world as selfless as possible. This is the age of spiritual aspiration, not in the hermitages of cave and forest, but in the very midst of political and cultural ferment. And here I will give you a free translation of the heart of this message of the Gita, from the third chapter:

All our activity becomes selfish unless it is done as a sacrifice, a sacrament; it is to be done in a spirit of service, without personal attachment. At the time of creation, in fact, mankind was told: you have natural desires. In order to fulfill them you will have to make offerings to the gods (i.e., the unseen and uncomprehended forces behind the phenomena of nature), to other men, to your forefathers

and to the animals. Thus is established the ritual of sacrifice. Cherish these forces of nature and they will cherish you: this will lead you to the highest good. Anyone who accepts the gifts of the gods, of nature, without offering to them anything in return, is verily a thief. Even in the act of eating, if you cook and eat food only for yourself, that is a sin; but if you eat after offering it to God, you are righteous.

Your work is done as sacrifice. Nature is pleased and sends the rain. From the rain crops come, and from that food comes your vital energy; from your vital energy, your children. This is the great wheel, the cycle of work and life, and anyone ignoring it and its foundation in sacrifice lives in vain.

### **Evolution from the Matrix**

We come now to the third and final phase, the most advanced and refined views put forward by the Hindus. I have already described that openness which accepts the fact that faith forces are the strongest and most conservative in a society; therefore there will always be a diversity of views on attitudes toward nature. You may know that some ancient doctrines of Indian philosophy/cosmology and some modern scientific thinking have found resonance. To mention one or two, there is the concept of evolution, the idea of all forms in existence having evolved from a single source, the substance merely changing its forms, and that source identified as the Matrix, the mother of all creation. And another: the best time for meditation, in the Eastern tradition, are the hours before dawn; endocrinology recently discovered that this is the time of maximum presence of "endorphins" in the brain.

If we look only at the consonance between Eastern and Western attitudes, we shall not learn much from each other. India now learned richly from the West, how to rearrange the environment. Has the West reciprocated by absorbing the lesson that the spiritual person adapts to the environment and does not expect the environment to adapt itself to him or her? You may have heard the Chinese adage that for one who wears sandals, the whole world is carpeted with leather: likewise thinks the Hindu.

There are radical differences between Western and Indian outlooks. Most importantly, the concept of the environment being something which is outside my body and extraneous to it, is the product of Greek and Judeo-Christian cosmologies. The philosophy to which I am only introducing you today takes a different tack entirely. Its claim is that the experiencer is essentially spirit, consciousness; in the "environment" are included the instruments of mind and body through which the experience comes; consciousness unknowingly perceives consciousness. But this will have to wait for another day. □

# *Enlightenment and Social Action*

**James M. Somerville**

The Enlightenment (Die Aufklärung), usually identified with a new 18th century emphasis on Reason as the only appropriate tool for obtaining truth, was, for the most part, inimical to faith and religion. But today Enlightenment has taken on another meaning, which has to do with religious experience. A Hindu or Buddhist in search of a reliable teacher will want to know whether the teacher is truly enlightened. Has he seen through the sham and pretense of human experience and come out on the other side? Can he lead others to see as he has seen?

In one respect both the Enlightenment of the secular humanist and that of the spiritual seeker have one thing in common: they both refer to a change, even a reversal of perspective. For example, in physics and astronomy, Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton built their view of the universe on a revolutionary idea. The earth is not the center of the universe around which the sun, moon, and stars move. The earth rotates on its axis and revolves around the sun, and over hundreds of millions of years, our galaxy rotates around a central mass, possibly a black hole according to current speculation.

## **A Copernican Revolution of the Spirit**

Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* introduced what he called “The Copernican Revolution in Philosophy.” Instead of holding the old view which pictured the mind as revealing the world “as it is,” Kant maintained that our knowledge of the world is limited by the way “we are,” that is by the structure of the mind. Since knowledge of the world comes through the senses, and since they contact the world only under the forms of space and time, our knowledge of objects must conform to the constitution of the mind. This makes science possible because science deals with space-time objects. But affirmations about objects not in space and time, for example, about God and the soul, extrapolate beyond the competence of the human mind for true, certain, objective, and publicly verifiable knowledge. They are, thus, subject to illusion.

The goal here is not to take issue with Kant, but to remind ourselves that Enlightenment in the spiritual domain involves a kind of Copernican Revolution in our way of seeing the world and acting in it. When a person is converted from a life of grasping, self-centered egoism to one of humble self-giving, a revolution has taken place in the way the individual sees him- or herself in relation to the world. What seemed acceptable and right in the first instance, now seems ugly and unattractive. Former worldly values cease to

determine one's thinking and behavior. One begins to see the world and human relations in a new light. One is on the road to Enlightenment.

This shift in perspective goes by different names. The New Testament speaks of "conversion," or "metanoia," a change in mentality. Christian Fundamentalists have a language of their own and make much of being "born again," "saved," "accepting Christ as one's personal savior." But, quite independent of any particular religion, we also speak of a person undergoing a change of heart. Instead of continuing to nurse a spirit of hatred toward a relative who once did something injurious, one is willing to forgive and forget, to turn over a new leaf with respect to that person.

Such experiences describe what might be called minor enlightenments. They are still not the Big One, unless they coalesce and endure so that they color one's entire worldview. I have often said that the first half of life is properly devoted to building up a strong ego, while the work of the second half is to get rid of the more unlovely aspects of egoism. Freud was right in holding that the Ego is the reality principle. It puts us in touch with the real world and provides the ability to cope with life's surprises and disappointments.

### **Types of Enlightenment**

But there does come a time in the spiritual process, especially if one has enjoyed a successful career, when it becomes imperative to start to distance oneself from the idea of one's indispensability to the world one has created. Or, as in the case of most of us who are neither rich, nor famous, nor especially talented, to settle down, live lovingly from day to day and begin to enjoy one's family and friends. That, too, can pass for a species of enlightenment: nothing special, just the realization that there is more to life than money, power, and the adulation of others in one's peer group.

However, even this break with a busy life, followed by a more mellow stage when one decides to settle down, take it easy, and let the world go by, can hardly be said to be the culmination of an enlightened spiritual life. It can be a form of "goofing off." The life of the arrived spiritual person is not his own. Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi, and Ramana Maharshi belonged more to their disciples and devotees than to themselves. If, during the first part of their lives, they were seekers, bent on self-realization and self-improvement, later on, when they became teachers, their lives were more devoted to giving than to getting. They did not merely sit crosslegged and contemplate the Void. Pilgrims arrived at five in the morning and there may have been times when there was scarcely time enough to eat.

