

## Editorial

### *Kindling the Fire: Celebrating Vedantic Teachers II*

Our request for additional material on great Vedantic teachers and how they affected the lives of the writers elicited several responses from our readers and contributors. Swami Yogeshananda gives us inspiring reminiscences of Swami Shraddhananda, who came to America to assist Swami Ashokananda in San Francisco and stayed on to become the first head of the Vedanta Society of Sacramento when it became an independent center. Cliff Johnson shares with us entries in his diary relating to his guidance under Swami Prabhavananda, founder and first head of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. The second part of Sister Gayatriprana's essay on Swami Pavitranaanda gives an overview of his work as head of the Vedanta Society of New York and also her own deeply personal reading of his role as a teacher. By permission of the publisher and the author, we reprint selected entries from Sister Gargi's *A Disciple's Journal*, detailing her training under Swami Ashokananda when he headed the Vedanta Society of Northern California. The book was reviewed in our last issue. John Schlenck recalls a pivotal meeting with Swami Madhavananda, then General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order, which removed an obstacle to the writer's spiritual understanding and practice.

All of these teachers shared an intense desire to kindle the spiritual life of whoever came to them with sincerity and earnestness, and an eagerness to pass on to their students the great inspiration they had received from the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. This eagerness echoed the pent-up yearning of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother to share their spiritual treasure, which found expression and fulfillment in their extraordinary love and training of their disciples.

Longing and readiness to awaken spiritual seekers can also be found in teachers of other traditions. Douglas Weaver's article, "Vedanta and the Method of Zen," gives accounts of Buddhist teachers who were ever ready to share their illumination with students who were prepared to receive it. Beatrice Bruteau, in her review of Rabbi Robert Levine's *There Is No Messiah and You're It*, shows the author's bold attempt to transform the concept of the (external) Messiah into a call for each of us to become the promised Messiah, to "rouse our own divine fire and fan it to others." Bruteau also reviews Swami Adiswarananda's *Meditation and Its Practices: A Definitive Guide to Techniques of Meditation in Yoga and Vedanta*, which demonstrates the ongoing commitment of teachers in the Vedantic tradition to awaken and guide spiritual aspirants.

—The Editors

# *Swami Shraddhananda*

## **Swami Yogeshananda**

I first met Swami Shraddhananda when I returned to San Francisco from Southern California in 1956. Swami Ashokananda had succeeded in bringing him there as his second assistant. The former had chosen him for this, having a high regard for the *Udbodhan* editor and his many talents. He had also known the swami when he was a student. Swami Shantaswarupananda, the first assistant, was well occupied with the Berkeley Center and regular visits to Olema. Swami Shraddhananda now gave lectures and classes in San Francisco and also at Olema and in Sacramento.

He was holding a morning class for the four or five of us in the living room at the Old Temple when I re-entered the San Francisco monastery. We were completing the study of the text *Vedantasara* which Swami Ashokananda had discontinued, probably in 1946. Although there was a difference in style between the two in methods of conducting the class, the acuity of Swami Shraddhananda's intellect was apparent at once. He had a thorough grasp of the philosophy in all its ramifications, logical exposition, a fine memory, and deep resources from previous scriptural and literary study. When we were studying the three states of consciousness (waking, dream, deep sleep), Swami Shraddhananda once expressed his opinion about the necessity for sleep—that it was a gift of God, and should be accepted willingly and gratefully and not done without. Someone reported this to Swami Ashokananda (whose attitude toward sleep was rather more austere and challenging).

But Swami Ashokananda was very proud of his younger assistant, praised him to everyone, and gave him full support and a lot of freedom. The only concern about the swami's conduct of his office that the senior swami expressed, of which I was aware, was the extent of his correspondence. It was indeed voluminous because of his long years as secretary to the President of the Order and his other posts. He had made many friends, and one may easily imagine their importunities. I believe Swami Ashokananda (who was never much of a correspondent) thought he might spend less time taking care of all that mail.

### **His Life in Sacramento Begins**

Before long, the assistant swami was spending much of his time in Sacramento, as the plans for founding a center there took shape, serving that small group of devotees who had subscribed to the idea. At this time I, too, was sent to Sacramento. I do not recall exactly Swami's weekly routine. He

would be there for Sunday to give the discourse. In midweek he spoke at the Old Temple in San Francisco or he gave monastic classes at Olema. His relationship to the brahmacharis and probationers was close to the ideal: He was elder brother, always acknowledging their technical savvy on work matters, consulting, seeking advice, ready to give counsel, but referring them to Swami Ashokananda where questions of very personal spiritual guidance arose.

The actual building of the Sacramento Center as regards external operations was undertaken by the workers under the direct guidance of Swami Ashokananda, usually by telephone from San Francisco. Swami Shraddhananda seemed to know exactly where to fit in to this. Once in a while he would put on some work clothes and pitch in with us on the work. In my mind I still see him suddenly appearing and pushing a wheelbarrow of soil to do his bit with the endless garden tasks. Difficult ones seemed to offer him a welcome challenge, and one had the impression that this had been his way in the whole of spiritual life.

### **Teaching the Monastics**

Surprising to me now, and probably to others, is the fact that we were able to have class with him at several periods, even in those hectic years of building. These were among the richest spiritual and intellectual experiences of my life. He was a master of the *shastras* (holy writings) and in order to teach us from the *Panchadasi* he ordered from England copies of the Shanti Sadan translation, the only one then available, a large paper-bound mimeographed affair. Of course he made many improvements in the translation. Someone would type out the new versions of some of the verses and we would paste them into our books. Before that, Upanishads and chapters of the Gita were dealt with, and the *Mandukya Karika* (Gaudapada's commentary on the Mandukya Upanishad). In the years I spent there this was the final book studied. By that time the library had been finished and that was where we had our class. We were very particular about the text, discussing and trying to grasp every subtlety. Someone would raise a question. Swami would check the original and find that there was indeed a little flaw in the translation. At last it was agreed by all: the *Karika* should be retranslated. His superior knowledge of the English language was the key to all of this, his sharp intellect as well and his retentive memory. Monks in India later told me that, had the swami remained there he would surely have been made Principal of the Training Center or given some similar post. He was not hesitant to talk about scientific concepts and the supposed conflict of these with Vedanta. John Dobson was perfecting his book on Advaita Vedanta and modern physics. He asked Swami Shraddhananda to read it, which he did. When John

asked for his comment, Swami grinned and said, “It must mean something to somebody.” John tells this story with relish.

