Editorial

Spiritual Practice in a Social Context

In our last issue (Spring, 2002) we presented a number of articles by American Vedantists about spiritual practice, with an emphasis on individual practices. In this issue we explore how spiritual practice works in group and social settings.

As we look at how spiritual aspirants relate to society, we find wide diversity. At one end of the spectrum are lone seekers who withdraw from society and pursue their goal in isolation, with minimum social contact. After reaching enlightenment, they may return to society to share the fruits of that illumination. Other aspirants remain in a social setting and transform their lives within that setting, while their practices remain largely private. Swami Vivekananda eloquently presented these two approaches in his lecture, "Each Is Great in His Own Place." Then there are spiritual practices which are performed by groups, and so are social in their nature. Communal worship is one such practice. Another practice may be called intra-community mutual service. Members of a family, clan, village or monastic community serve one another with love and reverence. This type of practice is central in some religions. Still another practice is service rendered by groups to other groups.

If we look at the Ramakrishna Movement as a whole, we see the entire spectrum represented. Most of Sri Ramakrishna's life and much of his teaching represented the lone seeker doing individual practice. After his illumination, he devoted the rest of his life to sharing the fruits of his realization with humanity, serving without stint right up to the end. Holy Mother lived and practiced in a domestic setting, with her early practice a combination of individual discipline and loving service of her husband and family. In later life, her family expanded to embrace the human race, and her spiritual practice became the worship and service of all who came to her, seeing in them God the Child.

Swami Vivekananda represented both the transsocial seeker, as expressed in "The Song of the Sannyasin," and the seeker doing individual practice within a social context (*Karma Yoga*), but also moved toward group spiritual practice. The revolution in Indian monastic life that he inaugurated pushed the monastic ideal in the direction of social responsibility and social concern, with groups of monks undertaking different kinds of service as worship. Groups of lay devotees have also been inspired to undertake similar

endeavors. This achievement was nourished by Sri Ramakrishna's own insistence that Vivekananda not remain satisfied with his own enlightenment but share its fruits with the larger society. Ramakrishna made a similar demand on Gauri-Ma, a woman monastic disciple.

Mutual loving service within the community of monks and devotees began with the service that Ramakrishna's disciples rendered to him and the love they developed for one another during his last illness. It continued in the establishment of the Ramakrishna Order and the joint monastic/lay Ramakrishna Mission. Mutual loving service has played an important, if largely unseen, role in keeping both organizations vital. Holy Mother stressed and pointed out to her disciples the importance of this loving spirit.

Communal worship has traditionally been less central in Hinduism than in Christianity, Islam and Judaism. In Ramakrishna-Vedanta, however, it has played an increasing role. In India, both the design and the use of temples have moved in this direction. In Ramakrishna temples there is a large congregational seating space under the same roof as the altar, which is open and clearly visible to the devotees. Every evening, householders join with monks in the singing of the vesper hymns.

We may fairly say that the Ramakrishna movement has moved toward placing the individual spiritual search within a social context, and also toward group spiritual practice, and that this movement was originally inspired by Ramakrishna's own love and compassion. This direction has been less pronounced in the West, where Vedanta Societies have usually stressed the individual spiritual search and individual spiritual practice. In recent decades, however, several lay service organizations have been started, and some monks and devotees and a few centers have moved in the direction of service and community. Congregational singing has also become more common.

The present issue of *American Vedantist* offers several examples of group spiritual practice and concern for the community. Nik Warren shows in his account of the Vivekananda Foundation how devotees in the San Francisco area banded together to serve a larger public. Margaret Nosek argues for a greater sense of community among Vedantists as related to the needs of handicapped devotees. Group practice and social concern are reflected in the effort to bring out the audiocassette recording of Swami Yogeshananda's introduction to Vedanta, *Waking Up*, a collaboration between the swami and a husband/wife team, and also in the swami's own dedicated participation in interfaith dialogue. Richard Simonelli gives an evocative, personal account of Native American spiritual practice, which has a strong social component and also resonates with Vedantic thought and practice.

We invite our readers to share any experience or knowledge they have of group spiritual practice.

—John Schlenck

The Vivekananda Foundation: 1985—2001

Nik Warren

On the first of July 2001, a group of Vedantists gathered among redwoods in Marin County north of San Francisco. The campground was special. It was the site where, as told in *Swami Vivekananda In the West, New Discoveries* by Marie Louse Burke, Vivekananda camped in the spring of 1900. He had arrived in California and his activities were giving birth to the Vedanta movement in Northern California.

Among attenders last July were Marie Louse Burke (Sister Gargi), Ann Myren, Ted Chenoweth, and William Corcoran, all founding members, in 1985, of the Vivekananda Foundation—an organization dedicated to service in the spirit of Swami Vivekananda. The campground gathering marked, in one way, the official end of the Foundation, but not an end to the contributions set in motion through its work.

A letter sent out October 6, 1985, announced both the Foundation's formation and its goals: "to emphasize Swami Vivekananda's message that the true nature of every person is identical with ultimate Reality, and that selfless service to the Divinity in all persons is one of the ways by which this identity can be realized." The letter continued, "We feel it is especially urgent at this time that his practical and strength-giving message be made known as widely as possible."

The founding members and first board of directors were all long-time members of the San Francisco Bay Area Vedanta Societies: Ann Myren (president), Kathleen E. Davis (vice-president), Theodore H. Chenoweth (secretary-treasurer), William Corcoran, Dorothy Madison, Marie Louise Burke, and Virgil M. Allison.

Project 1993

Several long term goals were announced in 1985 as "Project 1993." The project was named in commemoration of the centenary of Vivekananda's participation in the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 and the initiation of his work in America. The goals would be far reaching, and although some proved out of reach, the very stretch helped to bring others to fruition, including, perhaps best known, distributing books, making and distributing tapes of the writings of Swami Vivekananda, and the publication of what has become a very well received book, *Living at the Source: Yoga Teachings of Vivekananda*. These goals were originally organized around the vision of establishing a graduate degree-granting institute for the study of Swami

Vivekananda's teaching in the American setting. Steps toward establishing the institute were to include symposia and related publication of books.

The core of the vision—recognizing and communicating Swamiji's modern interpretation of Vedanta in the American setting—was clearly expressed as the heart of the Foundation's work during its formal life, and was emphasized again in discussions at that campground on that day last year: "What will be the authentic, and future, American voice of Vedanta?"

The founders of the Foundation clearly saw that the first answer to this question was to bring Swamiji's own words into as wide a context as possible. In this spirit, proposals were made: to commission dramas and video presentations, to investigate American religious ideas in the light of Vivekananda's teaching, to distribute selected works of Swamiji free of charge, to establish scholarships, and to sell and donate audio cassettes of Swamiji's lectures recorded by professional speakers.

By October 1985, the new foundation was already making the six-volume series of *Swami Vivekananda in the West* available to over 200 academic libraries. Within the following months this offer was to be accepted by nearly 100 public and academic libraries, including those at Harvard and Yale. The Foundation was also working to support the flow of American textbooks to needy schools and libraries in India. "Books for India" was spear-headed by Prof. P.K. Mehta, a member and supporter of the Foundation. This effort grew steadily over the next years. Within a year of this project's inception, nearly 250 college textbooks were mailed to seven advanced schools in India. In 1987, with the help of the Advaita Ashrama in Calcutta, Books for India expanded to include offers of the eight volumes of Swamiji's *Complete Works* and various biographies of Swamiji, including Burke's *New Discoveries*.

Swamiji on Audiotape

By mid-1986, the Foundation was pleased to announce that the Board of Trustees of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission at Belur, India, had granted permission and blessing to use materials from Vivekananda's *Complete Works* for the audio cassette project. The first effort was launched—500 audiotapes of four different titles. As noted in the Foundation's newsletter, "By this new means we hope to make Swamiji's message available to a broad audience which has not been ordinarily reached."

With regret, the Board of Directors also announced the death of Kathleen Davis, the founding vice-president and a long time Vedantist. Gail T. Gregory was added to the board.

The audiotape project grew. By November 1987, Series I of the Vivekananda Lectures had been produced and distributed. Series II was now underway. One aspect of the first series came under review: listeners to the

tapes had found that the professional readers did not always bring out the quality of Vivekananda's words. For Series II, trained readers who had an affinity to Swamiji's message would be the readers. The Vedanta Book Store of the Vedanta Society of Southern California organized volunteers who offered their time, skill, and love to this project. John Abott, Alan Arkin and John Batiste became the readers. A third series of readings became available in August, 1990.

To the Blind and Handicapped, and to Prisoners

Wider distribution was also achieved. The Vedanta Catalogue helped distribute some 6000 flyers to persons already interested in Vedanta. Requests for cassettes arrived from around the world. Unexpectedly, the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (an agency of the Library of Congress) published the Foundation's offer for free cassettes in their publication, *Talking Books*. Over 300,000 persons were reached. A request from Belur Math was received to send cassettes to all of the Ramakrishna Missions and schools—some fifty institutions. Sets of tapes were also made available (along with related books on Vedanta) to prisoners through the Prison Library Project of Claremont, California. By 1991 the prison project was being maintained with a $500 donation of books each year, and it could be reported that several requests had been received for the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*.

