Editorial

A Call to Love and Respect

In Vedantic tradition, Nature is regarded in different ways. As in the West, Nature is often regarded as she—Prakriti, the Cosmic Power of God, creating, preserving, destroying the universe. To the jnani, she is Maya, the cosmic illusion to be overcome. To the bhakta, she is Mother, nourishing and guiding us, giving liberation to those who seek it. To the karma-yogi, she is the field of action. To the illumined seer she is God manifest in all forms. But she is always respected, never regarded with carelessness or contempt, never to be used and abused.

In the presence of great natural beauty, human beings spontaneously feel a sense of awe and wonder. Ordinary activities and preoccupations are transcended, even if only briefly. We get a glimpse of something sublime, something ennobling. This response, documented in early cave paintings, is an important part of what it means to be human. It is an occasion, a stimulus, a great call for the human mind to look beyond the ordinary, to seek meaning and fulfillment.

Hunter/gatherer cultures developed an intimate sense of the interdependence of all life and a respect for all living beings. With the coming of agriculture, nature was seen as something to be manipulated, subdued. Modern technology has exaggerated this tendency, to our great peril. Only now, when our precious planet is rapidly being fouled and stripped bare out of greed for short-term gain, and in order to feed, clothe and house the ever-increasing human population—only now are we realizing the need to turn and to return to the wisdom of indigenous cultures and world mystical traditions, to respect, to love, to protect, to see Nature as part of the divine, to see worlds, oceans, mountains, living beings as sisters and brothers.

This sense of interrelatedness is being confirmed and strengthened daily by discoveries in scientific fields. But human selfishness and craving for immediate gratification compete with the knowledge and understanding of both science and spirituality. Vedanta, along with other spiritual traditions, can contribute not only a worldview that is reverential and protective toward our threatened environment. It can also contribute practices and disciplines which enable humans to overcome the greed, lust and selfishness which blind us to the larger picture, blind us to the threat to our survival on this garden planet, blind us to our spiritual potential and to the beauty and sublimity of the universe around us.

—John Schlenck

Vedanta and Nature

M. Ram Murty

In his second lecture on Practical Vedanta, Swami Vivekananda relates a story contained in the Chandogya Upanishad. There it is told that Satyakama goes to a teacher for self-knowledge. Instead of giving him instruction, the teacher gives him four hundred lean, weak cows to take care of and sends him to the forest. He tells him to return only when the number is increased to a thousand. So Satyakama goes and after a few years, he hears a big bull in the herd saying to him, "We are a thousand now; take us back to your teacher. I will teach you a little of Brahman. . . The four cardinal points are four parts of Brahman. Fire will also teach you something of Brahman." When Satyakama made a fire in the evening, he heard it say, "The earth is a portion of Brahman. The sky and the heaven are portions of it. The ocean is a part of Brahman." And so on it went. Satyakama was learning from the nature around him of the universal truth.

External Suggestion Evokes Internal Awakening

This story implies that spiritual knowledge is within us, but a suggestion is needed to bring it out. That suggestion is provided by nature, by external stimulus. Yet, this will not take effect unless the mind is first silenced through some form of creative work. In the case of Satyakama, it was taking care of four hundred cows.

In his lecture titled "The Cosmos," Swami Vivekananda writes:

> The flowers that we see all around are beautiful, beautiful is the rising of the morning sun, beautiful are the variegated hues of nature. The whole universe is beautiful and man has been enjoying it since his appearance on earth. Sublime and awe-inspiring are the mountains, the gigantic rushing rivers rolling toward the sea, the trackless deserts, the infinite ocean, the starry heavens; all these are awe-inspiring, sublime and beautiful indeed. The whole mass of existence which we call nature has been acting on the human mind from time immemorial. (*Complete Works*, II: 203)

A recurring theme found in the early Upanishads is the attempt to gain a cosmic perspective of the world we inhabit. Most of the time, our vision is narrow, limited to the small circle we live in. In these early writings, the authors attempt to give us a vaster dimension of things. "The sun is part of Brahman. The moon is part of Brahman and so is the lightning." In fact, the word "Brahman" is derived from the Sanskrit word "Brihi," which means that which is vast and expansive.

The essential goal of this teaching is the transformation of life by revealing its meaning. On this point, Swami Vivekananda writes:

> The things they were worshiping such as the fire, the sun, the moon, and so forth, ... form the subject of the stories which explain them and give them a higher meaning. . . The fire which was merely a material fire before, in which to make oblations, assumed a new aspect, and became the Lord. The earth became transformed, the sun, the moon, the stars, the lightning, everything became transformed and deified. . . The theme of Vedanta is to see the Lord in everything, to see things in their real nature, not as they appear to be. (*CW*, II: 312)

The Upanishad continues by expanding on this theme: "The essence of the beings is the earth. The essence of earth is water. The essence of water is plants. The essence of plants is a person." The gist of this line of thought is the ecological link between the human being and nature. The essence of the plants is a person since it is the human being who must take care of the environment. "One should meditate on the rains," says the Chandogya, "as well as the waters, the seasons, the animals, the vital airs and the life force in all things." In fact, many of the Upanishads emphasize this ecological interdependence and this awareness has given rise to the notion of the earth as Mother. The ancients saw the earth as a living thing and they tried to maintain this awareness constantly as a form of meditation.

The Gaia Hypothesis

Recently, this image has re-emerged in scientific circles. The exploration of the planets and the search for extra-terrestrial life has forced the scientists to ask the question, What is life? Shockingly, science has found itself in the same radical position as did Galileo four centuries ago, when he had experimental proof that the earth was orbiting around the sun. Even though we cannot perceive any movement, the image was that we were all on spaceship earth and that it was whirling in space. But the conclusions of some modern scientists are even more stunning. The earth is a living thing, a biological organism in which, we, the human species, the animals, the continents, the seas, the mountains, and the atmosphere are all vital parts. This is the celebrated "Gaia hypothesis" of modern ecology, named after the Greek Earth goddess.

In his compelling account of the theory in *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, James Lovelock writes:

> I first became interested in the possibility of the terrestrial atmosphere being a biological ensemble, rather than a mere catalogue of gases, when testing the theory that an analysis of the chemical composition of a planetary atmosphere would reveal the

> presence or absence of life. Our experiments confirmed the theory and at the same time convinced us that the composition of the Earth's atmosphere was so curious and incompatible a mixture that it could not possibly have arisen or persisted by chance. Almost everything about it seemed to violate the rules of equilibrium chemistry, yet amidst apparent disorder relatively constant and favourable conditions for life were somehow maintained. When the unexpected occurs and cannot be explained as an accidental happening, it is worth seeking a rational explanation. . . We shall therefore examine the atmosphere in much the same way a physiologist might examine the contents of the blood, to see what function it serves in maintaining the living creature of which it is a part.[1]

The Sun—Power and Symbol

Thus, the earth is found to be a living organism manipulating the atmosphere so as to maintain and sustain life. In this, it was known since ancient times that the sun plays a vital role. As is well-known, the sun sustains all life on this planet in many ways. First, it gives light and heat, and in quantitative terms, transmits to the earth 50 billion megawatt hours of power every second. Next, it provides the ordered energy for the biochemical process known as photosynthesis. This refers to the production of new organic substances such as sugars from carbon dioxide and water by the action of light on the chlorophyll in green plant cells. Without the sunlight, this cycle of life regeneration would not be. Though the ancient cultures may not have been aware of the precise mathematical formula governing this process, they were certainly aware of some form of symbiosis of life on the planet and the sun. Thus, attempts have been made to gain and maintain this awareness.

One of the greatest prayers in the Vedic literature is the Gayatri mantra, which begins with a proclamation of the glory of the sun. Not only is the sun a sustainer of life, but it is transmuted here into a powerful psychological symbol. The sun becomes a symbol of knowledge and understanding, and in fact, signifies the Supreme Being. “May that Supreme Being fill us with understanding” is the appeal of the Gayatri mantra. Since ancient times, sages have saluted the sun with this mantra and tried to bring this awareness into their daily consciousness.