### **Swami and the Women**

Among the monks of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Shraddhananda was one who gave women a high place. He often visited the convents in California and endeared himself to the nuns with his respect and affection. He encouraged women devotees to express themselves, gave them significant responsibilities, talked about his associations with the women who knew Holy Mother and of course about Mother herself.

Swami showed the same affection to the men who were temporary visitors of a month or a year as to the permanent monastic members. His affection was not a demonstrative one, or highly visible. Rather it ran, quite evidently, beneath the surface. One American swami tells me that when Swami Shraddhananda was on a visit to his center he was meditating in the shrine room when the latter came in and sat for meditation. Within minutes he felt the raising of his own consciousness to a deeper level of absorption.

He very rarely scolded anyone, being in this respect the converse of Swami Ashokananda. Once we were talking about methods of training, and someone mentioned that Swami Ashokananda had remarked that if we thought his methods were hard we should take a look at those of Swami Vivekananda, which were scathing. Swami Shraddhananda smiled and said, “I would have run away.” He felt that if his own teacher, Swami Shivananda, had been of that nature it would surely have frightened him off.

### **The Play of Esthetics and Humor**

Swami Shraddhananda loved formal ritualistic worship, and one had the feeling that he could hardly wait until there was a proper shrine built in Sacramento. We meditated in those days in the future foyer, wrapped in blankets in winter, accompanied by one kerosene heater. When the first shrine was ready for use (it now sits at the foot of the foyer stairs) Swami performed a form of five-item worship on Sunday mornings before the gathering of the “pioneers” who came for the lecture. I think his pattern of worship evolved, so to speak, into the final form followed today.

All of us know the swami as a musician, a singer of Bengali devotional songs, often accompanying himself on the harmonium. In Sacramento, he was at first not quite sure if the devotees would care for that, but soon his doubts were overcome and he made the congregation accustomed to it. Swami also encouraged us in Western music, particularly me, as I played and sang in those days. He asked me to work up and lead a little “choir” to sing for Christmas and eventually for the Sunday services when the Center had

opened. Over the years he wrote many letters to me, one of them with green ink on very exotic paper; no prosaic man, he! Having a mischievous sense of humor, he expressed it in many ways. At one point, writing to me about the possibility of my taking sannyasa in the future, he suggested a name for me: Budbudananda (*budbud* means bubble in Bengali) “He who feels joy bubbling up from his heart day and night,” he said.

### **Admiration for Lincoln**

Swami was, as many others will testify, a great admirer of Abraham Lincoln. In these early years his interest was just beginning, but he was deep into a biography (I cannot, alas, recall which one) of the great man, and would read passages to us to demonstrate the President’s spiritual nature. He was particularly interested in one dramatic dream near the end of Lincoln’s life. In a letter of 1960, he wrote to me that he was reading a book called *Great Captain*, a collection of three novels about Lincoln by Honoré Morrow. “Lincoln,” he says, “was surely a man of God—a great karma yogi.” Later, as we can see in some of his letters, when he was a bit free to travel he would make sure he saw the “pilgrimage places” associated with President Lincoln.

### **His Letters**

Let me then turn to some of the letters which I have kept:

In reply to my first letters from India, he gave this advice in 1966: “Be patient. Remember the hundreds of young men and women who are working in distant villages of India as Peace Corps volunteers. Remember the thousands of Americans who are fighting in Vietnam. Don’t be homesick.” Later in the same year: “Don’t lose patience. Remember: endure, endure, endure.” Then he quoted a little rhyming couplet in Bengali which means, “One who endures survives; one who does not is destroyed.”

In 1967: “May Sri Ramakrishna ever lead you to your spiritual fulfillment. Brahmacharya and sannyasa are only means to that great end. . . Don’t be too brave about the Indian climate . . . As you mention in your letter, some time in the future our centers in this country may have to start educational activities in order to give scope to the talents of brahmacharis and brahmacharinis. But right now there is very little scope unless they are given pulpit work! Your remarks about giving opportunities to individuals for the development of their specific talents sounds very reasonable, but you should remember that people do not join monasteries (at least in India) to develop their parts as editor or lecturer or engineer and so on. They come solely for spiritual development. I am sure any sannyasin or brahmacharin in India who is doing some administrative or lecturing or teaching job will not mind if he is transferred to some menial job. I am sorry I cannot agree with your

'advanced thinking' unless I am prepared to throw away all that. I have learned from the Gita and the lives of our great Masters about the spirit of karma yoga. 'Each is great in his own place' is the burden of Swamiji's *Karma Yoga*. To a spiritual seeker all work should be sweet as it is the Lord's work." About the Center there he added, "Our congregation is now in the neighborhood of 40 on Sundays and about 28 on Thursday nights. More young people are coming."

### **Advice to a Western Devotee in India**

In the fall of that year he wrote, starting his Vijaya letter in Bengali, "So you went to Kamarpukur and Jayrambati. I was overjoyed to hear it. And you bought sweets from the famous shop Thakur used to frequent. If you had stayed a few more days in Jayrambati you would have felt the atmosphere. The Mother is a shy lady, you know. She does not lift the veil on her face suddenly! Next time you 'go that side' make it a point to spend at least three nights there." (I did.) He also listed other holy places he thought I should visit. And then these extremely perceptive and cautionary words: "Please exercise tact and patience in expressing your opinions during conversation with people. Remember, the Indian people after Independence have become very sensitive to criticism. And they have their national pride too. Befriend them with sympathy and understanding. 'My religion is to learn.' Love India. Let them know that you are a friend of India."

I must have asked him a technical question about philosophy, for he replied in a letter of Spring 1969, writing to London, "Aggregate causal ignorance is *maya*. This *maya* is Isvara's Shakti. It is responsible for the three (creation, preservation and dissolution). Cosmic quiescence is only one phase of *maya*. The Brahma Sutras define Brahman as 'That from which the birth, etc., of the universe proceeds.' Isvara is Saguna Brahman. So He sleeps as He also does all the other activities pertaining to God, including responding to prayers. Hiranyagarbha can grant you just a few minor favors. In India there is only one temple of Hiranyagarbha or Brahma at a place called Pushkar in Rajasthan. . . There were 123 people at our Easter service this year."

"You will be glad to know," he wrote for Vijaya Day, 1969, "that we have started a Sunday school on Sep. 21. Sixteen children (age 6 to 12) have been enrolled." And he went on to tell me which devotees were doing what. In this same letter he mentioned the idea of swamis conducting marriage ceremonies and noted that it was not the custom in the Vedanta Society of Northern California to do so, but he saw no objection to "blessing" the married couple.

