

Editorial

Mahayana Vedanta

Some five or six hundred years after Gautama Buddha, a new school emerged with a new interpretation of his life and teaching, emphasizing compassion. The new school called itself “Mahayana: The Great Vehicle.” A central tenet of this new interpretation was that the highest spiritual seekers are not satisfied with their own liberation. They forego their own entry into nirvana, returning again and again to help and inspire others to gain freedom.

Sri Ramakrishna articulated a similar thought when he scolded Narendranath (later Swami Vivekananda) for wanting to remain immersed in the bliss of his own realization. He chided his disciple, saying, “I thought you were a huge banyan tree who would give shelter to countless seekers.” He also encouraged him to serve human beings as images of God (worshipping “Jiva as Shiva”). Vivekananda did embrace this “larger vehicle,” not only in his life but in his teaching. He persuaded his brother disciples to be concerned with more than their own personal enlightenment. He enshrined the larger view in the motto of the order he founded: “For the liberation of the soul and for the good of the world.”

Vivekananda, while basing his teaching on Advaita (nondual) Vedanta, enlarged that teaching to include Bhaktiyoga, Rajayoga and Karmayoga and placed these alternate paths on an equal footing with the Jnanayoga of classical Advaita. This enlarged view was grounded in what he saw in Sri Ramakrishna’s life and what he himself had realized. A further enlargement, exemplified in Ramakrishna’s life and teaching, was the acceptance of all religions as paths to the same spiritual enlightenment.

This enlargement was not foreign to earlier Hinduism, where it had found voice as early as the Rig Veda and was given a more detailed expression in the Bhagavad Gita. But in medieval Hinduism each school argued for its own supremacy, and other points of view, if they were recognized, were given an inferior status.

For followers of Ramakrishna Vedanta, it is received wisdom that all religions are true paths, that all yogas are equally valid means to reach enlightenment. The shining examples of Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Vivekananda, Gauri Ma and other disciples of Ramakrishna are there to point to the “Mahayana” ideal of delaying one’s own final liberation until others are liberated.

But how does this received wisdom play out in our lives as spiritual aspirants? Is it no more than a creed to be assented to? Do we merely admire these great teachers, or do we aspire to emulate them? And what about the underlying Advaita philosophy? What is our understanding of it? Is saying

“The world is unreal” a helpful way of putting it to our contemporaries? It might seem to imply lack of social concern or compassion.

The following articles stimulate these questions. Plato’s spirituality, like Vedanta, is based on a teacher/disciple relationship leading to individual enlightenment; yet we know that Plato was very much concerned with creating an ideal society based on spiritual philosophy. We talk of nondualism and honor Shankara, but how much do we actually know of his thought? We say Sri Ramakrishna is an avatar, but what do we mean by that? We talk of compassion and honor Vivekananda, but do we undertake to serve God in fellow devotees who are suffering? We say “All religions are true,” but do we participate at all in hands-on interfaith encounters?

We encourage our readers to engage in discussion of these questions, and to send us their thoughts.

—The Editors

Always Free!

Even in my illness,
even in this acute suffering,
I find my way.

I cannot be separated:
I am part of the Universal Activity—
taking form after form,
O Great Mystery!

This me, both within
and beyond what is seen;
this me, intensely suffering
and yet always free!

O beloved egoless self;
O Universal Mother!

I reawaken to you
my source,
to be healed and
restored to Trust.

—Judith, Hermit of Sarada

Philosophy As a Spiritual Practice

The Platonic Example

Beatrice Bruteau

It must be understood from the outset that philosophy does not mean an academic subject taught in universities, in which one learns what doctrines were held by which people, defended by what arguments. To ‘philosophize’ means at least to struggle with real issues for oneself and to try to come to some resolution about them on the basis of which one can live. But in the highest sense, the sense in which philosophy is a sadhana by which one can become a siddha, “philosophy” means direct insight into the ultimate reality and the style of life that leads to that and that follows from that. Philosophy means to see for yourself that Brahman is Atman—Selfhood—and that Atman is Consciousness, and that you yourself are exactly That, the Ground, the foundational, transcendent, and universal Reality.

There are guides to practicing philosophizing in all cultures and traditions, and in the West most of what we have inherited stems from Plato, who learned it from the life of Socrates. Socrates embodied the Truth that he tried to provoke other people to see. It isn’t something that can be told, because it transcends all form and all language. But one can live by it. Socrates himself felt that he was only a “gadfly” or at best a “midwife.” But those he assists have themselves to move under the provocation and give birth to their own vision. Plato also said that it was an unconscious admission of ignorance to think that you could put it into words and write it down. But together with a guide you can practice it as a spiritual path, and if you have the gift for it and if you have a skillful teacher and if you patiently persevere over a long period of time, at some point you will break through and see. The True, the Beautiful, the Good, Being Itself will suddenly flash upon you and establish itself irrevocably in you.

Preparing the Ground

Kenneth M. Sayre, who is a professor of philosophy in the University of Notre Dame and a Plato specialist, has written a book devoted to this very topic, how the quest of “philosophic understanding (or knowledge)” is a spiritual practice on the guru-chela model. It is entitled *Plato’s Literary Garden*¹ because Plato used the image of preparing the ground (which has to have a natural fertility), sowing the seeds, nurturing the seedlings, recognizing the time of fruition, and enjoying the fruit in its spontaneous season. This

1. University of Notre Dame Press, 1995, paperback ed. 2002, 292 pages, extensive notes, several indices.

article is intended in part, not exactly as a *review* of this fine book, but more as a *preview*. Or an introduction to it, exposing the kinds of questions it raises and the kinds of insights and inspirations it offers. I liked it very much and heartily recommend it to Vedantists eager to find parallels in the Western tradition.

In Sayre's presentation, Plato watched Socrates working as a philosophical "horticulturalist," and experienced the method himself, first as a "seedling" and later as a "gardener." He then composed helps for aspiring and willing philosophers in the form of *dialogues* in order to approximate the method by which the teacher selects, corrects, encourages, provokes, and finally withdraws from the student.

The process begins, we are told in the *Phaedrus*, with the selection of a "suitable soul" [276E6: *psyche* *prosekousan*]. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates confesses that he has the gift of knowing what kind of seed to throw on what kind of soil [149E3-4]. One may be reminded of the New Testament parable of the four kinds of soil on which seed was cast with quite different results [Luke 8]: enthusiasts with no staying power, those who are impeded by worldly cares and distractions, as well as those who never start at all. But those souls which are "good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance." Had the evangelist read Plato? The parable suggests that those who finally find "the secrets of the kingdom of God" may be comparatively few. Plato's Seventh Letter [341E] indicates that he also believed the natural ability for philosophy was rare. In the Bhagavad Gita Sri Krishna says that out of thousands few seek the Highest, and of those that seek only a few succeed in finding [7:3].

The Training

All traditions agree that the suitable student must have "an honest and good heart," and that a great deal of "patient endurance" will be needed. A strict regimen is ordered, requiring "hard work" and "dedication." The training begins with the *elenchus*, a "well-disposed cross-examination." This is for purification of the soul of the learner, clearing away the underbrush before the seed can be planted. False opinions, unexamined beliefs, poor methods of reaching judgments, and so on, have to be exposed and the reasons for their unworthiness made clear. Much of the "living together" [*sunousia*] of the student and the teacher consists of this work, which is conducted by means of conversation.

Sowing the seed takes place by introducing topics for analysis and development. The student learns not only how to inquire into a particular question but how to think about *knowing* itself. How do you know when you have come to the right conclusion? How is it that you are able to recognize a necessary conclusion as *necessary*? The matter of the conclusion follows from

the premises, but how are you aware of the “following”? What is the mind that it can do such things? While the teacher continues to “feed” the student puzzles to make sure that deeper and deeper questions come up to be wrestled with, the student must become seriously entangled with these issues and work on them alone also.

The student begins to make “many beautiful discoveries” without being led step by step by the teacher. The discoveries come from deep within the budding philosopher and cause great joy. This occasions further deepening: How, why, do I feel this joy? The insight into the truth of the idea is beautiful, is good. And I, even I, am capable of perceiving the beautiful idea, a beautiful course of reasoning leading not only to the necessity of the conclusion but to the realization that something ultimate has been touched. One has seen Beauty as such, Goodness. How could I do that unless I were somehow of that quality, myself? Not only in some particular instance of the truth or the value, but *in-itself*. So, do I not only participate in the Good and the Beautiful, but in this transcendence of particularity as well? One is no longer seeing a conclusion from premises, but one is seeing the premises, or the ideas of which any such premises can be formed, or the ability to form and the ability to see, and coming to awareness of being a being that does that.

