

## Editorial

### *Why Diversity?*

During the last several decades, life scientists have become increasingly aware of the importance of bio-diversity. This awareness is coupled with growing alarm over the destruction of species resulting from human activity. Worldwide, the pressure of expanding human population with accompanying industrial and agricultural development is resulting in loss of habitat for countless forms of life. While it is natural for some species to become extinct and others to arise, the radical suddenness of human dominance has overwhelmed nature's capacity to respond. We are poorer for this both materially and spiritually. We deplete various sources of food, change our climate, foul land, air and sea with our refuse and destroy the ozone shield. We impoverish ourselves spiritually by viewing nature as an exploitable *other* instead of recognizing it as part of ourselves deserving love and respect and part of a divine whole engendering awe and reverence.

Loss of bio-diversity has cultural and religious parallels. As a result of modern communications and rapid travel, many languages are dying out. One result of "globalism" is a premium placed on the English language. The functioning of large national and international organizations requires quick and easy communication in a single language. Due to the worldwide growth of the British Empire, followed by the rise of American hegemony, the English language is now dominant. Some other countries feel threatened by this, if not politically, then culturally. Popular American culture and its imitators have gained a similar dominance. Modern science, market economics and democracy, originating in the West, have become universal standards. The growth of religious fundamentalism is fueled in part by the fear of being subsumed in a faceless, universal, secular culture.

On the other hand, the growth of a few vigorously proselytizing religions has resulted in loss of religious diversity over the last two thousand years. Some proponents of two or three major religions think that is a good thing. In fact, they believe their own religion is destined to become mankind's only religion. Let us try to imagine a future in which the human race had only one language, one culture, one religion. Would we be better off?

Fortunately, there are forces working in the opposite direction. Even a proselytizing religion, as it spreads to different cultures, takes on characteristics of those cultures, even some religious characteristics, and thus becomes more diverse. Periodic revivals and reformations also bring diversity. Another opposing force: During the same time that American political and economic power has spread, America itself has become more ethnically and religiously diverse than ever before, and more and more Americans are

celebrating this diversity. India also continues to be extremely diverse, ethnically and religiously, both within and without the Hindu fold. Much as some parts of the world are especially rich in biodiversity and so are important for the entire biosphere, countries like India and the United States are special repositories of religious diversity and so are important to the cultural and spiritual health of humanity.

Another factor favoring cultural diversity is the explosive growth of cities. Large cities by their nature tend to draw diverse populations and also to stimulate intellectual creativity. Although the world's countries are becoming more alike, some countries are becoming more diverse due to increased mobility and immigration.

In spite of the trend toward globalism and cultural uniformity, modern communication arts have opened people to an appreciation of the ways of life of a great variety of human communities. Modern education at its best encourages varied and original thinking and discourages learning by rote. By contrast with traditional societies, modern science, the arts, and other branches of learning foster creativity and thus diversity.

What does all this have to do with Vedanta? A great deal, we think. Vedanta, especially Ramakrishna Vedanta, celebrates—one might almost say *enshrines*—diversity: many ways to think of the divine, different yogas, accepting the validity of all religious paths. Swami Vivekananda went even further and said that every person should have his/her own religion, in fact *does* have it. No two minds are alike. Each thinks of the divine in a unique way, each has to grow in a unique way. The many forms of the divine sanctioned and celebrated in Vedanta/Hinduism *nourish* as well as *reflect* this already existing diversity of human minds. Vedanta by its very nature helps to strengthen human diversity.

But Vedanta, like other religions, is also about unity—unity beyond and behind diversity, diversity within a greater unity. Without some idea of unity, whether a personal God, impersonal divine immanence, universal law, or even a simple sense of shared humanity, shared life, diversity by itself may lead to conflict, alienation and chaos. What is needed for all-round healthy development is diversity within unity, a balance between centripetal and centrifugal forces. If unity is imposed on a level where diversity is proper, the result is stultifying *uniformity*. On the other hand, if conflict, hatred and exploitation overshadow and hide our common humanity, not only humanity but all life on this beautiful, fragile planet is threatened.

Vedanta gives us a viewpoint, a handle, as it were, to work for balance, for creativity, for peace, for healthy variety, for strengthening underlying unity. By working thus we are in tune with both nature and God.

—The Editors

# *The Witness Self*

## **Beatrice Bruteau**

In Vedanta we are taught that the spiritual life is a search for the Self, the true Subject, the ultimate Witness, the one who experiences the real. This means, finally, the One beyond all descriptions, void of all defining and separating qualities, the Atman that is Brahman. In reverse direction, it also means that we have discovered that the ground of being, the ultimate reality, Brahman, is of the nature of selfhood—it is Atman.

That is the supreme metaphysical level. There are various paths to come to realization of that truth. All of them may be said to be gradual revelations of selfhood and the nature of reality. We find the self that is loving, devoted, celebrating divine beauty, and who feels the love of the Divine, both directly and as expressed through people and other beings of the universe. God is love, and the self is love. We discover also the self who knows, and knows the reality of its own knowing, and finds truth everywhere. We become able to pierce the successive levels of illusion which we ordinarily accept as our significant “world.” The real world reveals itself to us, and we find the self in us that knows it. And we even study consciousness as if it were an object for us to understand, working on it by means of our consciousness, which is subject. Through deepening practice we experience that the consciousness we study and the consciousness by which we study are the same, and we are it.

### **Reciprocity of Need and Service**

On the path of action, the same sort of thing happens. We do many things and search for the self from whom the action emanates. The world also acts, and we witness its behavior as things happen to us and to others. As we consciously interact with the world, both world and self reveal themselves at deeper and deeper levels, and we experience amazing things. The path of action often includes helping others in need, and one of the amazing things that happens, especially to persons made open and sensitive by meditation, is the discovery of how others have helped us. Our neediness was of a different type, but just as real, and has been cared for and aided just as truly. When this is realized, one's perspective on how the world is organized shifts dramatically. Our witnessing to self and reality stands in a new place. The world is found to be made of revelation and selfhood.

Insofar as the path of Karma Yoga means taking action to help those in need, it is important to be aware of this reciprocity. It is important also to have some experience of living in the place of the perceived needy ones, to be able to see what they see, experience their world. When an effort is made to do this,

the would-be helper is often astonished to find a perception utterly unknown before, something to which one had been totally blind. So, the first thing to do when one sets out to be “helpful,” is to live in the place of those to be helped, as far as one can. Just experience that place, that perspective, that world, for a little while. Don’t do anything yet, just “bear witness” to it. Acknowledge its reality, accept it into your own life.

### **A Daring Form of Spiritual Practice**

A daring and imaginative way of entering into such a spiritual practice is being offered by Roshi Bernie Glassman of the Zen Community of New York, who describes it in his book *Bearing Witness*. He organizes five-day retreats for those who want to experience “living on the streets.” Without money or provisions, a dozen or so people set out from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and walk to the Bowery. In that neighborhood they seek places to eat, restrooms, and places to sleep. Sometimes they are in missions set up to aid the homeless, sometimes they sleep in boxes, sometimes they are in churches or railroad stations. Often they are exposed to rain and cold. And they meet the other street people, the genuinely homeless, who are generous with practical advice and assistance. But most of all they meet with the unexpected, their deepest teacher.

Sitting practice is done together twice a day, and they also share their experiences, but most of their time is taken up by just obtaining the means of survival. Surprisingly, food is fairly abundant. Shelter is much more difficult. The public “shelters” are reported to be dangerous for several reasons, including hard-to-cure diseases. Walking everywhere—no money for transportation—can be painful (blisters) and fatiguing (one doesn't sleep easily on hard, cold surfaces, so begins the day tired). But the spiritual rewards are remarkable.

Participants get holes punched in their paradigms. They are required to practice begging. This is difficult, especially for givers. Many generous people cannot go to friends or strangers to ask for money, or food, or blankets. They have images in their heads of what people who beg are like. When they have to do it themselves, those ideas are shaken. Doubt appears and they touch the region of the Unknown.

### **Closer to What Really Matters**

“Aimless meandering,” another retreat exercise, is a revealing experience for strictly organized, efficiently time-conscious executives. They notice the neighborhood: crumbling buildings, graffiti, streets in need of repair, trash gathering in gutters, people sitting on stoops, standing on corners. They talk to the people: “How’re you doin’? We’re looking for a place to eat free; can

you help us?” Life is reduced to essentials, and the surprise is that one feels lighter, freer, closer to reality, to what really matters, to where everyone else is, too.