In fact, the sun is a powerful symbol that was known to everyone. But it became transfigured, deified in this way. Indeed, the sun animates all the

1. James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 69.

existence on this planet and solar system. Without the sun, no life would exist for life revolves around light. As the ancient sages meditated on the glory of the sun, sang its praises, they began to see its powerful psychological significance. It has a psychic counterpart: the pure awareness within. Just as the sun illumines all the objects on this planet and we cannot perceive anything until light is reflected off of it, so also, in the mental realm, the light of pure awareness must shine upon thoughts, ideas and sensations, for us to perceive them. The sun animates everything from afar, having no direct involvement in the various ecological, biological and physico-chemical processes, but being necessary in order for these to take place. Similarly, pure awareness is the condition for everthing that is. The sages discovered the substratum of all manifestation. In fact, before anything is perceived, it is pure awareness first, it is Brahman first.

In his essay, "The Atman," Swami Vivekananda explains this as follows:

> There is but one Existence, the Infinite, the Ever-blessed One. In that Existence, we dream all these various dreams. It is the Atman, beyond all, the Infinite, beyond the known, beyond the knowable; in and through That, we see the universe. It is the only Reality. It is this table. It is the audience before me; It is the wall; It is everything minus the name and form. Take away the form of the table, take away the name; what remains is It. The Vedantist does not call It either He or She—these are fictions, delusions of the human brain. . . There is neither nature, nor God, nor the universe, only that one Infinite Existence, out of which, through name and form, all these are manufactured. (*CW*, II: 248-249)

The Ocean: Power and Symbol

Even though human existence on this planet is largely confined to the continents, it is largely the role played by the oceans in the ecological cycle that preserves the biological life on the planet. In fact, the earth is mostly three-fourths ocean and more than half of the total mass of organic matter of the planet is to be found in the oceans. Here again, the sun plays a vital role energizing freely floating cells near the ocean surface.

Lovelock explains this cycle as follows:

> [In the ocean] life is freed from the limitations of gravity and the pasture is three-dimensional. The primary living forms that capture the energy of the sun and turn it into food and oxygen by the process known as photosynthesis, thus energizing the entire ocean, are freely floating cells, in contrast to the ground-anchored photosynthesizing plants on land. Trees are neither found nor needed in the sea and there are no grazing herbivores, but only

> large grazing carnivores - the whales which feed by sweeping up the myriads of minute shrimp-like crustaceans known as krill.'[2]

Thus the sequence of the life cycle begins with the fragile organisms living near the ocean surface, the phytoplankton and the microscopic flora that are imperceptible to the naked eye.

In the Vedantic literature the symbol of the sea is employed in various ways. First it is a symbol of vastness and the source of life. "The essence of the earth is water," the Chandogya declares. Modern science confirms that without the ocean, life on earth would never have begun. And without the ocean's sustaining role, the life cycle on the planet would quickly come to an end.

As Vedantic literature developed, the sea was transformed into a psychological symbol in a message of universal tolerance: "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so also the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."

The Depths of the Mind

Later, bodies of water became symbols for the mind: "the ocean of thought," "the lake of the mind."

In Raja Yoga, Swami Vivekananda explains:

> The bottom of a lake we cannot see, because its surface is covered with ripples. It is only possible for us to catch a glimpse of the bottom, when the ripples have subsided, and the water is calm. If the water is muddy or agitated all the time, the bottom will not be seen. If it is clear, and there are no waves, we shall see the bottom. The bottom of the lake is our own true Self; the lake is the Chitta and the waves the Vrittis. (*CW*, I: 202)

One consequence of the use of this image to denote mind is the element of the unknown it implies. We do not know what lurks at the bottom of the ocean's depths. Nor do we seem to know what lies below the surface. This symbolism and explanation conveys an image of the human being as merely something tossed about by the waves of the ocean, as a victim of his own psychic contents. Sometimes knowing the psychic contents does not seem to help at all. Confronting it seems to be even worse because the ocean is much stronger than we are. So what is the solution? It is interesting that the ocean in Vedantic literature is also used as a symbol for universal energy and this gives us some consolation.

2. Ibid., p. 93.

In Raja Yoga, Swami Vivekananda writes:

> In an ocean there are huge waves, like mountains, then smaller waves and still smaller, down to little bubbles, but back of all there is the infinite ocean. The bubble is connected with the infinite ocean at one end, and the huge wave at the other end. So, one may be a gigantic man, and another a little bubble, but each is connected with the infinite ocean of energy, which is the common birthright of every animal that exists. Wherever there is life, the storehouse of infinite energy is behind it. (*CW*, I: 156)

In Sri Ramakrishna's life, we see the image of the ocean transmuted to the image of the Divine Mother. The Divine Mother is Universal Consciousness. It is dark, because it is unknown. However, it can be befriended as Sri Ramakrishna did. The ancients saw everything as living and the planet as a living being. Mother Earth is part of the Divine Mother.

And some modern scientists, in their formulation of the Gaia hypothesis, have come to the same understanding. They have hypothesized that Nature is a living thing, and even Planet Earth, with its oceans, the seemingly inanimate mountains and continents, meets all the criteria for what we would call life. Even those who do not accept the Gaia hypothesis agree that nature cannot be exploited recklessly without disturbing the ecological cycle.

We Are Satyakama—Stewards of the Living Earth

The shocking awareness is that *we are Satyakama*, given the task here to take care of the living earth. The creative task in front of us is that we should ensure the growth of the planet and its resources, not deplete them. We should vitalize the atmosphere and the oceans, not pollute them or cause the extinction of many species. By thus taking care of our environment, we find that it will teach us, and give us a higher awareness of life. We will realize Brahman.

The Gaia hypothesis of modern ecology may soon become a scientific fact, and we may find ourselves turning to a new form of "Mother Earth" worship. The new rituals are not some esoteric ceremonies but simply a growing awareness of our symbiotic interactions with the rivers, oceans, lands and the atmosphere. This awareness will manifest itself in care and respect for the environment. The new ritual is really a change in our outlook. Lovelock writes:

> The Gaia hypothesis is for those who like to walk or simply stand and stare, to wonder about the Earth and the life it bears, and to speculate about the consequences of our own presence here. It is an alternative to that pessimistic view which sees nature as a primitive force to be subdued and conquered. It is also an

> alternative to that equally depressing picture of our planet as a demented spaceship, forever travelling, driverless, purposeless, around an inner circle of the sun.[3]

With further penetrating research, science may confirm that the earth is intelligent. As difficult as it is to define "life," so also is it to define "intelligence." Yet one can infer it from manifestation. Intelligence, of course, can be graded and one can speak of it at various levels. At the rudimentary level, intelligence is used for survival. Using this criterion, some modern ecologists consider the earth itself to be intelligent.

In ancient times, the forces of nature were thought of as intelligent forces. So there was a rain god, a wind god, a sun god, a river god, a sea god and so forth. Since ancient times, these symbols acted as powerful stimuli for the human brain and awakened it to inquiry. External nature pointed to internal nature. And all of these natural forces embodied in the sun and the ocean were fused into a single force of universal energy.

All manifestation is the percolation of this energy through the network of organisms. This awareness gives us a new relationship with nature, a new relationship with Gaia, of which we are a part. By taking care of it, we will see that it will take care of us. Our survival is intertwined. ❑

Thou art the fire, thou art the sun, thou art the air,
Thou art the moon, thou art the starry firmament,
Thou art Brahman Supreme:
Thou art the waters—thou, the creator of all!

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

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

—Svetasvatara Upanishad, IV: 2–4

3. Ibid, p. 12.

I Married This Forest

(adapted from Srimad Bhagavatam)

Hiranyagarbha

I was wandering through the forest with my friends one night. Suddenly one of them whispered "Look!" as he stared at something far away.

A beautiful woman was dancing under the moon. One of us said quietly what the rest of us were thinking: "Is she crazy? Is that how she dances without music?"

Thinking she must be cold and lost, I threw my shawl at her feet.

"Please," I called out, "please feel free to put on my shawl." The woman answered, "I already wear the sky. What part of the sky would I put it over?"

I said, "May we call you Sister?"

She said, "Everything in this universe does."

I asked her, "Where do you live?"

She said, "In you."

I said, "Why don't you cover your body?"

She said, "My body is everywhere. You've been walking through it all night."

We said, "Could we worship with you?"

She answered, "Just be kind to a living thing; then you'll be worshipping me."

I said, "Can we offer you anything?"

