

Editorial Introduction

Spiritual Practice: An Open Forum

Perhaps the most basic metaphor in spiritual life is treading a path to reach a destination. Vedanta boldly asserts that God/Self can be realized in this life. We needn't wait till after death. Indeed, what happens later depends on what we do now. But how do we realize God? Vedanta lays out a variety of paths or means to reach that goal. The goal itself may be unimaginable. We only understand it indirectly through the supremely beautiful and meaningful lives of those who have reached that state, or, intellectually, as the attainment of all that we yearn for—joy, knowledge, completeness. But the various means to that goal are tangible and easy to understand.

These means are what we call spiritual practice. For the “can do” American, indeed for any beginner “gung ho” to get started, these practices provide immediate entry into the spiritual life. For any journey, one needs a guide or guides to help avoid pitfalls and negotiate rough spots and forks in the road. One also needs ongoing encouragement that the road can indeed be traversed and the goal reached. We get inspiration from scripture and the lives and teachings of saints. But we also need the company and human support of other travelers like ourselves.

With this in view, the editors of *American Vedantist* solicited articles from friends and subscribers about their own understanding and experience of spiritual practices, their own paths toward the spiritual goal. We offer the following articles as encouragement to all of us as individual aspirants, and also to help foster a sense of community and mutual support among Vedantists.

We urge our readers to help contribute to this community of spirit. We did not have room in this issue to publish everything that we received, and expect the next issue also to center on spiritual practice. Please send us your thoughts—anything from a few words to a few pages.

—The Editors

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Covering Everything with the Lord

William Page

The first line of the Isha Upanishad, “*Isha vasyam idam sarvam*,” has been translated in various ways: “All this is full of the Lord,” “All this is pervaded by the Lord,” “All this is enveloped by the Lord,” “All this is dwelt in by the Lord,” etc.

Vedanta has always used different verbs to express the relationship of Brahman to the universe. Brahman contains, envelops, overarches, undergirds, supports, sustains, pervades, permeates, saturates, and indeed constitutes the universe. Both immanent and transcendent, Brahman is to the universe much as the ocean is to a current moving within its depths.

But some translators give a different rendering: “All this should be covered by the Lord.” This creates a puzzle. If the Lord already dwells within the universe, why should we have to “cover” the universe with him?

If we accept Shankaracharya’s theory that the universe which we perceive is *maya*, then an answer suggests itself. Maya is a veil that masks the true nature of reality, a superimposition of multiple phenomena upon a single noumenon. To perceive reality as it really is, we have to tear aside the veil and remove the superimposition.

Counter-superimposition

But if that is too difficult, we can initiate a process of counter-superimposition. By a process of will and imagination, we can mentally project an image of the Lord over the universe. We can superimpose him over the very superimposition that conceals him.

This is a little like fighting fire with fire, and in fact we do it every time we try to visualize the Lord dwelling within (and also outside) everything that is. We are not only trying to cover everything with the Lord: we are trying to infuse everything with the Lord.

It may be objected that what we are projecting upon (and infusing into) the universe is not really the Lord, but merely an image of the Lord as we imagine him to be, a poor and shabby figment of our imagination. That image is bound to be inadequate and distorted. But through it, and through the process of counter-superimposition, the veil of *maya* may be vitiated, and the Lord’s light will come shining through.

Take for instance Sri Ramakrishna’s vision of Brahman as a lake of pure water covered by the scum of *maya*. Remove the scum, and you can see the pure water; remove *maya*, and you can see Brahman. But if the scum is too difficult to remove, we can pour water on it to make it dissipate. The water we

use may not be as pure as the water in the lake—it may be common tapwater, it may even be polluted—but it may be enough to dissipate the scum.

Indeed, we do something very much like this every time we meditate on the image of the Chosen Ideal shining within the lotus of the heart. Beginners in meditation may sometimes have the uneasy feeling that this is an artificial exercise, that we are superimposing an illusion over something that is not there.

Skeptics will say that we are trying to hypnotize ourselves. There isn't any lotus inside our bodies, they will say, and there certainly isn't any Chosen Ideal. There's just bone and muscle and veins and fat and tissue; and, pumping away in the midst of it all, the heart. The heart is nothing more than a muscle, and not a very pretty one at that. To picture it as a lotus, and to project the image of the Chosen Ideal upon it, is to pile illusion upon illusion, and to engage in what the late Alexandra David-Neel once dismissively referred to as "playing with phantoms."

That's one way of looking at it. But once meditation begins to take hold, the image of the Chosen Ideal takes on a life of its own. Parts of its body that were vague and fuzzy gradually become clear. Sometimes the image even changes form. We may be trying to picture it in one posture, but it will assume another, as if it has a mind of its own. Most important of all, we get a sense of the presence of the Chosen Ideal within us.

“Monkey” and “Kitten” Approaches

Skeptics will dismiss even this as an illusion. For there is a fundamentally different attitude between theists and nontheists when it comes to meditation. The non-theists follow what Sri Ramakrishna called the “monkey” approach of self-effort and self-reliance. They believe that it is the meditator who is doing everything, that there is nothing out there or in here that can help us, and that when visions arise, they are nothing more than hallucinations caused by our own minds. Such hallucinations are to be ignored, and meditation is to be continued until the ultimate goal is attained. Usually this goal is desirelessness, freedom from all attachments, including attachment to the object of meditation. Don't play with your phantoms, the non-theists warn: they will lead you deeper and deeper into delusion, and possibly even into madness.

This is the viewpoint of the Theravada Buddhists, who practice an extremely austere form of Jnana. But it goes without saying that the more austere a path is, the harder it is to follow.

Theists have a different viewpoint. They follow what Sri Ramakrishna called the “kitten” approach of depending on God to help them. In actuality, though, it is not purely a “kitten” approach of utter dependence; it is a synthesis of the “monkey” and “kitten” approaches. Theists depend on God, yes, but they also exert self-effort. They know that the mother cat may

not pick up the kitten until the kitten cries out to be picked up. And the more insistently the kitten cries out to be picked up, the more quickly the mother cat is likely to respond.

Theists believe that the meditator does not do everything, but merely initiates the process of meditation, just as the kitten cries out to be picked up. Skeptics may call it playing with phantoms—but what happens when the phantom plays back?

Just as the mother cat responds to the kitten's cries and picks it up, so there is something out there (and also in here) that responds, that brings the image of the Chosen Ideal to life, that infuses us with a sense of its presence, and that may even provide visions to encourage us and lead us forward.

To theists, visions are not to be dismissed as mere hallucinations: they may serve as signposts on the way. Distinguishing between visions and hallucinations can be a tricky business, though—and that's one of the many reasons why we need the guidance of a guru. The Ramakrishna tradition has always held that the most reliable sign of spiritual progress is transformation of character. Unlike hallucinations, visions ought to be followed by a subsequent improvement in character.

An Interactive Process

Theists believe that meditation is an interactive process, with the meditator reaching out for the Lord, and the Lord responding if he chooses to do so. Go ahead and play with your phantoms, the theist says—just so long as you are sure that they are more than phantoms. If they are more than phantoms, they will lead you to the light.

In the Ramakrishna tradition, the most striking exemplar of this phenomenon is Gopala's Mother. After years of intense japa and meditation, she experienced her Chosen Ideal, the baby Krishna, as a constant presence. Then she saw the form of Krishna merge into that of Sri Ramakrishna (who was still in the physical body) and realized that they were one and the same. Afterward she saw the divine presence in all who came to her.

Meditation on the Chosen Ideal may therefore be thought of this way: Deep within us all lies the Atman—latent, formless, and inchoate. When we project an image of the Chosen Ideal upon the heart, we are providing a vessel for the Atman to fill. If we focus our love and devotion on this vessel, the Atman will be moved to rise and fill it.

To put it another way, the river or the Atman is always flowing deep beneath the mind. When we project the image of the Chosen Ideal within, it is like lowering a vessel into the river, scooping up some of the Atman, and bringing it up to dwell within the mind.

Indeed, the best refutation of the age-old charge that meditation is simply a kind of self-hypnosis is this: when meditation is most successful, the

meditator becomes redundant. He may have provided the image of the Chosen Ideal as a vessel for the Atman to dwell in; but once the Atman becomes activated, it is the Atman who does everything, and the meditator becomes the vessel. He no longer has to make an effort to project the image of the Chosen Ideal within. He just sits there watching as the image of the Chosen Ideal comes to life and reveals itself. He can feel its living presence glowing within him—and sometimes it even teaches him. If he is practicing japam, the repetition of the mantra becomes automatic, and goes on effortlessly.

This phenomenon provides an answer to the famous Zen koan, “Who is it that chants the Buddha's name?” When chanting becomes effective, the Buddha chants his own name. Who is it that meditates upon the Chosen Ideal? When meditation is deepest, the Chosen Ideal meditates upon itself.