In 1973 he, Swami Prabuddhananda and Swami Asaktananda flew together from Los Angeles to the memorial service for Swami Nikhilananda, which he described to me. In that letter he wrote, "We are building a small

residential house near the northwest corner of our property, which will be named Ashoka Cottage. Mr. Reed and Ananda Chaitanya will live there.”

I must have sent a photograph in the following year, for his reply was typically teasing: “It was difficult for me to recognize you in the picture—you look like an octogenarian talking to another octogenarian about death! Come to California on some plea for a few months, and the sunshine of California will restore to you youth and color. I went to Hollywood for three days in the beginning of this year. Swami Prabhavananda looks very frail. He had just completed his 80th year, but his heart is as warm as ever and his mind too is very clear. He was very happy to see me.”

He had the management of the Berkeley Center also, in 1976, as a fill-in, when Swami Swahananda, its head, was appointed to head the Southern California Center. It would take some time to bring a new swami from India. This excerpt from a 1986 letter is indicative: “Regarding work, do whatever you can and have self-surrender to the Master. . . That is the only way for your mental peace under the circumstances. Read Swami Yatiswarananda’s *Adventures in Religious Life* as much as you can, and also Swami Madhavananda’s translation of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* with Shankara’s commentary. The deepest truths of spiritual life will come by *mananam* [cogitation]. I shall be praying for you every day.”

### **Nearing the End**

His health had already begun to fail. In that very year, 1986, he thought his end was near. “How I wish you could be here at parting days. . . but my wish is not worth half-a-penny! Physically, I am still alive (but I have little energy to do my substantive work any more. Most of the energy I have is spent in *shravanam*, *mananam* and *nididhyasanam* (hearing, reflecting and meditating). That is, of course, a great thing.”

“I am doing fairly well,” says a letter of 1990, “Though the congestive heart failure, the name the cardiologist has given my ailment, is not sleeping. But subjectively I feel stronger and plan to attend the General Annual Meeting in San Francisco this time, after a lapse of about six years.”

This is from his Vijaya letter of Oct. 5, 1990: “Yes, the Brahmachari who was sent here from St. Louis to help out in Swami Ganeshananda’s absence is a fine young boy and is helping a good deal in the kitchen and also in the gardens. My Seattle/Portland trip was very successful. Indeed, nothing is impossible. . . anything can happen. That is the first sutra of Vedanta. That is to say, there is really no causality. The Bible preached it when they made men rise up from the dead and 5,000 people appeased their hunger with five loaves of bread. So, don’t be surprised if one day I knock at your door in Ganges in person. Bhaktiji [Swami Bhaktimayananda] is doing quite well in spite of his double operation. Now one new ornament has been added to his

body—Parkinson's. He is not shaking too much. But his face is always glowing with the joy of God. I hope your visit to Merton's monastery, Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky, was rewarding. We are now preparing for Kali Puja in a super simple way, and then Jagaddhatri Puja, the Anniversary of the dedication of this temple. That will be a big thing. About fifty people will come from San Francisco and the Bay Area. I was glad to learn that you accompanied Swami Lokeshwarananda to the Lincoln country [in Illinois]. At one time I had a desire to write a Bengali book on Lincoln. Did you see the recent mini-series on the educational TV channel about the Civil War? I was fortunate to see it."

Swami Shraddhananda visited the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center in New York where I was caring for Swami Madhavananda. He was anxious to pay his respects to this senior and celebrated monk. We met again when he visited the London Center when I was in that monastery, and we had a discussion about attire for attending lectures, etc. The London mode at that time was quite relaxed; the hippie era had brought drastic changes to the appearance of the population. The swami, accustomed to the formalities of Northern California, looked askance at all this, expressing his doubts about the future of Vedanta.

I paid him a couple of visits in Sacramento after returning to the U.S.A. He was in his final illness, gray, stooped, slow and serious; nevertheless, he enthusiastically walked me around the Saints' Garden, proudly showing the shrines and shrubs. I owe him so much! □

## *Swami Pavitrananda: Head and Heart Combined in One Person*

**Sister Gayatriprana**

*(continued from the previous issue)*

In 1951 Swami Pavitrananda, then aged fifty-five, was sent to the United States as the head of the Vedanta Society of New York, which had remained without a leader for almost a year after the death of Swami Bodhananda, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda and a veteran of the American work after 44 years. Although the posting was "prestigious" on account of the fact that the New York Vedanta Society was the first ever founded by Swami Vivekananda (in 1894, three years before the founding of even the Ramakrishna Mission in Calcutta), Swami Bodhananda's advanced age and ill health had led to a



distinct lull in the work of the society. Himself middle-aged and always in delicate health, Swami Pavitrananda had to decide how best to rejuvenate the center and carry forward the work of Vedanta. In the nineteen-forties and early fifties other swamis in the West were starting monasteries and ashramas, writing important works, and making Vedanta known to a wider audience than previously. Such activities began particularly after the end of the Second World War and were no doubt urgently needed to meet the spiritual crisis of the West. As Swami Pavitrananda regularly visited with his friends—Swami Prabhavananda in Hollywood, Swami Ashokananda in San Francisco, Swami Akhilananda in Boston/Providence—and was, of course, cross-town neighbor to Swami Nikhilananda, the wunderkind of the literary scene in the West, he saw for himself all that was afoot in the American work of the Ramakrishna Order. He himself contributed to Swami Prabhavananda's magazine, *Vedanta and the West*, notably one of his most cherished works, an English translation of the letters of Swami Turiyananda.

### **Emphasis on Character Formation**

However, above and beyond all that he did externally, Swami Pavitrananda's temperament was quiet and introspective, although he had been, in his own way, a "shaker and mover" in India. For a few years after his arrival in New York, he went on the lecture circuit and engaged in outreach with religious figures and institutions in the city. However, what struck him as the greatest need in the West was the formation of character based on deeply experienced spiritual principle. Noting that not one truly serious candidate for spiritual life resulted from his tours and travels, he shortly decided to discontinue them and concentrate on building up the inner lives of those who found him under their own steam.

There was to be no monastery, no ashrama, no publications nor public events. To be sure, luminaries like U Thant, Ravi Shankar, Krishna Menon, Norman Cousins, Vincent Sheean, and Donald Z. Harrington (of the People's Church in Manhattan) would speak (or perform) at the Center occasionally, but the main emphasis was on work in the proper spirit, devotional exercises such as singing (to which several creative and performing artists were attracted), meditation, and a deep understanding of the scriptures. To this last end, Swami Pavitrananda convened, on evenings when public events were not scheduled, a class to which close and serious devotees were invited. There a portion of a text would be read out and the Swami would require each person present to offer an interpretation, a remark, or simply what had appealed to them most. There was seldom discussion, but sharing with other, serious seekers in that format was to open out vistas of meaning in the scriptures that merely listening to a lecture or talking casually among ourselves could never

have accomplished. Those present cherished those evenings above all else, and Swami Pavitrananda himself felt that welding together such a group was the most important work that he had ever done.