“Knowing” by Being

Plato says one has realized immortality and is inhabited by the good spirit—that is, rejoices in being all that one can and ought to be in all goodness [*Phaedrus* 277A3], fulfilling the potentiality of the human and being loved by God. Later, the neo-platonist Plotinus will say that one has realized oneself as the Unlimited. By inquiring into knowing, one goes beyond knowing by reasoning or knowing by concepts into “knowing” by being. When this shift from thinking about to knowing to being happens, Plato says, “it is suddenly generated in the soul like a torchlight kindled by a leaping flame” and “straightway becomes self-sustaining” [*Seventh Letter*, 341D]. One has arrived at that which makes all else possible and real. When that moment nears, the teacher backs softly away. When that moment has arrived, there is no more teacher, no more student and no more process.

This whole matter is also shown very effectively in the Oxherding Pictures, famous Zen icons tracing the stages of the spiritual life from the search for the Ox (truth, reality, enlightenment, one’s true self) through sighting, taming, riding the Ox home, to sitting quietly alone, the Ox itself having disappeared. Oneself also disappears then and the culmination is depicted in three frames: total emptiness, the Vast Awareness of the transcendence; the beautiful garden, that eudaimonia of which Plato spoke, plus the perception of the relative world as the flip side of the transcendent emptiness; and the return to the community with “bliss bestowing hands,” the life of the philosopher after gaining the wisdom sought, now loved and shared. □

A Western Approach to Shankara

John Schlenck

The February 2002 issue of *Psychoanalytic Review* (published in New York) contained an unusual essay on Advaita Vedanta by Luther Askeland, an independent scholar, writer and teacher living in Minnesota. The essay was entitled, “Origin and Nature of the Great Illusion: An Introduction to and Translation of Shankara’s Analysis of Transference.” The author afterward sent the essay to *American Vedantist*, hoping to make his work available to a Vedantic audience. After careful consideration, the editors of *AV* concluded that the article was both too long and too academic to reprint in this journal, which is oriented more toward practical spirituality.

At the same time, the essay’s approach to Advaita, through psychoanalysis and evolution, was intriguing. *AV*’s parent organization, Vedanta West Communications, and *AV* itself, are dedicated to expressions of Vedanta in Western cultural terms. From this standpoint, it seemed appropriate to give our readers at least a report of Askeland’s work. Those who wish to study further may obtain copies of the original article from the author. Write to South Fork Hermitage, Rt. 2, Box 164, Mabel, MN 55954, or call (507) 864-7930.

Echoes in Psychoanalysis

In a prefatory note,¹ Stanley M. Leavy, M.D., mentions his surprise in learning from Askeland that Shankara (788-820 C.E.) had anticipated a basic concept of psychoanalysis: transference (usually translated in Vedantic texts as superimposition)—“the perception in one thing of some other thing.” Leavy goes on to say, “It is of no less interest that. . . Askeland. . . has evoked in his reading of Shankara [other] concepts. . . that have become. . . intrinsic to contemporary psychoanalytic theory. . . the metaphoric nature of. . . ‘verbal perception’ and. . . binary opposition [pairs of opposites]. . . Shankara seems to have anticipated the recognition that linguistic structure goes far to determine our grasp of reality. . .”

Askeland begins his essay by reminding us that we perceive and understand the world and ourselves by means of a “biological wonder”—the human mind. We do not perceive reality directly. This leads into Shankara’s radical thesis: that “*all* the mind’s customary operations. . . all commonsensical, philosophical, religious, ethical, and scientific interrogations and specifications of where and who we are, of how things are, of what is

1. *Psychoanalytic Review*, February 2002 (New York, Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis), pp. 125-126.

happening and why. . . have, as their genesis and starting point, error: a profound, beginningless confusion.” (p. 127) Shankara identifies this error as *adhyasa*—projecting, transferring, superimposing something familiar onto what actually *is*. The classic illustration is mistaking a piece of rope, seen in semi-darkness, for a snake. Momentarily, we actually *see* a snake. We transfer the snake onto the rope. Since the snake has no real existence, all investigations regarding the snake—is it alive or dead, what kind of snake it is— “will rest on, will *be* ‘illusion.’” (p. 128)

To help us understand this thesis, Askeland suggests that we consider a primitive life form: the planarian (a class of aquatic flatworms). The planarian experiences the world through an eyespot than can distinguish only degrees of light and darkness in a two-dimensional gray field. Through this instrument it locates safety on the dark undersides of stones. We can’t truly imagine the world as seen by the planarian, but we can understand that its perception is not a copy of reality. Scientifically we know that light is the movement in space of particles or waves and is colorless. What we *call* “light” is “a creation and function of nervous systems. ‘Perception’ is not a uniquely privileged event which unveils reality, but simply one more marvelous. . . event within reality—a navigational device. . . a biological and zoological happening.” (p. 128)

The Evolution of Perception

Here Askeland points out that, in contrast to the attention given to the evolution of biological forms and behavior, evolution of *perception* has received much less study and very little reflection. Just as the myriad forms of life have evolved from single living cells, so perception has evolved from simple distinction of light and darkness through the multifaceted perceptions of the bee’s compound eye, the sound universe of undersea fish and mammals, the color and scent-filled world of the dog, to the incredibly complex multi-sensual world of primates. To this, humans have added something entirely new: *verbal* perception— “‘seeing,’ as it were, by means of questions and answers consisting of verbal signs.” In human beings, the primitive gray field has “metamorphosed into. . . things, abstractions, events, acts. . . all that takes place. . . in time and three-dimensional space. . . the vast and familiar ‘the world.’” (p. 129)

But in two basic ways human perception is “eerily” identical to that of the planarian. First, it is organized around dualities, pairs of opposites. The planarian experiences only dark and light. Our polarities are more complex and numerous, but the same organizing principle holds sway. To hot and cold, sweet and sour, sweet- and foul-smelling, we have added, through language, good and bad, life and death, personal and impersonal, present and absent, is and is not. Above all, we divide our experience into two great

sectors: the intimate, immediately known “self” and the “other”—everything “out there.”

Second, our world is like the planarian’s . . . because they are made from the same ‘material.’ That selfsame stuff, the substance of each, is “perception.” Primitive nervous systems have evolved into complex brains, yet both are nervous tissue. In the same way, in both the primitive two-dimensional “gray field” of the planarian and the vast, two-sectored human world, “the stuff of both, perception by means of signs, is just the same. (pp. 130-131)

We Are More Than Our Perceptions

Some Buddhists claim that perception is the only reality. Are they right? Vedanta urges us to return to the original question: what does the planarian—or the human being—know of reality? And what *is* a planarian? What *is* a human being? Are they not immeasurably more than their perceptions? And is not *the world as it is*—what is “out there” much greater than any perception of it?

“In relation to its perception, the planarian is the perceiver, the ‘seer’.” Simply defining it as an “aquatic organism” or a “free-swimming flatworm” does not disclose its reality as *perceiver*. Those definitions exist only in the unplanarian realm of human verbal perception and are alien to the planarian’s own realm.

In this way we move toward Shankara’s position that Seer and seen, Consciousness and objects of Consciousness, the “I” and the “not-I” are essentially different. (Then is Shankara a dualist after all? Wait. This is not the end of his thought.)

The Perceiver immensely transcends its perception; but when we try to pin it down, it eludes us. As soon as we think we have perceived it, it becomes an object and is no longer the perceiver. After all attempts, the Perceiver remains unperceived.

What about the “out there” within which the planarian finds itself? The planarian’s perception is not a direct glimpse, not even a copy of reality. It is only an event *within* a complex biological occurrence. At best, it is an interpretation of reality. The gray patch it perceives is not and cannot be reality. Now we begin to understand Shankara’s insistence that reality—“out there”—is just as incompatible with being perceived as the Perceiver is.

The Triad: Getting It Straight

And so we arrive at three elements: the Perceiver (Atman); that which is perceived, “the world”; and reality (Brahman). Shankara brings his concept of “transference” or “superimposition” to bear on this more complex

framework. He insists that we not regard distinct things as if they were the same. Our thought about the triad must be consistent with the underlying relations between its three different aspects. We must understand “the clearcut distinction between Consciousness and reality on the one hand, and the perceived objects of Consciousness—‘the world’—on the other.” All sensory and verbal perception belong to the biology of perception and are grounded in animal life.

Considered from a post-Darwinian perspective, perception, whether sensory or verbal, is an adaptation, a kind of orientation or mapping instrument highly useful to life. Its functioning requires the emergence of that elusive something we call awareness or consciousness. Its best functioning requires that the awareness of the animal in question be directed exclusively and intently toward the particular perceptions which belong to its repertoire. . . . Natural processes of evolution produce a kind of consciousness which is wholly [unaware of] itself and [of] reality—thereby it is [able] to focus exclusively on the *objects* of Consciousness, on perception. . . . It induces animal consciousness to absolutize its perceptions as the totality of “what is.” Thus the very biology of perception is biased in favor of perception, and of error and confusion. That bias is implanted in animal life as instinct. (pp. 134-135)

Like the planarian, we absolutize our perceptions. “‘What is’ is filled for us by our particular sensory-verbal field, by perception. ‘What is’ becomes . . . ‘the world’. . . ‘the universe’. . . ‘heaven and earth.’”