In this way, it may seem that in meditation we are “covering everything with the Lord.” But in truth the Lord has always been there; we are simply covering him with himself; and as our meditation progresses he reveals himself more and more, and absorbs the covering into himself. Thus he makes the outer one with the inner, and transforms what some would call an illusion, into reality. q

Let Me Count the Ways

Edith D. Tipple

In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's immortal love poem to her husband, she writes:

*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach.¹*

Is not spiritual practice turning that love, that very same depth and breadth and height of feeling, to God, to Brahman, to Truth?

How do we do it? How do we turn such longing, such yearning, such fulfillment, to something we cannot see or touch? Swami Prabhavananda used to say, “The task is to cover everything with God. By hook or by crook.” By practicing the Presence, by constant recollectedness. We might argue that it takes longing for God to be able to practice constant recollectedness, but that is the lazy man's argument. What it takes is determination. What we need is working faith, a decision to put forth the effort. Let us count a few ways we can make that effort.

1. From “Sonnets from the Portuguese.”

A common example is the attitude toward what one eats. As a practice, the devotionally-minded who is attached to a Chosen Ideal offers his or her food to that Ideal and eats it as *prasad*. It can also be offered to stoke the fire (the power) of Brahman within. It can be taken to nourish the Temple of God (the body). It can be taken to preserve the body which one views as only a channel for work to be done for the benefit of God's creatures and the Self within all.

One can make a practice of thinking of God (in whatever way one is attracted) at the beginning of each new work, or at the beginning of each new day—at the end, mentally giving up the product of the work or the day. What is important is to convince oneself that it is not one's own work, but the work of the Lord—or that the power of Brahman is performing the work. Even to think that whatever one does, whatever happens, is one's own karma running its course, allows one to be the witness of it, rather than the performer of it: it is the acting out of the *gunas*, of *prakriti*, which must exhaust themselves and come to stillness in the ineffable silence of the One without a second.

Attaching the Thought of God to Everything

One can repeat the mantra in rhythm to one's walk—or one's swim stroke. Such repetition can be used to save one's equanimity in boring or stressful situations. It can be a self-check on our progress: when the recycling of the fears, hopes and dreams of normal thoughts ceases momentarily, does the mantra well up from within?

One can carry on a running conversation, albeit one-sided. Even though there seems to be no answer—and it will generally concern problems in the outer world—such a practice will put our minds at a slight distance from those problems, just by being shared.

The aesthetically-minded can make the home a place of beauty, simplicity, and serenity by keeping in mind the ones before the zeroes.² It can have a feeling of warmth and joy and cleanliness and caring, even though its silent yogi owner makes no show of religiosity in decoration.

In actual fact, there is nothing in this world to which one cannot attach the thought of God. Even the unmentionable horrors of war can be seen as Kali's play. For "God alone is Real; all else illusory."³ Everything else is nothing but nonsense, sheer nonsense. When that understanding, through hard experience and through discrimination, begins to dawn, recollectedness becomes an emotional necessity. It is then that spiritual practice can continue in work, in rest, in dream. And faith begins to dawn. q

2. As Ramakrishna pointed out, all value lies in the number before the zeroes. (*Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 178)

3. *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 81.

Clearing the Way

Pamela Hoye

Reflections—India 1991

Evening *arati* (vespers) is seemingly the same at all Ramakrishna Order maths and centers. Now, in India, I find this familiarity is warming, giving me a sense of belonging and cementing my place in Vedanta. Although I am half-way around the world, I am but a devotee gathered with other devotees. If I felt a little uneasy the first night in Jayrambati, this does not last as the sounds of village life filter through the meditation hall. Swami Atmarupananda was right. Any sound by me would make little impression here! Freed from my own self-awareness I can enjoy the freedom of belonging.

When I first felt attracted to the shrine room at our San Diego monastery, Swami Atmarupananda and long time devotees had patiently encouraged my presence in order that I might overcome my fear of holy places. Years of struggling to "keep still" had transformed being in church into a fearful experience which I brought with me into the shrine room. It is a characteristic of neurological disorders that one cannot receive and process sensual stimuli properly. In my case, having cerebral palsy causes my body to overreact. The sharp transitions between sound and silence which form part of the shrine ritual made it difficult for my senses to adjust. And my conditioned fear of holy places intensified my bodily reactions, at times to the point of near suffocation.

Fighting a Battle with God

I needed to disassociate my own longing to be silent from the fear I had developed. Swami Atmarupananda understood this. In the presence of my devotee brothers and sisters I fought a battle with God, whom I had always felt would abandon me at church. But that had somehow made sense. I didn't especially like attending church, and although it was called the "house of God" I could understand why he didn't enter in with me. But now, in my Vedanta home, where I wanted to participate but felt horribly uncomfortable, I became angry. Why was I here? Why did I want to be here? As my "anger" at God rose, my physical distress reached an all-time high. My body wrenched wildly. My breathing would become labored. Loud noises accompanied my gasps for air.

Why was I not being told to be quiet?

By Mother's grace, the loving patience of my brother and sister devotees bore fruit. The conditioning had been broken. I felt God's Holy presence in the shrine room and—at long last—I, too, felt welcome. On some days my body became quiet. I also discovered that I could let an occasional movement pass through me without fearing that its effect would escalate.

Yet, the involuntary motion associated with cerebral palsy is unpredictable. As my comfort within the shrine room continued to rise and fall with the intensity of these movements, Swami Atmarupananda and I agreed that I should not always attend public pujas. Actually, how we agreed involved the next step in my understanding. Once I had gotten past my fear of sacred places and my anger with God, remaining in the shrine room became a contest of will. Having achieved the right to be in the shrine room, I was determined not to let my uncontrolled gyrations drive me out, even though I was certain that the noises which were disturbing to me had to be disturbing to others. I thought that if I just could stick it out long enough my body would again become quiet. The exact opposite happened!

Was I there to force myself to sit quietly?

Finally, on one very crowded day of celebration, Swami told me not to go into the shrine room during the worship. My face betrayed momentary confusion, prompting Swami to call me two days later in order to explain his request. Before he could speak, however, I was thanking him. During the worship I had gone into the Center's lecture room. There, surrounded by wall shrines to various religions and seated before photos of Thakur, Swamiji and Mother, I had spent the time in happy awareness that I could now forget about my body and devote myself to God. My not wanting to cause disturbance to others was a legitimate concern. Denying this in a battle of will robbed my attention. Was I there to force myself to sit quietly?

There will always be times when I must withdraw from attending public worship. A significant difference has taken place, however. The fear has gone. I am free to approach. Indeed, there is joy in the process. When other devotees are not present, I have the shrine room to myself. More important, perhaps, I can now enter any church or place of worship without fear and usually feel the holiness within.

Thus I have come to India. As I have said, Swami Atmarupananda had told me before my departure that my movements would not be a problem. Yes, this is certainly true in Jayrambati. I have never been to a mangala (early morning) arati in America, and whether my enthusiasm would withstand continuous early rising is doubtful. For the present, however, I find exhilaration in the practice. Once again, familiarity is delight. I recognize five peace chants and the Gita meter *á la* Bengali accent! In the pre-dawn

hours a gentle, even light illumines Mother's place, eventually giving way to the natural light of day.

In certain respects, I prefer Mother's Jayrambati temple to Sri Ramakrishna's temple at Belur Math. Aspects of Thakur's temple grandeur bring difficulties which help clarify the past. During mangala arati, the sharp contrast between light and dark, the massiveness and the silences, bombards my senses in the hours before sunrise as the artificial light from Thakur's shrine casts spotlight-like beams through the darkened meditation hall. Mangala arati at Jayrambati is celebrated with chanting, the rhythm of which catches and absorbs my body movements. At Belur all is silent save for the distant tinkling of the bell. Although I have felt comfortably at home with Thakur during previous visits, now the temple seems assaulting. Feeling helplessly out-of-control in the transformed temple environment underscores how my early fear of holy places arose from this disability.

Here at Belur, fear does not drive me from the Temple. Rather it is the simple recognition that I often cannot control this body. To continue to struggle is to give it more attention than it deserves. With salutations to Thakur, who I'm certain understands, I spend the early mornings at Belur next to Swamiji's tree. Facing the Ganga, this is a perfect place to greet the breaking of day.

Once again, evening arati is welcome. I take my place at the back of the majestically columned meditation hall. Thakur's Temple is friendly once more. Peacefulness mutes the cawing of crows outside.

San Diego, 2002

Putting to rest concerns about the body has not made me adept at meditation. It simply cleared the way for the genuine challenge of spiritual practice to begin. While my situation may seem unique or extreme, it really isn't. When undertaking spiritual practice we must each discover those distractions over which we have no control. For some this means choosing to sit on a chair or to kneel instead of subjecting the body to the pain of trying to sit in the lotus position. For others it may mean making a sacred space in the garage where we may practice without hearing the sounds of our house and family.