That year the Foundation announced two new board members: Steven M. Johnson and Ruth Shahinian.

Meanwhile, Bookpeople, in Berkeley, sent catalogs to over 4,500 stores world-wide, and New Leaf Distributors carried the cassettes in Atlanta, Georgia. By the fourth year, Ann Myren could write in the June 1989 newsletter about the "determined expansion" of projects, and as with all nonprofits, ask for donations "of any size, one dollar is perfectly acceptable, more if you so desire." Vedantists are not known to be comfortable salespersons, but surely, in terms of "bang for the buck," the Vivekananda Foundation offered a great bargain in Karma Yoga.

During 1989, Virgil Allison, one of the founding board members, passed on. He was fondly remembered for his dedicated work and friendship.

Addressing Modern Day Americans

By the mid-1990s, over 3,700 cassettes had been sold or given as gifts. The nineties also saw the beginning of two additional projects that still stand as legacies of the Foundation. The first was the compilation of selections from Swamiji's works which would become *Living at the Source*. In this book, Swamiji's own words were to be organized so as to address the questions and

problems of present-day Americans. More than fifty volunteers from all over the country participated in this process, making selections from the eight volumes of the *Complete Works*. The single criterion for selection was whether or not the material would strike a chord in the postmodern American heart and mind, filling inner needs, supplying answers, and generally encouraging, cheering, and strengthening the reader. The selections were assigned to different categories by eleven editors. A computer professional was hired to word process all the choices, and the search was on for a good publisher. By June of 1991, the editors were working on the last and most challenging part of the project—creating chapters. The goal was to have each chapter emphasize the practical value of Swamiji's teachings for solving life's problems and gaining a spiritual understanding. For example, the first three chapter were "Who Am I?," "The Human Condition," and "The Intense Desire to be Free." The target date for publication was the centenary year, 1993. In 1992 it could already be announced that *Living at the Source* would be published in Spring 1993 by Shambhala Publications and would be distributed by Random House.

The second new project in the 1990s was to help expand the market for Vivekananda's books on the four yogas—*Raja Yoga*, *Jnana Yoga*, *Karma Yoga* and *Bhakti Yoga*. With the cooperation of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, the Foundation obtained a distributor, Bookpeople, making the quality paperback editions available in over 4,000 stores. Over the next years, both books and cassettes proceeded to sell well under this arrangement; it was clear that new markets were being reached.

Wide Distribution in India

1991 saw the completion of one phase of the Books for India Project. By this time 2535 books had been distributed to 55 universities. During this same period some 1,500 audio cassettes of Swamiji's works were distributed in India. This distribution was aimed at the youth of India, but found wider reception. The project was so successful that a second series of cassettes in Bengali and Hindi were now produced to reach an even wider audience. This was done by Summer 1992. Among other impacts, this inspired Professor Anand Kumar of Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi to organize a well received graduate course on the ideas of Swami Vivekananda at the university's School of Social Sciences.

By the summer of 1992, the reading of *Raja Yoga* to audiocassette was under way. This fairly long book—Swamiji's translation of and commentary on Patanjali's *Yoga Aphorisms*—was read by Dr. Vidyut Bose, a long-time student of Vedanta. The total tape set would have a listening time of four and a half hours. The recording came out excellently, and some who heard it felt that to listen to the tapes was in itself a meditation. In 1993 the Vivekananda

Foundation could well celebrate. It announced the availability of both the book, *Living at the Source*, and the audiotape set, *Raja Yoga*. This was indeed a year of fruition, a dedicated offering of eight years of service.

But more could now be done. Besides a continuation of its earlier programs, the Foundation focused on the fact that Swami Vivekananda stayed in the West until the end of 1896, and so it now sought to reflect the sense of centenary spirit through each of the years 1993 to 1997. The Foundation moved to expand its donation programs, offering 500 copies of *Living at the Source* to public libraries. This activity was encouraged by Shambhala Publications' offer to discount the books to help the program, and by a book review in *Library Journal*. The review noted the book as being "a highly accessible collection of brief vignettes of [Swamiji's] teaching as a guide for seekers of various traditions. . . . the selections will encourage a wide readership. . . . Recommended for public libraries and seminary and retreat center libraries."

Expansion into Cyberspace

The Foundation continued all its other projects, and also added to them. By April 1997, Ann Myren could look back and note that *Living at the Source* was continuing to sell about 1000 copies per year and that copies had been donated to over 1000 public libraries in 1996 alone. Now this offering was further expanded; the Foundation had established a website, and libraries world wide could request copies through the site.

The website (URL: vivekananda.org) was dedicated on Swamiji's birthday, 1997. At its start, it had two major functions. The first was to provide information about the Foundation—its work, books, tapes, and other resources. The second, more to the core, was to present Vivekananda's thoughts in his own words, in the form of lecture summaries with related comments from relevant sources. The first summaries offered were of three lectures: "The Macrocosm," "Worshipper and Worshipped," and "The Microcosm." Three more summaries were added by Fall, 1997: "The Goal," "The Four Paths of Yoga," and "Immortality." Also by that fall, a third function would be added, offering a more extensive bibliography and other materials useful to students, scholars, and devotees. In a matter of months the site had already received over 50,000 hits.

The website grew actively and interactively, Through the care of Ann Myren, the site provided changing lecture summaries (at three month intervals), a biography of Vivekananda, resources, as mentioned above, and a response portion, "FAQ" (Frequently Asked Questions). Over time, more than 100,000 requests were made—pages actually downloaded from the site or printed from the site. Thankful messages were received in response: ". . . the teachings of Mr. Vivekananda touches me to the inmost of my Being"

(from a prisoner); from India, "Can you tell me how to find a [particular text]?"; and from New Zealand, "I find your web site the most informative of any and a great joy to read."

Throughout these years, the management and all of the foundation's activities continued to be carried primarily on the shoulders of the core members who had nurtured it since its beginning. And each of them worked on multiple fronts. Ann Myren and Dorothy Madison frequently contributed to *Prabuddha Bharata*, the monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order, and to other publications. They and the other members of the Vivekananda Foundation worked with a sense of pioneering spirit. This was articulated by Dorothy Madison: "Whether we belong to the old guard, the Young Turks, or plain ordinary people, all first-century Ramakrishna Vedantins belong to the category known as pioneers. . ." Dorothy died in February of this dedicated year—1997.

By the year 2000, it was clear that the projects started by the Vivekananda Foundation would need to carried on other shoulders. The Foundation would begin its dissolution, and pass its assets and activities on to others. Books and tapes would be handled by the Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely, in New York State, and by the Vedanta Center of Atlanta, Georgia. The website would be managed by Swami Tyagananda of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Massachusetts. Cash assets were used to support like-minded organizations, and to support needs associated with the tapes, books, and the website.

Toward a Vedanta Well-Rooted in American Soil

What comes of such efforts as the Foundation's? As with Johnny Appleseed, many seeds are planted, more will be planted, and then come patient efforts to nurture growth. Here the growth is toward a Vedanta well rooted in the American soil. In 1987, Swami Yogeshananda, at the Vedanta Society of Florida, wrote to the Foundation with praise for its work, and noted that "there has never been a Vedanta Network in this country. . . a matter I have always regretted." In an article, he also noted "A century has passed since Swamiji. . . the yearning and need for a national movement of Vedanta in America is [now] clearly manifest." Work such as that of the Vivekananda Foundation moves Vedanta in that direction. Dorothy Madison wrote, "If we remember that it took Christianity three centuries to get to its feet, and about the same for Buddhism, we can take heart . . . . [What ensures] the growth and spread of a new religion. . . [is] the slow, tortuous evolution of the pioneer spirit and character. Squarely on us, however much our reach may exceed our grasp, lies the present well-being and the future of our religion."

We are living at the source. ❑

Does the Entrance to Spiritual Practice Have Steps?

Margaret A. (Peg) Nosek

Awakening with Good Luck

The one who opened the door to Vedanta for me wasn't sure the kundalini would be able to rise through my crooked spine. A beloved music teacher quite serendipitously discovered my interest in mysticism and gave me some books to read. He didn't know how I was going to handle spiritual practice physically since my disability, a congenital neuromuscular disorder, prevented me from walking and even sitting straight. Lotus position would be a painful ordeal. Nevertheless, he invited me to meet his spiritual master from Hardwar, India, Shri Swami Rama, who was spending the summer not far from my home town. It was an awakening at first sight. This man, the glowing epitome of peace and tranquility, would show me the path to the Light I was seeking. When the student is ready, the teacher will come, they say. Yes, the teacher came to me, but between us were many physical obstacles. I was lucky, though; I had a dedicated and robust mother who was willing to take me anywhere I wanted to go to sit at the feet of Swamiji, which in the 1970s usually meant carrying me up steps and into totally inaccessible houses. Getting me down and up from the floor so I could sit in meditation like everybody else was a balancing act for her, but Swamiji gave both of us strength and all his blessings, and by this we managed to prevail.