The other type of spiritual enlightenment, more Western than Eastern, culminates in service and social action. Again, there is little time for the luxury of relaxing and taking a week off or even a day off. The demands on

the prophet and the holy person can put a severe strain on a would-be contemplative who craves nothing more than a few hours of leisure. That, at least, is what nature wants.

But as long as the semi-enlightened person still feels imposed upon by one's duties or the demands of one's clientele, one has not arrived at the perfection of the fully realized person. At the summit of one's spiritual development there will be a perfect union of the active and the contemplative life. Without diminishing one's dedication to the task or the persons one is committed to, the contemplative life goes on simultaneously. Like a mother, all of whose children are putting demands on her at the same time, she can get hysterical or go quietly insane or rejoice in being needed. Never losing her peace of mind, she can simultaneously and in turn take care of the needs of her brood. Amidst external chaos there can be interior peace. Such composure is not built up in a day or a year. It is the result of little kenshos or enlightenments that accumulate, like money drawing interest in the bank.

Of course, it is possible to achieve a fairly high level of enlightenment and then gradually, as it were, lose altitude. This is a bit like a midlife crisis, when the noonday devil makes its appearance. The monk who begins monastic life with great enthusiasm and gusto may one day grow weary and become lax. That is why religious communities perpetually need a shot in the arm, some new experience that can restore enthusiasm. Great social and political revolutions almost always simmer down and the institutional mind takes over. As with social entities, so it is with individuals. The more emotional the onset of religiosity, the more likely it will turn to mediocrity after a few years. How to keep the revolution alive was one of Mao Tse-tung's principal concerns.

### **Two Temptations**

Two temptations follow along with both individual enlightenment and social revolutions. The first is to rest on one's laurels now that the battle has been won and try to live on the capital and memory of the past. Build monuments to the heroes of the nation and celebrate them in music and song. That exempts us from following suit. Spiritually oriented people sometimes do the same thing: they celebrate their past victories over the world, the flesh, and the devil and think they are secure. But that is the very time when the danger is greatest. Unless one presses forward continually, one falls back. At every age, we should become wiser, more generous, more open. All too often the graph of our progress fails to keep pace with the model, and we get stalled at a level that is far below our potential.

Spiritual writers often speak about the life of faith as one of continual warfare. That can be misleading. Trying too hard can defeat and put off the advent of true interior peace. The Buddha nearly killed himself with austerities and hours of meditation until he came upon his Middle Way, not

too much and not too little. Tell that to the beginner and the result may be mediocrity, a much too easygoing manner. These things always require balance. As the Upanishads say, it's like walking on the razor's edge. Prudence comes later, after one has overdone and underdone all phases of the journey.

So it is in the social order. The ideal state and constitution lie somewhere between tyranny and anarchy, where we are granted the maximum amount of freedom, but always freedom under law. Some people in a society like ours cannot stand too much freedom. They abuse it. Others want to legislate for others so that the individual has very little wiggle room. So also in the quest for Enlightenment: some form of discipline is a necessity. Your Buddhist Roshi will ask, "What is your practice?" No practice, no progress. But too many "have-tos" are equally debilitating. *In medio stat virtus.*

### **Doing and Being**

For the social activist, with very little leisure for quiet meditation, one's "practice" may be caring for the sick, visiting those in prison, or campaigning for better health care. But if there is no true love and compassion to back up all this activity, one is far from Enlightenment. And if one's idea of Enlightenment is to sit at home being "saintly" while one's neighbor is in pain or in danger, one is just as "far from the kingdom," as the saying goes, as the hyperactivist.

So I return to what was proposed early on: the truly enlightened person is one who is able *to do* and *to be* at the same time. By *doing* I mean being engaged in acts of mercy and in social justice causes, and by *being* I mean resting in the reality of the moment, the now that is a slice of eternity. When doing and being merge and become one and the same one has arrived. One has almost arrived when one is at perfect peace caring for the needy, the terminally ill, and the castoffs of society, and when one is able to say, "This is my practice. I am not itching to get away from all this and find a cozy corner and meditate and just *be*." This latter kind of *being* has a per se value, but the great saints have always been those who could *do* and *be* without finding them in conflict with one another. Earlier in their progress toward Enlightenment most would have had to alternate between periods of activity and periods of quiet meditation. It is only when the two become one that the seeker becomes the giver, and that doing become being, and being doing. By their fruits shall ye know them! □

# *Vedanta and the Twelve-Step Philosophy*

**Ernest Shulman**

I would like to bring a spiritually oriented, widespread American phenomenon to the attention of people in the Vedanta community and clarify it as best I can. I am referring to the Twelve-Step family of programs. These programs number well over a hundred types, each type with many chapters in different towns and cities of the U.S. and many foreign countries. The prototype, the original and still the largest and best known program is Alcoholics Anonymous, first begun in Ohio in 1935. It has served as the model for these dozens and dozens of other programs, each one oriented towards coping with a specific personal issue confronting large numbers of people, but each one also oriented towards personal and spiritual development in general.

Thus there is a major program for friends and families of alcoholics, known as Alanon. Then there are programs for every type of addiction or problem known to humankind, and usually a few for each, whether it involves drugs, food, sex, gambling, overwork, surviving incest, or what-have-you. Typically, each program, known as a fellowship, consists of many chapters around the country or the world, organized on self-help principles without any kind of professional leadership. That is, mutual support and an established structure of traditions, procedures, and recommendations provide the basis for each fellowship. All service to a program is voluntary and unpaid, but if a program is flourishing, its strength lies in the willingness of the most active participants to express their commitment and gratitude for benefits received by offering time and effort to maintenance of the program. The underlying idea is that the more you put into an endeavor, the more you get out of it.

## **Strictly Informal**

How are these programs structured? Every program accepts as a member anyone who can give the appearance of participating in good faith. Membership is strictly informal, and does not involve documents, forms, or financial payments. There is no regulation of attendance at meetings, or anyone's time of arrival or departure, although every meeting has its own specific rules governing its format. Each group, as long as it is functioning, meets each week at the same time and place, usually in a church or hospital or any other institution willing to provide or rent out space. In each meeting, a collection is taken through voluntary, unforced donations to cover expenses,



primarily rent or refreshments. The average meeting lasts an hour to an hour and a half.

