

Editorial

Vedantic Outreach

According to Swami Vivekananda, “Expansion is life; contraction is death.” He felt strongly that a narrow interpretation of Vedantic spirituality had been deadly for India, and he sought to correct that situation with a new, vigorous, creative form of Vedanta that, building on what was strength-giving in its past, would reach out and share its insights with other civilizations and at the same time learn and assimilate whatever was good in other traditions. He did not want either his Eastern or Western followers to forsake their own traditions and cultures but rather to learn and assimilate what was best in the whole human heritage. Indeed, as pointed out in Sister Gayatriprana’s book review in this issue of *American Vedantist*, Swamiji’s ideal for each human being was to expand toward universality, developing equally the emotional, intellectual, active and contemplative sides of one’s nature, and supplementing one’s own spiritual tradition with insights from other traditions.

With Swamiji’s vision in mind, we present articles in this issue of *American Vedantist* that relate Vedanta to three important figures in the Western tradition: the Biblical saint Job, the American Transcendentalist Emerson and the European psychologist Carl Jung. Other offerings present a Hindu view of interfaith relations and ongoing discussion of Vedanta and scientific evolution.

Vivekananda’s revitalized Vedanta also emphasized reaching out beyond the struggle for personal liberation and serving those in need as a spiritual practice, revering them as living images of God. We present a continuation of the discussion begun in the last issue of how to meet the needs of elderly Vedantists. We hope more of our readers will write to us with their own suggestions on how to address these needs.

—The Editors

Job Revisited: A Vedantic Reading

Charlie K. Mitchell

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Brahma,” 1856, 1857

Emerson’s omnipresent Deity allows, or even causes, terrible things to happen. What faith can one have in the goodness of this Being? How to reconcile undeserved suffering with belief in God: that is the Job Problem.

Decades ago when I was an undergraduate in college without a religious thought in my over-academic head, the story of Job held a magnetic interest for me. In part it had to do with its gorgeous poetry and profound subject matter all culminating in what I viewed as a banal, unsatisfying ending. But mainly I was stuck on the vexed question of faith. Job, the finest and most noble man in all the world, gets drowned in death and destruction because, it seemed to me then, Satan successfully tempts God. Job is given the counsel of despair by his wife (“curse God and die”) and finger-pointing explanations by three friends who have come to comfort him.¹ But Job keeps the faith, and in the end God sort of restores his family (some new kids to replace the dead old ones) and his cattle and his money—and then gives Job twice as much worldly *stuff* as he had before. Big deal. Such cosmic trials, such empty compensation. Has Job’s tremendous faith amounted only to this?

How Can One Reconcile Injustice, Suffering and Faith?

So I wondered at the frustrating ending, and I sensed that I was missing something. Now, after 35 years of studying and practicing Vedanta, it occurs to me to go back and take another look at this beautiful, perplexing story/poem/play. What does the story of Job suggest about the nature of God? How can one reconcile injustice, horror, suffering and faith? Why is the tale of Job told at all?

Vedanta teaches that our real and most basic nature is divine. Something in us yearns constantly, achingly, to reach this divine core. Whether we

1. I omit discussion of a fourth person who appears clumsily near the end of the story. He is not introduced as are the others, and his language is dramatically inferior in both tone and content. I view him as an interpolation by a later writer of lesser skill.

worship a being we call “God,” or whether we rigorously analyze the unreality of the material world, it makes no difference. Each of us, in our own particular way, struggles to experience the divinity that we sense is our ultimate goal. Each of us has a unique, utterly personal, approach to it. If we follow the path that our own nature has laid out for us (*swadharma*), we will succeed. As Swami Vivekananda insisted, Vedanta “must allow [for] infinite variation in religious thought” (CW I, 390, Mayavati Memorial Edition, 1970). “Whatever path people travel is My path,” says the *Bhagavad Gita*, “No matter where they walk, it leads to Me” (IV, 11).

As I re-explored the Book of Job, I found these Vedantic truths and more, set like jewels in the pain and beauty of human experience.

In the beginning, it is quickly established that Job is “perfect” in God’s sight and confident in his own goodness. He is innocent of wrongdoing, and he knows it. Though he is rich and comfortable he is ever vigilant to remain righteous, constantly mindful, praying unceasingly. But unknown and unknowable to Job, Satan gets God to wager that Job will not lose his faith if all his worldly comfort is destroyed. God lets Satan wipe him out. From the outset, suffering happens for reasons mere human beings cannot hope to understand. It is in the nature of things, in the tension and interplay between good and evil, the pairs of opposites that dominate the human mind in the material world.

Man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward [5:7].

Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble.

He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down. . . [14:1].

Rejecting the Prevailing View of Affliction

The prevailing theory of divine providence at the time of Job was that affliction is punishment for wrongdoing. This is what Job’s three friends will argue later. But Job says it’s not, and he is right. He prays only to understand the wrong that has been done to him. In this argument, Job borders on blasphemy—accusing God of inflicting undeserved suffering—but again he is right. And he is also right to hold fast to his faith that he will ultimately be redeemed.

I think the secret to the Book of Job lies near the very beginning, in the first words Job speaks. Job’s sons and daughters, servants, cattle and wealth are all destroyed in Chapter One. Job says simply, “the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away” [1:21]. (This is the first and only time that this saying occurs in the Bible.) In Chapter Two the “perfect and upright man,” the best in the all the world by God’s own account, is smitten with boils from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. He heaps ashes upon his head and scrapes at

his rotting skin with the fragments of his former life. At this point his wife counsels him to curse God and die. Job replies:

What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God,
and shall we not receive evil? [2:10]

God is the only doer.² Job's very first words, and this elaboration on them, say the same thing. Whatever it is, God did it. Mysteriously, at least to me, the Judeo-Christian world seems to have missed completely this vital point. Job understands God! His wife does not. As the story develops, it also becomes clear that his three friends (his "miserable comforters") do not. They are just regular, garden-variety friends parroting the regular, garden-variety theology of their day. They do not have, as Job has, and cannot even imagine, a particular, personal relationship with God.

I was raised with the standard Christian idea that there was an almighty God and an almost equally almighty Satan, God's enemy. It was he, the Devil, who caused suffering and grief and made me do bad things. But the Book of Job flatly rejects this notion. One way or another, it is all God's doing. The author of Job says point-blank at the very end that Job suffered from "all the evil the Lord hath brought upon him." And God himself says that his servant, Job, has "spoken of me the thing that is right" [42:7].

God, the Author of *Everything*

Job's revolutionary understanding is that God and only God is the author of everything. He—It—is both good and bad, oxymoronic. True enough that in the poem/play that is the Book of Job, Satan tempts God and seems to get away with it. They actually make a bet! They interact, they play! It is easy to see in this the idea of a divine and good spirit coexisting with an evil one. But Satan is one of God's sons in the Book of Job. He is not simply an evil being opposing a good one but a member of the immediate family, a creation of God. God is the author of Satan. Good and evil are a pair of opposites, arising together. The idea of Christ automatically gives birth to the idea of the Antichrist. While it isn't God who smites Job, it is with God's permission that Satan does it. In the Book of Job, God permits Satan's evil, literally makes it possible.

This is the problem with conceiving of God as a good person, a concept Job explicitly rejects ("Will ye accept his person? Will ye contend for God?" [13:8]) If I posit a God with attributes such as goodness, then I must also accept the other side of the attribute coin, evil. Job knows this up front. The components of the pairs of opposites don't come separately. "Good" and

² This monistic Vedantic theme runs throughout the Book of Job, much as it permeates *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*: "God alone is the Doer. Everything happens by His will." – *Gospel*, p. 236.

“evil” are human notions superimposed upon God. The one necessitates, gives birth to, the other. (Devil worshipers must have a hard time with this very problem: when they go to worship darkness, there’s the light.)

Either God is both good and evil or God is neither good nor evil, or maybe all at once—the whole conceptualization is a mental and emotional prison. Job was never in it. I can't trust a God who is such a mess of contradictions. And what is faith if not trust? For me, this is the essence of the Job problem, and a thoughtful rereading of the story reveals that it was never *his* problem, only mine. Job's faith was never shaken, not his faith in God and not his conviction of his own goodness. The problem doesn't arise for Job because he perceives, correctly, that God's nature is not merely “good,” but all-inclusive, far greater and more profound and more sublime. It is my faith, not Job's, that is shaken by adversity.

Let us be clear about this: When I pray for help, at that moment I really do believe God is kind, or good, and at least helpful. I forget the Vedantic lesson of Job, that God, the cause of everything, is the cause of prayer. I believe in one of infinite possible attributes. And I believe in that attribute to the exclusion of its opposite. God is to that extent personified, anthropomorphic and lopsided in my prayers. And such prayers are seemingly undercut by the overwhelming evidence that God is not kind or good, or is in any event simultaneously unkind and bad. It is not given me to select among attributes and endow God with only the ones I like, though I do it. Job was way ahead of me: God both good and evil, neither good nor evil, beyond good and evil, all at once.