The Joy of a Ramp

After leaving his body, Swamiji led me to the Ramakrishna Mission for continued guidance in my spiritual practices. I became totally absorbed in various physical and spiritual disciplines and, by His grace, have been able to meet many holy men and spiritually advanced souls along my journey. It was such a strong calling for me that I wanted to join one of the Mission's convents in California. A senior swami was visiting us about the time when I was at a juncture in my schooling and had to make a decision that would direct my future. I spoke of my dreams to him but he said that would not be possible. I would have a difficult time getting around the convent's facilities and my care would consume too much time of the other nuns. He told me of a very different future from what I ever could have imagined. He said I would travel to many places making life better for other disabled people. I was stunned; until that time I had always denied any identity with other disabled people and was convinced that I would live out my days from the home of my parents. All that he said came true.

In the course of my journeys, I have had the good fortune to visit a sampling of Vedanta centers around the country. Chicago, San Francisco, Hollywood, Raleigh, Houston, Boston all welcomed me so lovingly. Some, however, were located in very old structures, built long before there was any concept of equal access. I always managed to make it into whatever celebration I wanted, but it was a struggle, both for me and for whomever I could corral to lift me. The most shining example was at the summer retreat of Swami Sarvagatananda near Boston. After accepting my request to take initiation from him, Swamiji took all possible actions to make my visit comfortable. His assistant, George, even built a 30 foot long wooden ramp into the Holy Mother's House so I could join in all the worship and discussions. I was so moved by this, just writing of it brings me to tears.

Disability and Spiritual Practice

As I sit here very comfortably now in my fully accessible home with my fully modified van in the city of my choice that is completely modern and flat, looking back on a successful 20-year career of disability rights advocacy and rehabilitation research, I am challenged to think about how disability can affect spiritual practice. For me, spiritual practice probably would never have come into my life if I hadn't had a disability. I firmly believe that I was given physical limitations so I could by default be able to avoid the temptations of an adventurous life in very turbulent times and focus instead on my spiritual calling. But indeed, there have been times when the architectural barriers have brought me to a boil, and the belief that I would be a burden in a religious community certainly has its sting. On one level I am tempted to say that disability doesn't really matter. When the student is ready, the teacher will come. For someone who has the burning thirst to see the Light, she will do whatever it takes to get where she needs to go, and the universe will bring her what she needs to get there.

Access to our Faith Community

On another level, however, the continued presence of environmental and attitudinal barriers in the American Vedanta movement keeps many worthy people from the good words of Sri Ramakrishna and service in his name. Let me ask a few questions to get you thinking:

1. How many Vedanta publications have been translated into braille?

2. How many Vedanta centers offer interpreter services for people who are hard of hearing or deaf and want to attend their classes, worship services, or meditations?

3. How many Vedanta programs take extra steps to reach out to the population of people who are visually impaired or hearing impaired to let them know what Vedanta has to offer?

4. How many Vedanta center buildings meet current accessibility standards, especially concerning entrances, rest rooms, and sleeping quarters?

5. How many Vedanta centers go out to people who are unable to make it to their facilities?

6. What are the policies and practices of the Ramakrishna Mission, the Sri Sarada Math, and the Gauri Ma convents regarding admitting aspirants into their religious orders who have significant disabilities?

7. How accessible are their monasteries and convents?

Ashtavakra, the sage who had eight bends in his body, wrote some of the greatest verses of Advaita philosophy. Uncounted blind holy men are viewed with reverence in India and other parts of Asia. Saint Theresa of Avila was plagued with numerous illnesses and sufferings, but lived with the vision of God. In every culture and religious tradition there are people with significant physical abnormalities who have been spiritual beacons.

A Matter of Attitude

Why then, does the stigma of disability still linger in the faith communities? A passage from the Hebrew Bible gives us a clue to the roots of these stereotypes:

> The Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: 'For the generations to come none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is hunchbacked or dwarfed, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come near to present the offerings made to the Lord by fire. . . because of his defect, he must not go near the curtain or approach the altar, and so desecrate my sanctuary.'" (Leviticus, 21: 16-24)

That about sums it up; we are regarded as desecrating the sanctuary. You can imagine how hard we have yet to work to overcome the damage this attitude has caused over the millennia.

I also see this antiquated way of thinking as the reason so many people with disabilities are obsessed with finding a cure or have very negative self concepts. In my research I have found that the attitudes and expectations of

the families of disabled children have a strong influence on how the children form their self image. If the parents believe disability is a gift and not a punishment, their children will, too. If the children are expected to be employed and independent some day, they will be. If they are raised to believe that they can develop their talents and pursue their goals just like anyone else, they will. The opposite is also true. This is why I have found Vedanta and its western equivalent, non-programmed Quakerism, to be my spiritual home. They teach that within everyone is the Light of God, the Atman. With this understanding, it is absurd to express through words, policies, or buildings, the attitude that people with disabilities desecrate the sanctuary.

Our Best Examples

Spiritual practice from my perspective includes meditation, study, and service. For me, all three taken together constitute worship. Having a functional limitation or a chronic condition can make it just that much harder to sit comfortably and calm the mind, to acquire the materials and go to the meetings to learn about spiritual practice, and to be accepted into existing systems so you can officially devote your life to religious service. It takes extra effort on the part of any organization to ensure that all of its functions are accessible and welcoming to people with disabilities. For these reasons I would like to call all elements of the Vedanta movement to action.

For each of the questions I raised earlier there are stunning exceptions to the norm. I would like to see all the Vedanta programs that can answer yes to any of those questions come forward and present to the rest of the movement a model of how it can be done. Lack of money is no excuse. If domestic violence programs and public schools can make themselves accessible on limited budgets, so can Vedanta programs. It is more an issue of attitude and awareness.

Help and ideas are certainly available. The National Organization on Disability has extensive resources on religion and disability. Buttons on the Religion page of their website include Religion and Disability Program, Money and Ideas, Guides, N.O.D. Directory of Religious Leaders, Accessible Congregations Campaign, Resources and Links, Journey of a Congregation, Conferences, Facts and Statistics, News and Updates, and Seminaries: Access and Welcome. Another resource for accessibility consultation is the Independent Living Center in your city. These community based, consumer operated offices have advocacy programs that often help businesses and other organizations develop a plan to remove barriers from their facilities and programs.

Many students are ready, but does the door to the sanctuary have steps?

Peg Nosek, Swami Sarvagatananda, Joseph Dwyer, and George Mraz, builder of the ramp. Holy Motherês House, Marshfield, MA, July 14, 1995.

[The author of the following poem, herself part Cherokee, combines Native American with Vedantic practices in her interfaith hermitage in Colorado. The poem was composed after an experience with eagle in a limestone box canyon.]

Yellow Fire

I awakened with
a yellow fire
burning
deep inside
the belly
of my heartÑ

still in the eagle dance,
held by the eagle trance,
clouds all upside down
in my headÑ

soaring, soaring, soaring.

ÑSister Judith, Hermit of Sarada

"For All My Relations": Native American Spiritual Practice

Richard Simonelli

Most indigenous people inherently understand the web of life to be one interrelated and interconnected experience. The spirituality of relationship and connectedness is exemplified by the Lakota (Sioux) words Mitakuye Oyasin, which means "for all my relations." When a person enters a Lakota sweat lodge he or she says "Mitakuye Oyasin." The phrase "all my relations" has in fact become recognized throughout much of Native America as an acknowledgement of the connections we all share in the circle of life. It has also inspired many non-Indians to recognize our relatedness in the human family.

The Medicine Wheel of the tribes of the Great Plains is a way of speaking about the spirituality of interrelatedness. One of the teachings of the Medicine Wheel is: The honor of one is the honor of all, and the pain of one is the pain of all. I have always felt this statement to express a powerful principle of human systems theory: if there is harm or hurt in one part of the world or system, it will soon affect all of us. Do we not see this today?

A Symphony, Not a Jungle

Vine Deloria, Jr., Standing Rock Sioux, is an elder regarded as the foremost Native American philosopher today. His many books, starting with *Custer Died For Your Sins* in 1969, have galvanized both Native and non-Native people to the deeper issues of life in these tumultuous times. He ties together many issues of Native spirituality and understanding when he says:

> In this universe, all activities, events, and entities are related. Thus, it doesn't matter what kind of existence an entity enjoys: whether it is human or otter or rock or star, it participates in the ongoing creation of reality. To Indians, life is not a predatory jungle, "red in tooth and claw" . . . but a symphony of mutual respect in which each player has a specific part to play. We must be in our proper place and play our role at the proper moment. Because we humans arrived last in this world, we are the "younger brothers" of the other creatures and therefore have to learn everything from them. Our real interest shouldn't be to discover the abstract structure of physical reality, but rather to find the proper road down which to walk.[1]

1. Vine Deloria, Jr., in "Where the Buffalo Go," *The Sun*, Chapel Hill, N. C., July, 2000, p. 12.

In the late 1980s, I was entering my third decade as an electronic engineer. I realized that the pressures of the industry, and especially the world-view or mindset contained in the work, were blocking my own development as a human being. At that time I met Norbert Hill, an educator, a member of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, and President of AISES—the American Indian Science and Engineering Society. I revealed that I had just begun to explore a brand new interest as a writer. Norbert grew thoughtful and held up a copy of the AISES magazine *Winds of Change*. "Why don't you write for us," he said, his face lighting up in a mischievous smile. That was the beginning for me.