What happens in meetings? The heart of any meeting is members' shares. A person's share is a person's expression of thoughts and feelings concerning events in a person's life. No interruption or commentary is allowed during anyone's share, and for that reason, each person is constrained from confronting or talking about others who are present. Discussion during break periods, or more typically, before and after meetings, is normally acceptable, and is often quite useful. However, feedback offered during a meeting itself is typically non-verbal, supportive if possible, but only through gestures. A person can often benefit considerably from talking about highly personal matters to a receptive audience, especially if the share is spontaneous and involves honest self-examination. One often does not clearly understand one's own feelings or thoughts until they are expressed, either on paper, or better yet, in person to others. A person learns a subject best by explaining it to others, in effect by teaching it. For the sake of privacy and protection in everyday life, members' identities are shielded through the use of first names only, and confidentiality is required. The importance of this is expressed by the word 'anonymous' in the various titles.

In the average meeting, time is available for ten to fifteen people to share. If a particular meeting contains more people who wish to share than there is time allotted, those left out must unfortunately just swallow their disappointment.

### **Leaders Are Servants**

Each chapter or group within a program is self-governing, establishing its own format, procedures, and rules within the general framework of its program. A vote of those present at a meeting can be taken at any time to modify or even completely change existing rules. Since democratic principles apply so strongly, tradition states that "leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern." In fact leaders are supposed to be rotated at frequent intervals, and each chapter or group can diverge considerably from what is typically found among other groups in a program. This has the great advantage of allowing diversity of format and procedures within a program, depending on what meeting one attends. Of course, two groups with identical rules can differ considerably in atmosphere as a function of the specific personalities in each.

What is the spiritual basis for this family of programs? And how do they promote personal growth and strengthening of fundamental human values? The answers lie partly in the actual Twelve Steps themselves, the core of each fellowship that makes it a part of a worldwide family of programs. Note that the Twelve Steps are not forced on, or imposed on any member, but rather are

provided as a framework to be used at each person's discretion, and under circumstances chosen by each person.

The Twelve Steps begin with an admission of powerlessness over a basic personal problem, and go on from there. Two basic themes running through the Steps can be recognized. The most pervasive theme is acceptance of one's personal shortcomings, weaknesses, and human frailties, and the consequent need for reliance on support and guidance from a Higher Power, alternatively to be considered as God. Closely associated with this is a second theme that emphasizes the need for honest self-examination, with acknowledgement of wrongs committed and harm done to others, so that amends can be made and healthier living patterns established.

### **The Twelve Steps and Vedanta**

Now I would like to offer my own take on some of the core principles of Vedanta so as to indicate their equivalents in the Twelve Step Philosophy.

(1) Each person has a particular spiritual path to work out. Each spiritual path is based on an individual's specific self-understanding and conception of God. Such a conception is a personal matter not under the control of any theological dogma. The Twelve-Step philosophy is identical.

(2) All religious doctrines from each major religion are based on fundamentally similar spiritual principles, thus implying universal spiritual values. In Twelve-Step programs, no specific religious dogmas are promoted, only general ideas that cut across many religious traditions. The guiding Twelve-Step principle is: take what you like and leave the rest. This approach corresponds to Vedanta's openness to all major religions, with the emphasis on inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness.

(3) Vedanta emphasizes the divine elements within each person, even when such divinity is obscured through ignorance. Similarly, Twelve Step philosophy puts every member on an equal footing, with no distinctions of gender, age, race, class, education, nationality, sexual orientation, type of religious background, or any other mark of social identity. No matter how degraded a person has become through addictive behavior, a Twelve-Step meeting recognizes the inherent value, worth and dignity of that person.

(4) Ego-enhancement through purely self-serving behaviors is contrary to Vedanta principles. The first stated tradition in Twelve-Step programs is that group unity and the common welfare must always take precedence over the purposes of any given individual. Selfishness is generally condemned in both philosophies.

(5) The Vedanta principle of non-attachment to worldly pleasures, and avoidance of selfish emotional attachments to people and things, has a Twelve-Step parallel in eliminating obsessive preoccupations with other people, abstention from addictive behaviors, and having a balanced, moderate lifestyle.

(6) Illusions easily capture the mind, and so Vedanta encourages the practice of seeing the spiritual reality behind appearances. Similarly, the Twelve-Step philosophy encourages looking to God or a Higher Power for enlightenment and guidance so that egoism can be overcome.

### **Two Approaches Can Complement Each Other**

Personally, I find that Twelve-Step thinking accords well with Vedantic outlook. The two complement one another. My own conception of a Higher Power is the Higher Self that Vedanta emphasizes as the most important source of guidance for a spiritually oriented life. The Twelve Steps enable me to put my Higher Self into action in very satisfying ways. The Judeo-Christian heritage of God as the Creator, separate from mankind, has never appealed to my adult mind, and so my ability to utilize the Twelve-Step approach has benefited greatly from my understanding of Vedanta.

Let it be noted that Vedanta, like the rest of Hinduism, has a bias towards asceticism, which the Twelve-Step philosophy does not have. Conversely, the Twelve Steps emphasize personal reform and transformation in detailed ways that are not so specific in Vedanta. Also, Vedanta rests on a theological foundation that is necessarily absent from the Twelve-Step philosophy, which compensates in its own way with prescriptions in the form of maxims and ritual sayings. Maxims such as “Let Go and Let God” and “One Day at a Time” are well known. Best known of all perhaps is the Serenity Prayer, traditionally spoken by the members at the end of every meeting: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

But theory is theory, and practice is practice, and sometimes the twain don't meet. Both in Vedanta and in Twelve-Step fellowships, individuals vary tremendously in their ability and willingness to put theory into practice.

A spiritual journey that combines what feels most meaningful from the two traditions may have an extra impetus, and enhance the opportunity for self-fulfilment. □

# *God and The Scale of Evil*

**William A. Conrad**

*[Originally published in India International Centre Quarterly, Spring 2000]*

You can do very little with faith,  
But you can do nothing without it.

—Samuel Butler

What are the factors which go against belief at the beginning of the new millennium? How can traditional beliefs in the omniscience, omnipotence and benevolence of God, of any religion, square with certain actions in this world? The clearest example is the Holocaust perpetrated by Hitler's Nazis on the Jews and other peoples. Some 12 million people were selected by virtue of who they were, then tracked down in cold blood and killed, then either incinerated in ovens or buried in mass graves. This action was a crime against humanity by any reasonable definition of what constitutes a crime. If God saw this, and he must have, and since God did nothing on a large scale to prevent this, then it seems reasonable to assume he does not exist. For if he could have prevented the Holocaust and did not, then who needs such a God?