The Touch of Pure Being

But now and then we are “dimly aware of awareness itself, of the Perceiver, the Witness, the ‘I.’ We sense it momentarily as . . . apart from ‘the world,’ beyond measure, description, and conception. . . . a motionless, beginningless, inextinguishable flame. . . . We are. . . also. . . obscurely aware of something else—of ‘reality,’ . . . which is established, as it were, on the other side of ‘the world’ and is just as distinct and remote from it. It, too . . . is wholly beyond the reach and grasp of verbal signs. . . . Brushing against it, the ‘I’ knows, momentarily, the touch of pure being.” (pp. 135-136)

Can it be said that we are truly oblivious of ourselves and of reality? Do we not think and speak in terms of “I” and “the world out there?” Yes, but we project onto reality all our sense and verbal perceptions; we make the “world out there” appear to be composed of a multiplicity of objects; and we project onto the “I” the limitations of our individual existence, making the self into an object of consciousness, creating the illusion that I am a particular person of a particular age living in particular circumstances.

When we stop projecting, we recognize that “‘I’ am something to which definition, description, and verbal delimitation do not apply; something which may witness, but cannot possibly be contained by, ‘space’ and ‘time.’” Similarly, when we stop overlaying, transferring onto, the other sector—the “out there,” Brahman—our sense and verbal perceptions, we find that it is “indescribable, immeasurable, partless, uncontained; it is as it were the dissolution of biology and of the world into mystery and divinity.” (p. 140)

Finally, when projection, transference, is altogether stopped, we no longer distinguish Brahman from Atman, pure reality from pure consciousness. There are no longer “one” and “two.” This is pure nonduality.

How Does All This Help Us?

At this point we step back from Askeland’s presentation of Shankara’s philosophy and ask: Does this sophisticated analysis help the practicing spiritual aspirant? Is it not after all a conceptual structure like other conceptual structures?

Yes, it certainly is a conceptual structure, and it will not help all types of spiritual aspirants, at least not in all stages of spiritual life. But, like other major systems of spiritual thought, Shankara’s system has stood the test of time and has helped many seekers reach enlightenment. We must honor Shankara at least for this. Further, on a purely philosophical level, Shankara’s thought has rarely been equalled in its uncompromising intellectual rigor. For spiritual aspirants of an intellectual bent, it can serve as a spur to spiritual endeavor in a way that less rigorous systems cannot. If only for this reason, we should honor both Shankara and those who strive to communicate his philosophy.

Even for aspirants who follow other paths, contemplation of these thoughts can be helpful in loosening attachment to what we ordinarily perceive. If we remember that biological instinct prejudices our view *toward* objects of sense and *away from* self-analysis, we may pause and think before chasing what Ramakrishna called the “red toys” of the world. □

Some Thoughts on Sri Ramakrishna's Avatarhood

William Page

I have long been bothered by the claim that Sri Ramakrishna was an avatar (incarnation) of God. That he was an unusual person is beyond dispute. Some have called him a madman, others a religious genius; the young Narendra thought he was a monomaniac. The variety of moods he exhibited make it difficult to categorize him. Christopher Isherwood settled for calling him a phenomenon.

At first glance, to call him an avatar seems simplistic. Faced with the complexity of his personality, we slap a label on it. "What to make of Sri Ramakrishna?" we ask ourselves. "He was such an enigma! Well, he must have been an avatar." Problem solved; now we can go home and watch TV.

Once we have labeled him an avatar, there is no need to inquire further into the mystery of his personality, no need to seek to understand him more deeply. Labeling tends to preclude understanding rather than enhance it.

Getting Beyond Labels

If I understand the theory of avatarhood correctly, it goes something like this: God (usually Vishnu) looks down from on high and says, "Well, the world is a mess. Time to straighten it out. Let me incarnate myself." He causes a human embryo to come into being within a woman's womb, and he himself descends into flesh to become that embryo's soul.

The embryo grows and is finally born as an infant. The infant grows to manhood and seems in every respect to be just another human being; but in reality, deep within, he is the Lord, the creator and sustainer of the universe, omnipotent and omniscient. The human disguise is just a shell, a sport, a play, through which he intends to teach mankind something new.

This is the attitude which pervades Akshay Kumar Sen's epic poem *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi*; and in no way do I wish to denigrate that wonderful work or belittle Akshay's devotion. Constantly throughout his narrative, Akshay reminds us that Sri Ramakrishna is the Lord of the Universe, sporting through a human body.

While I sympathize with this viewpoint and admire the devotion that inspires it, it creates a few problems.

First, it makes the Lord guilty of a gigantic deception. He is tricking the vast mass of humankind into thinking that he is an ordinary human being. We may call it a play, a sport, a lila: but the net effect is to deceive people. Sri Ramakrishna himself held truth to be the highest virtue, so to make the Lord guilty of deception seems un-Lordly in the extreme.

Second, it diminishes the significance of Sri Ramakrishna's sadhana for human beings. The greatest lesson we learn from his life is that it is possible for a human being to realize God.

Admittedly, that human being has to have a love for God that seems superhuman in its intensity—but such love can be cultivated; and when it flowers and bears fruit, the human being can realize God. Through the life he lived, Sri Ramakrishna is telling us, “I realized God, and you can, too. So start working on it, and let's not have any excuses.”

But once we label him an avatar, we have provided ourselves with the ultimate excuse. Sri Ramakrishna realized God, yes; but he was an avatar, he was already God, he had supernatural powers that we lack, he was different from us. We can't possibly realize God, because we don't have what it takes, we are mere ordinary humans. For him to tell us to realize God is like Superman telling us to fly. Superman can fly, because he's Superman. We can't, because we're not.

Were Sri Ramakrishna's Struggles a Sham?

Worse, the avatar doctrine reduces all of Sri Ramakrishna's struggles to a sham. He was God all along. He didn't have to roll on the ground and weep for the Mother, didn't have to beg her to reveal herself, didn't have to experience burning sensations, didn't have to go six years without sleep, didn't have to threaten to commit suicide with a sword. All of these traumas become a sham if he was already God.

If he was already God, too, we may legitimately ask, “What was the point of all this suffering? Why would God put himself through such torment? To set an example for humans to follow? Is he saying to us, ‘If you struggle the way I struggled, you, too, can realize God?’”

But if he was already God, setting such an example becomes meaningless. Don't forget the excuse which the doctrine of avatarhood has given us: He's God; we're only human. He may appear to realize himself through struggle, but we can't realize him in the same way because we're not God.

All of this presupposes what might be called a “top-down” model of avatarhood. In this model, the avatar is born an incarnation of God, is omnipotent and omniscient even as a baby, and the life as a human is basically an act. The avatarhood reveals itself only gradually to others.

But the avatar theory gains in moral significance and avoids the objections I have outlined above if we assume a “bottom-up” model. Here a person is not born an avatar but becomes one. Just as a child grows into an adult, so a human being grows into God. We are born with the potential for Godhood within us, but we have to struggle to actualize it.

This model makes more sense than the “top-down” model if we examine Sri Ramakrishna’s life. Sri Ramakrishna had many divine qualities even as a youth; but as he grew up, he seems to have developed at least one shortcoming: a caste bias. Notice that he refused at first to serve as a priest in the Kali Temple because its owner, Rani Rasmani, was a sudra. If he had been born an avatar, it is unlikely that he would have developed any shortcomings.

Subsequently he overcame this bias, and during his sadhana made a conscious effort to uproot it by cleaning latrines—work fit only for an outcaste. Here we see him recognizing a shortcoming in himself, working to overcome it, and finally succeeding. Such behavior would be more typical of a person who was growing into avatarhood than of one who was an avatar from birth.

The “bottom-up” model also makes sense because Sri Ramakrishna does indeed seem to have “grown into Godhood”: his divine qualities multiplied and deepened as he grew older. He made statements later in life which he could not possibly have made when he was in his teens: “There are two persons in this body; one is the Mother, and the other is her devotee”; “He who was Rama and Krishna is now Ramakrishna in this body—but not in your Vedantic sense.”

In sum, Sri Ramakrishna’s avatarhood has far more significance for human beings if he earned it through intense struggle rather than having it bestowed upon him before birth. It makes his sadhana more meaningful and his struggles more real.

Can Anyone Become an Avatar?

Perhaps most important, it exonerates him from the possible accusation that he deceived people during the early part of his life. For if he was an avatar from birth, presumably he would have known it even in his youth. By pretending to be an ordinary human being, he would have been deceiving people all his life up until the time he admitted he was an avatar. But if we accept the “bottom-up” model of avatarhood, this problem does not arise.