The articles I began writing for *Winds of Change* opened me up to a family of tribal cultures that kept drawing me in. My ten years' study with a Tibetan Buddhist lama helped me understand what I was experiencing as I visited and wrote about Native culture. This may have been so because Tibetan Buddhism still has strong indigenous roots. I felt an affinity for Native life and issues that drew me on. In the next two years I accomplished a career change to advocacy journalist and editor of *Winds of Change* Magazine. Since then I have not looked back.

As I got to know Native people, I learned that Native American culture and spirituality cannot be separated. To Native societies life is sacred, and each and every aspect is a manifestation of what is sometimes called the Great Mystery. Traditionally there is no separation of culture and spirituality as different experiences. Spirituality is part of day-to-day life.

Trusting Inner Experience

An important element of Native American spirituality that has helped me a lot in my own life is the trust for, and valuing of, inner experience. In Native spirituality what is experienced is sacred and is a direct connection with the Creator. Experience is how the Mystery communicates. It is not necessary to doubt one's own inner experience. Insights or visions, either received while participating in a formal vision quest or happening spontaneously, are not subject to validation or rejection by a theology or a belief system. Visions are usually brought to an elder for clarification and discussion, but their interpretation is creative and relates to the current situation.

In the Lakota tradition the formal vision quest is called Hanbelecia, or Crying for a Vision. Hanbelecia often begins a year beforehand as a Medicine person works with the aspirant to prepare him or her to "go on the hill." The actual vision quest begins in a sweat lodge with Elders and community members present. When the lodge meeting is over the quester goes to another location where he or she will undergo a complete fast for as many as four days and nights while engaging in prayer, meditation and the singing of sacred songs. Since the site is usually outdoors, non-human brothers and

sisters are free to contribute to the experience. The spiritual advisor will often visit the participant without making contact so as to provide strength for the long testing ordeal. For example, the Medicine person might come behind a rock near the vision quest site and play the flute to provide inspiration for the experience.

After the Hanbelecia is over the individual comes back into the sweat lodge and shares what experiences he or she had with elders and others present in the circle. The elders think about what is said and offer possible interpretations in order to help the person benefit from the vision quest. Elders are an important part of Native American spirituality. In the traditional way, elders personify what a life of activity, knowledge, wisdom and balance can be. Most Native gatherings I have attended cannot begin until a blessing from an elder takes place.

Non-Separation of Spirituality and Governance

One outcome of the sacred view of life held by indigenous peoples is the non-separation of spirituality and governance. I was invited to a sweat lodge ceremony in the Denver suburbs in 1992. As I was new to Native American life, this was an honor and a source of some apprehension: powerful experiences can arise in a traditional sweat lodge. The heated rocks, called "grandfathers," were brought into the dome-shaped structure built of willow branches and covered with blankets. The flap was closed and the traditional songs were sung in the first round of the lodge. Assisted by the heat, darkness, the closeness of my brothers and sisters, and the songs, I did begin to have some inner experiences. Round two and its unique songs brought more of the same.

Expecting the entire four rounds to be spiritual in this way, was I surprised when a fierce socio-political discussion began in round three. It was the 500th anniversary of Columbus's entry into Turtle Island (the Native American name for North America) and some of those present were about to protest at the Denver Columbus Day Parade. The sweat lodge was just the right venue for a discussion about this because church and state are not separated in Native American life.

A similar experience happened to me many years later at another sweat lodge to which I was invited. After a round or two of traditional songs and spirituality, I was suddenly called to task for my management of the One Hundred Eagle Feather Hoop, a sacred element that the organization I worked for brought to Native communities for addictions recovery and healing. It was perceived that I was treating the Hoop too much like a commodity as I arranged its travel to the various Native communities. I was shocked, but immediately realized that expressions of spirituality (the sweat lodge), and more mundane matters are not separated in Native culture. I listened with

respect and made a few changes in my attitudes and procedures in relating to the Hoop.

Another aspect of Native American spirituality and culture is the land. As I attended gatherings in the early 1990s and listened carefully to the elders, I noticed that they often spoke of "the land," and did not seem to use the term "nature." This distinction always caught my attention. Traditional indigenous cultures were always lived in complete synergy with land. The trees, the rocks, the earth, and the skies and waters were always co-participants in the life of the community. The four-legged, the winged, those that crawl on the ground, those who burrow into the earth, as well as the spider people and the insect people were, and still are, regarded as brothers and sisters. Human beings, sometimes referred to as the "two legged" or the "five-fingered," are regarded as different from the other inhabitants of the land but not inherently better. We are endowed with certain gifts, and our non-human brothers and sisters have different gifts.

Learning from Buffalo Parenting

I heard of an incident recently that underscores the land as an active participant in Native spirituality and culture. A Tribal court in the State of Montana was faced with the dilemma of how to sentence a Native woman who was found to be inadequate in her parenting. After some deliberation and consultation with a tribal elder, the court decided to sentence the woman to live in a tipi out in the tribe's buffalo pasture, but not far from town, for thirty days. There she was instructed to pay attention to how the buffalo related to their calves. She was especially asked to notice what the mothers did and what the bulls did in their own parenting roles. Her family, friends, and the elder visited her often for conversation in an example of traditional restorative justice utilizing culture and land.

The Power of the Circle is another great experiential aspect of Native American spirituality and culture. In the work I do as an ally to addictions recovery and community healing in Native America, the gifts of the Circle are taught as a way to personal recovery from addictions and the healing of communities. The Talking Circle is a format and a protocol for sharing among a group of people. To convene a talking circle, chairs are arranged in a circle and a space is left at the eastern door to allow spirit energies enter and to leave. At the center of the circle, on the ground, is placed a ceremonial arrangement such as a prayer cloth with an abalone shell in which to burn sage, cedar or sweetgrass.

The facilitator of the circle might introduce a topic for consideration or generally mediate the sharing of individual participants. But the person conducting a traditional Native American talking circle is not a leader in control in quite the same way as a the moderator of a Western-style discussion

might be. The talking circle proceeds by passing around a sacred object, such as an eagle fan (wing) or some other object sacred to the community represented by the particular circle. The object is passed to people sitting in the circle and each one may speak or pass the object on. When a person speaks, no one interrupts. Respect is one of the guidelines for speaking in a talking circle. Even without cross talk, everyone is heard, and feedback often comes in powerful or mysterious ways.

Humor is an acknowledged part of the culture and of the spirit life. Good humor is good medicine. Attending a traditional powwow and listening carefully to the man or woman calling the event, it will be very easy to hear the Native sense of humor come through. As I attended conferences and gatherings in my role as advocacy journalist I would often enter in a very serious mood, ready for business. But pretty soon I would feel that there was a joke somehow "loose in the room." It was palpable, although I couldn't put my finger on it. It definitely cut my seriousness, and pretty soon humor would manifest itself in even the most important presentations of the gathering.

Restoring to Harmony

Harmony is another principle of Native spirituality that gradually dawned on me as I served as an ally over the past 14 years. The Dine (Navajo) people speak of *Hozho* as one of their guiding spiritual experiences. Hozho suggests harmony, balance and beauty, a sacred experience for a Navajo person. It is the state or experience of all is well. One afternoon in early spring I walked with a Navajo man in Canyon de Chelley in Arizona. The first thunderheads of the new season were just building up in the north and we could hear the haunting song of the canyon wren over by the sandstone cliffs. I had read about Hozho but my book learning was brought to life when my friend stopped and created a minute of silence in our conversation. "Hozho," he said after a while. I felt the harmony, balance, and beauty of that moment. The valuing of harmony is key to the Native spirit. It's not that conflict does not arise. It certainly does. But the underlying traditional Native American value is harmony, and not conflict or upset, even in the service of progress. Yet upset happens, and the purpose of many of the spiritual ceremonies in Dine Bahane (Navajoland), as well as among other tribes, is to restore a person to healing and personal harmony.

Native spirituality is non-abstract, non-conceptual, non-theological, straightforward, and experiential. It has many areas of similarity to Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, and other Eastern spiritualities. The holism and interconnectedness of the Medicine Wheel teachings can be expressed in a different way by using the language of some of the Eastern spiritualities: nonduality. Indigenous spirituality looks for the harmony, connectedness and

relatedness in any situation—not to manufacture it, but because it is already there. The purpose of many Native ceremonies is to *restore* harmony and balance, not to create them from scratch.