She said, "Say the names of God and depend on no one."

I said, "Tell us, Sister: You roam the earth like a happy child. Only the moon sees you dance, but you don't seem lonely. How did you get this way? Did you have a teacher?"

She said, "I looked for a teacher of universal wisdom, but I was told it's not something a girl is interested in.

"I was told that the holy don't associate with women, and that I was a woman. And to go home and be a good wife.

"So I came here and married this forest. And it taught me.

"From the earth, I learned that being walked over doesn't have to make you change your own path.

"From the hillside, I learned to give shelter to all.

“From the wind, I learned to move among the people and things of this world without getting stuck to them.

“No matter how many people look up, there is only one sky, being looked at by one self.

“From water, I learned to have the same sweetness for all.

“Fire, my bright and powerful ally, showed me that I don’t need a shape of my own. Now I take all that’s thrown at me without letting it change me for long.

“The moon is the same from night to night, but it looks different. Youth and age are appearances, too.

“From the sun, I learned that whatever sees itself reflected in a pond has seen only a pond and a reflection.

“From the python, I learned to be strong and take what comes to me, and not go seeking someone else’s life.

“From the ocean, I learned that wisdom is calm, unknowably deep, and hard to cross. With your mind in truth, your heart neither overflows its banks nor shrinks back like the river after a flood.

“From the moth, I learned what can happen if you follow your bliss.

“Like the bee gathering sweetness from different flowers, I took the inner drop of truth from each scripture. There’s good and bad everywhere, but the bee uses only the sweet stuff.

“A dead fish was kind enough to remind me: there are hooks under the bait.

“A hawk was carrying a morsel of flesh in her mouth. What a prize she’d won. She was very popular. When she finally dropped the flesh, all the other birds left her alone.

“The arrowmaker thinks of nothing but arrows while he’s making them. In order to penetrate the inner and outer worlds and be nothing but the self, one must be like that: sit firmly, keep your energy in one place, shake off your laziness, and gather the scattered forces of yourself.

“The snake lives just as happily in a hole made by others. Has wisdom ever stayed in one place? Those who’ve found it don’t talk very much, for they talk only when their words will help others—and words don’t usually do that.

“A spider, out of her body, weaves thread for her projects, then takes it all back into herself. The Lord spins the universe, then takes it all back.

“In order to satisfy the body, one marries it off, builds it a house, and surrounds it with money. And then it sits there, waiting for its husband—death.

"From my own body, which remembers being born but doesn't realize it will die, I've learned that I am separate from it. With its help . . .

. . . may I see face-to-face the eternal truth that has been teaching me through this endless forest of names and forms." ❑

John Muir

Cliff Johnson

Once when he was questioned about the apparent division between God and nature, Swami Brahmananda remarked, "Show me that line which separates matter and spirit." It was a reply that would have met the staunch approval of John Muir, America's best-known naturalist, founder of the Sierra Club, and savior of some of our most glorious national parks. In fact, so impressed was Muir with his first view of Yosemite Valley, after climbing Cathedral Rock, that he said it was the first time he had been to church. He later recorded that sitting atop that craggy dome, he had the experience of doors opening, and a view of a "transcendent realm."

John Muir was born on April 21, 1838 in Dunbar, Scotland in a household largely dominated by his father, Daniel Muir, a harsh disciplinarian and strict fundamentalist, who worked his family from dawn on their relatively prosperous farm in Wisconsin, to where the family had moved in 1849. From an early age John became an avid observer of nature, enthralled with the sounds and sights of the world around him. He was also an inventor of several mechanical devices, including a wooden clock that kept accurate time–and even of an apparatus that turned him out of bed before dawn.

Accident — Recovery — Resolve

Then, in 1867, while working in a carriage shop he was to have an accident that would change the course of his life. A sharp tool entered his eye, blinding him. The other eye, in sympathetic response, also became blind. In a short time, Muir recovered his sight but he resolved to use the blessing of his recovery to engage in a wider study of the world around him. He walked 1,000 miles to the Gulf of Mexico, then traveled on to Cuba, and eventually to California. It was here he was to find the environment that would shape his destiny.

His first view of the Sierra Nevada mountains and the Yosemite Valley overwhelmed him. Later he would write: "It seemed to me the Sierra should

be called not the Nevada or the Snowy Range, but the Range of Light. . . the most divinely beautiful of all the mountain chains I have ever seen." At times Muir was appalled by the lack of respect that he witnessed in visitors to his "range of light." He saw fishermen baiting their hooks in "the holiest of temples ignoring God himself as he preaches sublime water and stone sermons."

In 1874, Muir began to publish his observations in a series of articles, "Studies in the Sierra," which launched his career as a writer. In later years, he would write 300 articles and ten books, recounting his travels and love affair with nature. He prepared himself for this career by travels to Alaska in 1879, where he discovered Glacier Bay, and in later years to Australia, South America, Africa, Japan, China, and again and again to his beloved Sierra Nevada.

Every Hidden Cell Is Throbbing with Life and Music

It was the Sierra, in particular, which evoked Muir's most pronounced religious fervor. And perhaps it is appropriate here to ask, "What was John Muir's religion?" Just who this God was that Muir celebrated is unclear. Undoubtedly, his flat rejection of his father's stern religious views influenced him greatly (they did not speak to one another for the last twenty years of his father's life), and, as one writer describes it, "there is a pagan or Dionysian element" that invades his intoxication with the world he embraced. This is how he describes one such experience:

> A few minutes ago every tree was excited, bowing to the roaring storm, waving, swirling, tossing their branches in glorious enthusiasm like worship. But though to the outer ear these trees are now silent, their songs never cease. Every hidden cell is throbbing with music and life, every fiber thrilling like harp strings, while incense is ever flowing from the balsam bells and leaves. No wonder the hills and groves were God's first temples, and the more they are cut down and hewn into cathedrals and churches, the farther off and dimmer seems the Lord himself.

From the many accounts of those who knew John Muir, and, in many cases, those who had the good fortune to accompany him on his treks into the mountains, we get a picture of a man who was wholly at ease among the trees and mountains he loved. This was particularly true of his affection, which bordered on obsession, for trees. He traveled to China, Siberia, the Himalayas and Australia to acquaint himself with their numerous varieties. Once when Muir was invited to visit Peking at the invitation of President Theodore Roosevelt, who held a deep affection for him, he recoiled at the idea of visiting that "hot, dusty city." Even more important, he replied, "There aren't any trees there."

Nor did Muir fail to appreciate God's lesser creations. The wonderful variety and beauty of the flowers of the Sierra stirred him deeply. He sought and admired each species and made careful notations regarding them. To him every flower was "a window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator." How similar this is to Swami Vivekananda's assertion that the opening of every flower is an offering to God.

Mirror Reflecting the Creator

To Muir the wilderness was the purest reflection of God's beauty and the most natural place to consummate the longings of the soul. He often wrote of how "clean" nature was, so unlike the things created by men. The shrine where he worshiped most was his beloved Sierra. The mountains awakened in him something akin to a spiritual experience:

> These blessed mountains are so compactly filled with God's beauty [that] the whole body seems to feel beauty when exposed to it as it feels the campfire or sunshine, entering not by the eyes alone, but equally through all one's flesh like radiant heat, making a passionate ecstatic pleasure-glow note explainable. One's body seems homogeneous throughout, sound as a crystal.

Some mention should also be made of Muir's contribution to the National Park System. It was not only his deep affection for the Sierra, the Grand Canyon, Mount Rainier, and other areas but his ability to communicate the necessity for their preservation that saved them for posterity. And it was his influence over President Theodore Roosevelt, also a great lover of nature, that stimulated the political process necessary to save them. Roosevelt noted in his autobiography that "of all the people in the world [Muir] was the one with whom it was best worthwhile to see the Yosemite." Muir was also close friends with Emerson, whom he tried to get to camp out with him, but the philosopher was then too old to make the trip.