### **“You Are Americans, Not Indians”**

As in India, Swami Pavitrananda put heavy emphasis on pride in one’s own culture and dedication to living up to what was best in it. He would always say, “You are Americans, not Indians!” and discouraged pseudo-Hinduism in people he knew did not truly relate to the essence of Indian culture. There were no Sanskrit names, pranams, or dwelling on Puranic deities. One day a devotee made a bouquet of bright blue and yellow flowers and put them on the swami’s lunch table. He was enchanted by the vibrant color and happily remarked, “The person who made this can realize God!” The devotee, currently reading Hindu mythology, simpered, “Look, Swami! Those are the colors of Radha (yellow) and Krishna (blue)!” Immediately Swami Pavitrananda’s angelic smile disappeared, his eyes narrowed and he icily said, “Don’t talk rubbish!” This, not because he had no devotion for Radha and Krishna, but because he wanted, above all, that Westerners be true to their own archetypes and ideals. He felt very strongly that, as Indians had to work out Vedanta in terms of their millennial culture without let and hindrance from foreign interference, so Westerners would progress spiritually only when thoroughly grounded in the best of Western spiritual culture and not totally dominated by pre-existing Hindu forms.

### **Teaching through Singing**

Perhaps as a sort of bridge between Indian myth and the Western focus on human excellence, he would from time to time sing for us in the library some of the gems he had acquired in his sojourn and travels in the Himalayas, the songs of the poor hill people he so loved. One of these referred to Rama—like Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu in Indian mythology:

He in whose name Rama is seated—what does it matter whether he does formal worship or not?

He who has touched the feet of a saint—what does it matter whether or not he has visited a holy place?

He who has genuine compassion for one and all—what does it matter whether he gives a vast sum in charity or not?

He who constantly sees the vision of Rama—what does it matter whether he repeats the name of Rama or not?

In the same vein, he would also frequently sing the songs of Rabindranath Tagore, another champion of the divinity intrinsic to the human soul,

independent of stereotypical forms. One of these had been sung by Swami Vivekananda himself and was much loved by him:

Thou art the true, Thou art the good, Thou art All-Love;  
Thou art the blazing light amidst the encircling gloom.  
He who finds Thee always installed in his heart  
Is free from all woes and cares.  
How sweet it is to remember Thee, to meditate upon Thee, and to  
know Thee.  
He only can speak of it who has experienced it.  
He only knows to whom Thou hast made it known.

In these ways, his Western devotees could begin to see the possibilities for human evolution and transfiguration contained in the Indian mythic forms, otherwise so strange and exotic.

### **A Very Special Puja**

Another dramatic example of the same sort of teaching was how he celebrated Kali Puja, that most awesome of festivals. As we know, Swami Pavitranaanda was not a ritualist in any sense. The standard, yearly worships—of Durga, Holy Mother, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna—consisted of an hour of profound meditation followed by a few songs in his deeply moving voice and a gourmet breakfast masterminded by his French-Canadian devotees, the Genets. For Kali, however, he reserved a very special worship. In the library with his close devotees he would have read out “The Voice of the Mother” from Sister Nivedita’s *Kali the Mother*. This was, in fact, a compilation of the utterances of Swami Vivekananda when, aware of his impending death, he gave over all of his authority and power to Kali and lived, moved and had his being in the awareness of her presence:

Arise, my child, and go forth a man! Bear manfully what is thy lot to bear; that which comes to thy hand to be done, do with full strength and fear not. Forget not that I, the giver of manhood, the giver of womanhood, the holder of victory, am thy Mother.

My sport is unerring. For that alone set forth on the day's journey. Think it was for my pleasure thou camest forth into the world; and for that again, when night falls and my desire shall be accomplished, I shall withdraw thee to my rest. Ask nothing. Seek nothing. Plan nothing. Let my will flow through thee as the ocean through an empty shell.

Shrink not from defeat, embrace despair. Pain is not different from pleasure, if I will both. Rejoice, therefore, when thou comest to the

place of tears, and see me smile. At such spots do I keep my tryst with men and fold them deep into my heart.

Ask for no mercy for thyself, and I shall make thee bearer of great vessels of mercy to others. Accept bravely thine own darkness and thy lamp shall cheer many. Fulfill gladly the meanest service and leave high places unsought.

Strong, fearless, resolute—when the sun sets and the game is done, thou shalt know well, little one, that I, Kali, the giver of manhood, the giver of womanhood, and the withholder of victory, am thy Mother.

Here was a Kali who spoke unmistakably to the bold, the rational and at the same time, utterly surrendered soul, ready to sacrifice all for truth. Not the least of the impact of this “worship” was the very indrawn and exalted state into which Swami Pavitrananda would pass. The whole room would be filled with a tremendous sense of divine presence, as if Kali herself were present and speaking directly to every one of us.

### **Relating to Different Kinds of People**

In New York we were privileged to see how a single person could relate to an infinite variety of people and answer their deepest needs. Swami’s spiritual poise enabled him to relate totally to deep intellectuals, sophisticated entrepreneurs in silk suits and fur coats, typists, creative artists and emotionally disturbed young women, upset over some quarrel with a boyfriend. His translucent, profoundly detached intellect was perfectly balanced by a deeply accepting love, too subtle to be recognized by the merely sentimental. All who were open to what he had to give were enchanted by his sweetness, his pertinence to whatever was under discussion, and his unflinching vision of the divinity of whoever was before him. Stunningly beautiful women, humble bus drivers, housewives, artists and scientists could say, without any hesitation, “He saw me as a god/goddess. My beauty, talent, or humble circumstances simply did not exist for him.”

This was the final work of Swami Pavitrananda, whose whole life was the effort to integrate head and heart in the divine. Constricted at first by Hindu conservatism, he had found his natural milieu at Advaita Ashrama in the Himalayas, in which he could develop the two sides of himself and integrate them into a clear-headed and deeply concerned official of the Order. His coming to New York many years later was, as it were, the full opening of the lotus, to which bees with discrimination came from all over and absorbed the living, breathing reality of Vedanta.