One of the most astonishing things retreatants report is the “abundance” of the streets: the streets can give you everything you need. A forgotten belt can be replaced by a clever and elegant braid made of threads from a found potato sack. A ragged streetperson may buy you the cup of coffee the shop clerk refused to pour into your used and saved styrofoam container. You’re waiting on line at a mission when a truck pulls up and people distribute rolls. Word comes, while you’re sitting in the park, having arrived too late for lunch at one of the missions, that they’re giving out organic vegetarian food nearby. You hurry over, and find some young people who are squatters in a condemned building dispensing soup, potatoes, and salad. You learn they do it three times a week and they invite you to help if you like. Small coincidence-miracles happen. You wish you had a newspaper? A street vendor walks up to you and gives you a paper when you admit you have no money to buy it. And we believed we had to have money to get anything! Experience jostles our ideas and lays before us the reality that everything we need is right at hand.

### **Faith in the Unfolding Moment**

Experiences such as these begin to stir deeper feelings. Many retreatants come away with a new sense of faith in the unfolding moment, trusting to the unknown depth in the nature of things, difficult to put into words or even rational concepts, but presenting a definite shift in stance and perspective. The paradigm transforms, classification schemes melt, attitudes rearrange themselves, recognition of kinship with a wider range of “others” appears. We have borne witness to aspects of the world we didn’t know. And the world has borne witness to our ignorance and our prejudice and our opening and our learning.

The sense of “self” has been enlarged. “We” and “they” have met and embraced and found to our amazement that we constitute a single community. The whole meaning of “home” advances to a new dimension. Home is where we find those we share life with. Those to whom we give and who give to us, with whom we do and experience things together.

Vedantists are familiar with such practices and insights. Swami Pavitrana used to walk in depressed neighborhoods, where there were alcoholics and homeless people sitting, living on the sidewalks, to strengthen his realization that the same Atman he recognized in himself was present in these persons also. Swami Vivekananda tirelessly preached the classless society. And the Ramakrishna Mission takes practical action to correct harm done by natural disasters and social injustice. Designing, encouraging, and

performing such spiritual practices can be very powerful for us in our quest for full realization. Vedanta in America is well positioned to be a leader in developing this kind of yoga, congenial to our national feelings and traditions.

[See Bernie Glassman, *Bearing Witness: A Zen Master's Lessons in Making Peace* (New York: Bell Tower, 1998), Part III, "Bearing Witness on the Streets." Roshi Glassman also heads the Zen Center of Los Angeles and the Zen Mountain Center in Idyllwild, California. Further information can be obtained by writing the Zen Peacemaker Order, Box 313, La Honda, CA 94020; e-mail: [peacemaker@ibm.net](mailto:peacemaker@ibm.net), or [www.peacemakercommunity.org](http://www.peacemakercommunity.org). Roshi Glassman lives in Yonkers, where he has founded Greyston Mandala, a network of businesses and not-for-profits, as a response to the plight of the homeless. His lineage is that of Taizan Maezumi Roshi of Los Angeles.] □

## *Vedanta and the Democratic Spirit*

**John Schlenck**

While reading Vedanta literature, the Western Vedantist now and then comes across sayings and incidents which resonate with his/her own culture. An important part of that culture is democracy. Here we are not referring so much to political democracy as to social democracy, interacting with people in a spirit of equality. For all our failings to live up to that ideal, it nevertheless permeates our Western, and especially American, culture.

At the end of the Gita, Krishna advises Arjuna to reflect on what he has heard and then *do as he thinks best*. Krishna doesn't command Arjuna to do as he's told. In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Gargi, like a modern, liberated woman, openly challenges Yagnavalkya in Janaka's court. While there are only occasional glimmers of this spirit in the ancient literature, in the lives of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Swami Vivekananda and other direct disciples of Ramakrishna, the spirit becomes much more pronounced. The Western aspirant rejoices in discovering this free and open spirit, refreshing by contrast with the authoritarianism and lack of intellectual freedom in much of Western religious history.

## Democracy vs. Traditional Patterns

When the Western Vedantist then bumps up against traditional, hierarchical Indian culture, where women are expected to defer to men, the young to the old, householders to monastics, he wonders, “What’s going on here?” He can’t help feeling that, in their relationships with people, Ramakrishna and his companions were closer to the modern democratic spirit than to traditional Indian patterns.

Along with other Asian cultures, traditional Indian culture deems it uncivilized for a junior to criticize, or even engage in serious dialogue with, a senior, a woman with a man, a householder with a monk. A senior, a monk, a man are considered within their rights to demand obeisance from juniors, lay followers, women. At the same time, there are responsibilities on both sides. A person in the position of authority is expected to have concern for the well-being of the junior, and the junior assumes a role of dependency on the senior and so can assert a right to be protected and guided by the senior. This no doubt cushions what could otherwise be a harsh, exploitative relationship. But to a person raised in a modern, democratic milieu, these traditional attitudes seem, from the standpoint of the superior, patronizing and condescending, and from the standpoint of the junior, demeaning— often characterized by unhealthy clinging and begging.

Vivekananda once said in the West, “In India, we have to take the shackles from society; in Europe, the chains must be taken from the feet of spiritual progress.”<sup>1</sup> To a Muslim friend in India he once said that his dream for the future of India was a Vedantic brain with an Islamic body. His ideal was to combine the spiritual freedom of Vedanta with social democracy and freedom. Speaking from an historical standpoint, he said:

Just as . . . we find [that] . . . Western races . . . cannot bear absolute rule, that they are always trying to prevent any one man from ruling over them, and are gradually advancing to higher and higher democratic ideas. . . so, in Indian metaphysics, exactly the same phenomenon appears in the development of spiritual life. The multiplicity of gods gave place to one God of the universe, and in the Upanishads there is a rebellion even against that one God. . . it was . . . intolerable that there should be one person ruling this universe. . . The idea grows and grows, until it attains its climax. In almost all of the Upanishads, we find the climax coming at the last, and that is the dethroning of this God of the universe. The personality of God vanishes, the impersonality comes. God is no more a person, no more a human being, however magnified and exaggerated, who rules this universe, but . . . has become

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Mayavati Memorial Edition (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), II.115.

an embodied principle in every being, immanent in the whole universe. . The last word of each Upanishad is, “Thou art That.” There is but One Eternally Blissful Principle, and that One is manifesting Itself as all this variety.<sup>2</sup>

Turning now from the theoretical to the practical, we find in the lives and examples of Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swamiji a combination of spiritual and social democracy.

### **Testing the Teacher**

Ramakrishna encouraged his disciples to test him. One time, when Yogen (later Swami Yogananda) was staying with Ramakrishna, he became suspicious when the Master left his room in the middle of the night. He thought that maybe he was secretly going to visit his wife, Holy Mother, in the Nahabat. So he waited outside the Master’s room, in full view of the Nahabat. When, some time later, the Master returned from the direction of the Panchavati instead of the Nahabat, Yogen was deeply ashamed of his suspicion. But Ramakrishna, instead of scolding him, encouraged him, saying, “One should observe a sadhu by day and by night.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the disciple should test the teacher before accepting him.

Narendra (later Vivekananda) also received such encouragement, though he hardly needed it. By nature combative, plain-spoken, self-confident to a degree that seemed arrogant to some observers, he challenged Ramakrishna continually, from the beginning to the end of his discipleship. Seeing Narendra’s complete sincerity and great spiritual potential, Ramakrishna trained him much like an expert wrestler training a student or a lion raising her cubs, building strength through a combination of love and challenge. It may be thought that in their relationship Narendra was modern and Ramakrishna was traditional. It seems to me that both were modern while embodying the best of tradition.

Ramakrishna’s relationship with women was also unusual by traditional standards. As pointed out by Swami Sarvagatananda during a radio interview some years ago, Ramakrishna’s first teacher was a woman, his first disciple was a woman, and he worshipped his own wife as God. When Holy Mother felt diffident about his encouraging her to continue his ministry, saying, “What

2. Ibid., II.190-91.

3. Cf. Swami Gambhirananda, ed., *The Apostles of Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), pp. 151-52.



can I do? I am a mere woman,” he rejoined, “No, no. You will have to do many things.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Respect, Faith and Equality**

Vivekananda had a great capacity to make friends wherever he went, to relate to people in all walks of life, all cultures and both sexes in a spirit of respect and equality. This is especially revealed in his letters. And although he was sometimes a hard taskmaster with his disciples, he never discouraged them from questioning him, and often expressed the faith that their potential was as great as his.

Holy Mother related to her disciples primarily as a mother to her children. But there are other characteristics of her ministry and her personality. When Rammay (Swami Gaurishwarananda) as a child first visited Holy Mother, he expected her to be seated on a throne with ladies attending her. Much to his surprise, he found her working in the kitchen like an ordinary housewife. She asked him to wait while she finished her work and then come and salute her. Her respect for all forms of labor resonates with Americans. A disciple once asked her why she did all kinds of work without accepting anyone’s help. She replied, “My child, it is good to be active.” Then, in all seriousness, she said to the astonished disciple, “Bless me that I may work as long as I live.”<sup>5</sup> In her view no work was menial.