Despite all this, there seems to be something missing from the “bottom-up” model. People who believe in the traditional “top-down” model are bound to be unhappy with it because they *want* the avatar to be different so that they can adore him or her—or at least different enough that they can apply to the avatar for spiritual favors. “Isn’t there anything inherently

special about an avatar?" they will ask. "Is avatarhood a state of being which any Tom, Dick, or Harry can attain if he just works hard enough and earns the blessing of God?"

These questions have merit, because many people who became spiritual giants showed signs of unusual spirituality even in their youth. So while the "bottom-up" model of avatarhood sounds wonderfully democratic, we might want to be careful not to embrace it too quickly. The truth could conceivably lie somewhere in the middle, between the two extremes of "top-down" and "bottom-up." We could call it "bottom-up with a boost."

It is possible that those who later become avatars are born with unusual spiritual potential which has to be actualized through struggle. This special potential would be a gift from God. It would be given to the future avatar at birth to help him or her attain avatarhood and realize the divine identity. Since God is both the giver and the one who will ultimately receive the gift, it might be said that this special spiritual potential is a gift from God to himself before he becomes himself in order that he may become himself. (We can get into a lot of cute wordplay here.)

A Theory to Stimulate Thought

Even so, the "bottom-up with a boost" theory of avatarhood is simply a theory. It is a compromise which might satisfy both those who insist on the traditional "top-down" model and those who, like me, are uncomfortable with it. In fact, it will probably satisfy neither.

Besides that, reality is under no obligation to conform to our theories; so this theory, like all others, is tentative, only one of many possibilities, and not to be clung to. If, as is entirely possible, I have misunderstood the "top-down" theory, it may be discarded as irrelevant.

Many years ago, when Girish Ghosh and Ramchandra Datta were proclaiming him an avatar, Sri Ramakrishna remarked, "What do they know about avatars? One is an actor on the stage and the other earns his living [as a doctor] examining urine and feces."

The same question might be asked with even more validity of one who is a *mlechchha*, a foreigner from a different culture, and several generations removed from any possible physical contact with an actual avatar.

So I offer this theory in the full knowledge that it may very well be wrong, and only in the hope that it may stimulate thought. □

Discussion: Caring for Elderly Vedantists

A Plea and a Query

Edith D. Tipple

I have a friend who couldn't remember a week's pilgrimage the day she returned from it. She has forgotten where she was at times, so does not stray far from home. She wears a small notebook around her neck to remind her what to do, but she forgets to look at it. She lives alone and takes complete care of herself and her house. She is a brilliant woman who gave her life's energy, talent and financial support through many years to her Vedanta Society.

Another friend is bent in half with osteoporosis, has a faulty heart valve, does not distinguish day from night—and she lives alone, unable to leave her apartment. She cannot afford a retirement or a personal care facility. She also devoted all available time and funds to her Vedanta Society.

A third suffers from severe arthritis and fibromyalgia. She is fortunate to have been able to afford a three-tiered retirement community, but she finds the only people there interested in religion are fundamentalist Christians. Her macular degeneration is now so advanced that she can no longer satisfy even a part of her need for holy company through books.

The Need for Companionship and Pastoral Care

These women devoted their lives to the spiritual quest, and to the Vedanta Societies to which they belong. They now find themselves in a wasteland of spiritual contact. They are desperately lonely for spiritual company. They are cut from their heartlands by the simple fact of no longer being able to get themselves to the Centers. In Christian Churches with which I was associated years ago, ministers used to visit the housebound. To my knowledge, there is no such outreach program available from any of our Vedanta Centers.

The common and simplistic judgment about householders is that they work, they make money, and they have loving families to care for them in their old age. Some are so fortunate, but householder sadhakas in general have no more use for amassing wealth than monastics. What they do make, they readily share with their Vedanta Societies. As well, many have no children. Those who do, often find that their children do not share their spiritual quest; association with them is not the comforting communication and common support so taken for granted. There is a saying, "Old age ain't for sissies!" but the total disintegration of communication with one's spiritual

family after a life's devotion is very hard, and sometimes it is depressing to the extreme.

It is very difficult—nay, nearly impossible—to think, “I, too, will be debilitated.” We tend always to believe “the other person will die, the other person will not be able to care for him/herself, but I shall manage somehow.” At her retirement party a couple of years ago, the nurse who headed up the Santa Barbara County Geriatric Division pleaded with her audience: “Plan for the future! People are not dying; they are being put back together again; they are being kept alive for many, many years beyond their normal life spans—but their bodies and their minds continue to deteriorate. Take care now that you will be cared for later!”

The title to this depressing report is “A Plea and a Query.” My plea is for someone interested in researching the possibility of setting up a Vedanta retirement home. Ideally it would include two sections: small apartments for the self-sufficient retired, and a section for those needing help, extending to but not including critical care, which necessitates hospitalization. My query is, would Vedantists move to such a place if it were in their area—but, as important, if it were not?

There has been quite a lot of discussion in the *American Vedantist* about service to others as a spiritual path. Wouldn't it be wonderful to establish a spiritual home for devotees who are awaiting their Beloved, their Final Release? Tough work—but what blessed service!

A Response

Beatrice Bruteau

I believe this is a very serious issue and an important one for us to address. We must not only admit the seriousness but exert ourselves to find a feasible line of action. I accent “feasible” because if we urge something too expensive and too demanding in person-power, it will not be done. We must find a way that we can and will actually travel.

My first reaction to Edith's report and plea was to propose something that could be done at once with no cost: organize committees in the various centers to keep in touch with those members in need of companionship and assistance. She replied that a certain amount of that is going on but doesn't completely meet the need. For the sake of the devotional lives of these elderly, she points out, something more formal or official, that is to say, something that is a function of the Center itself and of its swami, would be a benefit far exceeding the friendship visits of fellow members. Furthermore, these elderly need to be in close physical proximity to one another, so that they can share with each other and can have meditation together, and so that the visiting

member of the Order (nun or monk or head of Center) can speak with a group of people on one visit.

Edith raised the question of a Vedanta retirement home, with small apartments for the self-sufficient and a section for those needing care (short of hospitalization). This means a building, its utility systems, and its staff. It's hard to see how we could possibly fund it, and there would be only one in the country, presumably. So Edith very rightly began by inquiring of us all whether these elderly would actually be willing to move to such a facility if we had one. And, of course, whether they could afford it. It may be that there are some financial answers to these questions: Medicaid, other government money, grants, etc. The question of location is different; even with plenty of money, one may not want to go to a new location, especially in old age. And not-yet elderly members of centers may not feel that they can undertake the responsibility of setting up and supervising such an enterprise.

A Family-Like Arrangement

So, I suggest—perhaps as an immediate stopgap measure—a compromise scenario: the local group home in a rented, already existing property. Zoning regulations on group homes may vary, but they are something like five adults (under supervision if that is an issue). The limitation on number escapes other laws that come into effect for bigger facilities. This plan could also be put into practice on fairly short notice: identifying the people, finding the house, making sure of the permission, figuring out the housekeeping, shopping and cooking, etc., and dividing up the cost. Residents would pay for everything, so cost to the Center would be nil. Each center would have its own, people would not move away from their familiar places and friends. Residents wouldn't have each their own apartment, but they would have community, a family-like arrangement with shared meals and recreation spaces. Cost would be no more, probably less, than they are paying now.

What Edith is especially concerned to provide, spiritual companionship and close contact with someone in the Ramakrishna Order, could be achieved this way. The Order would have to accept the burden of visitation only, no legal or financial responsibility. The residents would have a shrine room and could set up whatever shared practices they chose.

A variant of this idea would be that the local Center purchase an apartment building and rent it out to such residents, thus retiring the mortgage and covering taxes, insurance, utilities and repairs. More risk and responsibility for the center, plus having to raise the down payment. I think for starters the group home would be best. There's no investment and no legal/financial involvement of the center as such. Only the visitation by the Order. And that could be assisted by lay members specifically authorized by the swami in charge. The group home has the further advantage that it provides

an environment for the companionship that was the initial concern. An apartment building doesn't necessarily do that; people can still be lonely in their separate spaces. And the rented group home is maintained/repared by the owner, not the residents.

This is brainstorming, of course. We need to involve the membership at large in recognizing the need/desirability of such plans and discussing how best to serve their respective elderly—each center would have its own arrangement. The main point now is to draw attention to the need and give it a high priority in the various centers so that there is movement forward on finding what would be good to do in each case. The Editors of AV invite, indeed urge, readers to react to these thoughts and suggestions with reports of their local observations, perceptions of need, and opinions on what might be done. □

Chanting—An Interfaith Spiritual Practice

Laura Bernstein

For several years, I have had the pleasure of leading groups in the practice of interfaith sacred chant. Many of these encounters have been at an interfaith study center in the Chicago area called Common Ground. Others have taken place in churches, synagogues and on retreats. To the beat of a drum, we repeat melodic lines from a variety of spiritual traditions: Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Native American. Following each period of chanting, we sit in meditative silence, to let the effect of the chant penetrate more deeply. The result is sometimes an experience of unity consciousness that is profound. Artificial divisions and barriers melt away, as we discover experientially that there are many ways to the center, and each way has its own validity, its own unique authenticity. But once in the center, in the core of mystical consciousness, the differences between each tradition become unimportant, and a deep, shared commonality unites us and lights us.