## **Not the Same As Personal Tragedies**

It is the scale of events constantly thrown into our faces by the omnipresent TV in every living room that prevents belief. Personal tragedies and similar events on a small scale can be explained away as due to the need for individual freedom, or as past karma, or as the lessons to be learned from them. However, on the scale of the Holocaust, the mind can only conclude that there is something wrong somewhere. The simplest response is that the God of religion is a myth. There was not only the Holocaust during World War II, but some 30 million soldiers and civilians were killed. Senseless killing on this scale did not cease with that war. During the partition of India some two million people were ruthlessly murdered for no reason except that they were Hindus or Muslims in the wrong place. In the last half of this 20th century, ethnic and religious cleansing came in the aftermath of the breakup of the former Soviet Union, with the numbers of victims in hundreds of thousands, as most recently in the former Yugoslavia. Africans have not been far behind with the Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda among others, to say nothing of Pol Pot's decimation of the Cambodians.

The single element all these killings have in common, aside from their ferocity, is the large numbers involved. These numbers are a consequence, on

the one hand, of the tremendous increases in population everywhere and, on the other, of the technological advances in the power of weapons. Perhaps the idea that “more is different” now applies to killings, so that we need a new way of thinking about murder on the scale of millions. Or, à la Marx, quantitative differences become qualitative.

### **Facing the Brute**

One common response to these thoughts is a loss of nerve which causes a person to retreat from the battlefield of life. This was the initial response of Arjuna at the battle of Kurukshetra when he looked at the fratricidal disaster which was about to begin. Krishna exhorted the despondent Arjuna: “Yield not to unmanliness, O Arjuna; it does not become you. Cast off this mean faint-heartedness and arise, O scorcher of foes.” We must face the brute, as Swami Vivekananda among others has said. There is no salvation in running away from life’s battlefield. Christ is not known for his militancy, but he too said at one point, “I bring you not peace but a sword,” to rouse his disciples’ flagging spirits. We too must stand tall as we contemplate the evils of our century so as not to repeat them on the same scale in the coming centuries. Evil there will always be. It is for us to attempt to blunt its thrust and contain its reach.

If there is one human trait that is exploited by every tyrant, whether petty or world-scale, it is the lack of self-confidence in oneself as expressed by Arjuna at Kurukshetra. Both words, “self” and “confidence,” have to be contemplated and understood deep in the heart, in order to make the meaning operative. Self-confidence is the watch-word of the future as of the past.

### **Fearlessness and Detachment**

A personal experience comes to mind. Working as a biophysicist in 1965 at St. Michael Hospital in Newark, New Jersey, I had the privilege of often being present in the operating room during open-heart surgery. Once I saw a young resident surgeon promoted for the first time, called upon to do the crucial cuts on the fused leaflets of a child's heart. His hands trembled, sweat poured from his brow, and I am sure, as Arjuna said in similar circumstances, his mouth was parched, his skin was on fire and he felt fear. At this point, the chief surgeon stopped the operation and said, “You may kill this child, but you must be detached.” Without fearless detachment, he would, in fact, have been more likely to kill the child. The operating theatre is indeed a modern battlefield where all the techniques of self-control are necessary. Sadly, however, not always is there a chief who can stop the action to calm a person. And yet without this fearless, calm and detached poise one cannot perform the assigned task adequately. This self-confidence with fearlessness is indeed

purity in action. No one who has been successful in any endeavour has lacked this confidence. History is a story of people who rose to the occasion by mastering fear—not of people who had no fears.

To come back to the question of scale, we may still ask: what role can religion play when its authority has been so undermined by the sheer scale of evil in the modern world? The scriptures prescribe a way of looking at action that is different from the reasons we commonly cite for action. Could such a change of perspective help us, and does it make sense? “Actions speak louder than words,” goes the proverb. “By their fruits shall ye know them,” says St. Matthew. Swami Vivekananda codified this idea as: “That action is good which purifies the heart and that action which makes us more impure is bad.” As the quotations imply, action has to be considered both from the point of view of the doer and the receiver. Can an action done with bad intent be spiritually beneficial either to the doer or to the receiver? I think not, though it might be physically beneficial. The relationship between inner motivation and the outward action is a very complex one. Ultimately, there is no duality.

I have a friend whose husband has Parkinson’s disease. The progression of the disease compels her to do more and more for her husband. I watch her as she grows in detachment as she performs the tasks, her actions driven by her love without any thought of return. Caught in this mill of her marriage, all selfishness is being ground out of her by the exercise of detached action.

### **Swinging into a Circle of Holiness**

In general, the purification of the heart renders one more loving and considerate to others, and in turn the process is helped by the action expressing it. This cycle strengthens our character and helps us to stand on the rock of truth, and our view of what is right becomes steadfast. It frees us from the tangles of personal desire and makes us willing to risk our own life, if necessary, to save another's. We act, not for the greater glory of God, but because the action in itself does good to us as the doer. The confidence in one's self and then the judgment of one's discriminating intellect improves with every action which purifies the heart. Unselfishness becomes a key factor in making a choice and thus one swings into a “holiness circle,” which is the opposite of a vicious circle. Whereas the latter drags you down, the “holiness circle” spins you upward towards a holy goal, purifying you all the while.

The attitude that all these considerations suggest is a radical change within, while nothing that is obvious alters. When I was new to spiritual life, my teacher told the story of a young monk of the Ramakrishna Order who saw an old woman painfully collecting alms, grain by tiny rice grain. Suddenly, someone accidentally bumped into her so that all her painfully collected grains were scattered in the wind. The adept monk was so shaken by this stray incident that he went into seclusion for a week. On coming out, he was a

confirmed nondualist but continued his acts of service as before. Nothing had changed, but there was a transformation.

### **The Self in Me Is the Same as the Self in You**

Perhaps we can follow the monk's response to small-scale evil to help change the way we respond to the sweep of large-scale evil that we are considering. We may start with the working hypothesis that we and all other beings are the unchanging Self and that the goal of life is to realize that as a fact of experience. We approach every experience as an occasion to ask, "Is this what I seek?", and the answer is "No, not this, not this" (*neti, neti*). Despite such an apparently chilling spiritual practice, the process is compatible with a life of service as exemplified by some of the monks of the Ramakrishna order. Their active life of service emphasizes the positive aspect of nondualism: the Self in me is the same as in you. Service to others, which seeks to see the Self in them, goes hand in hand with developing the discriminating vision to see that the world, as it is, is changeable and ultimately unreal. Together, these practices are self-reinforcing and form a holiness circle that spins you up to the Upanishadic realization "Thou art That." That realized, one can follow the example of Swami Vivekananda or Buddha and others who have lived and worked in the world, striving for the good of all beings, without being perturbed by the world.