Holy Mother gave her disciples remarkable freedom to question her, even at times to warn and criticize her. It was her lot in later life to live with her brothers and their families. For a person of her spiritual sensibility, this was a great trial, with the worldliness of her brothers on the one hand, and on the other hand the neurosis, petulance, abuse, and at times outright insanity of some of her female relatives. She normally endured this trial with unbelievable patience, but once in a while a few words of exasperation escaped her lips. On one such occasion, Rashbehari (Swami Arupananda), then a young brahmachari, said, “Let them do whatever they like. Please bear with us. A person cannot be angry so long as he is conscious of himself.” Mother rejoined, “Right you are, my child. There is no virtue higher than forbearance.” Then she said, half to herself, “He who warns in time is a true friend.”<sup>6</sup>

4. Swami Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1962), p. 91.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

6. *The Gospel of The Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1984), p. 149.

It may be said that this attitude was one of humility rather than democracy. It was certainly an attitude backed by divine illumination. As Holy Mother herself said, “In the fullness of one’s spiritual realization one will find that He who resides in one’s heart resides in the hearts of others as well—the oppressed, the persecuted, the untouchable, the outcast. This realization makes one truly humble.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Humility, Democracy, Same-Sightedness**

So why bring democracy into it? There are at least three reasons. Democracy itself can be said to reflect a spiritual ideal. “All men are created equal” is not superficially obvious. It makes sense only if we believe that all are created “in the image of God,” or, as Vedanta says, all are essentially spirit, Atman. Vedanta can thus affirm and strengthen the spiritual roots of democracy. Seeing the divine presence in all people is surely the fulfillment of the democratic spirit. At that level all *are* truly equal.

The illumined soul *sees* this directly. For such a person it is a fact—not a theory or a belief. Aware of their own shortcomings, followers want to put illumined teachers on pedestals of worship. While respect for teachers is appropriate, we must guard against elevating them to the point where they can no longer function as models for our own reality and behavior. We need to encourage and remind ourselves that in the end equality is “the simple truth.”

Relating to the democratic spirit is important for Vedanta also from the standpoint of being relevant, of speaking to people of different cultures in their own languages and times and relating to their different cultures. This is true both because democracy is increasingly a universal norm, and because successful integration into the life of various cultures requires respect and open-mindedness with regard to those cultures and the people belonging to them—approaching them in a democratic spirit rather than in a spirit of coming only to teach and having nothing to learn. It was Ramakrishna who said, “As long as I live, so long do I learn.”<sup>8</sup>

### **A Protection against the Abuse of Power**

Another advantage of making the democratic spirit a part of our spiritual ideal is that it guards against the abuse of power. If seniors, monks, men are never challenged, are never held accountable for their actions, they come to

7. *Thus Spake the Holy Mother* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1998), p. 50.

8. *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1949), p. 333.

feel, sometimes subtly, sometimes not so subtly, their own superiority; they become increasingly intolerant of all criticism. Such an attitude is not only unfair to those who are considered inferior; it is spiritually deadly to “superiors.” As Vivekananda said, “I pity the oppressed, whether man or woman, and I pity more the oppressors.”<sup>9</sup>

Relating Vedanta to the democratic spirit is important not only for the West. As India modernizes, the democratic ideal, already embraced politically, becomes more and more the standard by which its society judges itself, by which educated young people judge their elders. Vedanta, to remain relevant to these young people, has to speak to them in this language. If the organizations expressing and representing Vedantic spirituality fail to embody the democratic spirit, they will seem out of touch, relics of an authoritarian past. There is no logical reason for this to be the case. Vedanta in its essence *is* democratic. That spirit needs only to *manifest* itself, to shake off the encrustations that have covered its true spirit.

But that is no easy task. Even with a democratic tradition, Western societies and individuals are still struggling to overcome ideas of gender, ethnic, racial and national superiority. For the spiritual aspirant, the struggle to regard all persons with equal respect is no less daunting than the struggle to overcome lust, anger, greed, jealousy or any other spiritual obstacle. Just as we turn to the lives and examples of the founders of modern Vedanta to gain inspiration in overcoming these more traditionally recognized obstacles, we can turn to them for inspiration to put the democratic spirit truly into practice.

Vedanta can contribute to democracy, affirming and deepening its spiritual roots. And democracy can contribute to Vedanta, reminding Vedantists to strive to practice what they preach and believe in: that every person embodies the same divine spirit. □

## *Dancing with Time and Eternity*

**Drew Leder**

It takes time to experience or accomplish anything in life. What is life, after all, but a multitude of moments of time strung together? Our attitude toward our life shows in the way we manage our time.

One attitude toward time is to “use” it productively. Or, we can “waste” it. Time as a commodity. We can even “kill” time. Time as worthless. We can

9. *Complete Works*, VII.238.

“pass” the time with a “pastime.” Time that doesn’t count and isn’t counted. These are all acceptable commonplaces for us.

But what about time as spiritual? Does our culture prepare us—enable us—to welcome sacred moments? Do we reckon with our power to transform time, to create a time out of time, a Sabbath in which time itself rests? Abraham Joshua Heschel says, in *The Sabbath*, “Spiritual life begins to decay when we fail to sense the grandeur of what is eternal in time.”

### **The Slow Waltz**

One of the reasons we miss the eternal in our moment to moment life is that we’re going too fast. We’re “dancing as fast as we can.” And it doesn’t get us anywhere. Eknath Easwaran, a multicultural spiritual teacher, advises in his Eight-Point Program that we Slow Down. Move through life with a stately grace that lets us appreciate our life on the way. Do one thing at a time, urges Easwaran, with full attention and enjoyment. The purpose of life, says the Dalai Lama, is to be happy. When are we going to be happy, if not now?

Remember Martha’s dinner party, when Jesus was a guest and her sister Mary was so absorbed in conversation with him that she forgot to help in the kitchen? When flurried and frustrated Martha complained, she was told she was trying to do too many things at once, most of which weren’t necessary anyway. Mary, on the other hand, was concentrating on the single thing that was necessary, savoring the depth of a happy moment. Perhaps Mary then went to help Martha, so she could be happy, too. But whatever service Mary renders is sure to be informed by the unity and presence she developed while sitting in peace.

Easwaran liked to tell of his early days in the spiritual life. He was a professor of English literature in a university at the time, exposed to all the little extracurricular activities of sports and concerts and lectures and seminars one could attend. But he made a list of all the things he expected himself to do and then went back over it and crossed off the ones he felt he could do without. It came to about half. So he reduced his expectations and increased his experience of living.

Most of us in our rush-rush culture find it hard to slow down. If we waltz through our days in this leisurely fashion, it seems we won’t get everything done! But don’t write it off as impossible. Make a list of your reasons for believing you have to keep dancing so fast. Are the demands coming from outside you, or are you driving yourself too hard? There is the pull of ego—“Only I can do it right!” Then, too, many of us are “people-pleasers,” judging ourselves by others’ measure of us, terrified of rejection. Or we’re keeping busy to stay distracted, to keep some internal pain down.

But compulsive doing is not a path to serene living. Slowing down means facing what we think we're afraid of and finding out we needn't be. Because, when we stop distracting ourselves, when we give full attention to what we are experiencing now, when we slow down enough to be fully in the dance steps—and, even more importantly, in the space between them—we glimpse the eternal happiness in our souls.

### **The Rhythm of the Rumba**

Dancing, of course, is all about rhythm. Rhythm is a repeated pattern in time. Living in the embrace of Nature, our life unfolds in rhythm. We have our daily pattern, our weekly pattern, seasonal, annual, life stages. When we experience ourselves embedded in history, the longer rhythms appear, the rise and fall of empires; classical, romantic, baroque periods; agricultural, industrial, atomic, information ages. Evolution. Many ups and downs, but also a sense of continuity, a sense of general advance tempting us to a sense of purpose. Some same value, some same Presence, is felt throughout. Perhaps it is Time itself, time that is always present. Time that is therefore eternal.

When we live in our rhythms, perhaps we live most in this eternity when we are most fully present. Being present is being aware just now, just here, without regret for the past, without anxiety about the future, without speculation or commentary. Relieved of judgment, with no “should have,” no “have to,” no “not good enough,” no “why me?” Just the ever-living present, Eternity's repeated gift to us, the capacity to be totally here, totally engaged.

When worry or fear, shame or pride diminish, there is greater joy in the moment. “Are we having fun yet?” Yes, now we are having fun. Our rumba has a little kick in it, a little happy crow like a baby's expression of glee. Dancing in a laugh. A shift of balance on the fourth beat, like the Turiya consciousness. Turiya, the Ground of Divine Playfulness—Turiya the eternal, expressed as lila, the play in Time. The rhythm of the rumba.