*(Conclusion)*

# *Memories of Swami Prabhavananda*

**Cliff Johnson**

*The brief notes that follow were written down during my years of association with Swami Prabhavananda, my teacher, whose blessings, instruction and presence have, without a doubt, given my life its true direction and inner purpose.*

To a devotee who said he wanted liberation: “Don’t seek liberation; seek God. Turn your back on liberation.”

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Regarding the direct disciples of Ramakrishna: “These were not men, but gods come to earth.”

\* \* \*

Once I found him sitting alone on the patio of the monastery at Trabuco. For a minute he was silent. Then he said: “Ah, I wish that you could have met just one of the direct disciples. When I think of them now I weep.”

\* \* \*

We were walking along the monastery road. He said: “Since my illness [he had suffered from a recent heart attack] I have gotten into the habit of meditating at 3 a.m., lying in my bed. (With a smile) I used to tell Avoya [a nurse-devotee] ‘Please don’t disturb me. I am doing some thinking.’ But early this morning I really felt as though all souls are really one. As though we are all part of God.”

I: “That seems to be the same experience of saints and others.”

He: (strongly) “Yes, but I really felt this!”

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For a time, perhaps for a month or more, each time he visits the Monastery (Trabuco) he removes his shoes in front of the portrait of Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda) and closes his eyes for a moment. He goes through the same procedure in front of Vivekananda’s statue in the courtyard. Prior to doing this he says with a smile, politely, “Excuse me, please.”

\* \* \*

“I have had two separate experiences of samadhi,” he said. “The first, when the Presence was consciously felt; and the other when the personal aspect disappeared. Neither of these was possible without His grace.”

\* \* \*

I said to him once: “I look upon you as my father. In your company all fears fly away.”

“Yes,” he said, “but as your friend, too. We are friends also.”

\* \* \*

On one occasion, one of the nuns was engaged in a dispute and Swami became upset with her arguing and proceeded to scold her. But as he did so he glanced at me and smiled.

\* \* \*

“Once, “ he said, “when I was being examined for an operation, it was necessary for the doctor to make a painful incision. I was lying down. Suddenly I was overwhelmed with the thought of Brahman and lost consciousness. There was no feeling of bliss or joy—nothing. Then I suddenly realized that I was Brahman and beyond pain. They thought I was dead. The nurse began to cover my head, when I suddenly awoke. She ran out of the room!”

\* \* \*

For many years, each summer, he would be the guest in a large, beautiful home with a swimming pool and sumptuously furnished rooms. Then, one summer in 1967, he had a disagreement with the owner and moved to the home of a school teacher. Though the home was new and large, it was poorly built. The stairs squeaked and it had fewer amenities. “I like this place,” he said. He was untouched by the other home.

\* \* \*

In answer to a statement that there seems to be a consistent equation in Christianity between suffering and religion, he said: “I say that the task of religion is to take men beyond suffering.”

\* \* \*

“It is Krishna who gives one the intelligence to struggle for Him.”

\* \* \*

Tonight, at the Monastery, Swami said that Maharaj never asked him to perform any disciplines. “‘Just love me,’ he said. He asked us to do *puruscharan* [chanting japa for a specified number of times] for a year and perform the worship, but that was all. On three occasions he said for me to love him. Once I was facing the mantle when he approached me from behind and whispered in my ear: ‘Lovest thou me?’ I was paralyzed. When I turned, he was walking out the door.”

\* \* \*

“When I was a young boy—sixteen or seventeen—I was terribly sensitive. One time I actually took a fan away from a teacher who struck me with it—and struck him back! He was shocked. On another occasion, I actually struck at, but did not hit, a teacher when he made to strike me. But he understood [my temperament], and we became friends.”

\* \* \*

Once he said to me before he was to have a short operation: “Pray for me.” Later I said to him, “Swami, you know that I would give my life for you. What good are my prayers?”

“Everyone’s prayers are worth something,” he replied.

\* \* \*

On one occasion, and my heart is heavy as I write this, Swami remained in bed all day following the failure of a proposition I had submitted, with his approval, to the Board the previous night. It met resistance. Later he said to me: “I was sick over the way it was handled.”

\* \* \*

“Once I went to see M. [Mahendranath Gupta, author of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*] and told him: ‘Would you grant me a request.’ He said: ‘It is granted before you even ask it.’ I asked him, ‘Please close your eyes and meditate on the Lord.’ He smiled and said, ‘That is easy.’ After ten minutes or so, when I knew he was absorbed, I prostrated before him and touched his feet. He immediately jumped up with a start, and then affectionately collared me. He gave me a slap on the back and said, ‘You caught me there, you rascal!’”

\* \* \*

“I remember someone telling me that he knew of someone who had said that Swami Premananda taught us to be somebodies. ‘No,’ he answered, ‘he taught us to be nobodies.’”

\* \* \*

One night at the Santa Barbara Convent he suddenly said, as we entered the room, “I think I can say after more than fifty years as a monk that the final goal of life, above all else, is to love God.”

\* \* \*

In reference to Billy Graham, who was scheduled to speak at the Anaheim Convention Center: “How can he expect to reach the hearts of others if he cannot find God in his own heart?”

\* \* \*

Question: “You once said that you had learned, after more than fifty years as a monk, that the purpose of life is to love God. Is it true that we can only really love God after realizing Him?”

“When the experience of God comes,” he said, “you become confirmed in your faith and love grows. This I can say from experience. If you meditate on Him you become convinced he is here (pointing to his heart). You begin to think of Him. At last you begin to realize how much love God has for you.”

\* \* \*

“Maharaj, like Ramakrishna, would often make jokes and be humorous after he was in a high mood. Thus, we would often know when he had experienced these high states.”

\* \* \*

“I saw M. more than others. Often he would call me into his room after the others had gone to bed. He would be stern in order to maintain discipline, but it was frequently his habit to behave just like a friend to us.”

\* \* \*

Upon entering the bookshop after taking a walk, when two women stood up as he approached them, he said: “Oh, don’t stand up! I am not some king.”

“But you are to us, Swami,” they replied.

“No, I am only a humble servant at the feet of the Lord.”

\* \* \*

“Once I brought some flowers into Maharaj’s room. He asked me: ‘Have you offered half to Thakur?’

“I thought to myself, ‘Oh, that is just a picture.’

“‘You think that is just a picture,’ he said.

“‘Yes,’ I replied.

“Then he asked me to begin to do the worship. On the third day I offered food to Ramakrishna. I lay down to rest after the offering and went to sleep. I had a dream. I dreamt that a beautiful young Brahmin approached me and said, ‘You have forgotten to put salt on my food for my cucumber.’

“Later, I asked one of the older swamis: ‘Did Thakur like salt with his cucumber?’