Now, what about the God of spiritual practice, not of reason? Let us face the scale of evil honestly. Krishna says in the Gita (11:32), "I am come as Time, the waster of the peoples, ready for that hour that ripens to their ruin." In the Bible, God says, "I kill and I make alive, I wound and I heal and none can escape out of my hand" (Deuteronomy 32:39). Yet God never said anything about scale. God is also considered as benevolent, bestowing mercy and unmerited good upon humankind, even answering unspoken prayers. These two contrary aspects are held separate in the mind. In the image of Kali she is depicted as two halves: one benevolent, granting boons, the other malevolent, destroying life. This sounds like a reasonable picture of the facts, but how can the human mind actually cope with the heap of human corpses, with purposeful killing on larger and larger scales?

### **An Interim Solution**

I believe that if we juxtapose our concepts of God with the magnitude of the purposeful human evil that has been perpetrated in the 20th century, the concepts of God would have to change. I cannot answer the questions that this must raise, but I choose to make a change in my own thinking. When it comes to meditation, I choose to retain the image of a benevolent God. I recognize

the contradiction but knowingly choose to live with it until I can find an honest resolution.

Murder on such a scale tends to numb the mind. I can fight against this tendency, feeling empathy for all those involved in holocausts and intense moral revulsion that such events could actually happen. I hope that if I am in future presented with the precursor of such events, the memory of the past will give me the courage to stand up and say no. □

## *Prison as a Spiritual Opportunity*

**John Schlenck**

“Life is the struggle of a being to unfold itself under circumstances tending to press it down.”

—Swami Vivekananda

An intriguing spiritual phenomenon of our time is the use of prison time for serious spiritual inquiry and even daily spiritual practice. Probably all Vedanta centers, like other religious organizations, receive mail from prisoners asking for books and guidance. Some of the correspondents have already read Vedanta literature and want more books and/or further instruction.

To someone new to the idea, it might seem almost contradictory that people convicted of crimes and imprisoned for them would have any interest in developing their inner life. But as a matter of fact, prison gives people enforced leisure time and is often an occasion for reflection on what life is all about. Furthermore, it can fairly be said that none of us comes to spiritual life because we are already perfect. We all have shortcomings; we all have to struggle against negative and destructive tendencies of the mind.

### **Advice from Krishna**

In the Gita, Arjuna laments to Krishna, “The mind is so very restless, strongly shaken in the grip of the senses, gross and grown hard with stubborn desire for what is worldly. How can it be tamed? Truly, I think the wind is no wilder.” Krishna sympathetically answers, “Yes, the mind is restless, no doubt, and hard to subdue. But it *can* be brought under control through practice and by the exercise of dispassion.” Sometimes the experience of prison, combining lack of freedom *to do* with abundant time *to think*, leads to dispassion and to spiritual practice.



At another place in the Gita, Arjuna asks Krishna, “What is it that makes a person do evil, even against his own will, under compulsion, as it were?” Krishna answers, “Rage and lust, the ravenous, the deadly. Recognize these; they are your enemies.” Prisons are indeed places full of rage and lust. Physical and sexual abuse of fellow prisoners are everyday occurrences. Some first offenders, thrown in with hardened, violent criminals, are brutalized and traumatized for life. Others, in spite of such an unpromising environment, or perhaps in revulsion against it, try to develop self-control and seek peace through spiritual practice.

Readers of *AV* may recall, in our Spring 2000 issue, a letter from a prisoner to a devotee couple telling of his own spiritual reading and practice and sharing with fellow-prisoners and of the striking difference it had made in his cell block.

### **The Prison Ashram Project**

One well-developed non-denominational, though Hindu-based, prison ministry in this country is the Prison Ashram Project of the Human Kindness Foundation. Founded by Bo Lozoff in 1973, the project is based on the concept of “using prison time for focused spiritual growth, as if one were in an ashram or monastery.” Bo’s internationally acclaimed book, *We’re All Doing Time: A Guide for Getting Free* is the keystone of the Foundation’s prison work. With a foreword by the Dalai Lama, the book contains a combination of spiritual teachings from different traditions, yoga postures and meditation exercises, letters from prisoners on the spiritual path and also tells how Bo and his wife Sita came to a life of spiritual practice and service. Free copies of the book and of related audio tapes are sent to prisoners and prison workers who can’t afford to pay for them. Nearly 200,000 copies of the book have been distributed since it was first published in 1985. Bo also gives free workshops in prisons, spiritual centers, schools and universities, and has inspired many high school and college students to consider not-for-profit “careers of kindness” and service. Equally important, Bo and his coworkers offer friendship to prisoners who want to change and grow spiritually. Some of those prisoners go on to offer friendship and guidance to other prisoners. Ample evidence of what that friendship means is found in *We’re All Doing Time*.

Headquarters of the Human Kindness Foundation is Kindness House, a spiritual community living on a 13-acre rural property in Durham, North Carolina. Members of the community share a lifestyle of spiritual practice, simple living and unselfish service. The Foundation also publishes and distributes other spiritual books and cassette recordings and publishes a quarterly newsletter. In 1998 it founded the Interfaith Order of Communion and Community “to provide a supportive structure and ongoing mentoring”

to those wishing to deepen their spiritual life. Members take vows to give up smoking, drinking, recreational drugs, lying and pornography, to do daily spiritual practice and to engage in some form of service work.

The Human Kindness Foundation also strongly advocates reforms in the American prison system such as separating violent and non-violent offenders, restorative rather than retributive justice, and treating drug abuse as a public health problem rather than a criminal justice problem and suggests ways in which ordinary citizens can work to effect these changes. Those who are interested in the work of the Foundation may write to Human Kindness Foundation, P.O. Box 61619, Durham, NC 27715. Telephone: (919) 304-2220.

The following article tells of a remarkable development at one prison in California. □

## *In Prison with Thomas Keating*

**Judith Koock Strassman**

*[Reprinted from Contemplative Outreach News, Winter/Spring 2001]*

There is really no way to describe this phenomenon—Centering Prayer in Folsom State Prison. You would have to experience it yourself. I wish with all my heart that you get the chance.

Father Thomas came to see for himself how his teachings were able to flower here in the harsh setting of the California prison system. Harsh setting—that's an understatement. Folsom has been dedicated to incarceration since 1880. High, cold, stone-gray walls, rolled barbed wire, towers, guards, search lights, surveillance cameras, high powered rifles with telescopes, heavy barred doors—4,000 men walled in with anger, bitterness, self-loathing, and ineffable sadness.