### **The Last Dance**

“Take your partners for the last dance!” Whom shall we have for partner when the last dance is called? Carlos Castaneda's don Juan often said that Death is our eternal companion and our best adviser. When pettiness threatens to engulf you, when you find you are still building your life around your personal importance, turn to your death, always at your side, and ask advice. When Death advises, many things drop away.

How shall we dance with Death? Death reveals both the preciousness of time and the reality of eternity. The name of this dance is The Two-Step: step-

close-step again. Take a step forward in time, bring both feet together in your sense of wholeness in eternity, step out again.

We can't say to our death, Let's sit this one out. But we can practice to make our final steps full of grace, and to make our everyday steps as grace-filled as possible. The test question is, If this were your last day (last month, last year), what would you do? Why not do that now?

Buddhists recommend on the last day of life continuing one's ordinary life as far as possible. A Talmudic story tells of a wise man planting a tree, when word comes that the Messiah has appeared. The sage methodically finishes planting and watering the tree, and then goes to greet the Messiah. Even on an extraordinary day we should not neglect our ordinary tasks, for they already bear within them the seeds of the eternal.

Only when we live our life within the context of our death do we live with integrity. Of course, we are always dancing with Death, and the expanse of eternity always stretches out within our times. It wants only our attention, our approval, our celebration to be the Wholeness, both partners whirling in the forever dance. Time is as real as Eternity, Eternity as present as Time. □

## *Vedanta in Brief: How Would You Say It?*

*[Vedantists are sometimes asked by non-Vedantists just what it is they believe in, what defines their philosophy or religion. Answering the question in a few sentences, even for oneself, can be a challenge. We encourage our readers to send us their thoughts so we can share them with other readers. We begin with the following two submissions.]*

### **1. What's the Vedanta?**

**Swami Brahmavidyananda**

As a student of the Vedanta, I've been an avid analyzer of the word for many years. What *is* the "Vedanta?" What does it mean? I'm sure many have come to their own seasoned conclusions. Well, here's an interpretation that's given me great satisfaction over the years, along with real focus and comprehension. I'm happy sharing it with others.

Ours is an age of knowledge. Reason reigns. The elemental ingredient throughout is the development of ever-greater insights and understandings. Information, the process of knowing, the opening of consciousness in all

directions, through the hard sciences to the arts and esthetics, from humanism to social transformation, the urge to arrive at ever larger insights and conclusions, is the overriding theme.

Religions have to contend with this. If they're to adapt, they have to address all of these discoveries that are constantly going on, improve their formulation and adjust to the mentality of the time. The problem is, they really can't. Largely rooted in myth and so-called faith, embedded in history and extraordinary personalities, they're not able to speak to the age directly.

But Vedanta can. How? Why? What makes the Vedanta so distinctive? What *is* the Vedanta?

### **Embracing All Knowledge**

The word itself is composed of two parts, *veda* and *anta*. "Veda" means knowledge, insight. In quick summary, Swami Vivekananda points out that "all knowledge"—and this includes our hard sciences, our arts and esthetics, our humanism, our social and economic sciences—is Veda. "All knowledge is Veda." When I read this definition, many years ago, I was stunned and delighted. It gave me a whole new view of the possibilities latent within the Vedanta movement.

With such a broad definition, Swami Vivekananda offered up fundamental tools by which we can address our age with the same passion and insight he had.

"Anta" means "end," and while it originally meant "last part," it can be interpreted to refer to the hidden aim behind all of our secular understanding, the end of the whole knowing process. So, we have veda-anta: secular knowledge and the end of secular knowing. What's the end of knowing?

Everyone senses perfection in his/her life, what John Dobson calls a fundamental Peace, Love and Freedom. Yet we're all trying to embody this Transcendent feeling, this higher, intuitive knowing, in externals. Naturally, we fail because the world is by nature limited, changing and divided. We simply can't arrive at any lasting peace, love and freedom in and through our ordinary, day to day knowing.

### **Going Beyond Fragmentation**

Is there a way of converting secular knowledge—the joys, freedoms and intimacies we experience on the surface of life—into a spiritual knowing that totally fulfills our need for lasting freedom, intimacy and security? The Veda-anta says that we can. But we have to get beyond the limitations and fragmentations of the surrounding world if we're to embody that underlying

Peace, Love and Freedom that doesn't change. This to me is at the heart of our Vedanta movement, and is what I try to get across in many of my lectures.

Students of the Vedanta will unanimously admit that Swami Vivekananda was aware of our modern world in a remarkable way. For me, and many others, he's the prophet, pure and simple. His message has everything to do with a living, dynamic process of knowing, occurring here and now. Knowledge is unfolding from the secular into the spiritual. Learn the art of "going beyond," which is fundamental to this worldview. The Upanishads speak of secular learning, the confined knowing of secular insight, as lower knowledge, and of the more expansive knowing of spiritual insight, totally free of restricted thinking, as higher knowledge.

This has exciting possibilities for me because it's so adaptive to our times. As I see it, the more we stay within the blaze of Vivekananda's vision, the more the Vedanta will provide a religious message and foundation that will speak to the ages.

## **2. The Purpose of Life**

**Cliff Johnson**

- I. The basic proposition that underlies man's existence is that he is born into a state of ignorance, the cause of which is unknown.
- II. Because of this ignorance, he remains unaware of his inner Divinity, his true nature.
- III. Cut off from this divine Source of being, he suffers, much as a person suffers when separated from his beloved.
- IV. This suffering is sustained and intensified by means of his five senses, which pull him outward into the field of the pairs of opposites—pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, etc.
- V. When man makes the decision to withdraw his senses from the outer world through spiritual disciplines, he begins to experience joy and bliss, which is God.
- VI. He then experiences the world of opposites as a manifestation of God and is released from suffering.
- VII. Since he no longer wishes anything from the world, he can truly enjoy it and need not return to it except to help his fellow man out of that ignorance from which he himself arose. □



*[The following poems appeared in our last issue with editorial and proof-reading errors. With apologies and corrections, we offer them again.]*

### **How It Is**

For us  
to take a sip  
of Vivekananda  
he had to make  
a thunderous splash  
a tsunami  
overwhelming,  
a deluge:  
for us to awake  
and even then  
we can't understand  
letting the water  
roll off, we keep  
playing in the sand.

### **A Perspective**

Divine  
in origin  
this human love  
simply begun:  
as natural as flowers,  
like blossoms  
on a tree.

“Split the wood. . .  
Lift the stone  
and there I am,”  
so said Jesus.  
If there it be,  
why only there?  
Why not such  
love in you  
and me?

—Elva Nelson

# *Hindu-Jewish Relations*

**Nathan Katz**

Relations between Hindus and Jews have always been characterized by mutual respect and affection. Jewish-Hindu dialogue may go back nearly 3,000 years when luxury goods from India were exported to ancient Israel, then ruled by King Solomon. Sanskrit and Tamil words for such items of commerce as peacocks, ivory, ginger and linen are found in the Hebrew Bible, and King Solomon and the Buddha share the legend of a wise monarch who mediated a quarrel between two women about who was the mother of a child, found in the Mahoshadha Jataka and the Hebrew Bible, I Kings 3:16-28.

In post-Biblical sacred literature, there are four references to India in the Talmud, the definitive commentary on the Jewish Bible. Josephus, the famous Jewish historian of the Second Temple era (1st century CE), recorded that the leader of the Jewish resistance to Roman rule, Eleazar, admonished his followers to heroism by citing the example of Hindus (Katz, 1991).

During medieval times, Jewish merchants and scholars regularly plied both sea and land routes between India and Israel. For example, it was an eighth-century Jewish scholar who brought Indian mathematics to the West, where written numbers are wrongly called “Arabic” numerals (Isenberg, 1988, p. 20). Many letters by medieval merchants have been preserved, and they provide a unique perspective on life in India between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries (Goitein, 1973).

## **Freedom and Respect in India**

India has been home for six distinct Jewish communities, each with its own history, customs and language. Each has enjoyed not only complete freedom of religion, but respect, affection and in some cases high social position.

The oldest Jewish community in India is found in Kerala. According to their traditions, they arrived at Cranganore (known in the Jewish world as Shingly and to the Romans as Muziris) just after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, and were warmly received by the local maharaja. In 379 CE (scholars say during the eleventh century) the local Chera king granted Joseph Rabban, the Jews' leader, aristocratic privileges which were engraved on copper plates (Katz and Goldberg, 1993, pp. 42-45). To this day, these copper plates are reverently stored in the Holy Ark of the Cochin Synagogue. The Cochin Jews were loyal subjects of their Nayar rulers; they were among the finest soldiers of the region, and Ezekiel Rahabi (1694-1771), the maharaja's Prime Minister, has been called “the Malabar's Kissinger” (Parasuram, 1982, p. 45).