While initially I gathered chants that were already part of a tradition, eventually I began supplementing them with my own melodies, which I composed to accompany words from liturgy or scripture that I found inspiring. Below are a sampling of some of these compositions. Each of them may be chanted for as long as one desires, but a minimum of five minutes is recommended. The repetition itself begins to alter consciousness, as the phrase becomes like a mantram. Chanting with a group increases the flow of energy, as does using a “kavannah,” or sacred intention, for each chant. Following the chanting, sit in silence, noticing your breath, gently releasing thoughts.

1. Hindu tradition—from the Rig Veda (translation from the Sanskrit by Eknath Easwaran)

**May the thread of my song not be cut (3x)
before my life merges
in the sea of love. (2x)**

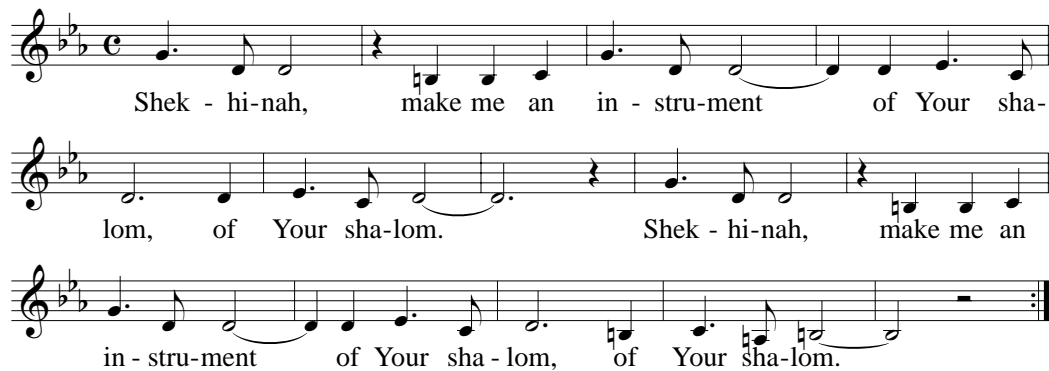


May the thread of my song not be cut, May the
thread of my song not be cut, May the thread of my
song not be cut be - fore my life merg - es
in the sea of love, in the sea of love.

2. Jewish/Christian traditions (from the prayer of Saint Francis)

Shekhinah, make me an instrument of Your shalom.

This chant utilizes the first line of St. Francis' well-known prayer, usually translated "Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace." Two Hebrew words substitute for the English. "Shekhinah" is the feminine face of the Divine in Jewish tradition; literally, She who dwells with us. "Shalom" is the Hebrew word for peace, but because it comes from a root that means wholeness or completeness, its meaning suggests a kind of spiritual perfection.



Shek - hi-nah, make me an in - stru-ment of Your sha-
lom, of Your sha-lom. Shek - hi-nah, make me an
in - stru-ment of Your sha - lom, of Your sha-lom.

3. Jewish/Christian traditions—Psalm 46:11 (translation from the Hebrew)

**Be still and know I am God.
 Be still and know I am.
 Be still and know.
 Be still.
 Be.**

This chant taken from the Psalms is done by chanting the whole line as many times as desired (I usually do 10 repetitions), and then gradually shortening the line, as written, doing the same number of repetitions for each segment.

The musical notation consists of three staves in 3/4 time, key of B-flat major. The first staff contains the lyrics "Be still and know I am God." followed by a double bar line and "Be". The second staff contains "still and know I am." followed by a double bar line and "Be still and know.". The third staff contains "Be still." followed by a double bar line and "Be.".

4. Jewish/Christian traditions—Psalm 92:6 (translation from the Hebrew)

**How great are Your works,
 How great are Your works,
 Yah! How very deep are Your designs.**

The Hebrew word for God in this line from the psalms is the four letter, holiest, unpronounceable name of God, known as the tetragrammaton. Since this name cannot be uttered, even in Hebrew, Jews always substitute something, usually Adonai (Lord) or HaShem (The Name). This chant utilizes another name for God: “Yah,” as in hallelujah (praise God). The chant may be done as a round.

The musical notation is in 2/4 time, key of D major. The first system has two staves. The top staff has lyrics "How great are Your works, How great are Your works, How great are Your works,". The bottom staff has lyrics "How great are Your works, How great are Your works, How great are Your works, How great are Your works,". The second system also has two staves. The top staff has lyrics "Yah! How ver-y deep are Your de-signs. How great are Your designs." with a note above "How great are Your designs." that says "(last time end here)". The bottom staff has lyrics "great are Your works, Yah! How ver-y deep are Your designs.".

5. A multi-faith chant

Melody 1: Om Shanti Peace Shalom, Om Shanti Peace Shalom
Melody 2: HaMakom, Ground of Being, HaMakom, HaMakom

This chant combines words and phrases from several spiritual traditions. “Om” is the sacred sound of creation in the Eastern traditions, the sound containing all other sounds. “Shanti” is the Sanskrit word for peace. “Shalom” is the Hebrew word for peace, which as mentioned above, also signifies wholeness or completeness. “HaMakom” is a Hebrew name of God meaning “The Place.” It corresponds well to theologian Paul Tillich’s “Ground of Being” as a way of understanding Divine Reality. The two melodies work together in counterpoint, but melody one can be used as a chant on its own.

6. Sufi tradition—from a poem by Rumi (translation: Coleman Barks)

Melody 1: You. . .the One in all, say who I am
Melody 2: Say I am You, say I am You
Melody 3: I am I am

This chant comes from a poem by the 13th century wildman of the soul, Jelaluddin Rumi. His love-saturated, God-saturated poetry overflows with tantalizing imagery that suggests union with the Divine and declares union with all of creation. The poem from which the chant derives is given on the following page.

I am

dust particles in sunlight.
I am the round sun.

To the bits of dust I say, Stay.
To the sun, Keep moving.

I am morning mist,
and the breathing of evening.

I am wind in the top of a grove,
and surf on the cliff.

Mast, rudder, helmsman, and keel,
I am also the coral reef they founder on.

I am a tree with a trained parrot in its branches.
Silence, thought, and voice.

The musical air coming through a flute,
a spark off a stone, a flickering in metal.

Both candle and the moth
crazy around it.

Rose and the nightingale
lost in the fragrance.

I am all orders of being,
the circling galaxy,

the evolutionary intelligence,
the lift and the falling away.

What is and what isn't. You
who know Jelaluddin, you

the One in all, say who I am.
SAY I AM YOU.

—Jelaluddin Rumi



*A Mighty Feisty Vedantist:
Stanley Michael Nosek
May 5, 1920-September 16, 2002*

Margaret A. (Peg) Nosek

My father was the quintessential American Vedantist—curious, literary, audacious, and perplexed. Yes, I know that there are many Vedantists in the United States who have immersed themselves in the Vedic worldview and traditions, and are living the lifestyle of a sannyasin. Dad wasn't one of them. He was much more like the millions of Americans who love the traditions of their childhood religion but are no longer fulfilled by it, who feel called to the mystical but have to look long and hard to find it, who love to ask stinging questions.

Dad was captivated with the mystic rituals of the Polish Catholic church when he was growing up in Brooklyn, NY. The son of immigrant parents, he survived the Great Depression by running errands for the family butcher shop, and that ethic, plus the experience of seeing so many people suffering in poverty, shaped his economic and political attitudes for the rest of his life. I don't know if it was when he worked as an aircraft engine mechanic for Pratt & Whitney as a teenager, or during World War II, when the company sent him to England and France to serve the U.S. and British air bases, but somehow a book on yoga by Christopher Isherwood came into his possession.

I discovered that book on his already overflowing shelves when I was seven years old. By then, Dad had finished a stint in the Army Air Force, and with benefits from the G.I. Bill, had a bachelor's degree (*Cum Laude*) in mechanical engineering from The Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn under his belt. He had worked for 10 years for General Electric in Schenectady, NY (where I was born), before being transferred to Cincinnati. I remember those years, when every Sunday we would sit on the floor in full lotus position and meditate. Well, maybe he was meditating, I just sat there thinking how neat it was to be doing something so exotic.

Can you imagine a mystical mechanical engineer? Seems like an oxymoron, but Dad certainly was one. I bet that was what led him to work for NASA's Lewis Research Center in Cleveland, where he spent the last 25 years of his career. I delighted in going to the NASA family open houses when we could peer into the enormous wind tunnels and soak up the mysteries of space exploration. I think Dad enjoyed being on the cutting edge in his work as well as his spiritual journey.