The goal of spiritual practice is to learn to control and direct the mind. By refusing to admit that there are external disturbances beyond our ability to change, we give our minds an excuse to be distracted and not to take up the real work at hand. As anyone who has tried to calm and focus the mind knows, it needs no excuse to rebel! My mind is no exception. In fact, because my life activities have been primarily "mental" in nature, my mind is, in the words of Arjuna, "as difficult to control as the wind." Unlike the movements of the body, however, this is a suitable challenge against which to direct my will—a challenge which I share with everyone. q

Dance as a Medium of Meditation

Carla DeSola

From focused prayer, gently flowing into movement, we enter into dance meditation. Thus, the sacred dancer demonstrates through her/his body a balance of stillness and action. A contemplative dimension allows the dancer to shift from doing the dance to being the dance.

Thus I introduce a course on dance meditation which is offered periodically at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA. Students work to develop an increasingly inclusive awareness of what is transpiring as they dance. This awareness includes the interaction of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions of their being. Awareness, coupled with detachment, underlies the dancer's ability to be centered throughout the movements. Surrendering all of one's self becomes an offering.¹

A River Flowing Onward

Through the various forms of our dance meditation we work toward becoming increasingly aware of God "within" and God "without." The sacred dancer, searching for God through the medium of dance, intuitively practices a double form of meditation: 1) she is centered on the "still point" within her; 2) she is aware of what she is experiencing. For example, the dancer may begin moving with a strong sense of her heart centered in God. While holding this awareness, she may perceive her "center" as flowing throughout her body. Aware of this flow, she allows it to shape her body into myriad forms, creating rhythmic and dynamic fluctuations. Her movements, in turn, affect the space around her. She is at one with all that is happening. Drawn by the beauty of this stream of movement, she is as a river flowing onward, giving "voice" to a song from within.

I believe an underlying factor shaping dance meditation is a quest for beauty. As movement begins to flow, a kinesthetic sense of beauty draws one's soul to follow the unfolding gift that is taking place. Urged by beauty,

1. I am indebted to Thomas Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body, Meditation and Yoga as Christian Spiritual Practice*, Paulist Press, NY/NJ 1995 for an inclusive discussion on meditation and how it informs Christian practice. He notes that prayer, in a contemplative form "is characterized not so much by the *absence* of thoughts and feelings as by *detachment* from them." He also distinguishes two basic types of meditation: concentrative (on a single point) and awareness meditation, in which "you try to be aware of all that you are experiencing."

the dancer/meditator, passive, as a *receptacle*, but active as an *instrument*, accompanies the movement's journey toward its epiphany. God becomes identified with the journey, with beauty and discovery.²

How does dance meditation work? I have discovered a variety of ways, learning the benefits of different approaches through a process that allows for an organic unfolding of movement, coupled with different methods of concentration. For example, dancing to a chant (such as Taizé), using repetitive movement sequences, helps quiet both mind and soul, giving opportunity to pray in the present moment without thought for “what comes next.” However, when dancing before an icon or holy image, the power of its presence may cause movements to unfold in new ways, though one may begin with a set pattern. Yet another meditative approach involves embodying a sacred “word,” directing it through movement so that all one's limbs engage in a living, wordless dialogue. Coming to rest, in stillness and silence, you and the word seem to become as one. Following a flow of movement (also known as “tracing”) throughout one's body with deep concentration, with *no* superimposed image is yet another mode of dance meditation. An additional level of awareness, applicable to all the above movement prayer forms, happens when the dancer also becomes the observer, watching herself without judgment, as if seeing her body from above or outside.

Beginning with Awareness of Breath

The simplest form to introduce, as well as being a foundational path for the dancer, begins with awareness of breath. The following is a hypothetical scenario, with infinite possibilities:

The dancer experiences her lungs expanding and contracting.
(Along with her heartbeat, these are her primary movements.)

Allowing her body to respond, rising and falling to each inhalation and exhalation, she releases a hand, which moves seemingly of its own accord until it comes to a resting place.

Her breath continues its rhythm. Then, once again she releases her hand (or another part of her body, for her entire being is held in relaxed, yet alert attention) on another phase of her breath.

This continues, her movements becoming fuller and fuller, eventually diminishing as her body and soul seek rest.

2. I believe the meditative dance experience has its counterpart in the experience of professional dancers during an improvisational, pre-choreographic phase of work. The movements may not begin in meditation, or even be connected with traditional religious imagery, but a counterpart is discernable when dancers speak of the simple joy that comes before their choreographic or technical judgment takes hold—when they experience the freedom of letting go and being at one with themselves—dancing their dance into being.

She bows at the conclusion, more conscious of “grace” within her,
aware and grateful for being held in God’s love.

One might ask if all of this is only preparing the body and mind for meditation. It has been said that as the body loves exercise, so the soul loves awareness. When does dance, focused exercises and awareness, become dance meditation? I believe dance meditation happens with intention, whether during a dance sequence or a movement exercise devised to this end. Yet it may also begin as “dance prayer,” and drop into stillness—a stillness that is alive, like silence reverberating after a bell has stopped ringing. I know that I am lured by its beauty. q

Through Nature

Rosalind Fredericks

[The following essay was sent to one of our editors by the author’s daughter shortly after her mother’s passing away. Mrs. Fredericks was a member of the Vedanta Society of New York for many years.]

Since I was quite young I have had a feeling of reverence and humbleness before nature. I have had a sudden quiet religious feeling when walking in a woods, looking at the sky, experiencing a wild storm with driving rain, thunder, and flashing lightning, walking in a soft rain, seeing the yellow light from the evening sky blazing on trees to the east. I have felt something within myself that was a part of the forces of nature, a very intense sense of being one with the storm, one with the stars, the sky, and the luminous clouds.

In recent years the observation and contemplation of nature has become an aid and a pathway to developing spiritual consciousness.

One evening a few years ago, I went out on the terrace at night. The two ornamental plums were in full blossom, having a very light fragrance. There was a power and presence, perhaps you could say aura, about the trees in blossom that was not tangible, but absolutely real, knowable. My son, Chris, was there. He felt it.

I have thought about it often, the tremendous immeasurable power in the blossoming tree. And when I look at the blossoms, touch them, smell them, I think about the power that brought them out of the bare twigs of the recently dormant tree, and the power contained in them which would bring forth fruit and in the fruit the seed, and I think about the power in the seed, which will in time burst open the hard shell and send forth the sprout. The fruit with the seed will be carried by the animals of the area, the raccoons, squirrels, chipmunks, and opossums and the seed will be dropped into the earth.

This year as the fruit developed, I thought about the seeds in all living things, the seeds that come from all the trees I know, the seeds in peppers, melons, tomatoes, berries—in all the vegetables and fruits that I use. When I take the seeds out I recognize them for what they are. I thought on about seeds, how every living being carries within it the seed for the continuance of physical life on the earth. I surprised my husband one day by asking him if he knew he was a seedpod. Our bodies that shelter and grow the seed are the fruit.

One evening recently I stepped out on the terrace on a night when the moon was clear and near full. The fruit lay in clusters on the branches of the plum trees, yellow and luminous in the moonlight. I felt the power in them, an indescribable Presence was there.

As I have gone on contemplating the Power in the physical universe, I have had more and more a feeling of the same power in me, the power through which I move, think, see, hear, produce seed, and produce life from that seed. I feel more and more a sense of oneness with all that I know, the plum tree, and all other plants, whales, land animals, birds, fish, even insects and minerals. I am very moved by this feeling of the Power that is so manifest in all of these beings around me and in me and in the stars, the galaxies and beyond, beyond, transcending all that we know. q

Centering on Work

John Schlenck

Early on in my Vedantic life I was drawn to *jnana-yoga* (the path of knowledge). Having been brought up an agnostic humanist, I had no patience with religion which required the suspension of reason. Vivekananda's *Jnana-Yoga* profoundly appealed to me. Here was accessible religion that did not require belief in something unprovable. Here also was a vigorous challenge to a life of strength and heroic struggle.

Less than two years after coming to Vedanta I made an ethical mistake. For the first time in my life I felt a need to pray, and it occurred to me to pray to God as Mother. Dualism after all had its uses. Analyzing my own mind, I also realized that I needed more surrounding tangible support for my spiritual struggle. Though I had been good at mathematics from childhood, I needed flesh on the bones of math in the form of music, which was also my profession. A shrine with a number of pictures was also helpful.

After initiation, I tried too hard at meditation and japa for a year or two. Then I was unable to meditate or do japa or even spiritual reading for more than a short time. What was to be done? I still wanted to develop my spiritual

life. It was then that *karma yoga* offered a way out. By that time I was living at the Vedanta Society of New York, and the work of the Center, which before had sometimes seemed like drudgery, now seemed like a saving grace.

Early on I developed a love for the Gita. In my enthusiasm, I memorized the entire scripture in English, using the Prabhavananda-Isherwood translation. For a period I recited half of the Gita every day. This also was too strenuous for me. My teacher, Swami Pavitrananda, recommended selecting a few verses which were particularly helpful.