Lo, these are parts of his ways; but how little a portion is heard of him! the thunder of his power who can understand? [26:14]

God Helps Everyone

*[But **helpful!** God, you are helpful! You helped Hitler, and you helped every Jew he killed. You helped the terrorists destroy the World Trade Center, you helped the survivors and you are helping the “war on terrorism” just as you are helping the “evil doers” to escape. You help me; you help my enemy. You really do answer the prayers you cause to be made. Your eye really is on the sparrow. The hairs of my head really are numbered. In the words of the mighty “Chandi,” you have “an ever-sympathetic heart for helping everyone.” I have learned this thing about you. You are wonderfully, awe-fully, unthinkably, inconceivably **helpful.**]*

God was helpful to Job, sent him three true friends (“Miserable comforters are ye all”) to help him clarify his thoughts. Job was light-years ahead of his well-meaning, self-aggrandizing, trite, annoying friends. “I cannot find one wise man among you,” he says. In his discourse with them,

he is reminded of the spiritual insight and attainment that are his despite the calamities that have befallen him.

Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him; but I will maintain mine own ways before him. . .

Behold now, I have ordered my cause; I know that I shall be justified. [13:15,18]

His life blown to bits around him, Job listens to what passes for wisdom among his friends and is comforted, *helped*. Their simpleminded view of divine providence has helped Job order his cause, convinced him more than ever that he is right, that he has been unjustly afflicted. He does not debase or disenoble himself in his suffering. There is no *mea culpa* here. The three friends are Job's culture, his society ("ye are the people," he says to them), and in sending them to him God gave him the conviction he needed to stand alone in his relationship to the Divine.

In the process, as one of many celestial spinoffs, the story of Job creates some of the finest poetry in the Bible, and the wisest philosophy, and the clearest picture of the transcendent spirit which human beings call God. This is the voice out of the whirlwind. Job hears and sees God out of the devastation wrought by God upon his life. (This, by the way, is his real reward—even Moses only got a glimpse of the divine backside—the restoration of Job's worldly trash is for the understanding of lesser men, like his three friends.) Job is justified, as he knew he would be, with nothing less than the vision of God. He is illumined, liberated, in the end. This is why the restoration of his worldly estate seems so trivial. It *is* trivial. Job has passed beyond all concern with such things. The serious reader, even without understanding, *feels* the dispassion Job has attained.

Three Great Questions

I think the Book of Job asks and answers three great questions:

- Does God inflict or permit unmerited suffering? *Yes*, from a human point of view (one lacking the concept of *karma*). But as in the wager with Satan, the purposes of the cosmic mind cannot be fathomed by mere mortals.
- Is such suffering incomprehensible and meaningless? *Yes, unless*. . . Unless it is confronted head-on, as Job confronted it, and turned Godward. "Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak," says Job, answering the voice out of the whirlwind. "I will demand of thee. . ." [42:3-4 echoing God's words to Job in 38: 2-3.]³ The idea is that a person of Job's towering faith can, as Sri

3. "Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?" says God to Job at 38:2. "Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge?" Job retorts in 42:3. "Therefore have I uttered that which I understood not." In the end as in the beginning,

Ramakrishna said, “force [his] demands on God.”⁴ Suffering is redeemed with divine knowledge if the agony is fearlessly directed back at its source. The first principle is the very first thing spoken by Job: God is the source of good and evil alike, and God is the creator of prayer. It is all God’s doing. The complaint department is a necessary part of the store that sold the defective goods.

- Is it possible to have faith where there is undeserved affliction? *Yes, but.* But the faith that’s required is unrelated to causality. Injury “A” probably did not happen because of sin “A1”; and even if it did, there is no reason to believe the same sin will necessarily cause the same result in the future. The required faith is also unrelated to the received wisdom of persons and institutions, though it may be enriched by such wisdom. It is *personal*, 100% personal, standing alone against all the world if need be. It is the individual soul in its unique, private dialogue with God. What is blasphemy to Job’s three friends is worship to Job. In this regard, the Book of Job is easily the most Vedantic writing in the Bible. Any path, it says clearly, followed with unswerving devotion and single-minded intensity, will get you to the one truth.

“I will maintain mine own ways before Him.”

God understands this. God rewards it. God and Job do what they do while a bewildered world looks on.

A Lever to Pry Open the Doors of Divine Knowledge

The Book of Job poses one other question, and it is as close to the unanswerable “why” question as the Bible ever gets: *Why* all the suffering? Or as Job asks, early on in the poem, what is man, that God visits him every morning and tries him every moment? In the end, God answers this question. After a pompous and seemingly inappropriate dissertation on the great beasts of the world and how God-the-almighty is in charge of them, God reveals himself to Job—man—who, perhaps uniquely among the great beasts, has within him the capacity to see God, to talk to God and hear God speak, to understand, to be Godlike. The suggestion is that through suffering there comes, given the right faith, an ennobling detachment from the comforts and sorrows and joys of this world. At such a moment the inherent divinity in human beings shines forth, and they can see and commune with God.

This is the *use* of suffering that Job ultimately finds. It is a lever to pry open the doors of divine knowledge. It is as much of an answer to the question, “Why” as I have found in the Bible or anywhere else. It requires, first of all, the intense conviction that God alone is the doer. Then it requires a

Job sees that it is all God’s doing and stands his ground accordingly.

4. See, e.g., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 147.

commitment to God to the exclusion of all else, even if that commitment be expressed in fury and accusation. Job virtually shames God into revealing himself. The intensity of the relationship between them is the whole point. Job has lost everything by God's will, but he must renounce his marital partnership and his society on his own in order to make the final leap to divine communion. That done, his wife and the three friends silenced, Job literally has nothing left to lose. At that moment he sees God.

Now that he holds it
He knows this treasure
Above all others:
Faith so certain
Shall never be shaken
By heaviest sorrow.

– *Bhagavad Gita*, VI.22

Emerson, Vedanta, and Higher Education

Judson B. Trapnell

In June 2001, I resigned from the Theology Department of the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota—a position that I had held for only a year and that had represented the apparent culmination of decades of education and professional development. Just before moving with my family to Minnesota, I had been diagnosed with stage III melanoma, necessitating the removal of the lymph nodes in my right thigh, followed by a yearlong regimen of chemotherapy. After a difficult year of reassessing our priorities, we decided to return to our roots. During the long drive back to Charlottesville, Virginia, and during my first weeks of adjusting to nonacademic life, I listened to a collection of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays on tape in the car (not, by the way, something I would recommend, given the richness of his prose and the depth of his thought). I had studied these essays over twenty-five years before while an undergraduate, but their impact upon my new situation was unexpected. Emerson's essay on "The American Scholar," in particular, quickened my own reflections upon the cultural enterprise of higher education in which I had been involved for most of my adult life. Building upon an earlier effort ("Emerson and Vedanta: A Mutual Reading," *American Vedantist* 8, no. 2 [Summer 2002]: 22-29), this essay recounts a few of the thoughts about higher education sparked by listening to Emerson, further informed by our shared affinity for the wisdom of Vedanta.

Emerson delivered “The American Scholar” to the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1837, when he was thirty-four. Society, he begins, is comprised of numerous individuals serving in complementary, interdependent roles, a view that sounds almost Vedic in its affirmation of the value of each to the whole. While foreign to my own American sensibility, shaped by our democratic and entrepreneurial ethos, Emerson’s view of society began to frame my reflection upon the role of professor that I was leaving and upon the far more uncertain role of the scholar without institutional affiliation that I was entering—a point to which I shall return.

The Scholar as *Man Thinking*

In his account of the various responsibilities of the different professions, Emerson portrays the specific role of the scholar within society as follows:

In this distribution of functions the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state he is *Man Thinking*. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking.¹

It is evident from the essay that Emerson was concerned at this time about a lingering dependence of American thinkers upon European scholars. He wrote, in large part, to exhort his audience to an originality and a freedom from bondage to past models that befit the genius of his young nation. Regardless of its original context, his view of the true scholar’s role in contrast to its “degenerate state” challenged me as I listened almost one hundred and seventy years later and resonated with truths expressed in the Upanishads over two millennia before.²

Striking in the above quote is Emerson’s suggestion of two “states” of thinking represented by the true scholar and the degenerate one. The scholar, he writes, and indeed every person, should always remain a student, one who is instructed by the past but also invited by the future, and one who is neither at the mercy of, nor victimized by, society. The thinking of such a scholar is not simply a passive echoing of social conventions and popular trends; rather, one is instructed directly by what Emerson calls Nature, a term that at once includes both the nature one observes and the nature of the observer.³ The

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures, volume 1 of Emerson’s Complete Works* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1893), pp. 85-86.