The move to Berea, a suburb of Cleveland, brought Dad to the next step in his search for a belief system that met his needs. I was drawn to Swami Rama, a realized soul from Hardwar, India, who spent his summers in Cleveland Heights in the early 1970's. Dad wasn't wild about my traipsing across town with my Mother to sit at the feet of a holy man along with a bunch of other hippies. Maybe it was the profound transformation he saw in me at that time, or maybe he was just ready, but he finally came around a few years later. My beloved Swami Rama had passed away, and I was feeling like I had just begun my journey down a very long road. Dad encouraged me to write to the address in one of the books Swamiji taught from, Swami Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga*, and ask for advice about setting up a Vedanta study group. In less than a week, we received a call from Swami Kalikananda of the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago, asking if he could come visit us that weekend.

The speed at which things moved from there was nothing short of miraculous. Our family had the privilege of hosting many swamis from the Ramakrishna Mission and the Chicago center as they made their frequent cross-country lecture tours in their "silver bullet" RV. It wasn't long after our initial meeting with Swami Kalikananda that we were honored by the first of many visits from Swami Bhashyananda. We were all quite taken by his effervescence and came to share his missionary zeal. Our study group thrived. I left to go to the University of Texas in 1977, and Mom and Dad kept the group going for decades thereafter.

Mom and Dad both took initiation from Swami Bhashyananda and became avid supporters of the Chicago center. They attended the occasional regional gatherings of Vedantists, such as in Ellicottville, N.Y., Chicago, and Ganges, MI. By attending the 1993 World Parliament of Religions Dad was able to renew his contact with many of the movers and shakers in the American Vedanta movement.

My conversations with Dad about Vedanta were frequent, long, and deep. We wrestled with all the words and concepts that were new to our spiritual lexicon. It was the dualism versus non-dualism debate that had Dad the most perplexed. The Catholic concept of the trinity didn't quite equate with it. Was the Holy Spirit the Atman or Brahman? Was God the Father equivalent to Shiva or Vishnu? And was Christ the same as Sri Ramakrishna? Dad and I wrote an article for *American Vedantist* a few years ago in which we offered our observations about what it might take to address these questions and make Vedanta more appealing to Westerners.

Dad was a complex, multi-faceted man. He was well known in Berea as a harmonica player, a witty and gifted public speaker, a patriot who cherished freedom of speech, an advocate for accessibility and the rights of persons with disabilities, a patron of libraries and music, and above all, a lover of books. He and his childhood sweetheart and wife of 60 years, Regina, helped found the Institute for Learning in Retirement at Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, where they were active as committee chairs, course facilitators, and students for 10 years. When my brother, Tom, asked Dad, shortly before Dad's death, to select from the 6,000 some books that weighted down his house, which three were his favorites, he responded, *Quo Vadis?* by Henry Sienkiewicz, Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, and *The Seven Story Mountain* by Thomas Merton.

I feel Dad's presence very strongly now, and it is loving and joyous. He is free, free of the blood that failed to nourish him, free of the bones that failed to support him, free of the pain that held him down. I see him sitting at the feet of the Master, finally getting things all figured out. I am infused with the Light of his revelation and cloaked in the warmth of his protective embrace. And I, too, am free now to enjoy the many gifts he gave me and pass along the lessons we learned together.

If there is one thing I carry on from Dad without the tarnish of time, it is a passion for life and learning. It sustains me and gives me the strength to keep up the pursuit. The power of the love that he and Mom have given to Tom and me and all whose lives we touch is truly the hand of God.

Now we can dance together, Dad, on the edge of the lotus pond, and nothing can keep us apart.

From the unreal lead us to the real!

From darkness lead us to light!

From death lead us to immortality!

—*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*

[Donations to the Stanley and Regina Nosek Scholarship may be sent to: Institute for Learning in Retirement Scholarship Fund, Baldwin-Wallace College, 275 Eastland Rd., Berea, OH 44017.]

Book Reviews

A Heart Poured Out: A Story of Swami Ashokananda

by Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke)

Kalpa Tree Press, New York

ISBN 0-9706368-1-4

447 pp., 50 illustrations

cloth

\$26.00

2002

[Available in March at amazon.com and bookstores]

To simplify the telling of a life story that is both complex and largely lived within can be an immensely difficult undertaking. Sister Gargi has seemingly accomplished it in this engaging and splendidly written account of the life and teachings of her guru, Swami Ashokananda.

Sister Gargi begins her story at the beginning, although she confesses that this proved difficult, for the Swami was reluctant to reveal much about his early life. In fact, he was not terribly certain about his birth date (“September 23, 24 or 25, 1893,” he told her.). He was equally evasive about the place of his birth, though she later learned he was born Yogesh Chandra Datta in the village of Durgapur, which is now part of Bangladesh.

Almost from the start, Yogesh knew he was not like other boys of his own age. “Outwardly I may have seemed like a little boy, but within I was never a little boy,” he told the author. “I always felt I didn’t belong to this world.”

Such detachment, later to be intensified through the development of a logical, analytical intelligence, would continue to be a singular mark of his character. As he grew in maturity, he would call upon this intelligence to make decisions immensely important in shaping the course of his life. The stirrings of a deeply spiritual nature were also beginning to grow within him. On reading *Bhakti Yoga* by Aswini Kumar Datta, he recalled, “It was as though a great storm passed through my mind. . . I was shaken to the very depths of my being.”

A Disciple of Vivekananda

However, it was in his early high school years, he related to the author, that he had the most deeply significant experiences. Vivekananda appeared to him one day in meditation and again, even more profoundly, the following night in a vivid dream. “I could not believe it,” he said. “I was his own, his very darling. I knew he was my teacher.” Later, Swami Brahmananda confirmed the authenticity of his initiation, and thenceforth Yogesh accepted Vivekananda as his guru.

In the years to follow the Swami made the acquaintance of several other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, from whom he received both guidance and supportive love. There seems no question that it was their encouragement

(but perhaps more decidedly the dream initiation by Swamiji) that encouraged the young Yogesh to embark on monastic life.

Later, as Swami Ashokananda, he would find that his keen intellect and attention to detail would make him a fitting choice for editor of *Prabuddha Bharata* magazine, to which he was appointed in 1926. It was, as the author states, a “monumental task,” but the Swami approached it with zest and with great skill as a brilliant editorial writer.

It is interesting to note that a large percentage of the swamis who edited *Prabuddha Bharata* eventually ended up with an assignment in the West. Swami Ashokananda was no exception. In 1931, he arrived in San Francisco to serve as Assistant Minister to Swami Vividishananda. Within a short period he became head of the Center. At first his youthful appearance and inexperience caused him some embarrassment. But in the coming months and years, the members of the Society soon came to deeply admire and love the strong intellect and unquestioned spiritual stature of their Swami.

High Ambitions for His Disciples

In the years to follow, the number of his disciples and devotees grew, and they were to learn that Swami Ashokananda had equally high ambitions for them. In order to realize those goals he could be at times a severe (though, at the bottom, loving) taskmaster. As he wrote in one of the Society’s early bulletins: “The challenge of Vedanta is tremendous. The weak may shrink from it, but those who have any strength in them will take it up and rise to the required heights.”

This he affirmed even more dramatically when he said to a disciple (the author, perhaps?): “The heart must be poured out—poured out!” Many were to be the receptacles of that pouring out, though it was not usually characteristic of the Swami to openly display his affections. This side of his personality was frequently hidden beneath a veneer of formality and conservatism, which many wrongly interpreted as sternness. In truth, he had a sensitive heart. On one occasion, he was deeply saddened when a close devotee left the Society, and he openly and tearfully expressed his grief.

As the swami’s influence grew, so did the size of the Society’s membership. He was a dynamic, inspired speaker, whose lectures would often stretch to an hour and a half—sometimes even longer. I experienced one of those “dynamic” lectures in 1959, when I knew little about Vedanta. I thought I would venture inside a Hindu temple to see what it looked like. The best word to describe the Swami that I listened to was “leonine,” as he paced vigorously up and down the platform during the lecture, forcefully making his points. I do not remember a word he said, but I have never forgotten that outpouring of energy and sincerity.

Swami Ashokananda soon developed a strong interest in disseminating the message of Vedanta to Berkeley, a university town across the Bay. Although some struggle was involved in procuring a building site, the newly built temple was dedicated on October 22, 1939.

During this time, a growing monastic core of both men and women devoted to living a serious spiritual life had been formed. Swami Ashokananda had long hoped for a retreat center that could not only provide a place for monastics to live, but one suited to those busy in the world as well. As he stated in one of his later lectures: “I think that nowadays there is a great desire in the West for retreats—where people can go and think about God.”

This was a dream soon to be realized. When he first gazed over the rolling, verdant hills near Olema, a small town about an hour drive from San Francisco, he fell in love with the area. With typical forthrightness, he declared this was to be place for the Vedanta Retreat—despite the fact that the owners insisted that the Society must purchase the 2,000-acre parcel—or none at all! Undeterred, the Society purchased the land in July of 1946 for \$166,250.