“‘Yes, he did.’



“Then I opened the door of the shrine and placed some salt before his picture. From that moment on, I was convinced of the truth behind the worship.”

\* \* \*

“I was Maharaj’s attendant for one month. I was just a boy of seventeen! I was jealous of a servant boy, Babul, and on the first day Maharaj asked me to tell Babul to bring him water for his bath. I didn’t ask Babul, but instead did it myself.

“‘Is the water ready?’ Maharaj asked me. I told him it was. ‘Who heated the water?’ he asked. I said that I had. ‘Oh, no, this is the wrong one. I have a special pot.’

“From that time on Babul gave Maharaj his bath.”

\* \* \*

“Once I thought to myself, ‘Perhaps I have lost Maharaj’s love.’ I didn’t sleep the whole night. Then I decided to do away with myself by jumping from a high cliff that I knew about near Madras. The next morning I went to his room as usual, thinking that I would never see him again. I prostrated before him and started to leave. As I was about to pass out the door, he called to me: ‘Come here and sit down. Do you think you can go away from me? The mother may spank the baby, but when it cries the mother runs to embrace it.’ It was then he said, ‘Our love is so deep that we dare not express it.’”

\* \* \*

“Once there was a complaint against me by a fellow Brahmacharin. I had proof that what he said was not true, but I kept quiet. The matter came to the attention of Maharaj, who knew everything, and he asked the boy to apologize to me and beg my forgiveness. Later, the boy came to me and said haughtily, ‘Maharaj has asked me to beg your forgiveness.’

“I embraced him and said, ‘You don’t have to ask my forgiveness.’ Later I learned that Maharaj told him to come back to him and tell him what I had said. After Maharaj passed on, the boy was to receive sannyasa from Swami Shivananda. He told him, ‘If Abani [Swami P.] gives his permission, I will grant you sannyasa.’

“He came to me in tears and begged me to do so. I said that of course I would do so.

“I then went to Swami Shivananda and prostrated before him. I said, ‘I beg you to accept him.’”

\* \* \*

“One time I was chanting alone in the Shrine when I heard a another voice chanting with me. I turned around, but didn’t see anyone. I asked the girls [nuns], but they knew nothing of it. At another time, when we were chanting ‘Jaya Sri Durga,’ I heard someone say, ‘Jaya Sri Ramakrishna.’ I asked the girls, but they said they did not hear it.”

\* \* \*

[Coming up the path with devotees] “I see you are all laughing at this body. But that is the nature of the body—old age, disease and death.”

\* \* \*

[In reply to a question regarding the existence of a Ramakrishna Loka] ”I only know that I am an existentialist. I only believe in that which I have experienced.”

\* \* \*

As he was about to leave his room at the Monastery, he asked me to switch off the light. I did so, but neglected to notice another switch below it which controlled the fan. As he turned it off, he turned to me and said, “I see that you are not concentrated!” After more than thirty years I still remember that small but valuable lesson.

\* \* \*

I was with him shortly after his first heart attack. He was weak and asked me to help him walk about the room. As I was doing so, he turned and said, “When the Mother gets you in her jaws, she never lets you go!”

\* \* \*

I once received some dietetic cookies from my mother as a gift to Swami, who was forbidden to have any sugar. During his visit to the monastery, I served them to him at supper. When he saw them, he said with some irritation, “You know I can’t have these!” But when I told him that they were from my mother, he said with a sigh of relief, “Oh, that is fine then,” and proceeded to enjoy them.

\* \* \*

When I submitted the manuscript of the anthology *Vedanta* to him for final approval, he saw that I had inserted my name at the top of each of the pages. “What is this! ‘Clive Johnson, Clive Johnson’ on every page!” It was only when Chris (Isherwood) assured him that it was common practice for authors to do this in case the pages were to become misplaced, that he calmed

down. But I never felt disturbed when he would shout like this. I knew it was a blessing disguised as anger.

\* \* \*

During one of his summer retreats at Malibu, he read *The Passover Plot*, a book that questioned many of the traditions associated with Christ. As he came down the stairs, he gave me one of his characteristically impish looks and said, "I have been reading that Christ may have never died on the cross. What do you think of that, Bhuma?" At a loss for words, I said I did not know and the matter was dropped.

\* \* \*

It was my turn to read from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, a common practice after supper at the Monastery. The previous reader would always carefully mark where he had stopped in the reading the night before. I was preparing to start at that point when Swami said, "Just open it anywhere and start reading." Of course, I did as he wished and thought to myself, "Ah, one never knows what to expect from him!"

\* \* \*

In the early years, I was curious about meditation and asked a friend, who turned out to be a devotee of Swami, to give me some direction. She told me to make an appointment with Swami and I did so. Of course, I had no idea what to expect. To my delight I was met by this not very tall Indian in a sports shirt and sweater.

"How may I help you?" he asked.

"Well, I would like some instruction in meditation," I replied, not knowing what else to say.

"Yes, I will give that to you. Come into the office."

After he made some initial inquiries, he gave me a short mantram and other basic instructions.

As I turned to go, someone approached and asked Swami what I thought to be a stupid question.

"How do you put up with questions like that?" I asked.

He smiled and said, "Oh, but it is my business to put up with them!" □

# *Vedanta and the Method of Zen*

**Douglas Weaver**

Much of the Zen literature consists of dialogues between Master and seeker. Here is a typical example: In search of a teacher who could enlighten him, a monk of medieval Japan was following the custom of wandering the countryside visiting various Zen masters. One day he arrived at the hermitage of Hakuin Ekaku. During the course of their interview, the master asked the tired monk, "What is the purpose of all this traveling north and south, wearing out so many pairs of straw sandals?" The monk had to face his own frustration with the whole experiment which so far had been fruitless. "I don't know," he sighed. "Ah," said the master, "not knowing is most intimate!" At this the monk had a deep insight into the nature of true knowledge.

This "not-knowing" is a key feature of Zen enlightenment, and is also prominent in several Upanishads. In the Kena Upanishad we read, "He truly knows Brahman who knows him as beyond knowledge." A more convoluted formulation is also given: "Who does not know knows. Who knows does not know. It is known to those who do not know. It is not known to those who know." (Repeat three times fast!) In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Yajnavalkya repeatedly stresses that Brahman is incomprehensible: it cannot be an object of knowledge. It is "Not this, not that."