2. On the influence of the texts of Vedanta upon Emerson’s thought, see the previous essay noted above.

3. Emerson, p. 88: "And, in fine, the ancient precept, ‘Know thyself,’ and the modern precept, ‘Study nature,’ become at last one maxim."

resulting call to attentiveness and originality is sharpened by criticism of those who simply “parrot” the thinking of others. Those familiar with the Upanishadic teaching on the *Atman-Brahman* will be reminded here of the injunction to know That by which everything may be known and with the presentation of the *rishi* or seer as one who knows directly, not by learning from others:

This Atman cannot be attained through study of the Vedas, nor through intelligence, nor through much learning. He who chooses Atman—by him alone is Atman attained. It is Atman that reveals to the seeker Its true nature (*Mundaka Upanishad* 3.2.3).⁴

Questioning Initiated by One’s Creative Source

Inevitably on hearing Emerson’s critique of the degenerate scholar, I asked (and continue to ask) to what degree I and others engaged in higher education are simply victims of society and its forms of thought, and to what degree we simply mimic the thinking of others. As I stood before classrooms full of undergraduates in required courses on modern religious questions and contemporary interpretation of the Bible to what degree was I simply passing on skeptical attitudes that I had inherited from my own “authorities”? How difficult it is to foster questioning in oneself and in students that is initiated by one’s creative source and not simply by a pervasive social malaise. There is much in our current college and university education that encourages such parroting in the thinking of both the professor and the student. For the professor, there are the politics of promotion and deference to the latest trends in one’s discipline. For the student, there is the almost irresistible tendency to mimic the professor’s viewpoint, motivated by an ascending scale of goals from a high mark in the class, through an impressive overall grade point average, to competitive credentials for seeking a high-paying job. Such a critique of higher education is far from original; every colleague I ever had was aware of these limitations. So was Emerson, who deemed his challenge to the colleges of his day still worth offering.

No scholar, he thought, can transmute “life into truth,” or fresh experience into verbal form, in a way that is untainted by what is “perishable” or socially conditioned. “Each age. . . must write its own books.” But most forget this point and fall into a lethargy of mind that uncritically reveres the books of the past.

4. Translation from Swami Nikhilananda, *The Upanishads*, abridged ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 117. The passage also appears in *Katha Upanishad* 1.2.23. See also the interchange between Svetaketu and his father Aruni Uddalaka in *Chandogya Upanishad* 6.

Starting Out from One's Own Sight of Principles

The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude, slow to open to the incursions of Reason, having once so opened, having once received this book, stands upon it, and makes an outcry if it is disparaged. Colleges are built on it. Books are written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking; by men of talent, that is, who start wrong, who set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles.⁵

The books to which Emerson referred were by Cicero, Locke, and Bacon, scholarly authorities from prior ages and distant countries who had influenced society in ways his American scholar need not revere. One might then conclude that our modern fashion of challenging authorities represents a positive response to Emerson's exhortation. However, this conclusion would miss his more fundamental point about types of thinking.

True scholars, or "Man Thinking," begin reflection "from their own sight of principles" rather than "from accepted dogmas." Here is the crux of his distinction between two types of thinking, one original, the other derivative—a distinction that modern epistemologists, who argue that all experience and expression are more thoroughly mediated by social context than Emerson allowed, might question. But what kind of "sight" does Emerson intend?

The one thing in the world of value is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although in almost all men obstructed, and as yet unborn. The soul active sees absolute truth and utters truth, or creates. . . The book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius. . . Whatever talents may be, if the man create not, the pure efflux of the Deity is not his; cinders and smoke there may be, but not yet flame.⁶

The Role of the Teacher

While Emerson does not totally disparage the value of reading "some past utterance of genius," his advocacy of the "active soul" to see for itself will strike most in higher education in a variety of fields as unrealistic, even reckless. We are far more inclined to teach what others have seen rather than to guide students to see. If I had limited myself in my teaching to principles derived from my own sight, I might have had very little to say. Further, if I

5. Emerson, p. 90.

6. Ibid., pp. 91, 92.

had attempted to teach others to see for themselves, I would likely have failed, discovering that this ability was indeed “obstructed” in myself. I may have been able to recognize and reward “talent,” but would I have been able to know and honor “flame” or a “pure efflux of the Deity” when I saw it? The Upanishads have influenced my own, and perhaps Emerson’s, evaluation of the risky but necessary role of the teacher of truth:

Though one may think a lot, it is difficult to grasp,
when it is taught by an inferior man.
Yet one cannot gain access to it,
unless someone else teaches it.
For it is smaller than the size of an atom,
a thing beyond the realm of reason.
One can’t grasp this notion by argumentation;
Yet it’s easy to grasp when taught by another (*Katha Upanishad*
2.8-9a).⁷

Emerson offers not only a critique of limited vision but a method for seeing, though one that further cuts across the grain of our cultural tendencies.

In silence, in steadiness, in severe abstraction, let him hold by himself; add observation to observation, patient of neglect, patient of reproach, and bide his own time,—happy enough if he can satisfy himself alone that this day he has seen something truly. . . . He learns that he who has mastered any law in his private thoughts, is master to that extent of all men whose language he speaks, and of all into whose language his own can be translated.⁸

Silence and the Active Soul

The style of mind that constitutes the “active soul” open to sight incorporates silence in a way seemingly as foreign in Emerson’s day as in contemporary modes of thought and priorities of education. Equally controversial is his conclusion that the discovery of objective, even universal truths (at least about human selves) lies in the purest subjectivity rather than in empirical methods that seek to eliminate all subjective factors. Once again, the affinity between Emerson’s view and that of Vedanta as well as the principles of Yoga is clear. Recall how the Upanishads present the Self as the witness and true seer of all the world’s activity, including that of the self (*jiva*) that identifies with that world:

7. Translation from Patrick Olivelle, *Upanishads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 236.

8. Emerson, p. 103.

Two birds, united always and known by the same name, closely cling to the same tree. One of them eats the sweet fruit; the other looks on without eating. Seated on the same tree, the jiva moans, bewildered by its impotence. But when it beholds the other, the Lord worshipped by all, and His glory, it becomes free from grief (*Svetasvatara Upanishad* 4.6-7).⁹

The contemporary foreignness of Emerson's and Vedanta's estimation of subjectivity is illustrated on our campuses as well. Awareness of the relationship between mental health and learning in our colleges and universities rarely extends beyond crisis management provoked by psychological problems and substance abuse. How extreme to my students, for example, were Mahatma Gandhi's vows that he believed were essential to his own attempts to study other's viewpoints honestly: nonviolence, nonpossessiveness, purity or celibacy, truthfulness, and nonstealing or poverty.¹⁰ How few could make a connection between their use of alcohol or amount of rest or repeated exposure to television or music and their ability to think and express themselves clearly in the classroom. "In silence, in steadiness...." Perhaps it is no wonder that most in higher education have despaired of finding in subjectivity anything but a private, inscrutable, and inescapable world populated by echoes and images from a decadent culture. From this perspective, only the scientific method can rescue truth from such confusion and noise. How preposterous and antiquated to our ears must sound Emerson's lofty vision of the true scholar as rooted in "self-trust": "He is the world's eye. He is the world's heart. . . These being his functions, it becomes him to feel all confidence in himself, and to defer never to the popular cry. He and only he knows the world."¹¹ This can only sound to many like the worst type of solipsism and hubris.

9. Nikhilananda, p. 134. The same verses appear in *Mundaka Upanishad* 3.1.1-2.

10. See Gandhi's *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* for a narrative account of how he realized the importance of these vows for his own efforts to see truth for himself, and as others see it, in the midst of a very active life.

11. Emerson, p. 102. Equally preposterous will sound the claims of the Upanishads for the liberated one. At least one university in this country has attempted to imbue its teaching of advanced knowledge in various subjects with the personal disciplines necessary for the development of the knower based in both Vedanta and modern science, Maharishi University of Management (formerly Maharishi International University) in Fairfield, Iowa.

A Vision for the Future

Emerson's response to such skepticism in the closing pages of his essay presents both a bleak picture of the present and a hopeful vision of the future.

I believe man has been wronged; he has wronged himself. He has almost lost the light that can lead him back to his prerogatives. Men are become of no account. Men in history, men in the world of today, are bugs, are spawn, and are called "the mass" and "the herd."¹²

The loss of light is not simply a private tragedy but is, within Emerson's view of society, to the serious detriment of all. As grim as the present appears to him, he can yet envision a time when our individual potential is realized for the benefit of the whole:

We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak with our own minds. . . A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.¹³

Conclusion

It is significant that we can hear Emerson's vision of the true scholar and of the country's potential only through a shift of worldview similar to that demanded by the Upanishads. One need not argue for direct dependence of Emerson's viewpoint upon Eastern sources in order to sense a similar radicality between them, a radicality grounded in similar metaphysical convictions about the unity of all things in an unchanging absolute that is, in fact, each person's truest Self. But we would be mistaken to dismiss the challenges to higher education posed by Emerson and Vedanta simply because we do not share in their view of Nature or the Self. The exhortation to honor and cultivate individual sight as essential to the health of the whole society can be found within different metaphysical systems or frameworks of meaning.¹⁴

In fact, regardless of our particular worldview, we are true to Emerson's principles and those of Vedanta in acknowledging that few of us hold our metaphysical convictions on the basis of our own experience. We may adopt them from reading him or the Upanishads or some other source of traditional wisdom, but how few of us have realized these truths from our own "sight."