There are many verses of the Gita that I treasure, but probably the most helpful overall have been verses 8 through 11 of Chapter 12:

Be absorbed in me,/ Lodge your mind in me:/ Thus you shall dwell in me,/ Do not doubt it,/ Here and hereafter.

If you cannot become absorbed in me, then try to reach me by repeated concentration.

If you lack the strength to concentrate, then devote yourself to works which will please me. For, by working for my sake only, you will achieve perfection.

If you cannot even do this, then surrender yourself to me altogether. Control the lusts of your heart, and renounce the fruits of every action.

A Complete and Balanced Program

Here was a way out of my difficulty. I could still aspire to God-realization. The first of these four verses was beyond my capability to practice. Even the second could be practiced only for a short time daily, and often not very successfully. But the third was a clear means of salvation. Here was something I could do: devote my life to works which would please Mother. Working for her sake I could reach the goal. Then, as a fail-safe, a safety net underneath even this, was the assurance that when I couldn't work, I could surrender myself to her altogether. The catch was—and this is only fair, for there has to be self-effort at least as a token of one's sincerity—I also had to control my lusts and renounce the fruits of my actions.

Here was a complete and balanced program for my spiritual life, centering on work, on the third of these four wonderful verses. As Gandhi said, the Gita is indeed a compassionate mother. Or, to put it more personally, the Gita has been for me a vehicle of Holy Mother's compassion.

Through her compassion, I have been able to live at a Vedanta center for most of my adult life. I have also been given the gift of music, a means to intensify my spiritual life, a means to serve God's devotees, a path to God in its own right, if properly utilized.

q

What's an Atheist to Do?

William A. Conrad

In this post 9/11 world with everybody praying and meditating, with politicians calling on God at every turn, what's an atheist to do? One possible response is a spirituality attack in which the atheist loses his grip on his ideas and goes with the flow. But before being carried along, let us hear how Swami Vivekananda praises the honest atheist:

We should, therefore, follow reason and also sympathize with those who do not come to any sort of belief, following reason. For it is better that mankind should become atheist by following reason than blindly believe in two hundred millions of gods on the authority of anybody. What we want is progress, development, realization. [*Complete Works*, 2: 336]

If the atheist clings to reason and at the same time has faith in himself, then the railings of unthinking believers who try to impose their views and methods can be ignored.

Qualities He Would Like to Possess

But suppose the atheist sees the lives of some believers who have qualities of love and compassion he would be glad to possess, what then? Again, Swami Vivekananda speaks to the needs of the atheist:

The watchword of all well-being, of all moral good is not "I" but "thou." Who cares whether there is a heaven or a hell, who cares if there is a soul or not, who cares if there is an unchangeable or not? Here is the world, and it is full of misery. Go out into it as Buddha did, and struggle to lessen it or die in the attempt. Forget yourselves; this is the first lesson to be learnt, whether you are a theist or an atheist, whether you are an agnostic or a Vedantist, a Christian or a Mohammedan. The one lesson obvious to all is the destruction of the little self and the building up of the Real Self. [*CW*, 2: 353]

Suppose the atheist falls in with someone who with honeyed, seemingly reasonable words, tries to induce belief in the many superstitions which are rife in Hinduism. These people weave a web of ideas into which a naive atheist might become entangled. If every objection is met with a quotation from the Vedas or, worse, a reference to the mystery of religion, superstition might enfold him in its smothering wings. Again, Swami Vivekananda defends the atheist who feels under pressure:

I would rather see every one of you rank atheists than superstitious fools, for the atheist is alive and you can make something out of him. But if superstition enters, the brain is gone, the brain is softening, degradation has seized upon the life. Avoid these two. Brave, bold men, these are what we want. What we want is vigor in the blood, strength in the nerves, iron muscles and nerves of steel, not softening namby-pamby ideas. Avoid all these. Avoid all mystery. There is no mystery in religion. [CW, 3: 278]

With Swami Vivekananda's message ringing in his ears, the atheist who still wants to bring spirituality into his life might turn to an atheistic religion like Buddhism. Although there are gods in some forms of Buddhism, they are mostly symbolic figures and are not fundamental to the message. Practice is the watchword in Buddhism as in all religions, but there are no reified abstractions such as a soul or *atman* or all-pervading life force to struggle with as in Hinduism. Life, in the Buddhist view, is like a river that flows, but there is no such thing as a river, only moving water, i.e., a process without an overall entity proceeding downstream. This view is compatible with the modern view of mind and life as a self-regulating physical process without an external regulator to give coherence to the process.

Empathy through Contemplating Shared Genes

One of the main emphases in Buddhism is compassion for all beings. This may well strike a resonant chord in our atheist from the standpoint of evolution. All living beings are related because of their common genetic heritage. Human beings share genes with bacteria, viruses, worms, plants and other forms of life. Our closest relative the chimpanzee has 98% of our genes. Lest this offend some people, it has to be remembered that genes are only the letters; the species is the letters organized together into a message. According to Ursula Goodenough, well known biologist and expert in science and religion, comparing a young chimp with a young human, the chimp is severely retarded but with good motor skills, i.e., the same tendencies to explore but vastly lower cognitive skills. Clearly, similar genetic makeup does not ensure similar outcome. Goodenough says the human brain is equivalent in connectivity to that of a 900 pound chimp. (Chimps normally weigh about a tenth that.) Contemplation of genetic relationship can lead to empathy for all beings.

From a spiritual standpoint, translating compassion for all beings into service to particular individuals has its pitfalls. We come face-to-face with our own short-comings as people. Quickness to anger, pride of person—"Here, my good man, take this quarter and let me go my way in peace"—inability to carry out promises—"I shall come tomorrow" and then I don't show up, etc. How difficult it is to serve another in the right spirit. What is the main

obstacle to a person's service? Is it not my own self, the inability to put my needs aside for the sake of the other person? I have a friend in a nursing home who is somewhat paranoid. When I visit her, she sometimes bids me farewell with, "Good-bye, Judas." It takes some control to ignore that and try to laugh it off. The fact that I use this as an example shows it still vexes me somewhat. In any case, visiting the ill is one way of acting compassionately, and the typical town or city affords many avenues of volunteering to help those in need.

Again, suppose our atheist wants a systematic course of self-development, what then? Thich Nhat Hanh has many books on mindfulness, a practice which calls for no belief in anything. He advocates practices common to many religions, such as attention to the ingoing and outgoing breath accompanied by a small half smile as seen on the lips of statues of the Buddha and also on Michelangelo's Mona Lisa. That smile physically relaxes us and helps free the mind of its tensions. Thich Nhat Hanh also recommends the practice of mindfulness in everyday activities such as cooking, etc. which will strengthen the mind and prepare it for meditation. Mindfulness, or recollectedness as we say in Vedanta, is the foundation of a happy life. I speak of the works of Thich Nhat Hanh rather than, say, those of Swami Vivekananda, because there is no call to believe in anything, only practice. The means are the way. There is no way to learn meditation; meditation is the way to meditation. But right action, including disinterested service to others, prepares the mind for meditation. Right action and meditation form a self-reinforcing holiness circle (opposite to a vicious circle) that spins you up to a pure mind ready for the next step in spiritual life.

Theological Discussions Distract from the Main Purpose

Now suppose our atheist in the course of investigating religions decides to look into Vedanta, what then? The basic goal of Vedanta is to "Know Thyself," as the Delphic Oracle also said. Even if one does not reach the goal, the effort should curb the passions and serve as a useful rule for life. The problem for our atheist comes in the effort to define the Self with a capital S and distinguish it from the self with a small s. It would serve the atheist's purpose to ignore all theological discussions since they distract from the main purpose of finding a systematic means for controlling the mind. However, there has to be a context for speaking about the means for controlling the mind. Vedanta and other religions provide coordinated sets of symbols and practices which, taken together, can help in learning to control the mind. Let the atheist plunge into the ocean of Vedanta without relinquishing his skeptical attitude so long as it is coupled with an honest desire to know the truth.

Since learning is generally done in groups, the atheist needs to keep his wits about him before joining in. Several useful questions for evaluating any group are: (1) does the teacher practice what he preaches? (2) does the teacher encourage questions? (3) are all doctrines presented as open to question? (4) is independent study encouraged? (5) is an aspirant left free to form judgments and attachments to the group? and (6) is there an emphasis on the ethical virtues such as adherence to the truth? If the group under consideration meets these tests, it is usually safe to plunge in.

Once the atheist starts down the spiritual path, the question arises, “What is the first quality to practice?” In my opinion, the most useful and basic attitude to try for is non-attachment or detachment. According to Swami Vivekananda, detachment is the basis of all the yogas (CW 1: 99). Basically, detachment means maintaining one’s balance in the face of provoking circumstances. Usually such circumstances involve people, but ideas can also be the cause of provocation. To insist to an atheist that God is doing everything is very provocative. If he can learn to maintain balance under such an attack, it will be a great benefit in his search. The source of the difficulty is attachment to the idea of atheism. The atheist identifies himself with the idea, so questioning it becomes personal. Practicing detachment from his idea of atheism will help him to go forward. Atheism is only one of many ideas held by the atheist, therefore learning to be detached from that one will develop an attitude useful under many circumstances. The atheist might find it useful to consider that he is a practicing Vedantist but not a believing Vedantist.