A Monastic House for Women

One dream that Swami Ashokananda had so far failed to realize was the founding of a convent. By the end of 1964, the monastic community had grown to fourteen members, spread among Centers at San Francisco, Olema and Sacramento. (The Sacramento Center had been founded in 1949 on seven-acres of land. Five or six monks from the other Centers completed the building of a structure, which still stands and operates today.)

We may well assume Swami Ashokananda felt a particularly strong need to found a convent. After all, the women members of the Society had been some of his most faithful and earnest disciples. He knew that he owed them a religious house that they could truly call “home.”

Earlier, in 1959, he was forced to fight hard to save his vision of a convent. He received a telegram from Swami Madhavananda, then President of the Ramakrishna Order, stating that the Trustees of the Order had voted to abolish any future convents in the United States. It came as a crushing blow to Swami Ashokananda. With a mixture of anger and despair, he wrote the President and prevailed upon him to reverse the decision. After a delay of many anxious months, the Trustees finally acceded to his request, paving the way for creation of permanent quarters for the nuns.

Almost from his youth, Swami Ashokananda had suffered from ill health. Though he seldom complained, his last few years were particularly painful ones. He was frequently confined to a wheel chair and was often too weak to leave his bed. We are fortunate in having so faithful an amanuensis as the

author to record these final months of Swami Ashokanananda's exceptional life. A few entries are appropriate here as a fitting and final commentary.

February 12, 1968: . . . You people have so poor an idea of greatness. . . when the many begin to enter into the One, then for the first time, you begin to appreciate greatness. . . All bondages fall off; then you really perceive greatness.

June 28, 1968 (to the author): For all the years to come, I wish you health, happiness, peace, accomplishment, and devotion to Sri Ramakrishna.

September 18, 1969: Purification of our emotion comes when the object of our emotion is divine.

On December 13, 1969 at 1:10 p.m., after nearly four decades of dedicated service to the West, Swami Ashokanananda left the body.

—Cliff Johnson

Saint Sara: The Life of Sara Chapman Bull, the American Mother of Swami Vivekananda

Pravrajika Prabuddhaprana.

Sri Sarada Math, Dakshineswar, Calcutta ISBN 81-86617-33-7

536 pages, 60 illustrations hard cover \$15.00 2002

In a book full of wonderful and often unfamiliar quotations from Vivekananda, one of the most intriguing is the following: "Jesus was imperfect," Vivekananda once exclaimed, "above all because he did not give women a place equal to men. Women did everything for him and yet he was so bound by the Jewish custom that not one of them was made an apostle." (p. 349) Vivekananda may or may not have been right about Jesus, about whose life we know a good deal less than we would like to know, especially as regards the crucial role—which the early Christian writers, all men, tended perhaps to disregard or deny, and which modern scholarship is trying to uncover—that such women as Mary Magdalen may have had in Jesus's life and in the history of the early church. But Vivekananda's outburst certainly reveals something about the originality of his own actions and attitudes, since it is clear that he did give women a place equal to men and even made some of them what we could justifiably call apostles. By the time we come to the end of *Pravrajika Prabuddhaprana's* carefully researched, richly illustrated (the numerous photographs are a treasure in themselves), and engagingly written biography, we feel that we have really gotten to know Sara Bull, both as regards her personal life and as regards her historically important role as one of the chief supports, financial and intellectual, of Vivekananda and his teaching mission in the West. Later generations will be grateful to this

American Sarada Math nun for bringing into the full light of day the fascinating life of this Vedantic apostle and for guaranteeing that the fate of Mary Magdalen and her sisters, whose historical importance we now can only guess at, will not be hers.

Saint Sara might seem to be a bit strange as a title; after all, the word “saint” is Christian and not Hindu, and it is not immediately clear why one would call Sara Bull a saint. But it turns out that this partly humorous nickname, which Sisters Nivedita and Christine (two other women Vedantic “apostles,” by the way) called their friend, who was known to the world at large primarily as the wife of the great Norwegian violinist Ole Bull, was fully deserved. Her tireless work for Vivekananda, with whom she had what for Hindus has been considered the closest of relationships, that of a mother to a son, and her unbroken devotion to his mission, made her into the truly remarkable woman that Vivekananda called “a saint, a real saint, if ever there was one” (p. 350).

Not in the Traditional Mold

Yet Sara Bull was hardly a saint cast in a recognizably traditional mold. She was quite wealthy all her life, her father having made a fortune in the lumber business in Wisconsin. When she was twenty years old she fell in love with the violinist Ole Bull, who was at the height of his fame and easily old enough to be her father, and married him in spite of her father’s disapproval. Their marriage, which lasted ten years until his death, was a generally happy one, although there was in the beginning a difficult year of separation during which the violinist, suffering from her absence in his manor house in Norway, had to beg her to come back to him. Sara Bull’s life before and after the death of her husband was spent in high society, and the biography gives a fascinating picture of the ways and means of the wealthy in America during the Gilded Age. Her relationship with her daughter Olea was complicated and fraught with tension. Whereas one journalist described her as “a delicate, sweet-voiced woman with a slender dreamy face” (p. 131), the reader of Prabuddhaprana’s biography soon realizes that Sara Bull was clearly a woman with a strong temperament and great independence of mind, along with a strain of self-righteousness that fortunately mellowed as she grew older. In short—and the biography makes this clear in great detail—she was a *real* saint, not a *plaster* saint.

Up until her mid-forties Sara Bull appeared in many ways typical of the strong-minded American society woman of her time, like her friend and fellow Vedantist Josephine MacLeod, who was the subject of Prabuddhaprana’s earlier biography (*Tantine: The Life of Josephine MacLeod, Friend of Swami Vivekananda*). She was a fine amateur pianist; she was intensely curious about the world, traveling to Europe frequently and

taking part in the international artistic and intellectual life of her time, which was especially open to her as the wife and, after 1880, the widow of the Paganini of his day. The opening section of the book shows her as the product of her class and time, the period of post-Civil War prosperity that made the American millionaire and the American heiress into legendary figures around the world. In fact, a major strength of Prabuddhaprana's biography is its discovery and use of a lot of original source material, and especially of Sara Bull's correspondence, which creates a fascinating diorama of the cultural and artistic life of the Gilded Age as Sara Bull lived through it. The detail is meticulously presented in an entertaining way; the first part indeed reads like a novel and seems ready for possible adaptation for Masterpiece Theater!

But, as Sara Bull began putting her life together after the death of her husband in 1880, her great spiritual adventure was just about to begin. She was first drawn to Vedanta in 1886 through the lectures of Mohini Mohan Chatterjee, a disenchanted student of Madame Blavatsky, who spoke on the New Testament as seen from a Vedantic perspective. As Prabuddhaprana describes this period of her life:

Sara Bull had felt the attraction of Indian spirituality, at first blindly, through spiritualism; she experimented with her friends to fill the gap in her loss of her husband and yearning for some proof that there was more to life than the limited world of the senses. Her deep spiritual yearning brought her a scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita, and now she sought an ideal, her own spiritual ideal. (pp. 88-9)

But it was her meeting with Vivekananda that changed her life forever. His talks at Greenacre in 1894 were for her the beginning of a long and spiritually rich period of association, and from here on her biography is inextricably entwined with that of Vivekananda.

Seeing Vivekananda Through Sara's Eyes

I found it a wonderfully novel experience to see Vivekananda through Sara Bull's eyes. Prabuddhaprana's biography is also rich in illuminating quotations from his teachings in America and in India. Sara Bull's home in Cambridge, Massachusetts became a refuge for him as well as a place where he could engage with some of the finest minds at Harvard. In this section of the biography the social whirl of the Gilded Age is left behind and the reader is given an intellectual feast in the company of William James and other Cambridge luminaries, with Sara Bull at the center, the perfect intellectual hostess, whose connections, intelligence and tact helped Vivekananda make his way in this rarified world. The reader will gain a new appreciation of the intellectual milieu in which Vivekananda was to find an enthusiastic reception.

Although Vivekananda's American period is well known to many of the readers of this journal thanks to the exhaustive research of Marie-Louise Burke, Prabuddhaprana's biography gives a more intimate view of Vivekananda in speech and action. Sara's relationship with Swamiji is understandably the richest and longest section of the biography. She was towards him as a mother towards her son—not at all times an ideal mode of relating, of course! Like a mother, she could be highly critical of the way he handled people in society. "Sara was the only person who had such a motherly relationship with Vivekananda that she could tell him his behaviour was mistaken. She hoped to correct her son" (p. 152), since, "to her, he was a teacher whose personality could bear developing" (p. 154). *Saint Sara* goes far beyond being a mere exercise in hagiography, and Prabuddhaprana's "Portrait of a Lady," like Henry James's, gives a full representation in depth of a complex individual.