12. Emerson, p. 106.

13. Ibid., pp. 114, 115.

14. See, for example, Jiddu Krishnamurti, *Krishnamurti on Education* (London: Krishnamurti Foundation Trust, 1974).

This limitation obviously constrains the “professor” of any discipline: Regardless of what philosophical or religious assumptions underlie our worldview, how many can honestly attest to having seen the truth of these principles? For those who have seen, how can this realization, whether about religious truths or chemical formulas, be instilled in the student without encouraging dogmatic acceptance?¹⁵

Even if we read Emerson’s critique of higher education apart from its metaphysical (some would say Vedantic) context, it still poses a valid challenge that we must hold in tension with our more mundane goals for such education:

Colleges. . . have their indispensable office. . . to teach elements. But they can only highly serve us when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame. Thought and knowledge are natures in which apparatus and pretension avail nothing. Gowns and pecuniary foundations, though of towns of gold, can never countervail the least sentence or syllable of wit. Forget this, and our American colleges will recede in their public importance, whilst they grow richer every year.¹⁶

In deference to my former colleagues, I must repeat that Emerson’s lament regarding the possible future of higher education is shared by most who are still in touch with the ideals that motivated their choice of a teaching career. However, while institutions are indeed “indispensable,” we must continually recognize and work to shake off the constraints to natural genius that they inevitably impose. Here the terse statements of the Upanishads about the true nature of knowledge and about the true teacher quoted above can offer important perspective.

Obviously the answer is not to avoid involvement in institutions of higher education. Though I no longer work within such an institution, I am not totally free of the lures of “apparatus and pretension” of which Emerson speaks, for these are obstacles interior to my own psyche and to the society in which I necessarily am a participant. I can only pray that Emerson’s image of “Man Thinking,” like the similar challenges of Vedanta, will help to keep me honest, humble, and alert.

□

15. One should note here the different approach of some religiously based institutions of higher education that are guided by the assumption, sometimes explicit, that the impossibility of such direct knowledge demands reliance upon truths revealed from a divine source—truths that must then be accepted as dogma and as the basis for a more deductive than intuitive approach to knowing.

16. Emerson, p. 94.

Interfaith Dialog: A Hindu Approach

Jay Lakhani

Recently I have been invited to speak on the theme of “Interfaith” at quite a few meetings held here in London. Let me share my thoughts on some of the key issues I have touched on.

In the last century we witnessed strife in the name of political ideology. We had two World Wars, with millions of people getting killed. In the new century we are seeing strife in the name of religion. This is a far more contentious issue, because religions can generate much stronger passions. There is a reason why this happens. Religions have a habit of telling us, “Carry out this much finite activity here on earth and we offer you infinite rewards in the hereafter.” The risk/reward ratio is skewed to the extreme. If we kill or are killed in the name of religion, surely, that is a small price to pay for an infinite reward in the hereafter!

How can we defuse the situation? We see politicians and diplomats working away frantically. We may say, “Surely these issues will get resolved by diplomatic maneuvering or by a bit of political haggling! Surely, all this is a matter of economics and control of the oil fields! Or maybe we need to show greater justice to some disadvantaged people.” Our American friends think the situation can easily be resolved through military action.

We know in our heart of hearts that all these—political, diplomatic, economic, judicial or military approaches—at best yield only patchwork solutions.

Religions Must Solve the Problems of Religion

The solution of a problem that arises in the name of religion lies firmly in the field of religion. It is wholesome spirituality that can tackle the issues thrown up in the name of religion.

I suggest that the reason these problems have arisen in the first place is not because the world is somehow becoming more religious and hence these tensions showing up as the world religions are forced to interact with each other. The reason I suggest is precisely the opposite. It is because we are becoming less religious that these problems surface. We forget that we just cannot afford to ignore religions. Even if we believe that all religions are erroneous, these issues have to be tackled and contained.

In the highly secular world we live in, the role of religion in society is not very clear, and we see two things happening. On one side we see society adopting a more materialistic stance; on the other side religions increasingly fall into the hands of simpletons. When mainstream aspirants are no longer

there to underpin religions, the rational and tolerant elements of religions are pushed aside in favor of the more fanatic elements. What is the solution?

The solution is to become more religious. Not to be religious only in name but in the real sense of the word. The problems facing us are the symptoms of a society that needs religion and yet has difficulty relating to it. The religion I come from has an important contribution to make in this situation.

The issue is: How can several exclusivist religions co-exist in a single society? We do not have the luxury of living in isolation, practicing our own exclusive religion. We live in multi-faith societies, and operating as single faith communities is no longer an option for the modern world. Hinduism offers a unique solution.

Whose Mom is Best?

It is called *pluralism*. It says that the same ultimate reality called God can be thought of and approached in different ways. Why different ways? Because human beings are diverse. The goal may be the same, but we come from different backgrounds, inspired by different prophets and scriptures, and so the manner in which we relate to the same Ultimate will necessarily be different. Imagine two children in a playground. One says to the other, “My mom is best.” The other says, “No, my mom is best in the world.” Both have tremendous love for their mothers and cannot tolerate the statement from the other, so they fight. A wise man comes along and says to both of them, “Why don’t you change your statements a little? Instead of saying ‘My mom is best,’ add two little words at the end: ‘for me.’ Now say, ‘My mom is best for me.’ Then you are both right and there will be no reason to fight.”

Children may perhaps take this advice easily, but many of my interfaith colleagues have great difficulty with this proposal. The advice suggests that their prophets and their scriptures are not absolute but have only contextual validity. Sounds blasphemous! The best resolution the mainstream religions have been able to come up with so far is to use phrases like “we tolerate other religions.” Meaning, “we hold the monopoly on the absolute, and the others somehow exist on the fringes.” As we can see, we still have a long way to go!

I have often wondered how any religion can claim to hold absolute truth within its framework of prophets, scriptures, doctrines and dogmas. By the very definition of “absolute,” if anything can encapsulate it then it is no longer absolute. If a religion can capture it, that religion has now become bigger than the Absolute! Hindu teachings on this matter are very clear. They say, “At best even the most esoteric religions can offer only a ‘perception of the Absolute’—but never the Absolute.”

As one can see, if the mainstream religions were to adopt this idea, the sharp edges dividing the major religions would disappear. This simple idea says, “Your prophet and scriptures suit you and are best for you, my prophets and scriptures are fine for my purposes, so why threaten or feel threatened by each other?” This is the Hindu concept of pluralism.

Many of my Christian friends shudder at this proposal, as it suggests that the prophets or the scriptures they hold so dear are a “perception” rather than the real thing. Why should this be? The reason I come up with is that we human beings exhibit serious weakness in spiritual matters. The Absolute is elusive in all religions; we try very hard to grasp it but fail. So in our weakness we ascribe absolute stature to what we can grasp in our religion: the prophets, the scriptures, the doctrines and ceremonials. This is the source of our problem. We are not brave enough to recognize the necessary limitations of what we perceive as absolute. This is the change I advocate when I suggest, “We need to be truly religious in order to resolve the issue of religious strife.”

What Is Involved in Being a Pluralist?

Some interfaith colleagues have asked what is involved in being a “pluralist”?

Firstly, pluralism says that we do not have to water down our own faith or beliefs. In fact pluralism suggests that our faith is perhaps the most suited to *our* requirements, so there is no need to shop around or change direction. We do not have to emulate other faiths, as that may not be our way. We should hang on to our own path with full confidence and greater vigor.

Secondly, pluralism says that the validity of other faiths should not be taken as a compromise of our own faith. Do we not know that God is infinite? If he is present in other faiths that does not reduce his presence in our own faith!

In a way, pluralism already exists in an apologetic manner in all the mainstream religions. These religions accept a variation of approaches within their religion. A vast number of denominations and approaches are grudgingly accommodated within these faiths. Pluralism gives all these denominations full dignity to exist side by side and promotes the idea of extending this dignity to cover other faiths too.

Pluralism has never promoted the idea that we take bits of all religions and produce some mix of all faiths called pluralism... What a grotesque idea!

One Christian colleague said quite candidly: “No doubt we are nervous about taking on this idea of pluralism, but in a way we are relieved that it is being put across. Thank God for that!”

One of my interfaith colleagues suggested that even though pluralism sounds like a good idea it will not be easy for the theologians of the mainstream faiths to adopt it so easily. Why not be practical and focus on the common ground of humanity and develop interfaith ideals based on shared human values rather than through religious teachings? My response is: This is precisely what the outcome will be if the secular lobby gets its way. The secular lobby has been suggesting that religions are responsible for the serious problems we face today hence they should all be toned down. In this scenario religions would have lost out to the secular lobby.