Cochin Jews wrote poetry in Malayalam as well as in Hebrew, and their greatest Qabbalist (mystic), Nehemia Mota (d. 1615), is revered by Jews, Hindus, Christians and Muslims alike. His tomb near Cochin's Jew Town is a striking example of how such saints helped extrinsic religions become integrated into local religious culture in India. The Cochin Jews' integration into the fabric of Cochin culture and society is evidenced in the rich "local flavor" of their literature, and in the many borrowings from Hinduism in their unique system of observance of Jewish calendric and life-cycle rituals (Katz and Goldberg, 1993, pp. 163-249). Once numbering around 2,500, this community has been reduced to a few dozen souls since emigration to Israel began in 1950.

### **"Saturday Oil-Pressers"**

The Bene Israel community of Bombay and the Konkan coast is by far the largest of India's Jewish communities (Katz, 2001, pp. 90-125). Their arrival in India is legendary: local traditions hold that seven Jewish couples were shipwrecked and landed at Navgoan, Konkan District. As their Torah scrolls were lost at sea, in time they forgot their Hebrew as well as most Jewish practices—save for the Jewish system of dietary laws known as *kashrut*, the observance of the Sabbath as a day of rest, and the central affirmation of Judaism known as the Shema ("Hear, O Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord Is One!") which they would recite on any occasion when prayer seemed appropriate (Isenberg, 1988, pp. 3-18). In the rural Konkan they were oil-pressers known as the *shanwar teli* caste ("Saturday oil-pressers") because they would abjure work on Saturdays.

Unlike the mercantile Cochin Jews, the Bene Israel were cut off from world Jewry. Therefore, they became the most "Indianized" of India's Jews. They had no sense of being part of an extrinsic religion known as "Judaism" until an eighteenth-century Cochin Jew, David Rahabi, "discovered" them. (Bene Israel tradition is that David Rahabi came from Egypt, not Cochin.) Rahabi began "the first Bene Israel religious revival" (Isenberg, 1988, p. 10), by teaching them the rudiments of normative Jewish practice and installing three of his disciples as *kajis*, who functioned as priests to the community.

Economic opportunities arose with the development of Bombay, and many Bene Israel were attracted there. They then encountered learned Cochin Jews, who became their teachers and ritual officiants. They also met Christian missionaries, who attempted to convert them but unwittingly increased their commitment to Judaism by teaching them the Bible and English, which gave them a link language with world Jewry. This era is known as "the second Bene Israel revival." In cosmopolitan Bombay, the Bene Israel were exposed to such world-shaking forces as modernization and nationalism—both the Indian nationalism of the *swaraj* movement and Jewish nationalism, known as

Zionism. As a result, their very identity was transformed from members of an obscure, oil-pressing caste of the Konkan into modern, urbanized Indians and members of the world Jewish community (Roland, 1989). There were once as many as 25,000 Bene Israel in India; today they number around five or six thousand, mostly in Bombay, but also in small communities in Konkan towns, Ahmedabad, Pune and New Delhi.

### **Mughals, Baghdadis and Others**

An obscure Jewish community was comprised of merchants and courtiers during the Mughal period. Persian-speakers, these Jews were scattered throughout the empire; their only known synagogue was in Agra. Perhaps the most lasting Jewish influence on Mughal-era India was made by an eccentric Jewish-Sufi-Yogi known as Said Sarmad. Best known for haunting quatrains written in Persian, Sarmad was a fervent mystic who cared little for the niceties of exoteric religion. He adopted the persona of a naked faqir and ultimately became tutor and guru to Dara Shukoh, son and heir apparent of Shahjehan (ruled 1627-66). Intrigues within the Red Fort led to an alliance between the mystically-inclined Dara and his guru Sarmad, the Maratha leader Shivaji, and Guru Hargobind of the Sikhs (ruled 1606-45). Theirs was a liberal alliance against the stern-minded Shahjehan and his fanatical son, Aurangzeb (ruled 1666-1707). The alliance collapsed when Aurangzeb beheaded both his brother and Sarmad in a palace coup which resulted in draconian anti-Hindu policies, and which contributed to the downfall of the Mughals. Today Sarmad's mazar (saint's tomb) guards the main entrance to Delhi's Juma Masjid, and most people have assumed that he was a Muslim (Katz, 2000).

Jews from the Middle East, chiefly Basra in Iraq, migrated to India's port cities, especially Bombay, Calcutta and Rangoon, which was for a time under the administration of the British raj. Known as "Baghdadis," they played major roles in the development of their cities. Bombay, for example, has had three Jewish mayors. They were led by the House of Sassoon of Bombay and the Elias family of Calcutta, and played major roles in the textile and film industry. The "Baghdadis" were never really integrated into Indian culture—their home language went directly from Arabic to English—and most left India soon after Independence. Several hundred Baghdadis remain in India, mostly in Calcutta, Bombay and Pune.

There have always been a few European Jews, known as Ashkenazim, who made their way to India, but they never formed a distinct community. During World War II, a significant number reached India seeking refuge from Hitler. Many of them were physicians, who made lasting contributions to public health—most notably, Walter M. Hafkine developed the cholera vaccine and an institute named for him flourishes in Bombay. But British and Indian

physicians did not welcome the competition, and India's doors of asylum were soon closed.

Finally, recent years have seen a curious phenomenon in far eastern India, in Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura. There, thousands of Chin-kuki tribals began experiencing dreams and revelations which convinced them of their lost identity as one of the scattered tribes of ancient Israel. Many have studied Judaism seriously, and several thousand have undergone formal conversion.

### **Toward Dialogue in America**

If interaction between Hindus and Jews in the past occurred mostly in India, present relations are mostly in the West, especially the United States. In America the two communities resemble each other very closely in demographics, education and professions. Both are concerned about the quality of public education, about fundamentalist extremism, whether Muslim or Christian, and about promoting public appreciation of religious and cultural pluralism.

What are the characteristics which define Hindu-Jewish dialogue today? The primacy of orthopraxy over orthodoxy is the first characteristic of contemporary Hindu-Jewish dialogue. Most Hinduisms and most Judaisms value practice over doctrine.

The second characteristic of Hindu-Jewish dialogue is that it is symmetrical. As Indian-Americans and Jewish-Americans begin to discover one another in the work place and in the public arena, one of the first discoveries is of their similar social position, their symmetry in the context of American society. Such symmetry bodes especially well for dialogue. Catholic theologian Leonard Swidler's seventh ground rule for interreligious dialogue holds: "Dialogue can take place only between equals, or *par cum pari*, as Vatican II put it." While Swidler was not referring specifically to socio-political equality so much as an equal openness and willingness to learn, nevertheless this more historical aspect of symmetry cannot be overlooked; it is a necessary component--perhaps a starting point--for the contemporary Hindu-Jewish encounter.

### **The Issue of Idolatry**

Before describing an agenda for Hindu-Jewish dialogue, there is one preliminary concern which must be mentioned, and this is entirely a Judaic issue: idolatry. Is there a way to reconcile the Hindu use of images (murti) with the Judaic commandment against idolatry? A traditional Jew who is serious about interreligious dialogue must avoid imposing his or her own definitions on the dialogue partner, and "idolatry" surely is not the way anyone would describe his/her own religion. At a minimum we should be able

to agree that the question of whether or not Hinduism is idolatrous must be bracketed, since any authentic answer could only emerge out of such a dialogue. Let us also remember Swidler's sixth principle: "Each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard and fast assumptions as to where the points of disagreement are." On the other side, perhaps some religious Hindus will have no problem with spiritual and philosophical implications of the First Commandment: that the primary reality of God is formless (nirguna), and that God is the summum bonum of religion.

### **An Agenda for Hindu-Jewish Dialogue**

What is the specific agenda for Hindu-Jewish dialogue? Based on my own experiences over the past thirty years, I offer the following as agenda:

1. Hindu-Jewish dialogue is about the Absolute and practices which lead to the Absolute. Although it is a mistake to focus upon theology to the neglect of practice, so too is it a mistake to neglect doctrines and mysticism entirely.

2. Hindu-Jewish dialogue is also about something so apparently mundane as dietary laws. As traditions which emphasize orthopraxy, it should not be surprising that the area of dietary laws has actually been on the forefront of Hindu-Jewish religious interactions in America. Any number of enterprising Tamil restaurateurs in New York City sell "kosher doshas," proudly display hechshers (kashrut certifications) from Orthodox rabbis, and in fact Hindu "brahmin" restaurants afford a kosher dining alternative for the most scrupulous Jew. Not only that, one often finds the latest in kashrut research in newspapers which serve America's Hindu community. While Hindu and Jewish dietary codes do not coincide, they do overlap, and these are areas in which communication and cooperation can be developed. The issue of diet is also a spiritual issue. Divine dietary codes are about the sanctification of food. Food can be kosher, just as it can be prasadam, and a study of Hindu and Jewish reflections on the meaning of food regulations would itself be worthwhile, beyond the practical issues of hechshers and food research.