Some of the early disciples of Vivekananda developed apparently irresolvable differences of opinion with him or left him for reasons they themselves may not have clearly understood. The problem may have been that Vivekananda was a blazing spiritual sun, and not everyone could bear the bright light and the intense heat for long—how many of us could have done better? But Sara Bull was faithful and loving to the end. Her motherly relationship with Vivekananda stood the test of time. Is it mere coincidence that we owe to her, as Prabuddhaprana describes later in the book, the three wonderful photographs of Holy Mother (Sri Sarada Devi) worshipped later around the world? Sara Bull had the mother's magic touch, and her recognition of the greatness of Holy Mother was not the least of her achievements.

—Steven F. Walker

Interfaith Dialog

Richard Simonelli

How can we share interfaith knowledge or experience, communicating across the gap of our different beliefs? It's a little like the idea of a black hole in the cosmology of the universe. A black hole is a "singularity." No one can say anything about what happens at the exact location of a black hole because all the laws of the phenomenal world break down there. But before you get to a black hole, you must pass across the event horizon. As you go closer to the black hole singularity than to the event horizon, all communication with that which lies outside the horizon is blocked.

Interfaith dialog, experience, and relationship might be a little like that. Some parts of an interfaith conversation are behind a veil. We can't know what another person is actually experiencing or knowing as they cross beyond the "spiritual event horizon" in a true interfaith exchange. Words only point at communication. Poetry, visual art, music, and sensitive ceremony can approximate. But the nature of our deepest sacred experiences is unknowable even to others in our own faith tradition, indeed to anyone but ourselves.

People can meet in interfaith experience in a moment of connection. All specific theology, dogma and doctrine step aside at this point, because the map is not the territory, and teachings are just maps. You know you have met but you can't "take it out" beyond the event horizon to actual verbal sharing as you undertake discussion or activity. You just have to trust and respect your counterpart without proof of any sort. You have to trust feeling and intuition. You have to trust love. You may undertake rational and intellectual sharing in support of interfaith dialog, but these are really secondary.

Beyond Theology and Doctrine

In the American Indian language of the Mohican nation, the sudden meetings of the heart and mind between two people are called *Natashnayah*, or touch-love. When they persist outside the sudden event and people are able to harmonize together in ongoing unity it is called *Iwashtanay*. Perhaps the mark of a fruitful interfaith exchange is the presence of *Natashnayah* and *Iwashtanay* in the relationship and activities of those of different faiths who relate and work together. Interfaith experience happens when people of different spiritual orientations meet inside the mysterious event horizon without the need to take it out in discussable terms, such as theology or doctrines.

Each faith or belief system contains a roadmap, a highway and even a tool kit of practices to help a person realize what all faiths hold in common. In true interfaith exchange we may speak of our own beliefs and theologies, but finally they must be put aside in favor of the meeting ground, which is at the end of all belief and faith. In interfaith exchange, we have to be careful not to stick too tightly to the details of our liberation, because we *are* the details. In interfaith exchange we are called on to *be* our faith and to manifest from the goodness that may show no trace of the path.

Letters

Bill Page has made a good case (*AV, Fall 2002*) for forgiveness of the attacks of 9/11 by spiritual aspirants. However, in his reference to the Gita he has left out an important instruction of Krishna to Arjuna. Since Arjuna is a warrior, his duty is to fight. How this applies in the modern world to those who must fight but are not of the warrior caste, remains to be considered. Krishna tells Arjuna, "Regarding alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, conquest and defeat, go into battle and you will commit no sin," (Gita 2:38). In sum, fight but be detached from

the result, an instruction that all can try to put into practice. Forgiveness is a high spiritual ideal, but as Krishna's instruction to Arjuna shows, it need not stand in the way of action, even fighting, rightly performed. No doubt real detachment in action is as hard to do as forgiveness, but we need as many strings as possible for our spiritual bow, in order to find one we can use in any given situation.

William A. Conrad
New York City

Reports

Sri Sarada Society Marks Tenth Anniversary

December 2002 saw the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Sri Sarada Society, a lay organization devoted to promoting the life and teachings of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi in the West and to supporting visits to the West by pravrajikas (nuns) of the Sri Sarada Math, India. Based in Albany, New York, the Society has members all over the U.S. and in Puerto Rico.

The Society began with a modest service: to offer to devotees in America a convenient way to receive the Sri Sarada Math's semiannual journal, *Samvit*. A more challenging project soon presented itself: sponsoring the visit to America of three of the Math's pravrajikas to participate in the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. Since that time, the Society has helped to sponsor subsequent visits by pravrajikas.

The Society also rendered valuable service in preserving Ridgely Manor as a place of pilgrimage for Vedanta devotees. Ten years ago, none of the Vedanta Societies was interested to acquire the property, where Swami Vivekananda had stayed for a total of nearly three months in the 1890s. A sizable donation from a long-time devotee made it possible for the Sri Sarada Society to attempt to purchase the property. Although it was not able to raise enough money to finalize the purchase, its sustained efforts to do so—even signing options contracts two years in a row—served to hold the Manor, with adjacent buildings and 80 acres of land, off the open market. In 1997, the Ramakrishna Order decided to acquire the property.

In 1996, the Sri Sarada Society inaugurated its website, one of the first Internet offerings of the Ramakrishna Vedanta movement. This fostered companionship and solidarity among devotees, particularly those not near a Vedanta center.

The Society's publishing work has grown from its semi-annual newsletter to the preparation of a new book for publication. *A Challenge for Modern Minds*, based on lectures given by Pravrajika Vivekaprana while on tour in the U.S. (edited by Edith Tipple), is being published by Llumina Press. The book may be ordered from bookstores and online from Vedanta Press: www.vedanta.org, or directly from Llumina Press and the Sri Sarada Society: www.srisarada.org/challenge.html. Paperback: \$10.95.

Vedanta West Communications Backs Spanish Translation Project

Eduardo Acebo, a former monk at the Ramakrishna Monastery in Trabuco Canyon, California, has returned to the monastery as a retired lay devotee and is devoting all his time and energy to translating major English language Vedanta books into Spanish. He is working in collaboration with devotees in Spain who are editing his translation. His aim is to produce inexpensive editions of these books for sale in Spanish-speaking countries. Several U. S. devotees expressed an interest in making tax-exempt donations to the project. Vedanta West Communications, *American Vedantist's* parent organization, has agreed to accept donations for the project and issue receipt letters. Checks can be sent to Vedanta West Communications, P.O. Box 237041, New York, NY 10023, marked "Spanish translations." Later this winter, VWC will set up a separate page on its website so that donations can be made by credit card. Log on at www.vedantawest.org.

New Recordings of Vedanta Music Released

Two new recordings of music with Vedantic texts are being released this winter. Albany Records, a respected publisher of contemporary classical music, is releasing John Schlenck's "Raise the Self by the Self" and "Life of All Lives," two cantatas on the Bhagavad Gita, recorded in Moscow in Spring 2001 with Timothy Mount conducting the Moscow New Choir and the Russian State Symphony Cinema Orchestra. The first of the two cantatas begins with the Battlefield of Kurukshetra and proceeds through Arjuna's Anguish, The Eternal Self, Duty and Karma Yoga, The Illumined Seer, One's Own Path, The Cause of Evil, and concludes with Meditation. The second work focuses on the all-pervading divine presence and devotion to God. The recording is available from early January and may be ordered direct from Albany Records by phone: 800-752-1951, or on their website: www.albany

records.com. The CD can also be ordered through amazon.com or arkivmusic.com, and will be available at record stores in mid-January.

Vedantic Arts Recordings will release John Schlenck's "Hymns of Yearning: An Album to Sing With," fourteen choral songs with flute, cello and guitar, in February on CD and cassette. The songs were composed over a period of 30 years for use in Vedanta services, and are pitched for average voices. Texts are from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, the Gita, the Bible and other sources. Timothy Mount conducts the Vedantic Arts Ensemble. Available online at www.vedantawest.org or write to Vedantic Arts Recordings, P.O. Box 237041, New York, NY 10023. CDs are \$14.95; tapes are \$9.95. Sheet music with keyboard accompaniment: \$11.95.

Contributors

LAURA BERNSTEIN, a writer, is also a composer of poems, songs and chants. She is an active member of Common Ground, an interfaith forum in Chicago.

BEATRICE BRUTEAU is an author of books and articles on philosophical and spiritual themes. She lives in North Carolina and is a member of The Vedanta Center of Atlanta.

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.

MARGARET A. (PEG) NOSEK, is Executive Director of the Center for Research on Women with Disabilities and Professor of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas. She attends Houston's Ramakrishna Vedanta Center and is a member of Live Oak Friends Meeting.

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

JOHN SCHLENCK, resident member and Secretary of the Vedanta Society of New York, is a composer of music. He is also Secretary-Treasurer of Vedanta West Communications.

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

SISTER JUDITH THACKRAY (Judith, Hermit of Sarada), lives in Nederland, Colorado. She is Founder/Director of the Contemplative Vedanta Support Network (CVSN) and was formerly associated with the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago.

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

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