One of the goals of Tibetan Buddhism, Chan/Zen, and Vedanta is to realize liberation or *moksha*. The Natural Mind is a condition of liberation from the divisiveness of the small self. But another way of speaking of the Natural Mind is as the Indigenous Mind. This breakthrough in terminology was not available until recently because, until the last 30-40 years, indigenous ways, values and spiritualities world-wide were thought to be a thing of the past. It is my experience that the root of the traditional indigenous mind is highly related to the mind of Eastern liberation spirituality, with certain differences that are best left for another discussion.

Indigenous spirituality finds harmony by trusting and valuing the phenomenal world as it is, seeking only to restore harmony to troubled situations. Eastern spirituality deals with Maya or Samsara by finding them to be unreal. But then what? Once we see that Maya/Samsara is like sticky tar paper, and once we see through or transcend it, don't we then also find the sacred to be expressed in the things of this world? Not as Maya or Samsara, but as none other than the created world, provided we understand it properly and respect it—an undertaking that may well be our life's spiritual work. In other words, God made all the things of this world. Once we have some clarity or relaxation in our own lives, then, to paraphrase a Christian tradition, isn't God's handiwork just darling?

Developing All Four Sides

Phil Lane, Sr., a Yankton Sioux elder I was fortunate to meet, said something I've never forgotten. He summed up some of the rewards of Native Spirituality when he said, "Our people say that we are born into this world to fulfill a destiny, and if we look to the Creator for guidance we will grow and develop on four sides: physically, morally, mentally, and spiritually. Our old people still lived in their aboriginal ways, completely in harmony with the land; and so, they naturally grew up developed on all four sides. When we grow and develop on all four sides, we become well-balanced human beings, able to be positive forces throughout our lives. Our old people believed we were born into this world to enjoy every moment of it. They had proof of this when they saw the young colts running, playing and kicking, the birds singing, the little puppies chasing one another and playing, and in the Northwest country, the beautiful salmon and other fish jumping and splashing in the water."[2]

To me, this is a statement of Native American spirituality at its best.

2. Visions, AISES Newsletter, Albuquerque, N.M., Spring, 1994, p. 1.

Horace Axtell, a Nez Perce Elder I've been honored to know, said something that I think capsulizes the essence of the interfaith dialog that is such an important and exciting part of this coming together time. He said, "Many religions have been brought to this land. And the way my religion is, they teach me. . . to respect all religions. And I still do that. And I will until I close my eyes for the last time. When someone else believes what his Creator is, then we can stand and pray together."[3] ❑

Some Memories of Erik Johns

Reverend John G. Mills

[Read at a memorial service in Stormville, New York, December 30, 2001]

To speak of Erik Johns is to evoke a person of note, a polished gentleman and an artist of distinction. When Erik came to our home in Cold Spring, as he frequently did, [my wife] Margaret and I were always glad to see him, and we felt his warm concern for us on this side of the county. Here in my study hangs the great portrait which Erik worked so hard to complete for my retirement in 1992. The idea came from a class we shared in a church library in Mount Kisco where there was a fine portrait of the old rector on the wall. Erik and [his friend] Jack [Kelly], clapped their hands and said, "This is what you must have, too." Erik gave hours of painstaking work to this portrait which was his loving gift to me after my 32 years in St. Mary's, Cold Spring.

Erik valued his faith, his Vedanta formation. He was also interested in other faiths and churches in Patterson and Cold Spring where he would come to St. Mary's from time to time with Jack. I remember that beautiful Easter Day when I looked down from the altar and saw Erik and Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda in the congregation. What a thrill it was! Erik had such a radiant smile and a twinkle in his eye, as he brought the swami to the altar rail for communion in the holy gifts of God. You can read all about this and other events with Erik and Jack and Swami in the very new book on Swami's life and prophetic ministry by Dr. Shelley Brown, M.D. If you will look into this masterful and complete work, you will find pictures of Erik, Jack and Swami and detailed memories of the year that Swami spent with them at Moss Hill Farms.

3. AISES Leadership Conference, April, 1992, unpublished.

In the Spirit of Vivekananda

Erik and Jack put heart and soul into the foundation of the SRV Retreat Center in Greenville, New York, with its unique house and ecumenical barn-temple with an ornate dome on a hill against the Catskills. The wind blows from up there, and Lex Hixon, another close friend of Erik, would say that the fresh breeze blew in from another world. Erik and Lex went together to the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago some years ago. Erik felt himself very much in the spirit of the great Vivekananda who himself addressed the first such World Parliament in 1893. Vivekananda felt the vocation to introduce the Vedanta-Hindu faith to the whole world for the healing of the divisions among the nations and races.

Every year on the Fourth of July, Erik opened his beautiful house and grounds to the Vedanta Fellowship from all over the East Coast, including a busload from the West Side Center. What an atmosphere of color, joy, friendship and sharing! There was the great marquee over the patio and all the tables set for luncheon. There were shrines and portraits in green nooks of trees around the spacious grounds with votive candles burning here and there. The day would conclude with a Vesper service and an original cantata by the devoted and gifted John Schlenck and his choir from the West Side Center.

I remember that Erik would easily quote from the sayings of Ramakrishna and Holy Mother. These came to him quite naturally after years of study. Erik was a searcher for truth, and he continued to be. His whole artistic response to life was inspired by this sense of seeking.

Now that the beautiful home on Moss Hill has been so cruelly destroyed by fire, I want to reflect upon the enchanting treasure that Erik had collected as well as his many fine paintings, the bronzes, the Buddhas, the bodhisattvas, the candlesticks, and precious little tables with their miniatures. There was a faint aroma of incense and you had only to sit down and let your mind wander as you looked around.

On this last Fourth of July (2001) Margaret and I were so happy to sit in the midst of the great house at the dining room table with the shiny new books by Dr. Shelley Brown. In opening these two volumes of the life of the Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda, I found these teachings which I think I was intended to read that day. I later told them to Erik and he smiled. First—*work until death*; second—*never feel yourself inferior to anyone*; third—*never be surprised by any event or circumstance, however strange*.

So, Erik, dear friend and brother, we say, "Thank you for all you were to us and all your love and caring. *Frater, Ave Atque Vale*. ❑

Emerson and Vedanta: A Mutual Reading

Judson B. Trapnell

> "When [one] can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings. But when the intervals of darkness come, as come they must,—when the sun is hid and the stars withdraw their shining,—we repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray, to guide our steps to the East again, where the dawn is."[1]

When Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) wrote the above lines in his address, "The American Scholar," the U.S. was experiencing a severe economic instability that culminated in the Panic of 1837 and subsequent depression. This was also a period during which the first stirrings of an anti-slavery movement were being felt, a movement in which Emerson would later participate, as an attempt to rescue the soul of the young nation. Yet the mid-19th century was also a time of intellectual ferment and individualism, informed by the Romantic philosophers of England and Germany, as well as by the increased availability of translations of the writings of non-European cultures, especially those of "the East." Emerson, as the primary spokesperson for the New England transcendentalists, was an important catalyst in this early infusion of Eastern traditional wisdom into the American mind. Nearly 200 years after his birth, as we reflect upon the impact of his encounter with Indian scriptures, one is struck by how his interests in Vedanta resonate with our ongoing turn toward the lights of the East during what some might see as our own "interval of darkness."

Emerson's Reading of Vedanta

Two questions have intrigued scholars concerning Emerson's relationship to Indian scriptures. First, what texts did he actually read, and second, how important was their influence upon the development of his thought?[2] The first

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Wm. H. Wise & Company, 1929), p. 28.

2. The classic studies of these questions are Swami Paramananda, *Emerson and Vedanta* (Boston, MA: Vedanta Press, 1918); Frederick I. Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930); and Arthur Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932). See also J.P.R. Rayapati, *Early American Interest in Vedanta: Pre-Emersonian Interest in Vedic Literature and Vedantic Philosophy* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1973).

issue has been thoroughly researched. Inspired by his father's and his aunt's interest in India, when he was only seventeen, Emerson began to read the Edinburgh Review in which articles on Indian thought and mythology at times appeared. Around the same time he also read *A Life of Sir William Jones*, who was an early important source of translations of Indian as well as Persian scriptures, and Jones's *Asiatick Miscellany* which contained a variety of Eastern scriptures. Drawing upon one of these translations by Jones, Emerson incorporated into his journal of 1822 the last ten lines of an Indian poem, "A Hymn to Narayena," to express his thoughts about the universality of God.[3] However, Emerson's early attraction to Indian texts evoked skepticism about their "superstitious" quality as well as admiration.