A second criticism of pluralism comes from the “main weapon of all philosophers.” (Use logic to blow a hole in logic). In this instance it translates as: “But then Pluralism too is a dogma. Why should it be given a higher standing than Exclusivism?” Sounds wonderful but fails to hit the target in this instance. Pluralism by its own admission recognizes its limitations. It never said that the pluralistic approach is absolute in any way. It recognizes its own contextual nature. But then why invoke it? Because there is a great contextual need for it in the world we live in. Religions that promote exclusivist agendas just cannot co-exist without thumping each other! Hence the need to invoke this Hindu concept of pluralism.

I suggested to one colleague that we have two choices in this matter: either we adopt the idea of pluralism and incorporate it within all faiths quickly to diffuse the serious situation we face; or we will be singing the glories of pluralism only after some serious catastrophes. □

Atma, Self, and Individuation *Jungian Psychology and the Advaita Vedanta Philosophy*

Cathrine Ann Jones

Consciousness going out towards objects is mind.
That which turns towards the Self is pure Sattva.
—Sri Atmananda¹

In 1938, C. G. Jung on his only trip to India was scheduled to travel south and meet the great householder sage, Sri Atmananda (Sri Krishna Menon). The trip was arranged by Dr. Roger Godel, a noted heart specialist and friend of Jung. Alice Godel, his widow, later related this story to me in India. The night before their departure, Jung had a dream which persuaded him to leave

1. Atmananda, ed. by Adwayananda, *Atma Darshan/Atma Nirvritti*. (Austin: Advaita Publishers, 1983), p. 9.

India early, thus canceling his trip to south India. If it seems strange to us that a well-educated, professional man such as Jung should take a dream so seriously, we must recall that Jung had grown up in a family of psychics and trained under Sigmund Freud, all of whom paid significant attention to dreams.

Jung was not only disposed to be guided by dreams, but he was already of the opinion that Westerners should retain and adapt their own means of enlightenment, foregoing the ways of the East. The Western mystery cycle of the Holy Grail, which Jung was studying at the time of his Indian trip, is an example of the spiritual tradition that Jung felt Europeans would be safer following.

Wide Chasm Between East and West?

But why should Jung have made such a strong distinction? Was it because he was a minister's son? Might it be that he could not surrender his own identity as a Westerner? Is it really true that there is such a wide chasm between East and West? Can it not be leaped or bridged? In particular, how does Jung's approach to what he called "individuation," or finding one's Self, compare to the enlightenment of the East—specifically to Advaita Vedanta?

Advaita is a philosophy behind Hinduism. There is a humorous saying in India, "It's all right to be born in the temple as long as one does not die there." Hence, religion is viewed as a stepping stone to higher philosophy. Eventually one must go beyond all forms. This Vedantic tradition has been kept alive by such great sages as Adi Shankara (ninth century), Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda (who brought Vedanta to America in 1893), and Ramana Maharshi (d. 1950, inspiration for Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*). More recent examples are the householder sages, Sri Atmananda (1883-1959) who inspired Joseph Campbell, and Atmananda's son and successor, Sri Adwayananda (1912-2001), my own teacher for the past thirty years.

The very word *advaita*, a-dvaita, means "not double," not two, nondual. It marks the distinction among the three basic philosophies of Vedanta, the other two being Vishistadvaita, modified nondualism (developed by Ramanuja) and Dvaita, dualism (taught by Madhva and others). Nondualism is represented in the West by neoplatonism, kabbalah, Meister Eckhart, Ruysbroeck, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and other mystical traditions.

Although both nondualism and dualism are present in both East and West, it is popular usage to characterize the East as nondualistic and the West as dualistic: for the Advaitist, the world is within; for the Westerner, the world is without, separate from oneself.

Western man is held in thrall by the ten thousand things; he sees only particulars, he is ego-bound and thing-bound, and unaware of the *deep root of all being*. Eastern man, on the other hand, experiences the world of particulars and even his own ego, as a dream. . .²

This *deep root of all being* is given various names in Advaita: the Background, Pure Consciousness, Brahman, Absolute, or Atma (the real Self).

Atma is that changeless, one *rasa* (unbroken peace and harmony), into which thoughts and feelings merge. . . The *light* in the perception of sense objects is the changeless Atma, the One without a second which abides in filling all.³

Atma as Self is not to be confused with the individual soul or apparent I, which is called *jiva* in Sanskrit. Self or Atma stands for the non-dual Absolute itself.

Eastern View Often Incomprehensible to Jung

Jung flatly states that the Eastern man's "relations with the world is often incomprehensible to us." (Storr, 258) He goes on to describe how the Western attitude, with its emphasis on the object, tends to fix the ideal—Christ—in its outward aspect. This robs it of its mysterious relation to the inner man. Hence, the Protestant interpreters of the Bible refer to the Kingdom of God *among you* rather than the more linguistically correct *within you*. (Storr, 258)⁴ One can almost imagine a Janus split with one Western face gazing outward towards the world while the Eastern opposite turns inward. The Vedantist might say, "How can you fear a world which you create anew each moment?" To translate from *Paramarthasaram*, an ancient, authoritative Sanskrit work on Vedanta: "What is perceived is not different from perception and perception is not different from the Perceiver and . . . therefore the world is the Perceiver himself." (Atmananda, 36)

In Jung's Commentary on *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, he writes:

What, on a lower level, had led to the wildest conflicts. . . from the higher level of personality now looked like a storm in the valley

2. Jung, C.G. *The Essential Jung*. Ed. Anthony Storr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 257.

3. Atmananda. *Atma Darshan/Atma Nirvriti*. Ed. Adwayananda (Austin: Advaita Publishers, 1983) p. 12.

4. Liddell & Scott give "in, within, inside" for *entos*. Oxford Annotated RSV translates "among." Reference is to Luke 17:21.

seen from the mountain top. . . instead of being in it one is above it (Storr, 227).

This implies a certain detached perspective which seems to align Jung's thinking with that of India. However, Jung continues, "But since, in a psychic sense, we are *both* valley and mountain, it might seem a vain illusion to deem oneself beyond what is human" (Storr, 227). Is it an illusion then to transcend both valley and mountain? The Indian sage would say that it is not the outer world that holds us, but rather our perspective and consequent attachment to it. All that is needed is to alter one's perception, to see deeply that one is not the body, not the mind, but Atma, the Self. This concept is portrayed over and over again in the Sanskrit texts and rests at the very heart of Vedanta. Here is one sloka (verse) from Shankara's "Six Stanzas on Nirvana":

I am not mind, intellect, thought, or ego;
Not hearing, taste, smelling or sight;
Not ether or earth, fire or air.
I am the soul of Knowledge and Bliss,
I am Shiva, I am Shiva.

Shiva stands here for the Absolute. All that is needed then is to see deeply that one is not the body, not the mind, but Atma, the Self. The method which leads to enlightenment, according to Vedanta, is simply to shift the false identification with the body and mind to Atma. "It is not the objective world that presents obstacles...but the false stand one has taken up" (Atmananda, 27).

To do this, three yogas are used: Jnana (knowledge), Karma (action), and Bhakti (devotion). This is no mere intellectual knowing: head and heart must combine to fully understand the Truth. To realize this, the relationship between a living guru and the disciple is paramount. Even a great soul like Shankara said, "I am the Absolute through the words of my guru." Unlike other attachments, this relationship only strengthens. One might say that this is *the* attachment to overcome all other attachments.

The Real Victory

Vedanta then offers a final solution as illustrated in the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. The Gita "points to a path by which man unites his finite self with Infinite Being" as stated by Krishna Prem in *The Yoga of the Bhagavad Gita*.⁵ In the dialogue between guru and disciple, Krishna represents the higher Self or Atma as it imparts wisdom to Arjuna, the individual soul or jiva. Hence, these two figures symbolize the human and the divine, man and God, Arjuna and Krishna. Kurukshetra is

5. Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavad Gita* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1958).

simply the battleground of life wherein the soul struggles to reach the divine. The aim then is not to escape but to see through the battle of life as one engages in it fully. This is the real victory. To do this is to align the lower self of body and mind with the higher self or Atma. It is essential to grasp that true knowledge is to be found within. Hence, Krishna's work, as indeed that of any great teacher, is to bring to birth that which already exists within.

This is echoed in some of our own western poets. Robert Browning in his poem, *Paracelsus*, reminds:

Truth lies within ourselves, it takes no rise
From outward things, whate'er you may believe
There is an inmost center in us all
Where Truth abides in fullness. . . (Prem 24).

Shelley adds, "The One remains, the Many change and pass" (Prem 24).

(to be continued)

Considering Ruins

A shining crystal movement
has blown the clouds
from the sky.
The stars

command
both the eye and heart
piercing the frozen night.
Vast glimmering

snows powdering over
a broken field
form yet another
sediment

between the air and scrap
concrete and re-bar
resting upon the cold earth:

In the archaeology of light
what shining within us
is it

into which
all that is solid
dissolves?