## **"I Don't Know"**

Here is a story involving the legendary founder of Zen in China, Bodhidharma. In 520 he was received by the Emperor Wu of Liang. Voicing the primitive understanding extant, the Emperor told Bodhidharma, "I have endowed monasteries and sponsored the translation of one hundred sutras. What is the merit of these actions?" Bodhidharma replied, "No merit whatsoever." "What then is the sacred doctrine's first principle?" "In vast Emptiness there is nothing sacred," came the response. At this the Emperor became angry and demanded to know who, after all, was this monk standing before him? Bodhidharma gave his famous reply: "I don't know."

In support of Bodhidharma's *via negativa*, Gaudapada, guru of Shankara's guru and expositor of the purest Advaita Vedanta (known as Ajatavada, or the path of non-birth) is quoted: "There is in Reality no creation, no dissolution, none in bondage, no seeker after liberation, none liberated. This is the Absolute Truth." The highest Truth is beyond comprehension. Precisely because the central teaching of Zen is beyond words and concepts, that statement may be the most accurate summation of it.

The etymology of the Japanese word *Zen* leads to the Chinese *Ch'an*, and further to the Sanskrit *dhyana*, revealing roots in Yoga and the Upanishads, since *dhyana* refers both to deep meditation and the direct realization of Ultimate Reality. However, in contrast to the logical and intellectual presentation of Vedanta, Zen, which is actually a blend of Buddhism and Taoism, often seems deliberately nonsensical and obtuse. What is the connection between the radical teaching methods of the Zen masters and Vedanta?

For the record, what I mean by Vedanta is both the sadhana leading to, and the realization of, Ultimate Reality.

Before we investigate the three main devices used in Zen to bring about awakening or enlightenment, it is very important to point out that the foundation and environment of Zen practice is intense mindfulness. In their basic seated meditation, called *zazen* in Japanese (to sit zen), the mind is focused on the breath, maintaining an absolutely still body posture and the cultivation of *shikan taza*, or just sitting. *Shikan taza* consists of keeping the attention unfocused but alert, and is considered to be the closest approximation to the enlightened state. Nowadays, *shikan taza* might be called “global” (unfocused) awareness. In all circumstances, walking, sitting, eating, washing dishes and any of the thousand daily activities, the Zen student is instructed to maintain complete attention to what he or she is doing.

### **Pure Awareness without an Object**

The rule is: “When walking, just walk. When sitting, just sit. Above all, don’t wobble.” This practice calms the mind and inhibits thinking. In terms of Vedantic sadhana, the mind is brought and kept very near to what Patanjali calls *chitta vritti nirodha*: the cessation of thought. In this atmosphere of mindfulness and sincere desire for awakening, which is often intensified during three-day, week-long and month-long retreats, the Zen student is made ready for the catalytic remark or action of the master (or any fortuitous event) which in an instant takes the mind beyond relative functioning and into the realm of pure awareness without a particular object, or Buddhamind. This shift in awareness is depicted in Vedanta with the image of a lake whose surface is disturbed by the wind and covered with ripples. When these cease, the depths of the lake can be clearly seen, even if only for a moment.

Now I will introduce the first method of Zen, which is stopping the mind.

An army officer was visiting a Zen master in Kyoto and told him of a story he'd heard which greatly puzzled him and occupied his thoughts. It seems a farmer had placed a gosling in a large glass bottle and allowed it to grow to maturity there. Later, he wished to get the goose out without either harming the bird or breaking the bottle. The officer implored the master to

help him solve this riddle. Well, the master changed the subject after a bit and spoke of trivial things. The interview came to an end and the officer was just about to leave the room when the master suddenly called out, “Oh, officer!” “Yes?” said the officer, turning in surprise. “There, it's out!” cried the master. In that wide-open state of thought-free expectancy, the officer had an experience of pure awareness. A qualified teacher knows when the student's mind is sufficiently prepared to be shocked into higher consciousness.

Shankara laid down the theory behind this Zen technique in his *Laghu Vakya Vritti* (short treatise of pithy sayings). He compares the background consciousness and the flow of thoughts riding on it to the thread and beads of a necklace, respectively. To get our attention somehow off the inner chatter and into the space between two thoughts is to contact pure awareness, or Sat-Chit-Ananda.

### **Stopping the Mind—Revealing MIND**

The emphasis on following the breath in Zazen has this contact as its goal. Focusing the attention on breathing slows both the rate of breathing and the thinking process. When a state of almost zero mental activity is achieved, the attention is brought to bear on the space between exhalation and inhalation. At this point, no breathing equals no thinking. This practice alone can lead to a Samadhi experience, especially if a loud noise or some sudden surprise comes along to completely arrest thought. Now in this context the seemingly bizarre actions of the zen masters—shouting, slapping, kicking, striking with their staffs and other expedients—become clear: stop the mind and MIND will be revealed. Sri Ramakrishna used the image of a fish being released from a bucket into the ocean to illustrate the feeling of freedom such an experience produces. He comes very close to this Zen technique in the *Gospel* chapter entitled “Advice to an actor.”<sup>1</sup> He is explaining the play of God, the Lila, to Hari, who objects that “this play of God is our death!” Sri Ramakrishna asks him, “Please tell me who *you* are.” For a ripe mind, this query could precipitate an awakening, in true Zen style, by suddenly confronting the rational mind with an indication of transcendent reality.

In my own practice of Zen I stumbled upon a technique for stopping the mind based on Aikido. This subtle martial art takes the initiative from the attacker, leading him quickly here and there and around in circles before suddenly stopping, while the attacker continues headlong to the floor or nearest wall. Similarly, when meditating, if you find stray thoughts intruding, don't try to avoid them, but take the lead and start thinking *more* thoughts!

1. Swami Nikhilananda, tr., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1952), p. 436.

Think them faster and faster. Flit from one idea or image to the next. Then, suddenly STOP thinking. At that point you'll be left with, or very near to, pure awareness.

### **The Nearest Link in the Chain**

The second method of Zen is related to the Tantric dimension of Vedanta. Tantra reveals the non-finite reality of apparently limited existence. In this method, the Zen master uses anything at hand to point the student's mind toward ultimate reality; any one thing implies the entire universe. Sri Ramakrishna vividly illustrated the basis of this teaching with his example of the thread and the chain. If you pull a thread, the entire garment comes along with it. If you pick up one link of a chain, the rest of the chain comes along with it.

When a monk asked T'ung-shan, "What is the Buddha?" the master replied "Three pounds of flax." This was no poetic image. These two men were either weighing flax or for some reason they had a three-pound parcel of flax. Maybe they'd just returned from the local healthfood store. In any case, the master simply "picked up the nearest link of the chain" and it was the monk's job to see that the "rest of the chain" came along with it. A monk asked Chao-chu about the essence of Zen. He replied, "The cypress tree in the yard." Takuan answered a query about the so-called "First Principle" of Buddhism with, "There is enough breeze in this fan to keep me cool." In the same spirit, if I found a wide-awake astronomer and asked, "Please point to the Milky Way galaxy (our own galaxy), she would unhesitatingly point to anything nearby. The *Nitya* and the *Lila*, the Universal and the Particular, are not two.