Prayers for Atheists

Now suppose the atheist, because of influence from the group, is subject to a prayer attack. What then? Somewhere in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Ramakrishna gives an atheist prayer: “O Lord, if you exist, show yourself to me.” This is similar to the poet Cowper’s prayer, “O God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul.” Finally, the atheist might be drawn to the Rudra prayer which, in Swami Vivekananda’s translation, goes:

From the unreal lead us to the Real.
From darkness lead us unto Light.
From death lead us to Immortality.
Reach us through and through our Self
And evermore protect us—O Thou Terrible—
From ignorance, by Thy sweet compassionate Face.

And so we are led to a possible answer to 9/11 which the atheist might find useful in his quest to find a meaning in the world. q

Practicing the Presence

Gordon Westerlund

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What I like most about my job is the people and the atmosphere. To me it's kind of like sacred ground up here, this is a holy place, a spiritual place. It is in the stillness and quietness that one becomes aware of the Presence. It's a little like Mother Teresa—I like to see God in everyone. She sees Him in the leper, she sees Christ in the people she serves. And I like to see Christ in the persons on campus—all the students, faculty and staff.

To me, there is not an inch in this universe where the Highest is not. I mean, God is omnipresent in every inch of space, in every particle, there is not an atom that the fullness of God is not in. That's why I get along with the students. What you give out you get back. You learn to see the good in them, the divine in them.

“Put your mind on God and ego will take care of itself.”

It has taken a lot to get rid of the ego. I asked a person in India, “How do I get rid of the ego?” She wrote, “It's not by thinking of the ego that you get rid of it. Put your mind on God and ego will take care of itself.” It rang a bell; it seemed from then on I had God's blessing—day and night my mind went on God.

I lived in a high crime rate area right after Martin Luther King passed away. I knew that God is in everyone. There is not a spot where God is not. I found that to be very true. I lived in a Negro section at that time and worked on the graveyard shift. There were very few white people in that area; I was in their territory. The Black Panthers said that any white man seen after dark would be shot. But I walked by their area in the middle of the night for about three and a half years. In the three blocks where I walked, I counted seven lives taken in those years. But I left my doors unlocked most of the time. I had given everything over to Christ already.

It was only about a half a dozen times that guys came into my place. Most of the time I was there, and they would take off. I would come home and the place would be ransacked, but I thought it was no loss whatsoever because everything belonged to God. There is a verse in Job that says the Lord giveth

and the Lord taketh away and blessed be His name. So I thought, “The Lord has come in the form of these persons and He has taken away.”

They had fun doing that, and I had fun cleaning up. I had suffered no loss whatsoever—just joy the whole time, even though I walked through the area and was held up a number of times. When I was hit over the head and knocked to the ground, I would get up and say, “I have nothing against you guys.” Every one of them, except for the last person, would come back and apologize that they had roughed me up. They paid me back fully and their lives were changed. So, it was learning to see God in everyone.

“Lord, What Do You Want Me to Do?”

In the three and one-half years that I walked through there to get to work I would usually leave about three in the afternoon and get back about three or four in the morning and I would walk through the alley ways. It was about a seven mile walk total, but it was learning to see God. I would have never known that God is controlling the black people and the white people. He is all controlling. There is no power but of God (Romans 13:1). I would have never known that unless I had spent those three-plus years just being aware of His presence. I said, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” And He spoke to my heart as if God’s will was to go through the area, to start walking instead of driving because the buses weren’t allowed in the area. The police were afraid to go through the area. This was in Portland, Oregon in the heart of the black section. I taught the black people there.

I’d be walking home and the black people themselves would stop me and would say, “Get in the car! Your life is in danger. You don’t know my people. Get in the car!” I would get a ride home. They wanted to protect me. Actually, I was only held up once every three months. No matter what happened, I would say, “O Lord, is this it or not?” It was a dying of my ego during that time because there were times that I didn’t want to walk home. Then I would pray to the Lord saying, “What you want done, not what I want. If you want me to go through the area, live or die, sink or swim, I’ll do whatever you want me to do.” It was a breaking down of what I wanted to do and saying, “Okay, Lord, your will be done.” It was truly glorious. It became like heaven walking through the dark alley. If I saw someone they would kind of freeze, seeing a white man.

So I began to feel God’s presence in the bushes and shrubs around. It was like I would wait on Him, kind of like a dog with instinct: “Go down that path. Go down this one.”

One time, I was walking down the street. It was during the daytime, going to work, and the Lord spoke to my heart and said, “There is a bus behind you. Get on the bus.” Later, I learned that my life could have been taken. Many times my life was mapped out to be taken, but it was like I was in God’s hand.

He protected me; I was doing what He wanted me to do. So it was kind of like dying of myself and what I wanted, saying, “Lord, your will be done in my life and in my heart.” It was a learning experience. It was great! I was just practicing the Presence. q

The Inner and Outer Practice of Jnana-Yoga

Ann Myren

This article focuses primarily on Swami Ashokananda’s interpretation of discrimination rather than on the classic methods as described in Shankara’s *Vivekachudamani* (*Crest Jewel of Discrimination*). While Shankara’s text is a must for any serious student of Vedanta, and its study can give the reader lasting joy and much to think about, Swami Ashokananda (1893-1969) was a man of our times who knew and understood Americans and their culture.

Many Vedantists and students of religion believe that discrimination as a method of God-realization belongs solely to the path of *jnana-yoga*. It is acknowledged that followers of other paths do discriminate, but it is not generally an important part of their spiritual practice. Swami Ashokananda, however, advocates that anyone practicing Vedanta include discrimination in his/her practice for realization regardless of whether one is a monist or a dualist. His point of view in this matter raises the question of whether discrimination as the swami taught it might find a place in the world’s religions. That is quite a leap, but it is something to think about.

I must say at the outset that I write from the viewpoint of one who has struggled daily for many years in this joyful and madly wonderful pursuit of God-realization and has yet to reach the goal, but nonetheless has loved the journey and has for many years relied on habits of the heart and mind that have been formed by the practice of discrimination to carry me along. I should also say that I have been greatly influenced by the works of Swami Vivekananda.

Mom Teaches Discrimination

Probably our first lessons in the technique of discrimination come from our mother when she takes us to the market to buy groceries. She may pick up a tomato, examine it, and then discard it. “Not this,” she says to herself, and continues searching for the best tomatoes by comparing the market tomatoes one by one with the image of the perfect tomato that she has formulated in her imagination. When she does find a perfect tomato, she thinks, “Now that is a real tomato.” Mom uses her intellect or reason

(*buddhi*) and imagination just the way Swami Ashokananda suggests. As we grow up we actually learn this basic method of discrimination. It is not foreign to us; all we need to do is shift our attention to matters of Spirit, to our own search for the ultimate reality. Swami Ashokananda tells us exactly how to use this practice:

. . . Take your mind away from differentiation, from the many, and make it dwell in imagination upon the infinite, homogeneous Unity, the one Being. At first it will be just some vague abstraction. . . Close your senses, and in imagination and consciousness feel this one unchanging, infinitely peaceful Being—just one Being unto the ends of the universe, the endless ends of the universe. Feel yourself one with that Being. . . Learn to do that more and more. . . A time will come when that Being no longer appears so abstract. . . You become aware of It in such a way that the most glorious being in the phenomenal world pales into nothingness compared with It. That experience is the proof of the reality of this one Being. . .¹

Two Specific Practices

He further tells us that there are two specific spiritual practices: *abhyasa*, “making the mind continually come back to the contemplation of truth,”² and *vairagya*, nonattraction or dispassion, that must be mastered if the devotee truly wants to practice discrimination.

All these things in the world look colorful; that is why they attract you. But if they lose their color, you no longer want to look at them. . . This world of appearance is like a canvas painted by the greatest of all artists—God. Or by you yourself. . . by the real you . . . A time will come when you know it is your own composition [and] you will no longer like it. Its color will have gone and you will no longer be attracted by it. . . You have seen through it. . . there is nothing there.³

[You] begin to perceive that this universe is not a material universe at all but is pervaded by something else, something much more wonderful than mind or body. And God will seem very close to you, real, interpenetrating everything. You will feel like sitting, quiet, and perceiving Him here, in the heart. This is where the

1. Ashokananda, Swami, *The Soul's Journey to Its Destiny* (Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, 1993) pp, 172-3.