—Tom Cabot

Discussion

Care for Elderly Vedantists

Cliff Johnson

Remember those early accounts, either fictional or reported in the newspaper: “. . .and he caught cold, took to his bed, and died?” Yes, in earlier years people died from illnesses that modern medicine now regards as simply a small bump on the road to the eventual exhaustion of the life force (to put it kindly). In the fifteenth century, the average life expectancy was twenty-eight years; today it is closer to eighty. True, we now live longer and perhaps healthier, but unless we are struck down in the bloom of life, we will *all* grow old.

Therefore, the issues addressed by Edith and Beatrice in the past issue of this magazine deserve serious attention. I am in close agreement with both of their views that we are indeed happier if we are in the company of our friends and loved ones, many of whom would presumably share our deepest spiritual beliefs. Although it is not out of the question that a facility such as proposed by Edith and amended by Beatrice could eventually be obtained, the expense would be enormous. Several of us, who were members of SRV in earlier years, investigated just such a plan. Not only were we unable to find a location in a place geographically suitable, but the projected cost of such a facility was simply not feasible. In addition, we questioned whether many Vedantists would have the funds to move to new quarters, particularly if there were to be a hospital facility attached to it.

Even more important, would any elderly person want to undergo the trauma of a move to a new dwelling? If they are at all like my dear, departed mother whom I many times heard saying, “Oh, how I love my kitchen!”, then I suspect not. Someone once said that stronger even than the ego is attachment to our environment. Unless the rent skyrockets or rock music shakes the walls, we do not like to move.

Creating a Foundation

What I propose is the creation of a Program to Assist Elderly Vedantists. The Program would be structured as part of the Vedanta societies and funded by a combination of support from the general fund of the Society as well as individual contributions through outright donations and bequests as well as grants. The Foundation would serve in the following ways:

1. A Program volunteer, to be called a Caretaker, would be appointed to visit the member in his or her own home on a regular basis.

2. If it was determined that the member was suffering any financial distress, the Program would evaluate that need and attempt to meet the need within its capabilities.

3. The Caretaker would arrange for visits from a swami should the elderly member wish it.

4. If the member is not housebound, the Caretaker would arrange visits with other Vedantists in the surrounding area by providing transportation and other necessities to make the get-together an enjoyable experience.

5. The Caretaker would also provide, as required, any immediate needs such as shopping, pleasure trips, medicines, reading, etc.

6. Above all, the Caretaker would provide friendship and spiritual support. For that reason, such an assignment must be carefully considered before acceptance.

Caretakers should receive remuneration from the Foundation for their expenses of transportation, sundry items, etc.

The care of the elderly has always been and will continue to be a major social problem. This is particularly true in the case of those afflicted with Alzheimer's, which seems to be the disease of our time. There are now a reported seven million cases of this disease in the U.S. alone, and this figure is expected to double by 2020.

I know the woman to whom Edith referred in her article; a particularly tragic case since she was an extremely alert and capable woman when healthy. How would a Caretaker address this case? Unless he or she was a skilled professional, it would be best left to those who are. Of course, there are always exceptions—particularly if the Caretaker had a particularly close relationship with the member.

Yes, it is not pleasant to experience the gradual diminishment of our faculties, the twinge here, the ache there. Most of us have seen how disease or simply old age can reshape our friends and loved ones—those we once knew as active and vigorous. We who are presently able-bodied, unless we are fortunate to ease out of this body without so much as a whisper, will most likely experience a similar decline. Therefore, those of us who *are* still active and vigorous owe to those who are not some degree of comfort and companionship during the final, and often painful, chapters of their lives.

□

Evolution and Vedanta

1. Richard Simonelli

I liked William Conrad's article on "Evolution and Vedanta" in the Fall, 2002 issue very much. It asks questions of human origins and meaning involving two great systems—Western science and Vedanta. It has the

potential to open up a conversation that is long overdue. Western science is a system of secular knowledge, and Vedanta is a system of meaning. What bridges can be discovered between the two?

In entering this conversation I would like to say that the scientific evolution described in the article is that of today's scientific orthodoxy. It is science's best guess about the origin of life.

Darwin's evolution is characterized by natural selection, survival of the fittest, and mutations, taking place in a long, gradual, uniformitarian framework, resulting in continuous Darwinian trees of life going back three and a half billion years. But this traditional understanding neglects catastrophism. Many are coming to believe that catastrophism plays a crucial role in Earth's history that is far more than the peripheral side issue suggested even by current concepts of punctuated evolution. Peter Ward and Donald Brownlee, in *Rare Earth* (Springer, 2000), explain why, although microorganisms may be widespread in the universe, complex animal life—favored by catastrophes—may be quite uncommon.

From this understanding, the continuous Darwinian trees of life are being seen as increasingly untrue, and some of the conventional interpretations of evolution, certainly true up until recently, are being questioned now.

We Are That Which We Seek

For me, what some of this suggests is that the notion of a “theory of life” has to be taken very much with a grain of salt, with a light touch, and with a sense of humor. In a speculative field like evolution, today's theory is tomorrow's outdated book. I feel that as practitioners of Vedanta or other spiritual paths, we have to be careful about “theories.” From the point of view of our practice, sadhana, or contemplative life, we, and all that is around us, ARE the complete “theory of life.” We don't need an intellectual construct for one because we are that which we seek. But theories of life might be useful to us as journeyers on the path if we can keep them in perspective.

I very much appreciate Vivekananda's understanding of this because his primary interest is that of meaning and deepest truth—something that touches us personally. I was fascinated to read that according to Swami Vivekananda, the cause of evolution is desire. As someone with a Buddhist background, I was taught through the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha that 1) Life is suffering, and 2) The cause of suffering is desire. Could this be the same desire that Swami Vivekananda talks about? If so, then is evolution connected to suffering?

The Buddha went on to teach that there is an ending to suffering by walking the path. If we walk a spiritual path properly and completely, and find the liberation that might be there for us, does that mean that in some way evolution ends for us? Is the root meaning of Vedanta, “the ending or

completion of knowledge,” somehow also connected with the ending of the evolutionary process in ourselves, or potentially in whole living systems if that kind of liberation is achieved?

My own experience of that pristine connection we can make, which goes by many names in different traditions, is that “THAT” does not evolve. So notions of striving for perfection over eons of gradualistic Darwinian-like development, whether spiritually or physically speaking, are not necessarily the final word. Just as catastrophism in earth history produces mysterious jumps in the fossil record, so may we, through sudden insight, drastically shorten or end the spiritual evolutionary process. In a nondualistic reality, physical and spiritual evolution need not be separated.

I believe the picture of Darwin’s classical, endless, gradual, uniformitarian development process will soon be shown to be only partially true because sudden catastrophic events play a key role in earth history. In a similar way, sudden spiritual events can collapse the process of spiritual evolution for an individual. The notion of “as above, so below” points to a remarkable similarity between the physical world on the one hand, and the world of spirituality, on the other. We, and nature, co-evolve. Or, through liberation, simply ARE.

Mr. Conrad’s article opens the door for some great dialog because of the specific knowledge that is presented here by juxtaposing two systems that are not often related. I hope he will continue to share in this way and am grateful for his skill. □

2. William A. Conrad

Richard Simonelli has caught the purpose of my article, “Evolution and Vedanta.” Let the dialog begin. There are few ideas with so many ramifications as evolution. One ground rule: the standpoint from which one is speaking should be constantly specified. This will avoid a lot of needless discussion.

Simonelli says that scientific evolution speaks of the origin of life. Not so. Evolution speaks only of the development of organisms due to random variations in their genes—once genes were developed—and of the winnowing of individuals by so-called natural selection. Natural selection is not a force or entity. Rather, it is the consequence of numerous random events in the environment such that there is a differential survival of organisms with successful adaptations. I would like to make a side remark on the origin of life question. The virus for polio has recently been synthesized from off-the-shelf chemicals following the recipe for its DNA. It has been over 150 years since Woehlers first synthesized urea, an organic chemical made by living creatures. Let us see what the next 150 years brings before dismissing scientific theories and experiments on the origin of life.

Darwin himself believed in gradualism, but he was distressed by the Cambrian explosion some 570 million years ago when multicellular life suddenly diversified. His attitude was an over-response to the catastrophism of his time. The geological record of development of species has large gaps, as expected, but, as Stephen Jay Gould points out, in the case of mammals, there is abundant evidence. According to Gould, though others dispute this, the impact of a comet 65 million years ago, which deposited the iridium layer discovered by Alvarez, triggered the Cretaceous extinction of the dinosaurs and other species and gave mammals their opportunity to develop. One branch evolved into *homo sapiens*. Apparently the comet gave us our chance.