3. Hindu-Jewish dialogue is also about our experiences of oppression and intolerance. We Hindus, Buddhists and Jews can better understand our own history—especially the less savory aspects of intolerance at the hands of powerful religions—by comparing notes with one another.

4. Hindu-Jewish dialogue is also about preserving culture in the face of diasporization and modernization. Many American Hindus see American Jews as role models for their gentle exile in America: we are taken as fully participating in American life while simultaneously maintaining religio-cultural traditions. Our Hebrew day schools, federations, newspapers, self-defense organizations such as the ADL, youth summer camps, and lobbying

organizations for both domestic and international issues are serving as models for other minority peoples who fear assimilation and the loss of traditions.

5. Hindu-Jewish dialogue in America has concerns specific to life as a minority religious culture in this country. For example, both ethnic groups have a vested interest in maintaining a strong public education system. The secular character of public institutions, especially schools, is a concern to both groups. Both communities can and do strive against discrimination in housing, the work place and in schools, as well as against the threat of violence from the resurgent Klan and other Nazi-like organizations. Parents in both communities fear unscrupulous missionaries. For both, calls for the "Christianization of America" are viewed with alarm. Finally, both American Hindus and Jews have deep ties to their countries of origin, and both groups would like the American government to reflect their sentiments in "special relationships" with India and Israel. Many American Hindus and Jews are gratified by the new and warm relationship between India and Israel. Therefore, there are many avenues for cooperation in the political arena.

6. Hindu-Jewish dialogue is itself multicultural; that is, there are and have been Hindu-Jewish dialogues in America, in India, and elsewhere. The Hindu-Jewish dialogue in India may well take forms different from that in the United States. The long and happy Jewish diaspora among Hindus ought to be recalled as a background for the contemporary dialogue.

### **Religion and Ethnicity**

7. Hindu-Jewish dialogue involves both religion and ethnicity. While any one given dialogue session might emphasize one aspect, we need to be clear about which aspect we are discussing.

8. Hindu-Jewish dialogue is not a monologue. I was asked recently to review a book manuscript on Hindu-Jewish dialogue for an academic publisher, a collection of essays by Jewish writers. We need to remind ourselves that dialogues must involve real people, not our imagination and surely not our projections. We must realize that the issue of Jews who practice Buddhist meditation or Hindu yoga is an internal Jewish issue, not to be confused with genuine Hindu-Jewish dialogue.

9. Finally, I would urge that Hindu-Jewish dialogue not be an addendum to Hindu-Christian dialogue. I would go so far as to urge Jews to avoid active participation in Hindu-Christian dialogues (although we may benefit from listening in). This point is imperative, because what most Hindus know of Judaism was learned from Christian missionaries, for whom Judaism is no more than a step on the path toward Christianity. We must insist on our unique identity in our relations with Hindus, and our identity as Jews is threatened by being subsumed into the missionaries' "Judeo-Christian"

fiction. Perhaps we Jews need to reclaim that unique identity for ourselves first.

### Conclusions

Hindu-Jewish dialogue is not some new fad; it is truly an ancient encounter which dates back more than two millennia. Since Western universities arose out of Christian cultures, it is natural that Christian categories dominated and continue to dominate most of the humanities, religious studies in particular. A retrieval of links between Hindus and Jews reconfigures not only our understandings of Judaism and Hinduism but the very manner in which we go about doing interreligious dialogue. More than that, how we study religious traditions is changed. Indeed, our understanding of the very concept of “religion” becomes modified when Hinduism and Judaism are allowed to meet symmetrically, which is to say without Christian conceptual intermediaries.

### Select Bibliography

Golteln, Solomon D. (1973). *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Isenberg, Shirley Berry. (1988). *India's Bene Israel: A Comprehensive Inquiry and Sourcebook*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.

Katz, Nathan. (1991). “Contacts between Jewish and Indo-Tibetan Civilizations through the Ages: Some Explorations.” *The Tibet Journal*, 16(4), pp. 90-109.

Katz, Nathan. (1997). “How the Hindu-Jewish Encounter Reconfigures Interreligious Dialogue.” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 16 (1), pp. 28-41.

Katz, Nathan. (2000). “The Identity of a Mystic: The Case of Sa'id Sarmad, a Jewish-Yogi-Sufi Courtier of the Mughals.” *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions*, 47, pp. 142-160.

Katz, Nathan. (2001) *Who Are the Jews of India?* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Katz, Nathan, & Goldberg, Ellen S. (1993). *The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.

Parasuram, T. V. (1982). *India's Jewish Heritage*. New Delhi: Sagar.

Roland, Joan G. (1989). *Jewish in British India: Identity in a Colonial Era*. Hanover, NH: University Presses of New England. □



## Rare Ability

I have the unusual ability to take my heart out,  
Put it on a table while still beating  
And stand and watch.  
Most people who come into the room  
Don't notice and walk out  
Others notice, look and walk out.  
Some have rolled it in salt and stuffed it back in my chest.  
And once or twice someone chopped it in half with a machete  
Pushed it on the floor and left.  
In that case, I go to my room  
Sit down, visualize them and  
fill all the nooks of the universe  
With misty pink love.  
(this does take awhile if I have had a bad day.)  
And grow a new heart.  
Dare to try it?

—Vann

## Meditation

All things seem  
working at a steady pace  
through the assignment  
of this world

Like a small flame  
on a candle  
on the altar  
of the god,

The god who dances  
when the candle rises.

Music quickens  
in the air's rhythms  
towards balance

In the soft harmonies  
like fire undressing  
itself in candle-wax.

—Tom Cabot

# *Virtues of Apostleship*

**Beatrice Bruteau**

We all can be apostles. There have always been millions of unknown apostles. The word 'apostle' is from the Greek *apo-*, meaning "away," and *stellein*, meaning "to send": one sent forth, one sent on a mission, one with a specific task in the world. We may say that every human being has a unique destiny, something to contribute to the world that no one else can do. Perhaps some of us live up to it better than others—or perhaps some of us just don't know what the others' true contributions are!

One of the astonishing things about the human race is that in spite of the fact that, in all countries and in all ages, it has engaged in horrors beyond imagination, it also produces everywhere persons who do good, with often repeated acts of kindness. and with occasional heroic acts of self-sacrifice. These acts of goodness are apostolic. Any act of kindness, generosity, or altruism sends a message. It testifies to the value of life and consciousness and personhood in all people. It proclaims the nature of humankind as communitarian, as interdependent and sharing. It sets before the witnesses an Image of God that transcends the selfishness of Nature, the urgency of seeking one's own welfare first, last, and only.

## **Manifesting God by Deed and Word**

The generous deed says loudly: If people can behave this way, then there is something more to reality than the struggle to get ahead. There is something that is already so far "ahead" that it can afford to give away what it has. What is this that is so different from what we thought was "human nature" and yet is performed by human beings? This is the apostolate of the everyday, as well as of the extraordinary, Good Deed.

There is also the apostolate of the Spoken Word. Many of our good deeds are done not with our hands but with our voices, with loving eyes and warm smiles. When we speak words of appreciation, understanding, sympathy and strengthening, words intended to help the hearer feel better, to live more fully, to rise to higher consciousness—when we speak so, we testify to the Author of Life, the One who gives and does not withhold.

Thus by deeds and by words we manifest the reality of That which transcends finitude. You might say that we *prove* the reality of God. Being that is radiant, that is not locked up in self-seeking, *exists*. There is no question about it, because there are people among us who actually live in these terms. How is this possible? The lives of finite beings have to be devoted to staying alive. These unselfish doers of Good Deeds, these apostles of Radiant Being,

must be in touch with something beyond the ordinary world of needing and seeking and gaining and possessing—whether material benefits or positions and honors. Their dynamic is to distribute rather than to accumulate. Thus they testify to, they manifest and display, the reality of the Radiant One even in and through the needy ones, the finite ones, the complexifications of clay that we are bidden to recognize as worthy of being called Children of God, “Spirits free, blest and eternal.”

There is a popular hymn about “All the Saints” declaring that there is no reason why “I shouldn’t be one, too.” We might take a minute to reflect on some of the qualities that saints and apostles need in order to fulfill their vocations. It seems to me that the fundamental thing, the very first thing, is sufficient, satisfied confidence to build on. It may not be perfect, it may still harbor questions and occasions of doubt, but it’s enough to get started. We need to have some personal conviction of the presence of the Transcendent in ourselves; we need to have faith that we are in fact basically Spirit and therefore not totally needy and vulnerable beings.

### **Provisions for the Journey**

This, in turn, makes possible generosity and the freedom to give something away. Sometimes we need courage to pursue such a lifestyle, because we live in a culture that is not—for the most part—tuned to this wavelength. For the same reason, we will need fortitude, understanding, and compassion. Our own confidence and generosity will be challenged. So we will need perseverance and patience with ourselves, and the ability to “renew our youth,” to recreate the fresh enthusiasm of just starting out on the spiritual path. A great help in achieving this is the regular practice of studying the lives of holy people, meditating on them and striving to emulate their interior virtues.