2. *Soul's Journey*, p. 172.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

perception comes, in the heart; the brain is just a receiving station. Haven't you noticed that when you see even the most beautiful scenery outside, enjoyment of it is here in the heart? This is where everything is gathered. It is in the heart you feel the presence of God, and feeling it, you just close your eyes. You want to feel Him deeper; you want to feel Him more and more.⁴

Let this mind be a little more quiet. What will you feel then? When a little quietness comes into this mind, you feel you are a soul—not Spirit yet, but. . . something a little different from the mind and the body. . . . when you look at others, you will begin to feel that they, too, are a little more than mere body and mind. . . . Let the mind become still finer; say it becomes really quiet. Then, although you will not yet feel yourself as altogether separate from the body and the mind, you will be convinced that you are a separate entity.⁵

What has happened to the devotee to awaken the heart to the Spirit? The mind has become purified through discrimination.

It is generally acknowledged that we should have a qualified teacher who will instruct us when we take up the spiritual practices of Vedanta. In addition, it is also essential that the student have a yearning for the Truth. This is vital, not only to one's own practice but also to forging an effective relationship with the teacher. And the student must like the spiritual practices the teacher prescribes, if not at the beginning of the practice, in due course. Eventually the student must become devoted to his or her practice. Speaking personally, at the very beginning of my association with the Vedanta movement I was strongly attracted to the monistic (*advaita*) philosophy of Vedanta as presented by Swami Ashokananda and was inspired by the fact that there was a practice which could take one to the Reality of Brahman. Also I was struck by the pragmatic character of both the philosophy and the practice of discrimination. Here was a practice that could be done anywhere, any time.

An Enjoyable Practice

In my early years of Vedanta practice there were devotee discussions about Jnana Yoga and especially viveka or discrimination. One side held that it was a dry, boring path to realization. And those who followed the path of discrimination would weakly contradict their opponents but in general did not have sufficient experience to make a strong argument for the path of discrimination. But I have found one strong argument for taking up

4. Ashokananda, Swami, *Worship of the Spirit by the Spirit* (San Francisco, Vedanta Society of Northern California, 1976), p. 57.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

discrimination as a practice: one likes, even enjoys discriminating. Sometimes I go to a park or some such place where there are people and just discriminate, seeking the Atman, the One among the many.

In the Amrita Bindu Upanishad, the necessity of meditation and discrimination is put forth:

Oneness of the atman. . . One-colorness (whiteness) is the quality of milk of cows of various colours. Even so, a wise man who looks upon the knowledge of Brahman as of milk, considers the others with various garbs of knowledge, as of various cows only in this case. Pure knowledge (*vijnana*) abides hidden in the hearts of all beings even as butter does in milk; hence, churning (meditation) should be constantly done in the mind with the churning-rod of the mind itself (discrimination and introspection).

By thus making proper use of one's thinking power . . . one extracts the sacrificial fire of knowledge (*tattva-jnana*) by which one attains within oneself the state of that transcendental Brahman which is non-fragile, motionless, tranquil and is considered as the Real. . . eye of pure knowledge in one's own self.⁶

Affirm the Truth Wherever You Look

Discrimination has an inner and an outer practice according to Swami Ashokananda.

The inner practice has two forms: negating that which is unspiritual, and affirming the Spirit. In affirming the Spirit remember that you are not the only Spirit; every one is Spirit. Affirm the truth always, wheresoever you look.⁷

The external practice—external worship of the Spirit by the Spirit—consists of serving God in man. Yes, that is what Swami Vivekananda recommended—actual service. Now, this kind of worship does not preclude worshipping God in a shrine or chapel . . . God exists there, too. . . But *in addition to formal worship there must be this other kind* of which I am speaking; wherever you see the Spirit, render your service and worship there.⁸

6. N.I.S. Subrahmanian, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Upanishads*, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1985) p. 400.

7. *Worship*, p. 64.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 66. Italics added.

Swami Vivekananda's deepest desire was to make humankind free in all aspects—spiritually, intellectually, emotionally. Freedom in the inner sense comes through the practice of meditation and discrimination. Outer freedom comes through service to fellow humans, regarding them as embodiments of the divine.

The practices are complementary. Meditation and discrimination prepare the individual, giving one the strength and right outlook to undertake service. And selfless work, transforming all work into service, puts the aspirant on the road to inner freedom.

In closing, it may be worth mentioning that Swami Vivekananda used several names before settling on "Vivekananda," which means "the bliss that comes from discrimination." The names were sometimes suggested by friends. It is not known exactly how the name Vivekananda was arrived at, but the fact that he agreed to it, if he did not actually select it, indicates the importance he attached to the practice of discrimination in particular and to *jnana-yoga* in general. q

A Vedantist Discovers Rotmae Yoga

William Page

[Reprinted from The Lamplighter: Swami Sarvagatananda in the West, by permission; revised]

I live in Bangkok, Thailand, which is famous for its traffic jams. You think you've got traffic jams in the United States? Ha. Americans know nothing about traffic jams.

Our Bangkok traffic jams are enhanced by the resulting air pollution (unleaded gasoline is rarely used here) and the horrendous heat, which reduces your average ex-New Englander to a soggy, miserable, melting mass. As I stand on the bus, packed in like the proverbial sardine among my fellow passengers, inhaling the noxious air and sweating all over the adjacent Thais (who, by the way, are not sweating at all), my only wish is to arrive at my destination instantly and escape into an airconditioned room.

The traffic jams at every intersection infuriate me. "Hurry up! Hurry UP!" I snarl in English between clenched teeth. This causes considerable alarm to the Thais, who fear that the enraged foreigner may go insane and commence biting people.

When the driver finally breaks free of the intersection and gets a clear stretch of road, my mood does not improve. For Bangkok bus drivers fancy themselves to be competitors in the Indianapolis 500. Every one of them is an aspiring world-class racing driver. They tear down the street, careening wildly around slower vehicles like slalom racers, pumping their brakes intermittently and jerking the passengers back and forth, just to keep them awake. I work off a lot of bad karma on the Bangkok buses.

Your average intemperate foreigner will react to this situation by working himself into such a fury that his brain capillaries are likely to pop. But I'm a Vedantist. I'm different. I have access to a superior ideology which enables me to transcend the torments of the flesh. And the means of transcendence I call *Rotmae* Yoga.

Brahman on a Hot, Crowded Bus

Rotmae (pronounced, approximately, roat-may) means "bus" in Thai. *Rotmae* Yoga thus translates as Bus Yoga, the yoga that one practices on the bus. This concept flashed into my head one dreadful day when I was perishing of heat on a jam-packed bus and suddenly imagined Sri Ramakrishna saying, "Why you are getting angry? All this is Brahman. The people are Brahman. The bus is Brahman. Even the heat is Brahman. Meditate on that."

The only thing surprising about this revelation was that it had taken so long to occur. The only excuse I can plead is that the heat of Bangkok has destroyed 90% of my brain.

Thereafter, when enduring a particularly stressful bus ride, I practiced *Rotmae* Yoga. I switched off my sensors, dived deep within, and imagined Brahman pervading the whole horrid scene.

Alternately, I would mentally recite my mantra and practice the standard meditation on Sri Ramakrishna which Swami Akhilananda taught me so many years ago.

And believe it or not, it worked. The body was still sweaty and miserable, but the mind cooled off and the spirit was strengthened. I emerged from the bus feeling much more favorably disposed toward life in general than anyone could possibly imagine.

What lesson does this experience hold for Vedantists in general? Just this: We have a remarkable ideology, and a complete set of methods for practicing it. This ideology can change our lives for the better. All we have to do is apply it consistently. If we don't, we are not much better than a hungry baby who is screaming for food when there's a big bowl of Gerber's Best sitting right beside him.

q

Spiritual Discipline: the Silent Heroine

Mercedes Vendrell

The Mother of Tender Heart

Spiritual discipline is all about channeling our energy from the worldly to the divine. The key word here is *energy*; therefore I will refer to spiritual discipline as feminine, because energy in this plane of existence is represented as Mother. And if we are going to look at spiritual discipline as energy, it means it is full of movement. It is not rigid; it flows.

Somewhere hidden in our minds there is a reluctance to follow our spiritual discipline. Discipline is a word often associated with a rigid pattern of conduct and a punishment if the pattern is not followed correctly. Sri Ramakrishna has described God as the Mother of tender heart and the Father who punishes. Let us make an effort not to associate discipline with rigidity and punishment. Since we are looking at the feminine qualities of discipline, let us approach Her with love and understanding, hoping that we receive from Her, reflected back to us, the same love and understanding.

God never leaves us; God is everything and is everywhere. God never forgets us, but we often become forgetful of God. Our spiritual practice is our tool for not forgetting God. Let us become like the river Ganges and let our minds flow unceasingly to the divine. How can we achieve this? By following our spiritual discipline.

Sri Ramakrishna's view of God everywhere is exemplified in his beautiful prayer:

You are the way and you are the goal;
You are adorable, O Lord!

You are the Mother of tender heart; the Father who punishes;
You are the Creator and the Protector;
You are the helmsman that leads my vessel across the ocean of life.

O God,
You are my Mother,
You are my Father,
You are my close relative and my friend,
You are my knowledge and my wealth;
You are truly my all.