DNA Evidence Corroborates Evolution

Simonelli says that “continuous Darwinian trees of life are being seen as increasingly untrue.” Since he is not specific, no comment is possible. However, despite the sparseness of the geological evidence, DNA evidence is a beautiful corroboration of evolutionary ideas. If one wants to know what a specific human gene does, you can look at how it works in yeast or in the roundworm *caenorhabditis elegans* which has about 4500 genes. We share common ancestors with these creatures showing a continuity over unthinkable periods of time. Evolution is not a speculative field. It is very much grounded in hard evidence and is the best guiding principle, for example, for medical discoveries, neurology, etc.

Turning now to Simonelli’s spiritual ideas. I do not understand what he means by “we. . . ARE the complete ‘theory of life’.” A theory cannot be embodied in a person since theories explain the organization of facts. To say we are a theory is to reify an abstraction, i.e., to take a concept as a concrete substance. Perhaps he means that the spiritual history of an illumined individual is a complete theory of life, but perhaps not.

Considering evolution, suffering, and the question of a parallel between biological and spiritual evolution. Evolution, as the word is used in biology, happens to populations, not to individuals. It is a matter of genetic variation and the winnowing of organisms with given variants under pressure of the environment. Those organisms less well adapted to their environment form a diminishing fraction of the population and may be extinguished. This poor fit could, perhaps, be seen as a kind of “suffering.” But in general “evolution,” as the word is used in Vedantic spirituality, means something quite different from variation and selection. It means something closer to what in biology is called “development” and “maturation.” It is important to be careful when we try to work out parallels between the natural order and the spiritual order, not too jump too quickly to claiming, “as above, so below.”

In closing, I thank Simonelli for his compliment and for grasping my intent. Let the dialog continue. □

Book Reviews

Universal Message of the Bhagavad Gita: An Exposition of the Gita in the Light of Modern Thought and Modern Needs, Volume 1

by Swami Ranganathananda

Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta

Introduction

Index

519 pp. casebound \$14.00 2000

Swami Ranganathananda is the present President of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. This commentary on the Bhagavad Gita was originally a series of Sunday discourses from 1988-1990, given in Vivekananda Hall of the Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad, to more than 1200 auditors drawn from a cross-section of the city's population. Delivered extempore, the lectures were recorded and widely distributed as audio and video cassettes. This transcription for print publication was made by Swami Mumukshananda, President of the Advaita Ashrama in Mayavati, with the assistance of Swami Satyapriyananda of the Ramakrishna Mission and Miss Dana Sugu, a Sanskrit scholar, and thoroughly edited by Swami Ranganathananda himself.

The present volume is the first in a series of three and consists of a 60-page introduction and the first four chapters of the Gita. Each verse is presented in the original Sanskrit, transliterated, translated into English, and explained word by word and developed thematically. The commentary, in the appropriate philosophical and theological contexts, expands into a discussion of contemporary problems and modern ideas, with recommendations and exhortations.

The Study of Selfhood

Typical of this treatment would be the discourse on the famous verses 19-20 in Chapter Two, the ones that Emerson turned into his own poem: "If the red slayer think he slays, or the slain think he is slain. . ." Focusing on the words *ajo*, "unborn," *nityah*, "eternal," and *purano*, the "ever fresh Ancient One," the swami speaks not only of the individual human soul but of the national character of India, so old yet constantly renewing itself, testifying to the immortal Self which "even God has not the power to destroy." He goes on to speak of the power to know this Self, which is the unique feature of the human being, a power which also the Delphic Apollo urged on us, saying "Know yourself (*gnothi seauton*)." This is basic advice to us today, for only so can we attain the much needed ethical purity consequent on this study of selfhood. Contemporary science recognizes the centrality of such study, both for itself and for understanding the relation of the observer to the world

observed. This is an example, as the author says in his introduction, of how the 700 verses of the Gita are “full of beautiful ideas, so relevant to the times in which we are living.”

The Introduction includes a presentation and commentary on the *Gita Dhyana Slokas*, which may not be familiar to all American Vedantists. These are nine verses intended for meditation prior to studying the Gita itself. Explaining them gives the Swami the opportunity to expatiate on the *jnana mudra*, which is mentioned in the verse saluting Sri Krishna [17-19]. Krishna is seen holding his hand in this pose made by pressing the tips of the thumb and forefinger together and extending the remaining fingers, thus displaying the virtue of the opposable thumb, key to the human being’s technical skill and opening the way to knowledge.

The value of knowledge is a favorite theme of the Swami, who holds that all knowledge is sacred, its presiding deity being Sarasvati, who offers the world everything from the holy scriptures to carpenter’s tools, making no distinction between sacred and secular. Learn to worship her properly, says Swami Ranganathananda, by going to university and studying. Ritual *arati* alone will not do it [19] .

Later, discussing the Gita verses themselves, the Swami takes up this theme again, urging the training of a strong, steady mind, which, he says, is the objective of all education and religion and needs to be asserted repeatedly. To attain our ideals in this life, training of the mind in knowledge and moral values is essential [255-56].

How Action and Inaction Complement Each Other

But Krishna is insisting that Arjuna involve himself in the war, in action—which the Gita sets in counterpoint to knowledge as such. “If knowledge is superior to action, why have me waste myself in this terrible action?” asks Arjuna. This has been the recurrent question in Indian civilization, says Swami Ranganathananda, and often *naiskarmya*, non-action, has won out, not only for the sannyasins but also for the householders. But this was the ruin of the nation, says the Swami, because the relation was not correctly understood: “It is only in the modern period that the Gita is being correctly understood through the powerful teachings of practical Vedanta by Swami Vivekananda” [255]. Life requires action, knowledge eventuates in action, action is based on knowledge, and “inaction” (the calm, ego-free mind) is discovered in the very heart of righteous action. Working out this “mysterious” [260] complementarity of action and inaction is the subject of the rest of the book.

Toward the end of this first volume the Swami calls us to take up the great challenge of assuming our part in the cosmic process, even as we are also the observer (*saksi*) of this process. The universe of which we are a tiny element

we are able to understand with our mind, encompassing that which encompasses us, “the greatest mystery of the human being” [479]. This power of consciousness is the source of our reality, but we need to cultivate it and come to realize that this same consciousness is also the source of the whole universe: Knowledge projecting as action, action developing itself to gain/become knowledge. Begin this pursuit of jnana, concludes Swami Ranganathananda, even as a small child in primary school. “Continue this pursuit of jnana, eventually you will get the highest jnana, undifferentiated, free from all limitations. This is God in Vedanta” [481].

This gives a taste of the wisdom and energy vibrating in this book. It is a splendid companion to the Gita, very appropriate for American Vedantists, striving to learn this Song of the Lord in the symbiosis of karma and jnana.

—Beatrice Bruteau

View from the Center:

**The Lectures of Swami Vivekananda on a Universal Spirituality
Revised & edited from the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda
by Swami Brahmavidyananda
Temple Universal Publishing, www.templeuniversal.com
195 pages paperback \$14.95 2003
Distributed by Vedanta Catalog, www.vedanta.com, 800-816-2242**

As Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke) has documented in her six-volume work, *Swami Vivekananda in the West*, Vivekananda had a loose package of themes which he would present in the different Western cities he visited, no doubt to introduce Westerners in a more or less organized way to the then quite unfamiliar philosophy and religion of Vedanta. Almost invariably, universal religion occurred in these packages, often at the beginning of the series. While the manuscripts of many of these lectures are lost to us, we do have some of the materials given in New York in the winter-spring of 1896, in London in the summer-fall of 1896, and in Pasadena in 1900.

Swami Brahmavidyananda of the Vedanta Society in Hollywood has selected, revised, edited and collated the seven lectures that most completely expound the subject of universal religion. In order to make these talks accessible to any interested person, he has slightly abridged the text, modernized the syntax and added headings within the text to help new readers get and keep oriented. A short glossary of Sanskrit terms at the back will doubtless help in assimilating the swami's ideas. This format leads us quite effortlessly through the texts which, as with any such collection of Swami Vivekananda's thoughts on a given subject, come together with a power and impact that is much more than the sum of its parts.

The very brief introduction to the book emphasizes Vivekananda's Universal Religion as an impersonal "algebra" applicable to all religions, based as it is on a systematic study of human experience, growth and development, embracing all forms of knowledge and drawing together different forms into an evolutionary series.

Swami Vivekananda's vision is intensely humanistic and focuses always on the needs of the individual who seeks true religion and how to actualize it in everyday living. His approach is concerned, not with particular dogmas, but with experience, what he calls being and becoming. While such realization is experienced by each person in his or her own special way, the vision it imparts is universal, enabling such people to appreciate and accept sincere religious effort in any guise (including atheism).

Validity Is Sincerity and Perseverance, Not External Form

Vivekananda's dictum "unity in diversity" gives us the key to his idea that all religious forms are valid expressions of the divine, those now extant and those that are yet to come. Validity is not a question of external form but of sincerity and perseverance in practice. The individual, living and actualizing his or her own religion, automatically recognizes the beauty and supplementary value of other religions, and thus true harmony of religions can occur.