Yet ironically, it is not unlike a monastery: individual cells, restricted access to the outside world, minimal life comforts, and unquestioned obedience to the rules. The only thing missing is the quiet. And often it is the promise of quiet that first attracts inmates to try Centering Prayer—then the tiny glimmer of hope that a loving God is reaching out to them.

For new inmates, when the shock hits that they're really being locked up to do a significant amount of time behind these walls, the feelings of disbelief, fear, and panic are overwhelming. Just getting used to the regimen, the severe restriction on one's ability to say anything about anything, the level of unrelenting noise, just getting used to being locked in with another man in a 4

x 8 cell designed for one, with zero personal space, zero privacy. Just getting used to the endless rules and their strict enforcement—the written rules of the system and, even more critical, the unwritten rules of the yard. Infractions bring swift and painful punishment. The prison world is so alien that new inmates, called “fish,” are put into a separate prison bloc until they learn to adjust.

Prison has nothing to do with rehabilitation. A man who realizes he must change his life has almost no options here. The few rehab programs offered are booked solid, their waiting lists jammed. That leaves only self-help—but how? What method? Most guys just settle in and grind out their time—time that is black, endless, unrelieved monotony. When they are released, nothing about them has changed. And in a flash, something happens they swore never would: they are back in prison again, serving another lengthy sentence.

There is no way that Centering Prayer should show up here. It is impossible, inconceivable. But it has happened—is happening. Four hundred men are doing their daily practice in Folsom Prison.

### **The Contemplative Fellowship**

It began with individual men, searching on their own for relief, trying different forms of meditation and practicing alone in their cells. One man, serving a life sentence, found a quiet room in the loft of the chapel, a rare commodity. He used it as his place of meditation. Another lifer happened to walk in on him one day, asked what he was doing, and they began meditating together. Other men began to filter in.

Then, from the outside, came Mike Kelley who had been a volunteer for prisons for a few years. His spiritual advisor had given him *Open Mind, Open Heart* and, after a time of solo Centering Prayer, Mike began looking for a group to center with. Brain storm! Why not form a centering group in prison where the chance of stable membership was guaranteed?

It takes forever to get permission, space, clearance, and proper documentation through the system. But finally, there was Mike, meeting in the upstairs room of the chapel, teaching the small group of lifers Fr. Thomas’ guidelines. Would it be accepted? Would it take? Each man had his own belief system—Sufi, Christian Scientist, non-Christian—and his own preferred mode of meditation. They called a meeting to decide—and voted unanimously that Centering Prayer was the one method most compatible with their diversity,

It did take. The men, now calling themselves “The Contemplative Fellowship,” began to meet for Centering Prayer on Friday evenings. Mike brought in Fr. Thomas’ videos and books. As far as he figured, it was set. They could just meet like that from then on.

But Spirit had other ideas. The group began to grow. Amazingly, it was the prison setting itself that fused and fueled the burgeoning fellowship. This is not easy to explain—prison life is so condensed, so concentrated—physically and psychically. A man has so much time to think, to think about what he reads, about what he's heard, to discuss these ideas in close and frequent conversation with other minds he will know/live with for the foreseeable future. A visitor from the outside is stunned to find that such deep and thoughtful minds reside here. And too, because it is impossible to shut out or ignore the strident noise that is constant—often obscene and vicious yelling—he learns not to contend with it but to make it integral to his practice. This takes centering deeper. And because during his lifetime, he has seen every con, heard every hype, run every game—and here, for the first time in his life, he has found what is true, real, and unassailable. This makes his practice of Centering Prayer something like ferocious. Certainly uncompromising.

### **A Quiet Revolution**

When Centering is this deep, the healing that results borders on revolutionary. This by their own admission. When they speak of what's happened to them since beginning their practice, it's in an awed voice—how the furious flood of hateful and revengeful thoughts has subsided, how they've begun to lengthen the fuse on their anger, how for the first time they have accessed an inner quiet and a peace they never knew possible. How, when they begin to look back objectively on their lives, they can see how they got here, and how they've come to feel that they belong to a brotherhood, a fellowship where, through love, they are healing one another,

These members of the Contemplative Fellowship stand out in the prison setting. Their attitude of peace, their smiling faces cause fellow inmates to wonder, to watch, and finally to ask, “What's going on with you, man?” The group was growing.

It was at a critical point. In prison, the code that governs inmate to inmate relations is as rigid as it is inhumane. In the yard, whites don't mix with blacks, neither mixes with Hispanics, who themselves are divided into four distinct gangs, each with its own rules. Territory is defined, and boundaries are inviolable. Men here learn this very quickly.

### **Gang Leaders Cooperate**

But Contemplative Fellowship seemed immune to these distinctions. Everyone wanted in. And in an unprecedented gathering of the gang leaders, held in the chapel, the Fellowship lifers asked that the Centering Prayer

meeting on Friday nights be ruled neutral turf, allowing anyone in who wanted in. The gang leaders said yes.

On Friday evening, in the chapel in Folsom, sit a circle of men of every race, religion and background. Their eyes are closed (very scary for inmates to learn to do). In the five years they have been meeting, there has never been an incident.

And Mike was watching this happen—the inmates taking the program as their own, taking responsibility for teaching it to the others, growing it—and he thought: Fr. Thomas Keating should know about this. He contacted him, describing what had happened. And Fr. Thomas came to see for himself what Spirit was creating.

They were trying to contain their excitement about his coming. A lesson you learn very quickly behind those walls is never to get your hopes up. There are so few things to look forward to—if you've let your hopes get too high and the event is canceled, it is devastating. Their biggest worry was that there would be a lock-down, which can happen in a flash. In this powder keg setting, when a fight breaks out in the yard, not only are the offenders locked up, but every inmate must return to his cell and all events are cancelled.

But there was no lock-down. Fr. Thomas was allowed to visit. It was wonderful experiencing the sweet gentleness that he brought into that circle of men. (Although they had seen his videos, you could see they were surprised at how tall he was.) And they met him with a depth of consciousness and gentleness of their own that I truly believe took him aback. Every man wanted to talk to him; each waited patiently (another lesson from prison.) They were eager to tell him of the radical changes in their lives, of who they had become. They wanted to tell him that the healing of Centering Prayer had not only touched them here in prison but was touching and healing their families as well, healing relations with their wives, sons, daughters, and parents. They wanted to tell him that they had heard from members of the Fellowship who had been released, who were Centering on the outside, and who were not coming back, not trapped in the revolving door that returned 80% back to prison. They wanted to say that they felt the Contemplative Fellowship has grown so powerful that it had drawn Thomas to visit them, just as it had drawn each of them to it.