On the positive note, we need to cultivate imagination, inventiveness, flexibility, adaptiveness—all the qualities that make growth and creativity possible. We need cheerfulness and humor and ability to enjoy and to appreciate and to honor and be grateful. We need evenmindedness, freedom from bias, ability to enlarge worlds and make them more inclusive, easiness in welcoming diversity within strongly centered unity. We are witnessing to the Reality of God the Creator (by creating), God the Savior (by opening ways to better living), God the Mother and Father (by nurturing life in all its aspects) and God the Friend (by sympathy, compassion, enjoyment of others’ presence). We also need knowledge and skill and discrimination. And we need energy to continue and not give up, to “run, never tiring,” to “walk and not faint” [Isa.40:31].

So we come back to the beginning: apostles must stay plugged in to the Source of Life. Pray without ceasing, believe even in the midst of misgiving,

engage the Divine Reality, draw It into the world like a suckling babe drawing life from the mother. Regular practice of meditation is essential. It is important also to maintain the attitude of alertness and devotion throughout the day. Maintain a sense of being connected with holy people everywhere. Remember the Communion of the Saints, the millions of unknown apostles of Transcendent Goodness in every tradition. Rely on their unseen support and offer yours to them. This apostleship is not a task accomplished alone or a song sung solo. The ideal manifestation of the Image of God in earth is to be a complex, organized, organic Living Body. We each have an indispensable role in That: each of us of infinite value, all of us equal in divine dignity, every one of us gloriously unique. As such, we are to be witnesses to the Source of Life throughout the Earth, apostles and saints. □

## Seek the Eternal

Text: Isaiah 55:6, 40:31, 26:3

Music: John Schlenck

5 Seek the E - ter - nal, for he may be found;

10 Call ye up - on him, for he is near. Seek the E -

15 ter - nal, for he may be found; Call ye up - on him,

20 for he is near. Seek the E - ter - nal, *retard slightly* for he may be

25 found. *in tempo* They who wait for the Lord shall re -

new their strength. They who wait for the Lord shall re -

© 2001 Vedanta West Communications

30 F#min E B D E  
 new their strength. They shall mount up with wings like

35 F# D B F#  
 ea - gles, They shall mount up with wings like ea - gles;

40 F#min E D G A  
 They shall run, nev-er tir - ing, they shall walk and not

45 Em9 F#min B Amin7  
 faint. Seek the E - ter - nal, for he may be

50 B Bmin F#min G D Amin7  
 found; Call ye up - on him, for he is near.

55 B Amin7 B D  
 Seek the E - ter - nal, for he may be found. Seek the E -

60 Cmin7 D Dmin Amin Bb  
 ter - nal, for he may be found; Call ye up - on him,

65 F Cmin7 D Amin Gmin D  
 for he is near, Call ye up - on him, for he is

70 Amin7 B A/E B  
 near. Seek the E - ter - nal, *retard slightly* for he may be found. *in tempo*

76 3 times G E D Amin  
 The mind stayed on thee, that trust - eth in

81 E D AΔ9 B F#min E B  
 thee, thou dost keep in per - fect peace.

## *Book Reviews*

**Meditation, Mind and Patanjali's Yoga:  
A Practical Guide to Spiritual Growth for Everyone  
by Swami Bhaskarananda.  
252 pages, illustrated, with bibliography, glossary, and index.  
Viveka Press, Seattle soft cover \$14.50 2001**

[Available from The Vedanta Society Bookshop, 2716 Broadway Avenue East, Seattle, WA 98102-3909; e-mail: [bookshop@vedanta-seattle.org](mailto:bookshop@vedanta-seattle.org); fax: (206) 329-1791; tel.: (206) 323-1228.]

This book ought to be required reading for everybody who is interested in meditation, and especially for those who are interested in Patanjali's yoga system. Swami Bhaskarananda has done Western readers an enormous service by bringing together a vast amount of material and organizing it so carefully and presenting it in such simple language that even a child can understand it.

The first thing that strikes the reader is the book's comprehensiveness. The table of contents alone is five pages long, and deals with such varied topics as the intricacies of Sankhya metaphysics and management of stress.

The second thing that will strike the reader is the care that has been put into the sequencing. Swami Bhaskarananda begins with a chapter on why we should meditate (to realize God), and follows it with a chapter on the teacher-disciple relationship which is notable for its illuminating discussion of how to distinguish real teachers from false ones. (Two of the criteria: Real teachers don't charge money or name organizations after themselves.)

These introductory chapters are followed by a detailed explanation of Patanjali's eight-step yoga system. Swami Bhaskarananda defines meditation as "guided imagination of the real"—the real being God—and gives detailed instructions for practicing it. There is a long chapter on obstacles to meditation which anybody who has ever tried to meditate will appreciate, and a shorter one on the hazards.

Then we get into fairly deep waters with a chapter on the Kundalini and the chakras, and another on Sankhya metaphysics. Western readers (this one, anyway), may have difficulty making sense of Sankhya metaphysics, with its puzzling relationship between the purushas and prakriti--but this may be one of the reasons why some of us call ourselves Vedantists rather than Sankhyists.

Next comes an exposition of the seven kinds of samadhi, followed by a discussion of what happens after samadhi. Japa is explained in detail, both as an easier alternative to meditation and as a complement to it. There is a discussion of the problems encountered in practicing japa, which are similar

to the obstacles encountered in practicing meditation. The book concludes with chapters on how to judge our own spiritual progress and techniques for relieving stress.

Despite the simplicity of the language, this book represents a prodigious feat of scholarship. Swami Bhaskarananda quotes from sources as disparate as the *Yoga Sutras*, the *Vedantasara*, and Bhartrihari's *Vairagya Shatakam* on the one hand, and *Lincoln's Yarns and Stories* on the other.

Yet the scholarship is completely hidden, masked by the simplicity and clarity of the language. The swami summarizes the central problem of Vedantic metaphysics in a single sentence: "Divinity is equally present in all, but not equally manifest." He illustrates abstract points with apt analogies, as when he compares the defects in the human mind to the dirt that accumulates under a rug.

He also lightens the tone with jokes (the one about the guru who kicks away 100,000 rupees is one of the better ones) and anecdotes derived from his 27 years of experience teaching Vedanta in the West. Married devotees will profit from the swami's advice to the woman who told him that she had complained to her husband, "You don't love me anymore." If he does love you, Swami Bhaskarananda responded, your complaint will hurt him. If he doesn't love you, he knows it better than you. You can't get love by demanding it. If you want him to love you, do something that will show you love him.

This is a rich compendium of spiritual instruction that can be easily understood by young and old.

—William Page

**Centred in Truth: The Story of Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda  
by Shelley Brown, M.D.**

**Kalpa Tree Press, New York**

**Vol. 1: 654 pp., Vol. 2: 474 pp. cloth \$49.95 2001**

It is no simple task to capture the spirit of a great man and his contributions in a single work. And yet, author Shelley Brown has seemingly accomplished this in *Centred in Truth: The Story of Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda*, Vol I. Of great assistance was her good fortune to have worked closely with the swami during the last five years of his life or until 1992, when he died at the age of 93.

Dr. Brown has approached her undertaking with great seriousness. She resigned her medical practice in 1994 and for the following six years embarked on the difficult task of revealing to the world a man, as she states in her preface, "who never used the pronoun 'I' or revealed his personal

history. Yet the available facts had to be told plainly, without embellishment or conjecture....” Her writing style is lucid and with a charm that can often conceal its rich scholarly merit.

However, *Centered in Truth* is more than biography. It is also the story of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in Calcutta, the now world-famous institution and gathering place for scholars from throughout the world, which the swami founded in 1938. The Institute had humble beginnings, starting as only a single rented room on the top floor of Albert Hall. Within less than a year it moved to a new and larger location (though not much so) where the Institute was to remain for the following five years.

According to those who met him, the swami was a demon for work and from the start was prodded to do so by his deep love for Vivekananda and his universal message. This message was to be realized in the Institute of Culture. The purposes of the Institute would be threefold: promote and propagate Indian culture in all its branches by intensive studies; assimilate the essential principles of the different cultures of the world, and, thereby, create a universal point of view.

### **Astonishing Energy and Will**

Such grand concepts required of the swami astonishing energy and will. However, he never seemed to lack them. “I do not believe in words,” he was often heard to say, “I believe in action.” Under the swami’s guidance the Institute continued its growth, though it was to move to two other locations, nearly suffer destruction in the partition riots of 1946, and undergo the long struggle to raise funds for the final dedication of its new, spacious quarters at Gol Park.