The Little Secret

Selfless love is a beautiful feminine quality exemplified by Holy Mother's love for all. We can approach spiritual discipline with this embracing love. Let us try to the best of our ability constantly to direct the energy within us towards God. Mentally we can dedicate our day with all its actions and feelings at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother. Mentally we can try to emulate Holy Mother's expansive love by looking at the immense sky and trying to connect for a few seconds with higher thoughts of our inner Self. We can make it part of our spiritual discipline to try to touch our Mother's tender heart, made of love and understanding. Nevertheless, the only way we can achieve this feeling of warmth in our own hearts is by trying to love and understand the universe that surrounds us.

Just as God is real and hides behind this Maya that is unreal and passes away, spiritual discipline is that which hides behind us. We pass away, our bodies disappear, but the spiritual discipline that hides behind us make our energy real and one with God. The energy in our bodies, in our thoughts and actions, travels, changes and passes away. The repetition of the holy name we do when we work, the constant offering of ourselves to God, our spiritual disciplines, are the only things that make our actions a reality. Spiritual discipline is what makes our actions have a positive meaning for God realization. This positive meaning is what binds our actions to God so that our good deeds are not washed away with our lives. Spiritual discipline is what makes our energy karma yoga and not mere work.

Endurance: the Name of the Game

Endurance is a quality very feminine in nature. It often happens that women are able to win a long distance race over men while men are able to run faster for a shorter period of time. She, spiritual discipline, can be one of the biggest helps we can find to give us a long range view of life. Spiritual discipline can enlarge our view of life to include even our problems. We often make our problems seem larger for us than they really are. We expect to solve our problems right away and put them aside as if problems are not part of our lives. But problems are there beside us like the air we breathe. We solve one, then another comes, and if we don't have any we will still worry and be angry about the most insignificant details. Without going out of our way to look for problems, if we have them we should try to solve them one at a time, knowing they are there to give us an opportunity to learn and to rise above our own selfishness. Problems make us suffer and soften our hearts to become more compassionate towards others. A long range view of life helps us solve our every day problems by keeping our attention focused on the spiritual

objective. In this way many events in our lives help to purify us, becoming flowers to be offered at the feet of our Beloved.

Endurance is the name given to a life of constant practice, a life shot like an arrow moving steadily towards the objective. There is another way that endurance can help us overcome our daily problems. First, by not exaggerating our problems as though they were the biggest challenges we face. Next, by making both our problems and our virtues seem smaller. Life often seems an uphill struggle; every day we climb a little higher. When we reach a distance high enough, the problems are still there but we look upon them from a different perspective. We have grown a little detached from both our negative and our positive experiences. Our problems have become little stones that we find along the way. Once again, our real challenge is our spiritual discipline. We realize we have only one big problem, our spiritual discipline, a riddle for life, a problem that will be solved when we meet God face to face.

An Acquired Taste

As our flow towards God becomes steadier, more continuous, we understand that what seemed rigid at first is a tool to help us establish a routine. Our spiritual discipline no longer seems rigid and we want to practice more and more. What seemed punishment becomes grief for our own forgetfulness of God. After all we are the makers of our own destiny. When we embrace every little act we do as our spiritual discipline, as an offering to the divine, then we have a wonderful opportunity to remember God in a humble way for most of the day. Spiritual discipline can seem insipid at first, but it keeps growing sweeter. The more we do it, the better we feel. The more we understand the value of it, the more our heart expands. Spiritual discipline is an acquired taste.

Some very wonderful people become heroes and heroines by doing a very special task, a once in a lifetime event. Others, as Swami Vivekananda would say, are like the river, silently flowing, always giving of themselves to others in small, insignificant ways. The river of energy is constantly flowing within us. Little by little our spiritual practice opens up a deeper view of ourselves and the world around us. It is up to us to honor it by sharing and expanding its refreshing presence among those around us, among those we choose to touch. A discipline is what we do every day; it is what makes us what we become. It is our choice either to follow our spiritual practice or to follow our tendencies, our impulses. Spiritual discipline is the name we give to that silent heroic struggle. May we approach spiritual discipline with love and understanding so we may never stop being conscious of Her flow within us. q

Our Real Human Condition

- 1- It was the trees,
it was the forest,
it was the quality of the high timber that afternoon,
the lowering sky,
thunderstorms prowling about but standing off,
gray jay come to visit the clearing where I came to rest...
It was the tall red fir,
the natural ones that dust off the obstacles in me,
cutting through to *see*.
- 2- Sometimes life's concerns
cover the sun of my own shining jewel;
But coming to this place in the forest is transmission,
re-awakening the teacher's state,
which is my state, your state,
a climate really,
as large and as surrounding as the sky.
- 3- The jewel was there in a peculiar quality of perception,
a silence in which the forest and I were not one, not two,
entering the sheer vulnerability—
father, mother, sky.
- 4- It was there in that lowering afternoon
when human voices in the campsite
like music
take their place among the giant plants,
humans humble in the natural landscape—
perhaps they felt it too?
- 5- It is re-assertion of *this* moment without conflict—

the sparkling jewel,
clarity, silence, *knowing*,
inclusive radical non-duality—
A sea,
A certainty,
Our real human Condition.

—Richard Simonelli

Discussion

Publisher's response to Review of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita, Vol. I* by Swami Atmajnanananda (AV, Vol. 7, No. 4—Winter 2002)

We are extremely grateful to revered Swami Atmajnananandaji for reviewing *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita, Vol I*, [translated by Dharm Pal Gupta, Sri Ma Trust, Chandigarh, India] and for making kind suggestions. We would at the very outset of these comments humbly submit that our attempt is a very small offering at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna in the belief that he accepts even the humblest offering.

1. The basis for the translation is the original Bengali edition of the *Kathamrita* as published by M and as being currently published by the Kathamrita Bhawan, 13/2 Guruprasad Chowdhury Lane, Calcutta, India. This Bengali edition is a five volume work and is not printed in chronological order. We in no way want to compete with *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. The *Kathamrita* is like the Bhagavad Gita that has various translations: viz. by Swami Chidbhananda, by Sri S. Radhakrishnan (Late President of India) and others, each published with a specific objective.

2. The blissful nectar of Thakur's words is available only through the prism of M's totally devoted and pure mind. We believe that it is useful to present to non-Bengali readers an authentic and literal translation of the original work of M. We feel that more than the nicety of language what is important is to convey the original *bhava* (flavor). Therefore we have retained whatever was there in the original Bengali text, exactly in that order. We feel that we are too lowly to add anything; thus if something is missing in our translation, it is because the same is not there in the original Bengali work. Similarly, we did not have the courage and wherewithal to delete any matter from M's version of the intense and original *bhava* of the Godman, Sri Ramakrishna.

3. However, we recognize the need of a native English speaker to review the book. Volume II of the translation, expected to be printed in the second quarter of 2002, has been thoroughly reviewed by two American devotees. Its English and grammar are better and will be simpler to read by Western readers. We would like to take the help of American editors for Volumes III, IV and V as well.

4. As far as the credentials of the translator are concerned, we can only state that he was a humble devotee of Thakur and taught English to graduate and post-graduate students throughout his thirty five years of academic career. He was proficient in many languages and spent many years at the University in Paris learning the nuances of another foreign language. Though

a native of Punjab, he had two associate editors helping him with the Bengali. The translation was compared and thoroughly reviewed with the Bengali edition. On the other hand, it is important to understand that Bengali and Hindi are very close to each other, their characters having more or less one to one correspondence, their grammars not vastly different, and sharing a large common vocabulary with differences only in pronunciation.

5. From M's life we learn that he not only wrote the *Kathamrita*, but lived it himself as a householder-sannyasi and encouraged others to live it. M himself has given the objective of writing the *Kathamrita*. In *M, The Apostle and The Evangelist*, Volume VII, Section III, page 36, he says:

The *Kathamrita* contains the whole life—the unfoldment of mind and soul. I was present in all these scenes. How the mind was influenced by all these scenes and words has been narrated here.

Thus, we feel that the order of the volumes is important. M made an enormous effort to prepare the *Kathamrita* as a step-by-step approach to unfold the mind of an ordinary aspirant from intellectual to intellectual-spiritual, from intellectual-spiritual to spiritual-intellectual and from spiritual-intellectual to spiritual. M himself prepared a concordance / index in Volume V to give an account of the history of the characters in this divine play.

—Nitin Nanda, on behalf of the publisher, Smt. Ishwar Devi Gupta

Speaking in Tongues Is a Form of Spiritual Practice

I was disturbed to read in the last issue of *AV* (Winter 2002) a pejorative comment about a legitimate form of spiritual practice. Steven Walker says in his otherwise fine article (“Some Timely Thoughts on the Harmony of Religions”), “Think of the monstrosities created by the human religious imagination working overtime: apocalyptic cults. . . suicide cults. . . speaking in tongues. . . human sacrifice, ethnic cleansing. . . To how much of this must Vedantists give the Harmony of Religions official stamp of approval?”