### **We Are All in Prison**

Fr. Thomas sat in their circle, in a big armchair, telling them that we are all in prison, and the unloading of the unconscious, through Spirit's grace, brings us to a Father so loving, so unlike earthly fathers, that the far-flung, disparate parts of us can be reconciled and brought to wholeness. Nothing outside Folsom's walls could bring them this kind of peace. They knew exactly what he meant. And he invited them (this is so typical of him) to write

to him personally. He would try to answer each letter or see to it that each was answered. The lights were dimmed, the little votive candle shone in the center, and Fr. Thomas led us into that evening's meditation.

They still speak of his visit—of Fr. Keating coming to see them inside Folsom State Prison. □

## *My Journey to Interfaith Ministry*

### **Marchienne Rienstra**

What is a Protestant, Calvinist minister from a missionary family doing working as an interfaith minister at an ashram called “Mother's Trust, Mother's Place” in Ganges, Michigan? People raise their eyebrows in surprise, shake their heads in bewilderment, purse their lips in disapproval, and perhaps say a prayer for the safety of my soul! But those who know me best affirm what I know: that this fits. It is the culmination of a life which began during World War II in Rangoon, Burma, continued through childhood in the plains of Pakistan and the high Himalayas of India, and wound its way from Asia to America to Africa and back to America. All along the way, I enjoyed close friendships with people of other cultures and religions, and because religion and spirituality was always a passion for me, those friendships included intense interfaith dialogue.

### **Learning the Need First Hand**

My parents were medical missionaries for the Presbyterian Church. My physician father said he would rather heal than kill, and my nurse mother agreed. They were both Christians whose primary interest was in embodying in deeds God's love for humanity that they both had experienced through Jesus Christ. My father always wanted to be “where the need was greatest,” and it was great indeed during those tumultuous years from 1941-1955, when India became free and then tragically split into two countries whose citizens slaughtered each other in great numbers as they were uprooted from their homes to live in a new land based on their religious identity. This made a deep impression on me, for I personally witnessed the tremendous human cost of religious conflict and intolerance. We talked about these things as a family and as students from many religions and cultures at Woodstock School in Mussoorie, India. My parents counted devout Muslims and Hindus among their friends, as did I, along with Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, and others. My

parents were also pacifist by nature and conviction, and I have grown up treasuring and affirming their love of peace.

When we returned to the United States, I was plunged into a confining and narrow-minded religious atmosphere in western Michigan. It was incredibly painful and was outwardly symbolized by the move, from the grandeur and beauty of the Himalayas where I was free to wander in the spaciousness of the rooftop of the world, to a little brick house with a tiny back yard on a city street in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Through the years that followed, I experienced the damage done to the human soul and human community when people believe their beliefs and ways to be superior to those of others, and consider it important to try to persuade others how wrong they are!

About fifteen years ago, Lillian Sigal, a Jewish friend, and I began the Interfaith Dialogue Association in Grand Rapids. Once again, I found myself in friendship and soul-stretching, soul-nurturing conversation and communion with people of other faiths and cultures. I felt I was finally experiencing “home” again. Meanwhile, I was also serving churches as a minister, and teaching at a local seminary. This created a good deal of tension for me, since this latter world was considerably more narrow, and in it there was little understanding of my passion for interfaith dialogue and community. Why is it that people who are devoted to one religion can be so smug, so superior, so self-satisfied, so indifferent to the wisdom and beauty in the different faith of others? I still don't understand it.

### **Into a Joyful Adventure**

For the last couple of years, divine leading has taken me out of service to the institutional church and into the joyful challenge of working with others to establish an interfaith community in which people meet to dialogue, study, meditate, sing, pray, worship, share, and care for each other across all the old divisions of culture, religion, and ideology. It is a marvelous adventure in what I believe is the wave of the future. It has been pioneered by people like Rabbi Joseph Gelberman who founded the All Faiths Seminary in New York. This seminary, which trains people to be interfaith ministers, was the one from which I graduated recently. Increasingly, couples and families, neighbors, friends, fellow-workers, and business partners find themselves in close relationships while coming from different religious backgrounds. In addition, there are increasing numbers of people, especially among the young, who find that they cannot fit themselves into any of the traditional religious “boxes.”

These are the people we particularly wish to serve at Mother's Trust, Mother's Place through our Interfaith Community and our new Interfaith Institute, which seeks to provide a place in the West which honors the Divine Feminine, the unity at the heart of all the world's wisdom traditions, and the

special and diverse gifts they have to offer. We believe traditional religious wisdom and ways need to be treasured, but also transformed to fit the needs and emerging deep values of the new millennium. There, full partnership and equality among the races and both genders is a *sine qua non* in every area of life, including religious life in which the emerging wisdom of modern scientific cosmology, the new physics, and the ecological movement are integrated into the spiritual wisdom of the past. We also believe it is of the greatest importance to educate children into an interfaith consciousness and way of being in the world since its future rests with them. That future is much in doubt if the old superiority complexes and enmities afflicting religious communities continue.

We treasure being part of a growing network of spiritual communities dedicated to these same ideals, and are pledged to work with them to help usher in an era in which the religious ignorance, intolerance, and arrogance of the past are only a fading memory. □

## *Why an Interfaith Institute?*

Swami Tapasananda

On September 27, 1893, Swami Vivekananda rose to speak at the final session of the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago. The advice he gave to the several thousand mostly Christian dignitaries and theologians assembled in the hall was, from the perspective of today's world, remarkably prescient:

The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve their individuality and grow according to their own law of growth. If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possession of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character.<sup>1</sup>

It is very much in the spirit of these ideas that Mother's Trust has undertaken to start an Interfaith Institute. The goal is not simply to facilitate acquisition of an intellectual grasp of various faith traditions, but rather, as Vivekananda said in England in 1896, "to become many-sided. . .protean in character, so as not only to tolerate, but also to do what is much more difficult,

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama), I.24. Hereafter *C.W.*



to sympathize, to enter into another's path and feel with them in their aspirations and seeking after God.”<sup>2</sup>

It is the genius of Vivekananda that he would come to the West not to preach Hinduism, not to preach Ramakrishna, not to establish a new religion, but rather to teach the universal spiritual principles of all religions. As he phrased it, “The one infinite Religion existed throughout eternity and will ever exist, and this Religion is expressing itself in various countries in various ways.”<sup>3</sup> “Every religion is an expression, a language to express the same truth, and we must speak to each in his own language.”<sup>4</sup> “To learn this one central secret, that the truth may be one, and yet many at the same time, that we may have different visions of the same truth from different standpoints. . .this is the crying need of the day.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Embracing Variation**

The modern world has collapsed barriers at many levels and brought about a mingling of cultures and religions across the globe unprecedented in all of history. National identities can no longer be built upon religious and cultural monopolies. Willing or unwilling, we are brought face to face in the workplace, in the marketplace, in places of recreation, with a variety of religious and cultural values. “What can we do?” asks Swami Vivekananda.