An additional part of the swami’s dream was to include a library that would be of use to scholars and serious readers both in India and from overseas. Many years ago I had the pleasure of availing myself of this wonderful library (which now contains more than 100,000 volumes) and still have a clear memory of its neatly arranged stacks with their wealth of information. In some respects, the library was a reflection of Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda: exacting in its construction, aesthetically pleasing, and universal in the broad range of its literary and philosophical works. B.S. Kesavan, the Institute’s highly respected librarian, said of the swami: “[He] was a tough character; he was not easily convinced. He was very pleasant, but you know that unless he was convinced, he wouldn’t say ‘yes.’...He was a man who really stood his ground.”

Throughout his life, this toughness and the swami’s frequent refusal to bend to authority would unleash conservative forces within the Order that would eventually end in his departure as Secretary of the Institute. “Refusing to compromise his own pure vision of Swami Vivekananda’s intent,” Dr.



Brown writes, “and no longer able to fulfill his ambitious goals for the Institute in practical terms for various reasons beyond his control, Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda resigned as Secretary at the end of 1973.”

Something should be said of the remarkable detachment the swami demonstrated when conservative opposition undoubtedly contributed to his initial resignation from the Institute in 1962, shortly after it had reached its peak of glory in its new home at Gol Park. Even then he didn't complain. As Dr. Brown describes it: “He never said a word. After delivering a deeply moving, gracious retirement address, he simply turned in his keys. Perfect renunciant that he was, he left behind every accoutrement of his former office, down to the shaving mug that was inadvertently packed for him and which he subsequently returned.”

However, the swami had no idea of retiring from other tasks. He revised his *Human Unity and Education for World Civilization* and a brochure, *The World Civilization Centre*. In the years remaining, ill health was to plague him at various times, but he rarely, if ever, complained about his ailments. However, on one occasion he referred to them as “natural conditions of the body...” and this attitude prevailed throughout his many bouts with asthma, bronchitis and failing eyesight, as well as other physical troubles.

### **The Last Years: Travel, Censure and Respect**

Despite the swami's rapidly deteriorating condition, he paid one final visit to the United States in 1987 (he had visited earlier in 1962), where he was to remain for the next fourteen months. Here he felt at ease among his American friends, particularly Erik Johns, who had been of great assistance to him over a period of many years. He also brought with him a trunk filled with his books for distribution to interested Americans.

In the following year, the swami returned to India where he was to remain until his passing in October of 1992. However, these final years of the swami were not always peaceful ones. His final work, *Back to Vivekananda*, was confiscated by Trustees of the Order. The swami had strongly accused the Order of straying from Vivekananda's democratic ideals, and this was met with expected anger by some of the conservative elements in the Order.

Though many of his writings were controversial, his idealistic views, honest self-appraisal and love of truth earned him the highest respect and love by countless devoted friends and followers throughout the world.

### **Writings and Reminiscences**

In Volume II, Dr Brown has gathered together a judicious sampling of writings either by or about Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda under the subtitle of Selected Writings, Reminiscences, and Memorial Lecture Programmes. I

found this volume immensely appealing. Unfortunately, the limitation of space permits me to give only a few examples. In an editorial titled “Tragedy,” the Swami responded in this way to a Western speaker who failed to find a sense of tragedy in Indian literature: “Tragedy exists in the Indian mind—but it cannot stay there long. . .the Indian mind *must resolve its tragedy* [italics mine] , and the greatness of Indian literature lies always in the presentation of the solution. . .and not in the tragedy itself.” Vedanta philosophy in a nut shell! And another: “Bondage occurs when the mind identifies itself with its experiences” (from “On the Misuse of Indian Philosophical Terms”). And finally, from a reminiscence by Swami Abjayananda we find in a few words perhaps the truest of all assessments of Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda: “His Advaitic thinking had raised his consciousness to such heights that he could not conceive of the entire human society and civilization as anything but One.”

It was such conviction of Oneness that made Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda into the child of Vivekananda that he was.

—Cliff Johnson

## *Report*

### **Vedanta in the Third Millennium**

A conference of this title was held at Vivekananda Monastery and Retreat in Ganges, Michigan, near the end of June, 2001. Hosted by the Chicago Center, swamis gathered from near and far, totalling more than fifteen, Heads and Assistants at centers across the country. The gathering was the result of four years of planning and hard work, by volunteers from the Chicago Center and elsewhere, who had trimmed and cleaned the grounds and buildings and made all the arrangements for what proved to be the smoothest, best-managed such conference in our experience,

Putting the meals outdoors under a huge tent allowed the very large dining room to become the meeting hall—renamed Millennium Hall for the occasion. The nearly 600 devotees and friends who assembled here were fed the five meals of the weekend as well as drinks and snacks. Only those who worked so faithfully in the kitchen can truly understand the meaning of that. Overnight arrangements for all but the swamis and volunteers had to be found in hotels and motels of the neighborhood.

In the official program, thirteen swamis delivered their messages addressing the topic of Vedanta in the Third Millennium. These were given in three sets of four, with Swami Gautamananda, Head of the Madras (Chennai)

Center initiating and closing the procedure. Master of Ceremonies Dr. K. Bhatnagar of Louisville gave an impressive performance in setting the pace and keeping things in line, with alarm-clock alerts to make sure the next Swami was not deprived.

Flashes of humor lightened the addressing of serious issues the coming years present to us: the shrinking world and the increasing diversity of our population; our “intoxication with technology”; whether ancient Vedic-age values can apply in our so-different world today; the tension between ethical problems and the “freedom of information” mood; the shift from the churches to the psychiatrists' couch. This reporter felt that some very important things were said. Swami Gautamananda, for example, commented on the “impulse for work” he had found in American life, and suggested that if all this work could be made unselfish, this would eventually be a most spiritual nation.

### **The Future, Ramakrishna, Popularity**

Mysticism was pronounced the religion of the future, and the lecture “Is Vedanta the Future Religion?”, as given by Swami Vivekananda, the document for our study. The Third Millenium, one speaker suggested, “belongs to Sri Ramakrishna—not in the narrow sense of his history or personality, but in the sense that his power is not going to stop for the likes of us (swamis).”

In raising the question of why Vedanta is not popular in the West, one speaker explained that as we are unable to run yoga studios, vegetarian or Indian restaurants, or organize *kirtan* parties, our movement is not going to be “popular.” But this does not explain why some of the Buddhist groups, which also do not have such adjuncts, are very popular. Another swami pointed to the fact that e-mail and the internet have made isolation impossible now, and we have, willy-nilly, become a world community. Yet we often do not know our next-door neighbors. “Let the neighborhood become a brotherhood,” he said.

The historical usage of the word Vedanta was carefully delineated, and it was shown that our present use of it is defined by Swamiji, who raised the word’s meaning above its partial usages (as Advaita only, or Veda fundamentalism, in earlier eras). “No book, no Person, no Personal God even...”

It may be that the entire message offered by these spokesmen of the Second Millenium to the next was just this: Vedanta cannot evolve. It is our comprehension of it which can and must evolve.

Music punctuated the sessions, relaxing the delegates and the audience. Swami Chidananda’s melodious voice introduced and concluded sessions, with

his chants and prayers. Intermissions were provided by Dr. Ram Bala and his singing group, gusty and enthusiastic purveyors of *bhajans*.

In this country a conference generally is not considered complete without opportunities for the audience to ask questions and to make either written or verbal evaluations of the presentations. “Feedback” is thought desirable. Unfortunately this conference made no such provision. Someone afterwards remarked, however, that even if none of the monks had opened his mouth, a powerhouse was represented here—that, actually, speaking had not really been needed.

—Swami Yogeshananda

## *Contributors*

SWAMI BRAHMAVIDYANANDA is a monastic member of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. He first came to Vedanta in 1962 at the Vedanta Society of Berkeley, where he joined the Ramakrishna Order in 1974.

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.

TOM CABOT, a librarian and student of philosophy, lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

DREW LEDER, Professor of Philosophy at Loyala College in Baltimore, Maryland, is the author of several books including *The Soul Knows No Bars*, *Spiritual Passages*, and *Games for the Soul*.

CLIFF JOHNSON has been a member of the Vedanta Society of Southern California since 1960. He was formerly managing editor of *Vedanta and the West* magazine and a brahmachari of the Ramakrishna Order.

NATHAN KATZ is Professor and Chairman of the Department of Religious Studies at Florida International University in Miami. He has authored several books and articles on the Jews of India and Hindu-Jewish relations.

ELVA NELSON, associated with the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Massachusetts since 1949, is author of *Vivekananda and His Swamis* (1992).

WILLIAM PAGE recently retired from teaching English at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand. He has been connected with the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Massachusetts since 1960.

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.

VANN (John Van Hazinga), a carpenter and poet, lives in New Hampshire. He has been interested in Vedanta for nearly 25 years.

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.