John Muir died in 1914 after engaging in a life that perhaps made more tangible contributions to our understanding of and admiration for the natural world than any other naturalist. Why? Because more than anyone he had the God-given capacity to observe in nature that "window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator." It will now be up to us, in a world threatened with environmental disaster, to cleanse the lens of our own perceptions and act on them. If we are fortunate, we will look through that window and see the world as John Muir saw it. ❑

The Monk and the Mountains: Akhandananda in the Himalayas

Steven F. Walker

I read once that St. Bernard of Clairvaux was traveling along the shore of the Lake of Geneva, with a breathtaking view of the Alps unfolding on the other side of the lake. His response, however, to this wonderful sight was to keep his eyes on the ground the whole time in order not to be distracted from the thought of God by the beauty of the mountains! Another great medieval saint, Thomas à Kempis, urged the sincere monastic to stay within his cloister, and not to wander about: "What can you see elsewhere that you cannot see here? Look at the sky, the earth, and all the elements, for of these all things are made. What can you see anywhere under the sun that can endure for long? Were you to see all things at present in existence spread out before your eyes, what would it be but an unprofitable vision?" (*The Imitation of Christ*, chapter 20) So much for traveling to the mountains!

By contrast, Jeremy Bernstein, writing recently about his first trip to Nepal in 1967, had this to report:

> I will never forget our first view of the Himalayan chain. There appeared on the horizon what I, at first, took to be clouds. . . . But they did not move. They floated, still as castles, in the sky. It finally dawned on me that these were mountains. I had never seen mountains like this. Despite years and years of reading about the Himalayas, I had had no idea that this was what they really looked like—giant, serrated castles of snow and rock soaring into the sky. To this day, I get goose bumps thinking about that first view. It is a feeling that comes back every time—now many—I first see these mountains again.[1]

Not Necessary for a Spiritual Aspirant to Denigrate Nature's Beauty

It is hard to know what to conclude from a comparison of these passages. Should we perhaps conclude, since so many of us today are more likely to share Jeremy Bernstein's reaction to the beauty of the world than that of St. Bernard or Thomas à Kempis, that the modern mind has come to appreciate the beauty of nature, but it has lost in the process an ecstatic feeling for the spirit and the intense desire to go beyond all things created in order to see God that characterized the mystics of the Middle Ages?

1. Jeremy Bernstein, *In the Himalayas* (New York: Lyons and Burford, 1996), xii-xiii.

Fortunately, from the example of Swami Akhandananda, it does not seem necessary to denigrate the beauty of nature while on the path to God vision. Akhandananda wandered in the remotest recesses of the Himalayas for several years after the death of his master Sri Ramakrishna. I don't know if anyone was ever more enthusiastic about their beauty than he was. His account of his journeys, *In the Lap of the Himalayas*, is full of rapturous descriptions of the mountain scenery. But I will quote instead from his biography (by Swami Annadananda, 1993), which includes many extracts from the swami's private correspondence. A typically precise but enthusiastic description runs as follows:

> The ice-clad mountain tops stand in magnificent contrast to the dark green deodars at their feet. The banks at places are of shining white rock and look like natural altars. Their unearthly beauty is impossible to describe, and I lost myself completely amidst this wealth of beauty.[2]

There are many such passages in his writings. After one of them he added the following remark:

> The same mountain expresses at times a variety of moods, or sometimes, none at all. For the liberation of man, whose powers of intellect are so limited, Brahman Itself, though devoid of name and form and without qualities, has assumed the form of the mountain to open man's eyes to His extraordinary nature and powers.[3]

I cannot think of a better example of a Vedantic appreciation of the spiritual value of the beauty of Nature.

The Play of Purusa and Prakriti

Thus we see that Swami Akhandananda's ecstatic appreciation of the beauty of the mountains was accompanied by an equally ecstatic sense of their mystical nature, of their potential to awaken spiritual ideas in the meditative mind. One moonlit night while in deep meditation in an isolated spot in the Himalayas he had a vision of Sri Ramakrishna, a vision which he described as follows:

> All of a sudden, I felt the Master behind me standing with one end of his dhoti over his shoulder. "Look here," he said, "there is the play of Purusa and Prakriti, without beginning or end. The Himalaya is the Purusa and its flora, fruits, and flowers is Prakriti. This is what they call the dance of Prakriti on Purusa." Then the

2. Annadananda, Swami, *Swami Akhandananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1993), p. 42.

3. Ibid., p. 48.

Master sang a song about this divine dance with his hand on my shoulder. I can't describe in what unalloyed joy I spent that night![4]

The poet Wordsworth, whom Swami Tripurananda admires as a true precursor of Vedantic thought in England, expressed a similar approach to Nature in the following lines from his well-known poem "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," in which he evokes how, in his later years, his earlier unreflective passion for nature was transformed into a sense of the presence within natural beauty of spiritual meaning and inspiration:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains . . . ❑

Challenge

I like the peace of high places. In the stillness, your pack frame creaks, and the snow complains beneath your feet. No one talks much; you're working too hard. Sometimes an icefall breaks away from a rock cliff and rumbles and roars down the pitch. The mountaineer is in his element at such times, and part of it is the realization that danger lurks everywhere, that you have put your life on the line.

I went to Mount Everest because of the challenge. I wanted to see if I could stand on top. You don't really conquer such a mountain. You conquer yourself. You overcome the sickness and everything else—your pains, aches, fears—to reach the summit. Man is better off when he meets a challenge like this. He needs challenges; that's the nature of him.

—James W. Whittaker, first American
to reach the summit of Mt. Everest

4. Ibid., p. 57.

From the High Sierras to Carnival

Edith D. Tipple

In Webster's dictionary "to vacate" is defined "to make vacant, to quit the occupancy of" and "vacation" as "a stated interval in a round of duties, the time when a post has no occupant." But a void, as pleasant as it may be in quitting the clash of hurly-burly activity, is no recipe for refreshment. Rest from the pressure of ordinary activity does not in itself promise renewed vigor. Something positive is necessarily involved in revitalization. Actually, its promise is the only reasonable explanation for wishing to vacate one's life's course.

Quieting and Gentling

Many years ago we used to rent a cabin on Wood's Lake at Mammoth Lakes, California. The Lodge facilities were at 9,000 feet and at the foot of the John Muir Wilderness Trail, which rose sharply behind to over 11,000 feet. Across the lake from our cabin was a huge rock similar to Yosemite's Half Dome. It reminded me of the King of the Himalayas, especially when it loomed into the heavens on a full moon night. The purity of the high country behind resounded, as it were, in a silent Om, though the activity of Mother Nature, of Prakriti, was in sharp contrast: the splash of a falls, the sharp crack of a boulder cut loose to tumble to the bottom of a ravine, the life force of blooded creatures shying from us human impostors into their world. We found ourselves quieting and gentling as we were able to absorb the silently shifting patterns of nature.

But duty was not finished, so the resurgence of energy we found by being in-filled with the majesty of the High Sierras enabled us to re-enter our life's stream. Another year was born.

Dedication to One Goal

Carnival in Rio! Such a degenerate, bacchanalian reputation it has—but oh, what a glorious feast of joy and dedication to one goal it is. From seven o'clock at night until seven or eight o'clock the next morning the huge boulevard on which it is held is filled with dancers swirling in brilliant costumes, with exquisitely-disciplined percussion bands, with huge and fabulous flower floats. As far as the eye can see in both directions is one undulating line of color moving slowly, inexorably on, and all the individual samba groups' songs are woven into one splendid symphony. Visually and audibly it is overwhelmingly beautiful. It is emotionally overwhelming to

know that these poor people have so little—they live in shanty towns clinging to the sides of hills, with very little hope—but they spend an entire year planning the next theme, writing the next samba tune, designing the next costume, building the next float, all to come together in a twelve-hour explosion of exuberant joy.

Such a visual and audible extravaganza takes us completely out of the monotonous pattern of our daily lives, into a different universe of sense cognition. The samba rhythm of Nataraja's dance becomes one with the heart beat of our own basic being and is available to be tapped at any time for the experience of fundamental joy.

The Real Vacation

Yet all the wonderful experiences of memorable vacations are really only distractions, just as our daily duties and pleasures are distractions—from the real intent of our lives: the experience of God. If we were able to keep our minds in God, whoever or whatever we may believe that to be, what earthly need would there be to vacate that occupation? The real vacation will be when we can keep our minds united there. Until then, we can nevertheless attempt to live an intentional journey from which we need not escape. To do this, our minds must every moment remain constant in the thought of the Highest. Such practice alone makes it possible to vacate the pressures of this relative life. ❑

Buddhist Vespers at Nilambi

Columns of ants ascend and descend the post on my verandah.
As they approach from opposite directions, they pause to shake hands
and then continue on their busy way
(though what they are busy about I have no idea).
Far below, hidden by trees, children play terribly serious games.
I hear their excited cries, muted by distance.
Doleful cows hopelessly lament their age-old bondage.