This world must go on wheel within wheel. We can make it run smoothly, we can lessen friction, we can grease wheels as it were. By what? By recognizing variation. Just as we have recognized unity by our very nature so we must recognize variation. We must learn that truth may be expressed in a thousand ways and each one yet be true. We must learn that the same thing can be viewed from a hundred different standpoints and yet be the same thing.<sup>6</sup>

The existing alternative to this sympathetic worldview is being demonstrated all over the world today in hundreds of wars and mini-wars, all fueled by religious and cultural intolerance.

The spiritual traditions of humanity are like the rainforest, a vast pharmacopia in which new and more suitable solutions to humankind's

2. C.W. VI.136.

3. Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries, Vol. IV* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1986), pp. 501-502.

4. C.W. VI.331.

5. *New Discoveries, Vol. IV*, p. 502.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

spiritual illnesses may be found. We must learn what is there and how to use it. What is true? What works is true.

The Interfaith Institute is the logical extension of the universal teachings of Ramakrishna as preached in the West by Vivekananda. This, we feel, is a very valid and valuable service to the world. □

## *Reports*

### **Vedanta Center of Greater Washington D.C. Dedicates New Temple and Monastery Building**

2000 was a year of achievement and further promise for the Vedanta Society of Greater Washington D.C. in Silver Spring, Maryland. When the fledgling Center purchased its 5 1/3 acre property in 1996, there was only one rather small, rundown house on the property. With necessary repairs, this had to make do as a meeting place, a living space for Swami Atmajnanananda, the resident monk, and a guest-house for visiting monks and devotees, until money could be raised for further building. Public lectures were held in a rented hall some distance from the Center. Nevertheless, a regular schedule of lectures and classes was initiated in 1997, and the Center prospered through the devotion and hard work of monks and devotees and financial contributions by friends and well-wishers. Plans were soon laid for a permanent lecture hall, shrine and monastery building.

Last June 10, the new building, nearly complete, was formally inaugurated by Swami Smaranananda, General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Swami Swahananda, head of the Center, came from his main headquarters in Hollywood, California and stayed for more than a week, dedicating the shrine, giving talks and meeting informally with devotees. Swami Atmajnanananda moved into the new building and started classes right away, even before the kitchen was completed.

One of our staff visited the Center last November and was impressed by the new building's combination of simple beauty and well-thought-out functionality. Swami Atmajnanananda, a skilled carpenter, constructed the attractive wooden altar and lectern. The lectern, it may be mentioned, sits democratically on the same level as the congregation. The visitor, on a Saturday morning, noted the cheerful karma-yoga of many young devotees.

Not resting on its laurels, the Center is now exploring the possibility of purchasing an adjacent 5.7 acre property and developing a retirement community.

## **SRV Launches a Quarterly Journal**

The Independent Sarada-Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Associations of America, under the spiritual direction of Babaji Bob Kindler, have initiated a new spiritual journal. Titled “Advaita-satya-amritam: Nectar of Non-Dual Truth,” the journal published its first issue in Fall 2000. The 32-page issue contains teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda, and articles by Kindler, Purnoham Rob Reno (head of SRV New England), Annapurna/Leigh Anne Gurtov (head of SRV Oregon), Rabbi Rami Shapiro and the late Lex Hixon/Sheikh Nur Al-Jerrahi, founder of SRV. The annual subscription rate is \$18.00. Those who are interested may phone (503) 774-2410, fax (808) 776-1042, or e-mail SRVorg@teleport.com.

## *Book Review*

**Gita on the Green: The Mystical Tradition Behind *Bagger Vance***  
**by Steven J. Rosen**  
**Continuum, New York and London**  
**176 pp. hard cover \$18.95 2000**

The spiritual experiences of humanity have ever been the source for myths and scriptures, poetry and art. Thus have mystical truths been made available to humanity in its growth from simple tribalism to complex civilization. But often the spiritual basis of these texts has been diluted, romanticized, and politicized in the process. The rise of nations with their racial and ethnic considerations sometimes limited applicability of the teachings despite translations from the original languages. Even the translations often gave new interpretations to original intent.

Still, despite cultural trappings, some of these attempts have remained valid for a larger humanity, and certainly the Bhagavad-Gita is one of these.

Therefore it is not surprising that Steven Pressfield's novel, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, should have drawn on this source, as did J. D. Salinger in the recent past, or that Steven Rosen should discover it and be challenged to clarify the parallels with the original in its various manifestations.

*Gita on the Green* is a successful result of these efforts. It makes a valuable addition to the Pressfield novel and the ensuing movie. I saw the movie rendition, and though I did perceive the link to Karma Yoga and the idea of a spiritual teacher that was put forth, I did not get the total connection with the Gita as Rosen did. The movie's language is more colloquial than that of the novel. There are simpler locutions that bring it closer to everyday

speech. One is lulled in believing Bagger Vance is only an erstwhile golf caddy before the depth of his message becomes apparent.

It is this depth that Rosen penetrates in his work. *Gita on the Green* becomes a rich supplement to those who have been intrigued by *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. It shows how a long-honored spiritual substance can be dealt with in a short book of 169 pages and be made viable for a modern-day audience. Even the perennial tussle between monists and dualists finds new energy in Rosen's presentation of *bhakti* and *jnana*. So, for those of us who have long been in the Ramakrishna Vedanta tradition, *Gita on the Green* provides a fresh approach.

—Erik Johns

## *Contributors*

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ERNEST SHULMAN, a psychologist and writer, lives in New York City. He has been interested in Vedanta for nearly twenty years.

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

JUDITH KOOCK STRASSMAN is a community volunteer for Contemplative Fellowship meetings in Folsom State Prison, California. She also tutors children in reading skills.

SWAMI TAPASANANDA is a monk of the Ramakrishna tradition. A member of the Vivekananda Monastery and Retreat in Ganges Township, Michigan for many years, he is now affiliated with Mother's Trust/Mother's Place, also in Ganges Township.

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.