The annual reading lists that appear in Emerson's *Journals* document further sources, both primary and secondary, that found their way into his publications. In 1842, Emerson and his friend Henry David Thoreau published extracts from "ethnical scriptures," including Indian, in *The Dial*, a magazine on which they collaborated. The Bhagavad Gita particularly impressed Emerson, prompting him to paraphrase it in his well-known 1857 poem "Brahma." His essay on "Immortality" (1862) concludes with a quotation from the Katha Upanishad. It is clear, then, that Emerson's interest in Indian scriptures was a lifelong one. Frederick Carpenter's conclusion after a lengthy study of Emerson's encounter with Asia is that it took many years (at least until the mid-1840s), for his early readings in Indian scriptures to seep down to the roots of his thinking. An early skepticism about Eastern sources gradually matured into profound and abiding affinity.[4] In his memoir of Emerson, James Cabot claimed that, of the varied sources his friend read

3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notes*, vol. 1, pp. 153-54. The lines he quoted are these:

> "Of dew-bespangled leaves and blossoms bright
> Hence! vanish from my sight,
> Delusive pictures; unsubstantial shews!
> My soul absorbed, only one Being knows,
> Of all perceptions, one abundant source,
> Hence every object, every moment flows,
> Suns hence derive their force,
> Hence planets learn their course;
> But suns and fading worlds I view no more,
> God only I perceive, God only I adore!"

4. In addition to Carpenter's work, see the many writings of Kenneth W. Cameron on the evolution of Emerson's thinking.

(and there were many), those of the Hindus (specifically the Gita, the Puranas, and the Upanishads) "were among his favorites."[5]

Although there is general scholarly consensus on what Emerson read and when, the second question regarding the degree of influence of Indian sources upon his thought has prompted divergent answers. Most scholars have concluded that these sources were significant as supports for Emerson's own philosophical ideas, but must be set in importance alongside numerous other influences, especially the writings of Plato and Plotinus, and reconciled with the quality of his own original genius. In rebuttal, E.V. Francis in his *Emerson and Hindu Scriptures* (1972) rehearses this scholarly discussion of the influence of Hindu sources, but concludes with little qualification that Emerson's fundamental ideas are of Hindu origin.[6] In contrast, writing in 1981, biographer Gay Wilson Allen concludes that Hindu sources reinforced but did not initiate Emerson's basic philosophical assumptions and mystical inclinations, giving him terminology but few new ideas.[7]

This disagreement regarding how to assess the influence of Indian scriptures upon Emerson's thought should interest us since it elicits awareness of our own assumptions about what Vedanta is. Some of us, like Francis, assume a causal model: If we find similarities between Emerson's thought and the Indian sources he read, then we may conclude that they are caused, consciously or unconsciously, by his reading of the Gita, the Puranas, and the Upanishads.[8] A different explanation is proposed by Daniel Thottackara in his 1986 study, *Emerson the Advaitin: A Study of the Parallels between Emerson and Samkara's Advaita Vedanta*. Employing what may be called a perennialist model, Thottackara develops parallels between Emerson and

5. James Eliot Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol. 1* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1887), p. 290, quoted in Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, p. 9.

6. Elamanamadathil V. Francis, *Emerson and Hindu Scriptures* (Cochin, India: Academic Publications, 1972).

7. Gay Wilson Allen, *Waldo Emerson: A Biography* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), pp. x-xi. Cf. Stephen Whicher's similarly measured assessment in his *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), pp. 115, 151.

8. This is the conclusion not only of Indians such as E.V. Francis and Swami Paramananda, but also of more recent defenses of Indic traditions in response to a perceived depreciation of their importance for Western civilization in American education. For an example, see Rajiv Malhotra, "The Position of Hinduism in American Education," published on the website of the Infinity Foundation (<www.infinityfoundation. com. mandala/society_essays frameset. htm>).

Shankara on the basis of common "innate mystical tendencies."[9] It is because both thinkers approached reality mystically that their philosophies sound similar to us in spite of great differences in their historical contexts—a common wisdom called by some "the perennial philosophy," by others "Vedanta."[10] Thottackara's book is a balanced and well documented review of key parallel themes, including the nondual nature of ultimate reality, the relation of that reality to the individual and to the perceived world, the varied ways of knowing what is real, and the ethical implications of knowing reality as nondual. Which model we prefer, the causal or the perennialist, will tell us much about how we understand the nature of Vedanta.

In the remainder of this article, we will focus upon a single passage from an Emerson essay that suggests strong parallels to Vedanta. In a second essay to be published separately, we will examine some of the implications of Emerson's thought for higher education, implications that are similar to those of Vedanta.

Emerson Read in the Light of Vedanta

In the first chapter of Emerson's 1836 book *Nature* there is a striking description of an experience that has attracted the attention of those inclined to identify him as a mystic and/or as one influenced by his reading of the Upanishads and the Gita. It is significant that this essay was written not long after his resignation from ministry in the Unitarian Church and his formative trip to Europe, both in 1832. The book begins with a forceful turn from reliance upon tradition, both religious and cultural, to pose a challenge:

> The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?[11]

9. Daniel Thottackara, *Emerson the Advaitin: A Study of the Parallels between Emerson and Samkara's Advaita Vedanta* (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 1986), p. 6. Thottackara attributes some of his thesis to Bliss Perry, *Emerson Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1931), p. 77.

10. Cf. "What Do We Mean by Vedanta?," editorial in *American Vedantist* 3/4 (Winter 1998): p. 1.

11. Emerson, *The Complete Writings*, p. 1.

He then proposes that this revelation may indeed come through nature, answering all of the questions we might ask, and in a fashion more reliable than those "religious teachers [who] dispute and hate each other."[12]

But such faith in self-reliance must be qualified by a disturbing fact: "To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature."[13] Some disharmony between the "inward and outward senses" in the adult has distorted the purer perception one received as a child. Nevertheless, it is apparent as the essay continues that Emerson has seen nature, however briefly, and by the experience:

> In the woods, too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child in the woods, we return to reason and faith. There feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.[14]

The Vedantist will likely feel striking familiarity with this account of seeing and knowing reality. We will discuss a few of the parallels that are suggested.

Optimism Born of Realization

Vedanta offers a similar diagnosis of the human predicament, that we are unable to see reality clearly. One is reminded of Shankara's metaphors for superimposition and maya, Krishna's account of how perception is clouded by emotion (Bhagavad Gita II.62-63), the image of the dusty mirror (Svetasvatara Upanishad II. 14), and Virocana's delusion (Chandogya Upanishad VIII.7). Yet one also hears in the ancient sources, as in Emerson, an optimism born of experience that humans can in fact see reality and not through imitation but through one's own direct realization. This latter theme is particularly clear in the Upanishads, especially once interpreted historically as a polemical response to an over-ritualized Brahmanism (e.g., Katha Upanishad II.5, 23; cf. II.7-9; Bhagavad Gita II.42-43), an interesting parallel itself to Emerson's turn from institutionalized religion.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., p. 2.

14. Ibid.

One is also struck by the setting for Emerson's experience. The woods have long symbolized in both American and Indian cultures a place apart, a setting for creative solitude, and an environment for both turning inward and contemplating nature. As Emerson's language suggests, much of what a person has accumulated over the years and thus what obstructs our seeing may be sloughed off in the woods. It is interesting that traditionally the Indian husband and wife retired to the forest after their children were grown to renew and deepen their spiritual journeying (*vanaprastha*). Yet perhaps less immediately familiar to the Vedantist will be Emerson's belief that the woods or nature in general can mediate answers to all of our questions. There is certainly a world-denying or at least world-transcending tone in some Indian spiritualities. But if Vedanta is understood within its full Indian context (Vedic, Brahmanic, shramanic, and Dravidian) then the intimate connection between the divine and nature is reinforced in a way resonant with Emerson's description.[15]

Initially unfamiliar as well might be Emerson's statement that reason and faith return in the forest, illustrated by the conviction that nothing could happen to him that nature could not somehow heal. Read in relation to his plea for "an original relation to the universe," this observation about faith appears different than the religiosity from which he was distancing himself. Nor are reason and faith eschewed in most interpretations of Vedanta, however much we may be reminded that by themselves they are incapable of grasping what is eternal and unchanging. One need only remember Krishna's discussion of the virtues of both *vijnana* or the *buddhi* and *shraddha* (Bhagavad Gita II.65, III.41, V.28, VI.8; III.3 1, VII.21-22, IX.23).

Radically Open to the Currents of Being

The Gita's highly synthetic message, with its integration of the experience of a nondual relation to Brahman with the path of devotion, may also help one discern a harmony in the qualities of Emerson's experience. For in the midst of the retrieval of reason and faith come declarations of self-naughting and oneness with Universal Being that remind us clearly of Buddhist as well as Hindu scriptures.[16] Clearly there is a shift in identification suggested by Emerson's language, from a narrowly confining self that is lost, to one that is "transparent" and "nothing" yet radically open to the "currents" of that

15. See Protap Chunder Mozoomdar, "Emerson as Seen from India," in *The Genius and Character of Emerson*, ed. by F.B. Sanborn (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1885), pp. 365-71.

16. On the parallels between Emerson and Buddhism, see John G. Rudy, *Emerson and Zen Buddhism* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001).

Being (reminiscent of *shakti*) as they move through him. Now he sees and sees all, but only because of this shift, this realization of an original relationship not only to the universe but through the universe with God. There are again intriguing similarities and differences to be explored between Emerson's account and Vedanta's discussion of the distinction between the *ahamkara* (I-sense) of *jiva* (individual soul) and *Atman* (universal soul).