Another twilight a few centuries ago
in a Japanese mountain hermitage
two old poets are drinking plum wine.
Water splashes from a fountain.
Bamboo shoots are silhouetted against the darkening sky.
They are writing poems and exchanging them, laughing silently.
There is no way to explain their happiness.

Well, there is no wine here,
but the smell of wood smoke is intoxicating
as the cooks stir up the fire for evening tea.
I take the path to the kitchen and sit by the door,
watching barefoot or sandaled yogis pass wordlessly by:
Don Quixote, Mary Magdalene, Allen Ginsberg--I have names for them all.
They are ants. They are children. They are cows. They are Buddhas.

In the meditation hall as twilight yields to candlelight,
I am filled with an immense and melancholy joy
at the passing of another day. Namo Buddhaya.

May I be filled with loving kindness.
May I be well.
May I be peaceful and at ease.

May those who begat us, guarded us, guided us
be free from suffering and at peace.
May they forgive our thoughtless ingratitude.
May we forgive our thoughtless ingratitude.

May schoolmates, teammates, partners, friendly neighbors,
devoted dogs and spiritual friends live free from affliction and at peace.

May postal clerks, bank clerks, checkout clerks, ticket-takers, barbers
all be happy, free from hostility and distress.

May those who tried to hinder our work,
misunderstood us, turned others against us,
deceived us, ridiculed us—may they be free from spite and anger.
May we be free from anger and spite. May the vindictive become
forgiving. May we forgive the vindictive.

May all be well.
May all be wise.
May all be peaceful.
May all sentient beings be well, wise and peaceful.

—William B. Buchanan

The Natural World—
Moving Beyond Our Moralities

Drew Leder

Since time immemorial people have projected their moral codes onto a Czar of the heavens. So many have uttered some variant on the following: "I will strike you down in the name of God, because you offend his Righteousness and call down His anger, of which I am the instrument."

Jesus takes a different tack: "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Matthew, 5:44-45) Here Jesus is saying something like: "Get off it. God is not a cosmic nag, holding the same self-righteous prejudices you do." The evidence? Simply look to the character of the world God made. There are sun and rain. Both are necessary for the crops to flourish. But they are not offered or withheld according to moral worth, as many of us would do if masters of the universe. The righteous farmer is not given a bit more sunshine to ripen his grapes, and a timelier downpour when drought threatens, while the sinner's crops are left to parch. Anyone who thinks this is how the universe works is a poor observer of the natural world, and hence a poor theologian.

In the words of the Chinese Tao Te Ching:

> The great Tao flows everywhere, both to the left and to the right.
> The ten thousand things depend upon it; it holds nothing back.
> It fulfills its purpose silently and makes no claim.
>
> TTC 34 (Feng, English)

Not even a claim that we must be good.

Enough of Conditional Love

When will we come to terms with this scandal – that Creation, bountiful and balanced as it may be, is not about "good" and "bad"? What a scandal, but also what a relief. Haven't we all had enough of conditional love, which our well-meaning parents lavished or withheld depending on their judgment of our conduct? "You were so polite, let me give you a kiss!" Or, "You were rude, march right to your room!" Hey, its part of the parent's job to use a bit of Pavlovian conditioning (kisses, banishment) to elicit civilized conduct. But can we reduce the Creator of one hundred billion trillion galaxies to an eat-your-peas prig?

Many religious teachers have tried to do so: eat your (moral) peas, and you can have infinite dessert (heaven); don't and you'll be sent to your room forever (hell). Thankfully, the universe is more subtle and less judgmental than this. The skies, rivers, and mountains don't watch our every move, and punish the least transgression.

True, our actions have natural consequences. Certain modes of being (like kindness, acceptance, humility) are more in harmony with the Tao, and thus help us to flourish in our lives. Conversely, "That which goes against the Tao comes to an early end." (TTC 30) Behave selfishly, as if only you existed, and you'll likely find yourself, at a crucial juncture, frustrated and friendless. (That, after all, is what our parents sought to teach us.) But such consequences need not be thought of as a punishment meted out by God. It's the natural outcome of breaking with a universe in which all things are interconnected. It would be like a plant separating off from the surrounding ecosystem (I want to do things my way!) and growing sickly as a result.

So nature has much to teach us on how to live. One primary lesson is to have a bountiful heart, rather than one shriveled by self-righteousness. After all, sun and rain give themselves equally to saint and sinner. It is a spirit to which we can aspire. ❑

Oneness with the Universe

> I wish to maintain here, that through these rites (the spiritual practices of the Oglala Lakota Sioux) a three-fold peace was established. The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of individuals when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its Powers, and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells Wakan-Tanka, and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us. This is the real Peace, and the others are but reflections of this. The second peace is that which is made between two individuals, and the third is that which is made between two nations. But above all you should understand that there can never be peace between nations until there is first known that true peace which, as I have often said, is within the souls of people.
>
> —Nicholas Black Elk, Native American spiritual leader, 1947

Evolution and Vedanta

William A. Conrad

If one were to ask, "What are the most important discoveries of the last two centuries?," any short list would include Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. The theory is confirmed by an interlocking web of experimentally determined mutually consistent facts from biology, geology, meteorology, genetics and ecology. For example, yeast and humans have many genes in common showing that humans and yeast shared a common ancestor many hundreds of millions of years ago. Darwin's theory has been credited with the secularization of science in the 19th century since he did not attribute any action to non-material, supernatural powers or forces. This secularization has posed large problems for Judeo-Christian-Islamic religions, causing fundamental changes in the attitudes of rational adherents. But what about Vedanta? How has Vedanta responded to the challenge of evolution by natural selection? In this essay I shall first address what evolution is and some of the facts confirming it. Then I shall consider the relation of these ideas to roughly comparable ones in Vedanta. For the first part, I shall follow the lead of Stephen Jay Gould, Ernst Mayr and Paul Davies. For the second part, I shall follow Swami Vivekananda and other Vedantic exponents. It is hoped that the juxtaposition of these ideas will serve as a stimulus to informed thought rather than as a solution of problems.

Species are Interbreeding Populations, Not Types

Perhaps the most crucial concept Darwin introduced is that species are populations of individuals with different characteristics, not types for which all individuals are basically the same. In this population view, statistical averages are among the important measures defining a species. In the earlier typological view of species, there was a certain fixed, unchanging essence, and any variations were considered accidental and irrelevant. Take the species of seagulls as example. The bird's wingspread has a certain average length. I read recently that after a severe storm, all the gulls who died had wingspreads significantly below or above the average, showing that the average wingspread is close to an optimal length. Following Mayr, the population of seagulls satisfies "the biological species concept (BSC): Species are groups of interbreeding populations that are reproductively isolated from other such groups. In other words, a species is a reproductive community. Its reproductive isolation is effected by so-called isolating mechanisms, that is, by properties of individuals that prevent (or make unsuccessful) the

interbreeding with individuals of other species."[1] There is no unvarying essence as in the typological species concept. Interbreeding of individuals is the key.

Now how do new species originate from older ones? Before we can address that question we have to ask how new individuals originate from older individuals who are their parents. In this day and age with the trumpeting of the deciphering of the human genome, it should be common knowledge that the propagation of individuals depends on their genes—"you are what your genes have made you"—as modified by the environment, of course. Obviously, children are different from parents, having half of their genes from each parent Incidentally, even a clone of anyone will not be identical to the donor of the nucleus of the cell because of random variations in the timing of the development of various organs. For example, the cloned cat CC has different fur markings from its donor. The genes propose, but random variations dispose of the results. A gene is a set of instructions for making proteins, which do the actual work of constructing the body. As Davies[2] notes, drawing a parallel to computers, genes are the software for running the protein hardware. The message of the gene is written in arrangements of molecules, what Schroedinger called an aperiodic crystal,[3] and which Watson and Crick showed to be a double helix. The arrangement of the molecules is both *random*, as it must be to contain maximum information, and *highly specific*, as it must be for that information to be biologically relevant. Note that this view of the building blocks of life could not have been proposed until the 20th century developed exquisitely sensitive methods of measurement and the ideas of computers. Every age uses its knowledge of the world to frame a theory of life.