One of the things I have learned from interfaith work is that it is important to study unfamiliar religious practices from the standpoint of the practitioners. It is certainly not responsible writing to put speaking in tongues in the same category as ethnic cleansing or suicide cults. Speaking in tongues is a spiritual practice like any other; it is a Christian form of contemplative prayer or meditation. It is a kind of primal speech which is practiced for the sake of opening up the unconscious and putting oneself in touch with the Spirit. It sensitizes a person both to his/her own emotions and to the emotions of other people. Like other spiritual practices, it must indeed be *practiced* for one to gain proficiency, and, like other forms of meditation, it can be harmful if carried to extremes.

—Sister Eleanor Francis

Book Review

Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue Between Christian and Asian Traditions

Edited by Bruno Barnhart and Joseph Wong

Continuum New York

Pages xx + 364 \$35.00 hardcover 2000

The papers in this book were delivered at a five-day Symposium at the New Camaldoli Hermitage, Big Sur, CA, June 25-July 1, 2000. Perched 1300 feet above the Pacific Ocean, the Hermitage offered an ideal setting for a dialogue involving exchanges among contemplative monks of the West and the three main Asian traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism/Confucianism.

The theme and purpose of the meeting and the book were well expressed by Thomas G. Hand, S.J. when he said the future of Christian spirituality is to be found in dialogue with other faiths. This is especially true today when so many practitioners of Eastern spirituality are living in the West and opening the eyes of occidental contemplatives to the riches of the venerable Eastern traditions.

One is reminded of the Sixth Beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the pure of heart for they will see God." Precisely what purity of heart means in the various monastic traditions goes by different names, but they are all referring to an indispensable element in the practice of anyone who sincerely seeks God. Some call it "detachment"; others refer to self-emptying or emptiness or sitting in forgetfulness. What has to be forgotten are the ten thousand things that cloud our inner vision. Contemplation is "a vision of the One," or "keeping the One," as it is expressed in the Taoist tradition. Creation begins with the One, then the two (duality), then the many. The contemplative must reverse the downward and outward expansion and return to the dyad finite/infinite, and finally to nonduality. All seem to be agreed on this.

Acquiring the Skills to Regain the Lost Kingdom

The world of *maya* is not illusion, unless we endow it with the qualities of the absolute. It becomes illusion when it so magnetizes the sensual and egoistic appetites that we surrender our freedom to our addictions. Every time we yield to our lower appetites we engrave grooves in the psyche, a kind of scar or *samskara*. To overcome these ingrained habits that have become second nature requires a skill which consists to some degree in ignoring their

appeal. Gradually they become weakened and, as they wither away, the heart becomes pure and authentic contemplation becomes possible.

The pure of heart set out to regain their Lost Kingdom, like the tale outlined by Pravrajika Vrajaprana, a nun of the Sarada Vedanta Society in Santa Barbara: A king fell off his horse in a dark forest and awoke an amnesiac, not knowing who he really was. Eventually a *sadhu* convinced him that he was a king and urged him to return to his kingdom and claim it. We are, to a great extent, suffering from amnesia. We have forgotten our birthright, that we are divine beings. Contemplation enables people to rediscover their true identity and return home (23-24).

Joseph H. Wong, in his treatment of Chuang Tzu and Meister Eckhart, describes the nature of the “True Person” in the Taoist tradition. “The true knowledge of the true person is knowing through unknowing” (211). I take this to mean that ordinary conceptual knowledge cannot encompass the Tao, since the concept is already a limited virtual reality and once removed from its object. True knowledge is “being there,” being Being in a nondual relationship of identity. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* outlines the sense in which the soul must forget (unknow) the things that are below as it penetrates the Divine Darkness. It is by not knowing God in the usual way that unknowing opens the way to true coinciding with the divine Source. God is not anything or anyone about whom we can speak in a meaningful way. Only when the soul is truly empty can it experience the immanence of the Transcendent.

Turning to the Buddhist tradition, it was interesting to find that Dogen (1200-1253) wanted his monks to be involved in external activities and not become self-enclosed. Those in administrative positions, and especially cooks, are to be concerned with the welfare of others, while “at the same time they must be exemplary in their own practice” (154). Buddhists are fond of paradox. Francis H. Cook (“Zen and the Impurity of Purity” [124-136]) outlines the sense in which the truly pure monk does not live in a world of the pure versus impure; for that is to be caught in a world of duality and impurity. To the pure all things are pure. The greatest impurity of all is ignorance (Dhammapada XVIII, 243).

Integrating Body, Mind and Spirit

Chapter five, “The Space in the Lotus of the Heart,” deals with the writing of Dom Bede Griffiths by Cyprian Consiglio. Bede was surely one who sought to allow the wisdom of Hinduism to illumine his Christian faith. At his ashram in South India he was not bent on converting Hindus to Christianity, but was ready and willing to learn from the East—a very different approach compared with the missionary zeal of some Christians. His tripartite view of the human composite distinguished the physical, the psychological

and the spiritual, paralleling St. Paul's terminology. The Spirit should not be confused with soul which is the animating principle of the body in the Aristotelian sense. Those advanced in the spiritual life seek to, and often do, succeed in integrating body, mind, and spirit. This means that one does not despise the body, for it is the instrument through which we communicate with one another while in the flesh.

One could go on summarizing each valuable chapter of this splendid book. It is best to leave that to those who purchase *Purity of Heart* or borrow it from their local library. It is, in any case, a book that should be read and, we strongly urge, owned by all on the contemplation path, whether in an East-West context or not..

—James M. Somerville

Announcements

Swami Yogeshananda's *Waking Up* now available on audio cassette

Swami Yogeshananda's useful introduction to Vedanta, *Waking Up: Ten Short Chapters on the Vedantic Way: An Ancient Path to Enlightenment*, published in booklet form in 1996 by The Eternal Quest, Atlanta, is now available on audio cassette. Narrated by Charlton Griffin, the two-cassette package, with a running time of two hours, sells for \$16.00. The cassettes may be ordered from Audio Connoisseur, 404-816-4028 or 800-484-8365, code 502, or online at www.audioconnoisseur.com.

New Vedanta Publisher Offers First Book

Vedantic Shores Press, based in Redding, California, has set May 29 of this year as the publication date of its first book, *Ramakrishna and Christ, The Supermystics: New Interpretations*, by Paul Hourihan. The Press is dedicated to exploring the landscape of the Vedanta philosophy through the nonfiction works, creative biographies, and novels of Dr. Hourihan, the first American disciple of Swami Ritajananda, a beloved Ramakrishna Order monk who worked in America and France for over 40 years. Dr. Hourihan, born in Boston and educated at Harvard and Boston University, was a serious student and practitioner of Vedanta for 45 years. He taught dozens of courses and give hundreds of lectures on mysticism and the great mystics in Ontario, Canada. In later years he devoted his energies to writing, producing twelve carefully crafted books on Vedanta and mysticism in different genres. He passed away last December in California at the age of 79. Vedantic Shores Press can be reached at 866-549-4757; e-mail: vedanticshores@shasta.com.

Contributors

WILLIAM A. CONRAD, a bio-physicist, has been a member of the Vedanta Society of New York since 1955. He is President of Vedanta West Communications.

CARLA DE SOLA teaches liturgical dance at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. She is founder/director of Omega Liturgical Dance Company at St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York and Omega West Dance Company in Berkeley.

SISTER ELEANOR FRANCIS (also known as Brahmacharini Chandra) has been a student of Vedanta since 1971. She is a member of the (Episcopal) Community of St. John Baptist in Mendham, New Jersey.

ROSALIND FREDERICKS, a homemaker, was a member of the Vedanta Society of New York for her last thirty years. She lived in Birmingham, Michigan.

PAMELA HOYE (JAYANTI) came in contact with Vedanta in the early '70s in northern California. Associated with the San Diego monastery, she has written for Vedanta publications and does computer graphics expressing Vedanta.

ANN MYREN, a retired community college teacher, has been associated with the Bay Area Vedanta Societies since 1960. She is President of the Vivekananda Foundation.

NITIN NANDA, Assistant Secretary of Sri Ma Trust in Chandigarh, India, joined this publishing center in 1990. He is Project Manager for Quark Inc. in Chandigarh.

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.

RICHARD SIMONELLI, a student of Tibetan Buddhism and Native American spirituality, is an advocacy journalist and staff member of White Bison, Inc., an American Indian non-profit organization. He is affiliated with Vedanta through the Contemplative Vedanta Support Network (CVSN).

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

EDITH D. TIPPLE has been a member of the Vedanta Society of Southern California since 1963. She presently makes her home in Santa Barbara.

MERCEDES VENDRELL, housewife, mother and part-time design consultant, is Vice President of the Sociedad Vedanta de Puerto Rico a San Juan. She also serves on the board of directors of Sri Sarada Society, Albany, New York.

GORDON WESTERLUND, a recently retired custodian and public safety officer, is a follower of Anasuya Devi. He has had extended contact with Vedanta Societies in Portland and Santa Barbara over the last thirty-five years. He lives in Santa Barbara.