Emerson would attempt to say much more about this God of which he feels himself, if only for a moment, "part or parcel." Sometimes linked to his concept of "the Over-Soul," his reflections upon the nature of God are in ways quite similar to the Upanishadic account of Atman-Brahman as well as to Plotinus's writings on the One. He felt increasingly uncomfortable, for example, with attributing personal qualities to God and simultaneously explored verbally a relation to transpersonal Being that we may characterize as nondual (a-dvaita). Nevertheless, one may identify enduring theistic tendencies in all periods of Emerson's writings, a characteristic of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita as well.[17] He appears to have wrestled with the conundrum addressed by the distinction between *nirguna* and *saguna* Brahman.

In the remaining chapters of this early work, Emerson discusses the various uses of nature, beginning with nature as a commodity and source of beauty, through nature as a language and teacher of discipline, to nature as "the symbol of spirit." In the end he returns to the theme of seeing and lifts up the possibility that we may be restored from blindness to "perfect sight."[18]

The Context of Our Reading

Emerson read the scriptural sources of Vedanta from a physical and psychological, though perhaps not a spiritual, distance from their culture of origin. He could have known little of India's Hindu renaissance as he wrote, dying eleven years before the 1893 Parliament of Religions in Chicago when Swami Vivekananda brought to this country a living witness to that renaissance. But we read Vedanta in very different times, with far more knowledge of India's ongoing religious struggles available to us, and thus

17. For a fuller treatment of these parallels see Thottackara, *Emerson the Advaitin*, chapter 2.

18. Insightful studies of Nature, with analysis of the passage we have discussed, include: Merton M Sealts, Jr and Alfred R. Ferguson, eds., *Emerson's Nature: Origin, Growth, and Meaning*, 2nd edition (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979); and Alan D. Hodder, *Emerson's Rhetoric of Revelation: Nature, the Reader, and the Apocalypse Within* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989).

with more responsibility to reflect upon how Western culture is impacting the land that gave birth to those scriptures that Emerson revered. When Protap Chunder Mozoomdar praised Emerson's genius in 1884, he mixed that praise with foreboding about the influence of the West upon those Eastern lights to which the American philosopher had turned: “Amidst this ceaseless, sleepless din and clash of Western materialism, this heat of restless energy, the character of Emerson shines upon India serene as the evening star.”[19]. It is intriguing that Mozoomdar describes Emerson using similar sidereal imagery as Emerson used for Indian sources in the above epigraph, as though India in the late 19th century as now is undergoing its own “interval of darkness” in response, in part, to Westernization.

However much we share “innate mystical tendencies” with both Emerson and Vedanta, we must quicken the peace of meditation and reflection with awareness of the conflict of cultures that defines the context of our own reading. Here again Emerson’s example of balancing mysticism with social concern can help us. ❑

Book Reviews

Two Ways of Light: Kabbalah and Vedanta
James N . Judd, Ms. D., D. D.
Xlibris Corporation, U. S. A.
113 pp. paperback $16.00 2000

This book is well organized, accurately presented, and illustrated by inspiring scriptural passages. Its thesis is that both Vedanta and Kabbalah see the totality of reality from a nondualistic point of view and can complement one another where their presentations differ. The author obtained prefaces from both a rabbi and a swami supporting his arguments for balance of opposed features and unification of diverse approaches. In the author's opinion, both of these two “unique religious philosophies” provide “clear answers to all of our questions about life,” and they “will surely lead us to eternal freedom.” [17] The arguments are intelligent and buttressed with respectable lines of evidence.

19. Mozoomdar, *Emerson as Seen from India*, p. 367. The following assessment is also striking: "Brahmanism is an acquirement, a state of being rather than a creed. In whomsoever the eternal Brahman breathed his unquenchable fire, he was the Brahman. And in that sense Emerson was the best of Brahmans" (p. 371).

Both traditions, says Judd, teach that (1) the human being's real nature is divine; (2) that our aim on Earth is to manifest this divinity which is eternally within us; and (3) that this truth is available to all (although neither tradition actually taught it publicly to "all"). [72] The Many come forth from the One to phenomenalize and glorify the One, and having demonstrated their potentiality for variety, reintegrate into the transcendent formlessness of the One.

Interaction Between the Will to Give and the Will to Receive

Another thesis running through the book is that there are two "wills," the Will to Give and the Will to Receive, naturally attracted to one another. There is "a constant interaction between these two principles at all levels of consciousness," [69] and this dynamism governs the cosmic development and the reunification. Judd urges that we not limit ourselves to analyzing and comparing the two great traditions but rather "enjoy what they both have to offer." [74]

There is an important error on page 84. Speaking of "freedom from the limitations imposed by thinking that we are only the body and mind," the text reads: "This does not mean that we should deny the body and the mind." The next sentence (containing the error) is: "This does mean that we should turn our backs to and deny the world." But the following sentence after this reads: "To the contrary: we must live our lives to the fullest. . ." So I believe there is a printer's error in the intervening sentence and that it was intended by the author to be parallel to its predecessor. It should read: "This does not mean that we should turn our back to and deny the world."

Later in the book Dr. Judd proposes a reconciliation even of the great divide between dualism and nondualism, each of which he identifies correctly and sympathetically. He reduces the difference to union with God being actual either by nature (nondualist position) or by grace (dualist position). But both teach that "once the human soul is assimilated into the divine substance there is a condition of absolute unity." And this, he says, "is a constant theme of both Vedanta and the Kabbalah." [100] The convergence of the Kabbalah and Vedanta ways is demonstrated in chapter four, where Judd presents a verse by verse parallelism of the Isa Upanishad and Kabbalistic texts and teaching.

At the very end he brings in C. G. Jung and Abraham Maslow for their ideas of the "archetype of wholeness" in "the Self" (Jung) and the "third movement in psychology . . . to integrate both the 'transcendent' and 'transpersonal'. . .to become psychologically whole" (Maslow). [107] He also mentions Joseph Campbell on the goal of attaining knowledge of "our own deep inward mystery." [109]

References to and quotations from Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda abound throughout the book, which is not surprising since Dr. Judd is a past President of the Vedanta Society of Houston. He is now President of Universal Teachings and lectures extensively in the United States and England. He addressed the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, 1993.

I found this a satisfactory and useful book, and I intend to recommend it for group study in the seminars with which I am associated.

—Beatrice Bruteau

Ramakrishna and Christ: The Supermystics
by Paul Hourihan
Vedantic Shores Press, Redding, CA
212 pp. paperback $16.00 2002

For Ramakrishna devotees, Paul Hourihan's book, *Ramakrishna and Christ*, will serve as a refreshing review of the many stages of Ramakrishna's spiritual development. For newcomers, the book offers an engrossing introduction to a great Hindu mystic. By entering sympathetically into the well-documented spiritual life of this nineteenth century holy man, we should be able to understand better Jesus of Nazareth, his first-century precursor. Though the two are removed from one another in time and space, not to say in religion and external practice, what they have in common at the highest level as mystics overshadows cultic and cultural differences.

Human and Divine

People who have difficulty in reconciling the transcendent Christ of the Fourth Gospel with the less exalted, engagingly human Jesus of the first three Gospels may find it reassuring to learn that Ramakrishna, like Jesus, was able to live in the Impersonal world of the Absolute "I Am," as well as in a world in which one relates to God in a personal way; that is, as Mother in the case of Ramakrishna and as Father in the case of Jesus. Ramakrishna learned at the peak of his spiritual maturity to hover in the Bhavamukha state, between experiencing God as impersonal or as personal. At times he would be lost in the impersonal Absolute, while at other times he would relate on the devotional level to God as person, that is, in the feminine form of the Goddess Kali. When he was deep in the one state it apparently excluded the other. However, when he was not fully engrossed in one or the other, he tried to remain in Bhavamukha, a mood in which he was, at least virtually, in both.

In like manner, Jesus could abide in a relationship of identity with God as Transcendent Being and at other times relate to God in the personal mode as

Father. Thus, in one poise he could say that no one knows when the heavens and the earth will pass away, not even he, Jesus, the Son of God the Father (Mk.13:32). Then he would turn around and declare "I and the Father are one. . . Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn.10:30; 14:9). In the latter state the dualism of the first was completely overcome. And we have reason to believe that Jesus, like Ramakrishna, was able to keep both modes in a state of dynamic tension.

Among the most difficult aspects of Hindu spirituality for Westerners to understand is the practice of Tantra, in which very attractive and very repulsive experiences are presented to the aspirant, who is expected to remain detached from both. Under the guidance of Yogeswari, a Hindu Brahmani, Ramakrishna, far from yielding to either desire or disgust, withdrew entirely into himself and fell into *samadhi*. The samadhi did not differ in kind from the type he experienced in the most sublime moments of his mystical absorption, that is, when the senses were stilled and he had entered into union with the Absolute. Hourihan's account in Chapters Seven and Eight throws considerable light on Tantric practice, while warning of its dangers. It seems not to have scarred Ramakrishna in the least, and, in fact, prepared him for his next teacher, Tota Puri. It was he who taught Ramakrishna how to attain spiritual union with the Absolute as Nirguna Brahman, God without form.