How Evolution Began

The first known living creatures appeared about 3.5 billion years ago. They are bacteria, called prokaryotes (preceding nucleated cells). They have not changed much down to modern times. It has been estimated that bacteria outweigh all other forms of life and would probably continue to exist in protected regions under the earth even if all other forms of life were destroyed in some catastrophe. The bacteria developed genes for replication held loose inside a membrane, and many other features, such as cilia for

1. Ernst Mayr, *What Evolution Is* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 166.

2. Paul Davies, *The Fifth Miracle: The Search for the Origin and Meaning of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), p. 113.

3. Erwin Schroedinger, *What Is Life? And Other Scientific Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), p. 61.

locomotion. Since bacteria do not have sexual reproduction, they achieve diversity by lateral transfer of genes by means of a variety of devices.[4] This transfer is, shall we say, promiscuous and leads to a commonality among bacteria which makes it hard to construct neat branching trees of descent as in higher organisms. The next step in evolution came from a combination or symbiosis of two different types of bacteria into what is called a eukaryote, a much larger cell with a nucleus and specialized organs within the cell. As Mayr has pointed out, "The origin of the eukaryotes was arguably the most important event in the whole history of life on Earth. It made the origin of all the more complex organisms, plants, fungi, and animals possible."[5]

This means that all living things in nature are related to each other. Each being is an elaboration of the basic principles of order embodied in the prokaryotes such as e. coli and eukaryotes such as amoebae. These cells shuffled, combined and divided their genes into random variations. Variants that were better adapted to their environment were able to reproduce more successfully than their competitors, and their progeny thus crowded out others. A large part of adaptation is relating advantageously to other living things, so surviving populations form a mutually supporting web of life. Taking each being as a musical phrase, nature is a grand symphony in which even dissonance adds to the glory of the music. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." [Mark 4:9]

The Vedantic View

Now, then, what is the Vedantic view of evolution? According to Swami Vivekananda (*Complete Works* 5: 255), every evolution is preceded by an involution. The whole of the tree is present in the seed, its cause. The whole of the human being is present in that one protoplasm. Certainly he does not mean that the whole of the tree is physically present in the seed. As he notes (*CW* 2: 230), "You know by mathematical reasoning that the sum total of the energy that is displayed in the universe is the same throughout. You cannot take away one atom of matter or one foot-pound of force (energy).[6] You cannot add to the universe one atom of matter or one foot-pound of force (energy)." Thus the only thing that can be present in the seed is a non-material substance, which is also present in the parent tree. From the modern

4. However, not all types of bacteria exchange genes with other types of bacteria.

5. Mayr, p. 47.

6. Foot-pound is a unit of work or energy since pound is a unit of force and foot a unit of length. A force of one pound exerted through a distance of one foot does one foot-pound of work or energy. This error in the text should be noted in future editions of Swami Vivekananda's works.

standpoint, an evolutionist would say that non-material substance is the information in the genes of the seed. Swami Vivekananda could then ask the evolutionist: Does not this information come from the tree's parents and so on back to the first life form? How did information come into a formless universe?[7]

A physicist could chime in and point out that the universe immediately after the big bang was in near thermal equilibrium, almost uniform throughout as the cosmic microwave afterglow shows. However, a gas in equilibrium, uniformly distributed, has maximum entropy or minimum distinguishing characteristics (order) and therefore minimum information. But, if the gas cloud is big enough and slightly inhomogeneous, it will become unstable and start contracting under its own gravitational attraction. At a certain point, the thermonuclear fires at the center of the gas cloud or proto-star will be ignited and light at discrete wavelengths, i.e., ordered energy, will stream forth. This ordered source of energy from the gravitational instability of the gas cloud will power the development of life once photosynthesis starts and information in genes will accumulate.[8] To the query of how life starts, the present answer is: We don't know, but it did start as soon as conditions on the newly formed earth were hospitable, about 3.8 billion years ago.

Does Behavior Cause Evolutionary Change?

According to Swami Vivekananda the cause of evolution is desire. The animal wants to do something, but does not find the environment favorable, and therefore develops a new body. Who develops it? The animal itself, its will. (*CW*, 2:356) This analysis does not accord with Darwinian evolution as presently understood. Random changes in the genes cannot be directly caused by desire in the animal. Vivekananda's conception is similar to Lamarckian evolution in which the long neck of the giraffe is due to the effort of the protogiraffe to reach the highest leaves of the tree, i.e., the desire of the giraffe to reach higher is passed on to the next generation in a longer neck. Nevertheless, as Mayr points out:

> Even though this theory of inheritance is now refuted, evolutionists still believe, but for very different reasons, that behavior is important in evolution. A change in behavior, for instance, the adoption of a new food item or increased dispersal, is apt to set up

7. I would like to note that this question is completely uncharacteristic of Swami Vivekananda. He was familiar with the concept of conservation of energy, but seems to have been almost unaware of the concepts of ordered energy and its measure, entropy.

8. See Davies, pp. 63- 65 for a more complete description.

> new selection pressures and these may then lead to evolutionary changes. There are reasons to believe that behavioral shifts have been involved in most evolutionary innovations, hence the saying 'behavior is the pacemaker of evolution.' Any behavior that turns out to be of evolutionary significance is likely to be reinforced by the selection of genetic determinants for such behavior. The influence of behavior is called the Baldwin effect."[9]

Swami Vivekananda's view of evolutionary change because of desire can thus be considered as an anticipation of the Baldwin effect.

But Swami Vivekananda was really interested in spiritual, not physical, evolution. Continuing the quotation of the previous paragraph, "You have developed from the lowest amoeba. Continue to exercise your will and it will take you higher still. The will is almighty." One must be careful not to ignore the spiritual point of view assumed here. A given response to a particular environment will limit the direction of future evolution. There are constraints on physical development imposed by previous development. For example, the crossing of the passages for air and food at the glottis is a relic from our development over 600 million years ago from a worm-like animal that was too small to need separate respiratory and digestive paths. Spiritual development has its own analogous sets of constraints. Due to our tendency to act selfishly, the development of ethical virtues is a necessary constraint on any path of spiritual development. Vedanta is well aware of this need.

Striving for Perfection

Now what is the Vedantic view of evolution *par excellence*? Swami Vivekananda gave his opinion during a visit to a zoological garden in the following conversation with the superintendent of the zoo. (*CW* 7: 152)

> **Rambrahma Babu:** What is your opinion of the evolution theory of Darwin and the causes he has put forward for it?
>
> **Swamiji:** Taking for granted that Darwin is right, I cannot yet admit that it is the final conclusion about the causes of evolution.
>
> **Rambrahma Babu:** Did the ancient scholars of our country discuss this subject?
>
> **Swamiji:** The subject has been nicely discussed in the Samkhya Philosophy. I am of opinion that the conclusion of the ancient Indian philosophers is the last word on the causes of evolution.
>
> **Rambrahma Babu:** I shall be glad to hear of it, if it can be explained in a few words.

9. Op. cit., p. 136.

> **Swamiji:** You are certainly aware of the laws of struggle for existence, survival of the fittest, natural selection, and so forth, which have been held by the Western scholars to be the causes of elevating a lower species to a higher. But none of these has been advocated as the cause of that in the system of Patanjali. Patanjali holds that the transformation of one species into another is effected by the "in-filling of nature" {Sanskrit}. It is not that this is done by the constant struggle against obstacles. In my opinion, struggle and competition sometimes stand in the way of a being's attaining its perfection. If the evolution of an animal is effected by the destruction of a thousand others, then one must confess that this evolution is doing very little good to the world. Taking it for granted that it conduces to physical well-being, we cannot help admitting that it is a serious obstacle to spiritual development. According to the philosophers of our country, every being is a perfect Soul, and the diversity of evolution and manifestation of nature is simply due to the difference in the degree of manifestation of this Soul.