The lectures as arranged in this book weave a line of thought through these themes. Lecture #1 links renunciation and self-transcendence—the traditional purview of religion—to the development of higher states of consciousness. Lecture #2 enlarges on how to recognize and validate such levels of consciousness in our everyday world. In Lecture #3 the swami tackles the issue of how to make religion rational and considers the different conscious states as an evolving series, culminating in the experience of the impersonal God immanent in the universe and interconnecting all levels of existence.

In lectures #4 and #5 Vivekananda speaks of how we can consciously and deliberately unveil our innate divinity: through living life on universal principles, seeking unity with all beings and aiming to become prophets, the authentic spokespeople of religion. Everyone is capable of such attainment, because the same divinity is within all. Similarly, all paths or yogas, and all religions, have the capacity to bring out our divinity, to produce prophets. In addition, the religions represent different forms of the same universal religion and, taken together, create a whole picture of what religion can be most fully. The goal is to integrate all the features of the different religions so that they may mutually support and reinforce each other and at the same time be able to see and welcome new forms opening out from the divine source.

In Lecture #6, the Swami carries his thesis of the supplementary nature of the yogas to its logical conclusion that, to be complete spiritually, we need to develop all four sides of our nature by using all four methods together. To the extent that we master all four yogas we deepen our understanding of others and equip ourselves to be truly universal in our outlook. In Lecture #7, his survey of Krishna, Buddha, Christ and Muhammad works along similar lines, emphasizing the overriding value of personal experience over received opinion and unexamined lives. To the extent that we experience what the prophets experienced, we become like them and thereby expand our capacity to see and practice unity in diversity, the universal religion which, Swami Vivekananda assures us, already exists, if only we could see it.

Swami Brahmavidyananda regards this volume as the first in a series laying out Swami Vivekananda's work in the West under broad, general themes. It is a good beginning.

—Sister Gayatriprana

The Dalai Lamas: The Institution and Its History
By Ardy Verhaegen
With a Foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama
D.K. Printworld, (P) Ltd, New Delhi
Glossary, Appendices, Bibliography, Index
203 pp. Hard cover \$19.00 2002

We are all familiar with the amiable spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. He is an honored guest speaker at many conventions and interreligious gatherings. What few of his admirers are familiar with is the long history of the Dalai Lamas as an institution. Ardy Verhaegen with painstaking research has made available to interested readers a much needed document that will remain a remarkable achievement for years to come.

The book is divided into four sections: (1) developments preceding and leading up to the advent of the Dalai Lamas in the fifteenth century; (2) the history of the Dalai Lamas; (3) how the Institution works; and (4) events since 1959 when the present Dalai Lama was forced to flee from Tibet.

This scholarly text—it is supported by no fewer than 542 footnotes—is a remarkably readable treat, due in no small measure to the fine literary skills of Verhaegen. It was enthusiastically endorsed by His Holiness, the present Dalai Lama, who recognizes the importance of a work that joins others in keeping alive awareness of the plight of Tibetan refugees, victims of Chinese aggression in its ruthless takeover of a peace-loving, deeply religious nation.

When asked recently if he would return to Tibet if the opportunity offered, the Dalai Lama replied in the affirmative. Verhaegen adds:

Just what role he would play is something the Dalai Lama has spoken about on many occasions. He sometimes says he might be the last Dalai Lama but quickly qualifies that by saying it is up to the Tibetan people to decide whether or not the institution is useful to Tibetan culture. At any rate, he has also said he would prefer to see the Dalai Lama serve only as the spiritual head in Tibet and remain free of politics.

—James M. Somerville

Letters

Kudos for Sister Gargi

May I add some comments on *A Heart Poured Out*, the biography of Swami Ashokananda by Sister Gargi, so aptly reviewed by Cliff Johnson in a recent issue of "American Vedantist"? As I went slowly and with care through this almost Boswellian portrait of the Swami, I thought about how I had had ten years of association with him—and believed that I "knew" him. Sister Gargi's exhaustively revealing account made clear how mistaken I had been. For when new light from other angles is poured upon a subject, one sees that what one *thought* was the person "in the round" was not so at all: there are multiple and unguessed dimensions.

For example, it was surprising indeed that Swami Ashokananda had suggested, even instructed, the author to write about him at all. What most of his monks saw of this towering abbot was the "upstairs" Swami, scrupulously guiding his charges, of which I have written elsewhere. What we have here is the "downstairs" Swami, a priceless gift of humor and humanness, so fragile and even self-doubting. He taught us not to do scrupulous self-examination; perhaps he had seen its futility from having done much of it himself. Time and again he warned me against the habit of comparing myself with others: it seems in youth he had become familiar with its misery.

In the style of this writing there is a lovely warmth and flow not always present in the earlier well-known histories by Marie Louise Burke: here there is the immediacy of her personal experience of the Swami and the divine inspiration that attended him. Completing the reading, I wondered what book I could pick up next—for after this one, all seemed dull and flat.

Readers: don't stop with the Prologue, thinking "Oh, more hagiography!" for it isn't. And enjoy the bounty of such a flock of photographs.

Most of all I want to say that for those of us who fancied (and many did) that we could take Swami Ashokananda's personality as a mold into which to pour our own, the book will make evident how vain was that ambition.

Swami Yogeshananda
Atlanta

Tribute to Erik Johns

Everyone has experienced brief encounters in our personal relationships. Despite the relative brevity of such contact, certain uplifting qualities in that person can make a lasting and profound impression. Such was the case in my relationship with Erik Johns.

To the shock and sorrow of his family and friends, Erik died suddenly on December 11, 2001 when his home in

Dutchess County, New York burned to the ground.

A memorial service was held soon thereafter on Sunday December 16 at the Vedanta Society in New York City. I was fortunate to have attended this tribute to Erik. At the service, friends, family, and associates who knew him well spoke of their fond memories. Many of the speakers talked of Erik's love of Vedanta philosophy and how he lived his life in accordance with its highest principles. Among the traits cited were his kindness, generosity, and humility.

In the 2002 summer issue of this magazine, Reverend John G. Mills wrote of his warm personal memories of Erik. He reiterated the above-mentioned qualities that made Erik so loved and respected. In particular, he remembered Erik's caring nature, ecumenism, spiritual seeking, and his sensibilities as an artist and collector.

Although my contact with Erik was not deep, he touched me in unspoken ways. If I was so moved by his benevolent character in a relationship of relatively few and short occasions, I imagine many others who crossed his path in this way were similarly affected.

I met Erik in three circumstances.

The first circumstance was at meetings of the Board of Directors at SRV (Sarada-Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Association) in Greenville, New York in the late nineties. Erik was the President of SRV (now known as the Interfaith Temple). I was a member of the Board.

Erik conducted the meetings with consummate dignity. He had strong beliefs that SRV should preserve the ritual, sacredness, and purity of the Vedanta Centers. His view ran contrary to the majority view which he felt minimized ritual and maximized such humanistic and social activities as a 12-step recovery group, martial arts classes, and a food cooperative run by an outside community

group. It was not that Erik was against these positive and important activities, merely that there was an imbalance away from ritual. Despite Erik's deep feelings of regret about how SRV chose to operate, he nevertheless continued his position as President of the Board. His decision to do so rose from his abiding loyalty to what he perceived as more spiritual concepts for an SRV organization.

At SRV, Erik impressed me with his community spirit, conciliatory mindset, patience, and loyalty. I also learned from him that one could buy an apple crumb pie in upstate New York which was as good as any in Manhattan. Before every Sunday board meeting, on his drive up to Greenville from his home, which he called Moss Hill, he stopped at a roadside market along the Taconic Parkway. There he purchased two or three superdelicious apple crumb pies for our meetings.

The second place where I encountered Erik was at his home on several July 4 Swami Vivekananda birthday celebrations. Erik had offered the grounds of Moss Hill for forty consecutive years to so honor the great Swami. Like Reverend Mills, I too was impressed with the large scale of these events. A big outdoor tent was set up. Busloads of Vedanta lovers would arrive on the scene. The work and organization needed to feed, entertain, and arrange for holy talks and music for such a large group was awesome. His steadfastness, graciousness, and intense involvement hosting these holy festivities every year since 1962 up to the date of his death was truly inspiring.

The third circumstance where I was involved with Erik was when I submitted an essay to this magazine for publication. Erik was the editor who reviewed my essay. The article involved my spiritual interpretation of the universal attraction and draw to the ocean. After reading my essay, Erik suggested ever so gently that I rewrite the essay as a poem. The thought

of presenting my ideas in poem form had never occurred to me. Eric explained that a poem format would bring more animation and life to the subject matter. I followed Erik's advice. Erik assisted me in crafting a poem from the essay. In the end, I had to agree that the poem form was the better medium. The poem was published in Volume 4 of the spring 1998 issue. I was grateful for Erik's involvement in my publication.

From my companioning with Erik in the above three situations, I came away with warm and respectful feelings. He was always a gentleman, never ostentatious. This man was a true servant of the Lord. His motives were pure. In his humble way he was an outlet for God's Life, Love, and Intelligence.

Michael Isaacs
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