Another parallel between Jesus and Ramakrishna, at least in the telling, is the way most of the people around them turn out to be flawed in one way or another. Thus, Yogeswari proved to be possessive and jealous of anyone who got close to her client. Tota Puri, the teacher of Jnana Yoga, was exposed as an intolerant exclusivist who could not measure up to Ramakrishna's openness to all faiths and spiritualities. In like manner, Jesus stands head and shoulders above his bumbling apostles. They fail to understand him; they doubt, betray, and deny him. He alone is without sin or fault. By exposing the flaws of the disciples, the virtues and prowess of the master are set in relief.

Magdalene as Spiritual Consort

Ramakrishna and Christ makes a point of showing how Jesus, like his Hindu counterpart, had a high regard for women and that both he and Ramakrishna benefitted by a close association with one particular woman. For the latter it was primarily Sarada Devi, Ramakrishna's wife, devotee, and future apostle. Paul Hourihan sees Mary Magdalene functioning as Jesus' female consort in his earthly mission, a role traditionally assigned to Jesus' mother Mary in Roman Catholic dogmatic and devotional practice. In fact, says the author, Jesus' attitude toward his family, including his mother, was to keep them at a distance. Aside from the legendary infancy tales found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mary plays no significant role in Jesus' ministry, at least in the three Synoptic Gospels. This does not seem to be the case in John's Gospel, where Mary induces her Son to work his first miracle,

and she was with him at the end when she stood at the foot of the cross. Still, a case can be made to show that during the time of his public ministry and during the decades after Jesus' death, it was Mary Magdalene who played a major role in his life and in disseminating his ideas. Few scripture scholars today believe that Magdalene was the unnamed sinful woman—traditionally a prostitute—who came in from the street and washed the feet of Jesus with her tears. Luke's Gospel presents Magdalene as the companion of wealthy women who supported Jesus and his disciples out of their personal resources (Lk.8:3). In any case, as Hourihan points out, it was to Magdalene, and not to any of his apostles, that Jesus first appeared after his resurrection. Short of thinking of Jesus and Magdalene as lovers—a temptation some recent novelists have been unable to resist—it is not beyond the realm of possibility that they were bound together in a holy friendship, inseparable from the work of spreading the Jesus message. If Sri Aurobindo had his Mira Richard and Ramakrishna his Sarada Devi, are we to suppose that Jesus alone dispensed with any kind of close friendship with a woman coadjutrix in his active ministry?

The Importance of Who Killed Jesus

It might be wise to eliminate in future editions of the book the statement that Jesus was killed by the Pharisees (p. 53). Jesus was arrested (Jn.18:12) by a Roman cohort (*speira*) headed by a Roman legionnaire (*chiliarchos*) and crucified by the Romans. Though Jesus disputed with some of the ultra-conservative Pharisees, he also had friends among them, was invited to dine at their homes, was saved from being executed by Herod Antipas, as was John the Baptist, because of the timely warning of some friendly Pharisees, and he was buried with the loving assistance of Nicodemus, a leading Pharisee.

The question of who killed Jesus is of monumental importance. For nineteen centuries, "the Jews" without distinction have been called "deicides" and have suffered indescribable indignities because of the libel that "they" killed Christ. Jesus was killed by Romans on the false charge of insurrection. The Pharisees had nothing to do with it, and Caiphas, the High Priest who collaborated with the Romans, was universally despised by the Jewish masses and rightly regarded as an illegitimate occupant of the High Priestly office. He was anything but a representative Jew.

Paul Hourihan's book is a glowing tribute to his knowledge of Hinduism. He is masterful in his command of the information he incorporates into his text. By his profound understanding of Ramakrishna, he has in the bargain introduced us to a Jesus more plausible than the one usually presented in theology textbooks and Sunday school classes.

—James M. Somerville

Audiotape Review

Waking Up: Ten Short Chapters on the Vedantic Way
by Swami Yogeshananda
Narrated by Charlton Griffin
Audio Connoisseur #4001-4 2 audiocassettes
The Vedanta Center of Atlanta $16.00 2002

Swami Yogeshananda's *Waking Up: Ten Short Chapters on the Vedantic Way*, published in book form in 1996, is now available in a new venue through this beautifully read and packaged audio version. Charlton Griffin, award-winning narrator, engages and holds the listener with his clear, beautifully paced, almost conversational style. The lovely cover design, by Alston Anderson, features a detail from a Van Gogh painting that draws the viewer toward a luminous golden center. The audio and visual aspects serve together as an appropriate, one might almost say seductive, setting of the swami's thoughtful yet easy introduction to Vedanta.

Chapter titles include: Yoga and You; Reincarnation and Karma; Desire; Meditation: Questions that Arise; Your Religion, My Religion—and Ours; Social Service, Consciousness and the Cosmos; The Sacred Writings; and The Teachers. The approach is non-dogmatic. The chapter on Reincarnation, for example, considers various possible explanations.

We highly recommend this package as a gift to friends who are interested to learn more than a few paragraphs about Vedanta. The two tapes contain two hours of listening material.

—AV Staff

Report

Interaction with Buddhists, Christians and Muslims

April 6, 2002 proved to be a "redletter" day for interfaith relations in Atlanta. First there was the celebration of Sakyamuni Jayanti (Birthday of the Buddha) at the temple of Nipponzan Myohoji. This subdivision of Nichiren Buddhism has the practice of walking for peace, all over the world, and here they have built with their own labor, their dojo or Peace Temple, in a rundown neighborhood, remodeling a derelict house. This service was simple in its ritual and liturgy and ended with a multifaith segment which included a Vedanta prayer, a Sufi song and a Christian prayer. Because the Japanese celebrate the Birthday in April, it is possible for us to attend theirs; ours is held in May and it will be attended by the monastics of the dojo.

An entirely unfamiliar celebration followed this familiar one, in the evening. It was billed as an Interfaith Convocation. The flier, issued by Morehouse College of Atlanta (alma mater of Martin Luther King Jr., Maynard Jackson and many other worthies), announced that the presiding figure would be the Reverend Dr. Lawrence Carter, Dean of the College, well known in the religious circles of Atlanta. And who was to be the honored speaker? Imam Warith Deen Mohammed. Here was a notable and notably Christian institution, about to honor one of the most important Muslim leaders of our time. I accepted the invitation, little dreaming what it would mean.

A Gandhi-Like Figure

There was a reception in advance, with welcome refreshments, and the honoree of the evening was brought in to meet with us. I knew little of Deen Mohammed, except that he is the leader of the main body of the Nation of Islam (from which Louis Farrakhan split off). So his father was Elijah Mohammed, who founded the Nation years ago in Chicago. Warith Deen Mohammed is a man entirely different from either of those. A Gandhi-like figure in his simplicity and demeanor, which was deferring and self-effacing, he greeted the gathered people of all faiths and stripes with real warmth and apparently a total lack of enmity-consciousness. Next thing I knew, about fifteen of us, all of different persuasions, were called to sit on the platform, facing the congregation and behind the speaker's podium.

The whole program was a beautiful and striking one. First there was a dance-drama enacted by impoverished young boys and girls of India, entitled "EKTA, Unity," by a company called Manav Sadhna and Darpana Academy of Performing Arts. The act was long, and had episodes of Gandhi's life woven into it. The audience, which seemed to be at least fifty-percent Muslim, loved it. By now it was clear that I was expected to represent Hinduism and to offer a prayer! My good friend, Imam Plemon El-amin, who is the Atlanta representative of Mohammed, had not warned me of this; now he was beckoning to the Swami to give the first prayer. You know what we do in such circumstances; I did that, and out came the verse, "Sarve bhavantu sukhinah," with English translation, "May all beings be happy." And I sat down. The other clergymen followed: Sikh, Unity, Baha'i, New Thought, Islam, several kinds of Christians. There was music from an African-American choir.

Deen Mohammed, we learned from his introducer, is a world traveler and walks with kings, so to speak. A close friend of the Dalai Lama, he consults with the Pope, prime ministers and presidents, and is to be found in most of the councils of international interfaith activity. But this small, unpretentious man knows the value of brevity. Already the program was long, and he spoke quite to the point on the subject: The Meaning of Peace for Human Society as

Given in the Religion of Islam. You can imagine the content of that, representing what he feels to be the true spirit and message of his faith.

The audience was on its feet with applause. Call it charisma? If so, very subtle indeed. The most remarkable part of the affair to me was the obvious admiration and love for the man on the part of the Dean of Morehouse College. Mohammed was presented with an engraved Award, and a portrait of him (very well done, I thought) was unveiled, for mounting in the College gallery. All this, together with the thundering postlude of the mighty organ just behind us, raised the hair on my head, and the feeling of inspiration carried on to the next day.

—Swami Yogeshananda

Contributors

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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.