Clearly, Swami Vivekananda conceives of evolution as a striving for perfection, thus giving a direction to the process. This is called orthogenesis and is a teleological process, i.e., based on final goals. As Mayr points out, this type of theory was abandoned because no mechanism based on genetics could be found to drive a trend for perfection. Natural selection does not have a long term goal. This is shown by the fact that 99.99% of species have gone extinct. There is frequent change in direction of an evolutionary lineage, e.g., the middle ear bones of mammals are evolved bones of the jaw articulation in reptiles.

Evolution As Spiritual Development

But is there a way to see the striving for perfection as a viable theory of evolution? Swami Vivekananda already made this possible by tacitly changing the meaning of evolution from that of evolution of species to spiritual development, although his definition of evolution from lower to higher is not the modern one. Continuing the previous quotation,

> The moment the obstacles to the evolution and manifestation of nature are completely removed, the Soul manifests Itself perfectly. Whatever may happen in the lower strata of nature's evolutions, in the higher strata at any rate, it is not true that it is only by constantly struggling against obstacles that one has to go beyond them. Rather it is observed that there the obstacles give way and a greater manifestation of the Soul takes place through education and culture, through concentration and meditation, and above all through sacrifice.

In sum, the Vedantic view of evolution is from the standpoint of spiritual development, and it is very well adapted for this purpose. Just because it is so well adapted for spiritual purposes is no reason to assume either that Darwinian evolution is wrong or that Swami Vivekananda claimed it to be wrong.

Humans share with other social animals the inherited tendency to form groups of mutually supporting individuals. These ties of family, resource sharing, social rules and customs foster ingroup solidarity but also outgroup hostility. As human groups become larger and larger, developing into tribes and nations, making civilization possible through large directed efforts, outgroup hostiility develops in parallel on larger and larger scales, with increasingly destructive results.

Religions, from primitive times, have had both social and spiritual dimensions. The social dimension has tended to parallet the development of civilization, with larger and larger groups fostering both solidarity and hostility. The spiritual dimension, however, gives a way out of this dilemma. Great spiritual figures see beyond social divisions to a broader unity of all beings. For them, there is no outgroup; all belong to the ingroup. The challenge to humanity, especially in modern times, with the every-increasing power of technology to amplify tendencies toward both solidarity and hostility, is to bring the vision of these great religious figures into day-to-day practical life. Vedanta, with its acceptance of all religious traditions and its emphasis on the spiritual transformation of human life, can play an important role in furthering this evolution of attitude. ❑

Wrestling with September Eleventh

William Page

Shortly after the atrocities of September 11 last year, I was walking down the alley I live on talking to God. “Well, Lord, this is a hell of a mess,” I observed in my usual earthy way. “What do you want us to do about it?”

Instantly one word popped into my mind. It popped up so fast, and with such force, that for a fleeting moment I had the creepy feeling that God was actually answering.

The word was “Forgive.”

My initial shock was followed by outrage. “Come on, Lord, you’ve got to be kidding. Forgive those [impolite expressions deleted]? Why, we ought to track them down like the animals they are and rip out their hearts and lungs and feed them to wild packs of rabid leper dogs.”

Silence from on high, possibly induced by the ferocity of my response.

For almost a year now (at the time of writing), I’ve been wrestling with the question of how we ought to respond to the attacks of September 11. I’m sure other devotees have done the same. I’m also sure that other devotees have come up with better answers than mine, and that they’ve done it a lot faster. If you’re wondering why it's taken me so long to come up with an answer, it’s because (a) I’ve been wrestling with the problem only sporadically; (b) I haven’t been wrestling very hard; and (c) I’m slow.

I was raised a Christian, so it was only natural that the command to forgive should have popped into my mind. One of Christianity’s outstanding characteristics, which distinguishes it from all other religions, is its emphasis on forgiveness. “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone,” Jesus tells us (Mark 11:25). Once Simon Peter asked him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” (Matthew 18:21-22.)

Why Should We Forgive?

Why should we forgive? We should forgive out of gratitude to God for the great and overflowing love he has for us; because he wants us to have the same kind of love for himself and all his creatures; because he wants us to forgive; and because our forgiveness will please him. God loves us and forgives us, even when we don't deserve it; so we should love and forgive others, even when they don't deserve it. As God has done to us, so he wants us to do to others.

All of this is very noble and high-minded. Lots of people admire the ideal of forgiveness as an abstract principle. But most of them change their tune when confronted by an atrocity so monstrous that forgiveness seems impossible.

It requires no great moral heroism to assent to forgiveness as a general principle, or in cases where the sin is small. But if forgiveness cannot encompass great sins as well as small, it is hardly worthy of its name.

When we consider forgiving Hitler for the Holocaust, or Pol Pot for the Cambodian killing fields, or bin Laden for the World Trade Center conflagration, something deep within us rebels and says, "No, we cannot forgive this. This is too monstrous. This requires punishment. Call it justice or vengeance or whatever you like, but this is a sin that must be paid for."

If Good People Don't Stand Up and Fight. . .

It is our human nature that makes us think this way, and practical experience shows that such thinking, and the action that flows from it, makes sense. If the Allied Powers hadn't resisted Hitler during World War II, the world might now be languishing under Nazi domination. If good people don't stand up and fight evil, evil will crush them.

Turning the other cheek to an attacker is a noble ideal, but it makes sense only if your attacker is a sensitive soul who will be moved by your forbearance and repent. In the real world of insensitive souls who do not repent, an eye for an eye makes a lot more sense.

Unfortunately, this is the situation which Americans face. If we could be certain that the forces who attacked us would be moved by our forgiveness and stop their attacks, forgiveness might be a viable option. But this is not the case. The Al Qaeda organization has declared war on us, and is bound to attack us again and again, whether we forgive them or not.

Should we forgive a person who is trying to kill us if we know for sure that he will keep trying to kill us even after we forgive him? Jesus does not deal with this question. The Bhagavad Gita deals with it, though; and here is where Vedantists have an advantage over Christians.

Arjuna's situation at the beginning of the Gita is not too far removed from our own. A battle is about to begin, and Arjuna is a warrior. If he throws down his bow and refuses to fight, the Kauravas will take advantage of his magnanimity and annihilate him and his relatives and all their armies. The practical consequences of inaction alone should suffice to persuade Arjuna to fight.

Considering all this, I concluded that the proper response to the September 11 attacks was exactly the one which the United States pursued: a

massive and sustained assault on the perpetrators in their Afghan strongholds and wherever we might find them.

Even so, something nagged at my brain. What about forgiveness? Was it then just a lofty ideal, to be admired but not practiced? Was Jesus' advice irrelevant in a world consumed by violence?

Just the other night I was sitting outdoors at a streetside food stall, reading a book and eating my usual supper of rice and curry, augmented by an insight-inducing bottle of beer. Without any forethought or preamble at all, another thunderbolt suddenly struck me. The first one had been prompted by a question; this one came right out of the blue. (Actually, it came out of the black, because it was night.)

This one neatly sidestepped all sorts of questions and shifted the focus considerably: "Spiritual aspirants have to forgive."

Well, I thought, whatever part of my brain was crafting these little gems, it certainly knew how to be concise. The first dictum had been a single word; this one was only five. But it elaborated on its predecessor and made things clearer.

Arjuna's Dilemma Gives Us the Key

The next morning, I reconsidered the whole problem. Arjuna's dilemma gives us the key to the solution. Arjuna is a warrior. His caste duty, his role in society, requires him to fight. But what about those who are not warriors? If Arjuna had been a Brahmin, or a Vaisya, or a Sudra, it is unlikely that Krishna would have advised him to fight.

So when we ask the question, "What should we do in reponse to the Al-Qa'eda attacks?," we need to specify what we mean by "we." As a nation, the obvious answer is that we must fight back. If we are soldiers, of course we must fight back, and fight as hard as we can.

But I am not a soldier, and neither are most of the readers of this journal. Whatever our occupations may be, we are all spiritual aspirants. This imposes special obligations upon us. Our goal in life is to realize God. In pursuit of this goal, we have to do our best to overcome our baser instincts and rise to higher ones.

Some of the idealistic reasons why we ought to forgive are listed near the beginning of this article. There is also the consideration that the highest religious teachings are the ones that are richest in love and mercy. The ideal of forgiveness is rich in both.

But spiritual aspirants must forgive for practical as well as idealistic reasons. If we do not forgive, our minds are likely to be agitated by unwholesome emotions like anger, hatred, and a thirst for revenge. These all come from the ego, and will impede our spiritual progress.

Cleaning Up Our House

If you invite a king to visit you, first you have to clean up your house. If you want beautiful flowers to grow in your garden, first you have to uproot all the weeds. God does not usually manifest himself in a mind cluttered with hatred, anger, and vindictiveness. He does not expect us to be perfect, but if we want to realize him, we owe it to him to clean up our house and weed our garden as best we can.

In short, we who are spiritual aspirants have to forgive for our own good. Forgiveness is often difficult, but the effort can be part of our spiritual training. If we cannot forgive, we should at least try. And if we have lost friends and relatives in the September 11 disasters, and forgiveness is impossible for us, we can take comfort in the certain knowledge that God, who is all forgiveness, will forgive us for being unable to forgive. ❑

Vedanta in Brief: How Would You Say It?

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

What Remains

Paul Hourihan

[Reprinted by permission of www.VedanticShoresPress.com]

If each religion was deprived of those elements in its creed and practice that separate it from other religions, then what remains—that is Vedanta. For example: all religions teach the perfection of self-sacrifice as the highest virtue. Vedanta takes its stand on this at the outset. So all religions resemble one another in this respect. They stress the virtue of renunciation, service to others, relating to others as though to one's own self, as though we had in common the same life, the same destiny and the same self … which is a simple but adequate rendering of the prime truth of Vedanta.

Vedanta is without creed or dogma or ritual or doctrine. Vedanta is the mysticism of spirituality. It is what is left over when all the differences that separate religions have been eliminated.

Vedanta is the essence of religion. Vedanta is the truth embedded in the heart of every religion. Vedanta is the Godhead that makes every religion divine.

Vedanta is the chief means whereby each religion will have the incentive to practice tolerance and acceptance toward all other faiths.

The One-Page Tao

James Grob

[Sent to AV as an attempt to express "the simplicity of reality."]

The Tao Is!

As unmanifest (without form), it is totally empty of all characteristics that can be thought or stated, and therefore infinitely full. As manifest (with form), it is the universe—ever developing to higher levels of consciousness, like a bud opening.

Everything that is has Tao as its source, center, and goal!

Tao is the totality of all that is—and we, being individual parts of Tao's manifestation, are not-two/not one with this totality (Tao, Godhead, Suchness, Creative Spirit). Nothing that is can ever be separated from Tao.

Consciousness is another name for Tao. All consciousness is seamlessly one—and yet each one of us who shares in consciousness is uniquely different from every other—creating a rich and marvelous diversity within Oneness.

Consciousness is not within our bodies. Rather, our body, and everything else in the universe, is within our consciousness. This can be known experientially.

As we gradually recognize the reality of what we are (through the practice of awareness within inner stillness), we begin to experience mountains, oceans, starts and galaxies, flowers, birds, frogs (and their splashes in the pond), and other people as truly existing within our consciousness.

When anything is known in this simple, direct, unfiltered way we see the radiance of infinity shining through it like sunlight through a stained glass window.

With this nondual awareness of reality, we are immersed in the infinitely compassionate fullness of divine emptiness and lovingly involved in creative and supportive attention to the everpresent light of that glory shining through, and being, all creatures.

Yes, you can swallow mountains and drink oceans—totally glorious, but also very ordinary, for what can be more ordinary than everything that is just being what it is! ❑

Book Review

Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time
by Marcus Borg
Harper, San Francisco
140 pp. cloth $13.00 1994

Those American Vedantists who grew up as Christians might be surprised by the work of modern-day Christian scholars. One of my favorites is Marcus Borg, a professor who has done a great deal to bridge the gap between the university and ordinary church-goers. Borg is not just a scholar, but a sincere Christian devotee who regularly attends an Episcopal church. (His wife is a priest). Borg belongs to a group of about 200 biblical experts called the Jesus Seminar. Since 1985, they have been meeting for the purpose of trying to determine the words, deeds, and nature of the historical Jesus.

Liberal and even moderate biblical scholars begin with the premise that the Bible was written by men (and perhaps a few women) who, however inspired they may have been, had normal human limitations. They were products of a particular community within a particular culture in a particular historical period. Some writers hoped to influence their readers to accept a social or political or theological viewpoint similar to their own. As such, it becomes the task of the scholar to interpret the Bible for modern-day readers, separating "fact" from mythology.

For Borg, the most important thing to know about Jesus is that he was a "spirit person," or what Vedantists call an illumined soul. Borg defines spirit persons as "people who have vivid and frequent subjective experiences of another level or dimension of reality" [p. 32]. Their experiences are noetic; that is, they involve a knowing as well as a feeling of the sacred.

Before becoming a Knower of God, Jesus practiced intense sadhana. We know from the Christian Gospels that he fasted and prayed for hours at a time, sometimes all night long. Borg surmises that Jesus most likely practiced a form of meditation which was also known to some other Jews of his time. They were instructed to "still their hearts before God." He had visions, including a vision at his baptism in which, like Ezekiel, he saw "the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove" (e.g. Mk. 1:10). That vision was followed by a series of visions in the wilderness in what is generally called the temptation narrative, but which, says Borg, "a cultural anthropologist would recognize immediately as a wilderness ordeal or vision quest" [p. 35]. Jews in the time of Jesus ordinarily looked upon God as a rather remote figure; however Jesus himself called God "Abba," which is usually translated "Father," but is really closer to "Daddy" or "Papa."

In passages such as Matthew 7:29, we read that Jesus "spoke with authority." We may easily guess that, like Sri Ramakrishna, Jesus' disciples felt him to be authoritative not because of his book learning, but because of his personal experience of the Divine. As Borg says, "Jesus was not simply a person who believed strongly in God, but one who knew God" [p. 37]. Jesus' followers felt a divine presence around him that was tangible and contagious.

Readers of *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* will notice that Borg never speaks of Jesus as unique in history, as Christians have traditionally claimed. The historical Jesus is presented as one of a number of mediators of the sacred who appear in different times and places. Modern-day scholars tend to see Jesus as distinctive rather than unique. Borg would not even say that he looks upon the "pre-Easter" Jesus as God, although it is not incorrect to look upon the post-resurrection Christ as God. Some Christians think that if Jesus was only one of a number of mediators of the sacred, it takes away from his credibility. Marcus Borg does not agree. He says [p. 37]:

> To speak personally, when the truth of the Christian tradition was tied to the claim that the revelation of God was found only in this tradition (and in the antecedent Jewish tradition), there came a time when its truth became for me highly unlikely. What are the chances that God would speak only to and through this particular group of people (who just happened to be our group of people)? Indeed, I can put it more strongly: it became impossible for me to believe this. However, I find the image of Jesus as a spirit person highly credible. There really are people like this—and Jesus was one of them. There really are experiences of the sacred, of the numinous, of God—and Jesus was one for whom God was an experiential reality.

—Sr. Eleanor Francis

Letter

Depth and Quality

I have just finished reading *American Vedantist, Vol. 8, No. 1, Spring 2002*. I have read cover to cover and felt extremely happy and forward looking while going through the pages.

I wish all your issues are of the same depth and quality.

With heartfelt felicitations to you all,

Yours affectionately,

Swami Atmasthananda
(Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission)

Contributors

WILLIAM BUCHANAN, a retired English professor, lives at the Vivekananda Retreat in Ganges Township, Michigan.

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.

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.

JAMES GROB, a recently retired reading specialist and district administator for public schools, lives in Issaquah, Washington.

HIRANYAGARBHA (P. SHNEIDRE) has been a member of the Vedanta Society of Southern California for 30 years. He writes folk operas on religious themes and makes his living as a real-estate inspector.

PAUL HOURIHAN, a writer and teacher of world mysticism, was a student of Vedanta for most of his adult life. Since his death last year, his writings, in different genres, are in process of publication by Vedantic Shores Press.

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

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

M. RAM MURTY, Professor of Mathematics at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, became interested in Vedanta while a student at MIT in 1978. He is associated with Vedanta societies in Boston, Providence and Toronto.

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.

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

STEVEN F. WALKER has been associated with Vedanta centers in Boston and New York for nearly thirty-five years. He teaches comparative literature at Rutgers University.