This "not-two" is, of course, the premise of Advaita Vedanta. There is only one Reality, which is mistakenly seen as being composed of many separate units. Here our understanding of ecology and the Gaia hypothesis—that the Earth's ecosystem is one Being—can help to clarify the meaning of nondualism. Early naturalist John Muir wrote that if we pluck a plant up by its roots, we can see that it is hitched to the entire Universe, to poetically sum up this understanding. William Blake spoke eloquently of this dimension when he said "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would be seen as it is—Infinite."

Identical with this conception of oneness in apparent multiplicity is the Indian Mahayana Buddhist teaching of the Avatamsaka Sutra. There, the central image is the "net of Indra," at each knot of which is a multifaceted jewel. Each jewel reflects the entire net and at the same time reflects each of the other jewels, which are themselves reflecting the entire net and also each of the other jewels, ad infinitum. This early holotropic model informs the

response of the Zen master when, asked to reveal the Absolute, he or she simply “picks up” one of the jewels, be it a stick, a pillow, three pounds of flax or the cypress tree in the yard. In this way the entire net is offered. To a sufficiently prepared person, this kind of “direct pointing” could precipitate a breakthrough from separate being to undifferentiated BEING. One is reminded of Confucius’ rule in regard to identifying qualified students: “If I pick up one corner and he cannot come back with the other three, I don’t talk to him anymore.” (!)

### **Compassion Born of Identity**

The third way Zen has embodied its Vedantic roots is in the recognition that the Universe and all human activity is the expression of the Absolute. The most mundane action or task, seen with the enlightened eye, takes on cosmic significance. In the Kena Upanishad, once again, we read, “In the flash of lightning or in the wink of the eye, the power that is shown is the power of Brahman.” The Zen poet P’ang-yun, many centuries later, was delighted to find “Miraculous power, marvelous activity—chopping wood and drawing water.” Each breath I take involves the entire universe, and my experience of life is enhanced to the extent I am aware of this. In the same way, to be aware of the people who grow my food, pick my tea, etc. and the folks who pack, ship and sell it brings this universal-in-the-particular vividly into daily life, and awakens the compassion born of identity.

Such is the world the awakened live in. Whether they are called Paramahansa or Roshi (the formal title of a Zen master, derived from Lao-shr, which is another name for the Taoist sage LaoTzu), these enlightened ones see and experience the threads and links which make One the apparent diversity of the world. As a Zen saying has it, “To one whose mind is in accord with the Buddha mind, there is not one speck of dust that does not become a Buddha.” One of the things we love about Sri Ramakrishna is that whatever he was shown, he immediately found there the thread running straight to the infinite.

The Chinese founder of the Japanese Rinzai school, Lin-chi (d. 867) expressed the universal-in-the-particular employing the earthy mode characteristic of both Zen and Taoism when he said, “Eat when hungry. Sleep when tired. Move your bowels when nature calls. Fools will laugh at me, but the wise will understand.”

Another Zen story illustrates how the master sees what is hidden from the un-enlightened: A farmer heard about enlightenment and, lamenting his lack of even the rudiments of Buddhism, sought an interview with a roshi. After exchanging a few pleasantries the master asked him why he’d come. “I am ignorant,” said the farmer, “and I want you to instruct me.” “Tell me what



you do at your work,” asked the master. “Well, in the morning I take the cows out to pasture, and in the evening I bring them back to the pens.” “Ah,” said the master, “splendid is your ignorance!” The farmer saw only his limited existence. The master saw the infinite at play. Another master, of the Vedanta school, the sage Vashishta, saw things the same way: “I believe him liberated, who performs every act without the idea of personality doing it, taking it to be only a part of the spontaneous action of Nature.”

In many ways Zen asks us to stop using discursive thought to try to comprehend Reality. If we could just experience life fully, all our so-called problems would disappear. Zen teachers are trying to get us to give up flights of philosophical fancy, to Be Here Now, knowing we are already one with Brahman and that every activity is the expression of Shakti, the power of Brahman made manifest. The trick is to express this knowledge with style, and Zen has, as we have seen, a definite style.

Once a student went to his master and quoted a line from an old Chinese poem: “‘The lines of the hills are the pure body of Buddha. The voices of torrents are from one great tongue.’ Isn’t that right?” asked the student. “Yes,” sighed the teacher, “but it’s a pity to have to say so.”

### **Nothing is Mundane**

You see, Zen wants to express and enjoy the absolute reality, but to be cool about it! This is why in Zen art an obviously religious image, like a Buddha, is rarely used. Instead, a few rocks, or a spray of bamboo or mountains in the mist with only a vague hint of a sage in a boat convey the transcendent. To the enlightened, there is nothing mundane. All is sublime, and it is in this sense that I see Zen as the full flowering of Advaita Vedanta, in very much the same way Sri Ramakrishna took his samadhi and ecstasy and made them available to others using simple, vivid illustrations from everyday life.

But this is still not the ultimate: in the words of Seng-t’san (d. 606), the third Chinese patriarch of Zen, and also a great Taoist; “Stop talking and thinking, and there is nothing you will not be able to understand.”

I am reminded of Sri Ramakrishna again, saying that all things have been defiled by the tongue except Brahman. Only when speech and thought are exhausted can That be known.

It may be that a confluence of Zen and Vedanta could yield a startlingly new, hybrid sadhana for sincere seekers of enlightenment, samadhi, liberation, vijnana. Personally, I find the combination most effective. □

# *Excerpts from A Disciple's Journal: In the Company of Swami Ashokananda*

**by Sister Gargi**

*[Excerpts reprinted by permission of Kalpa Tree Press.]*

*August 25, 1952*

*Swami:* Do you think you are going to like this life you have chosen?

*Me:* I think so.

*Swami:* There is a long way ahead. Have you considered your prospects for the future?

*Me:* I haven't thought of it that way.

*Swami (smiling):* Oh, you haven't?

*Me:* If it's the way it is now, it will be all right. I will just grow older and older.

*Swami:* That is one way of looking at it.

*Me:* Presumably I will get more and more spiritual, and that will help. If I don't, it will be too bad.

*Swami:* Too bad for whom?

*Me:* For me.

*Swami:* That is right. That is one way of looking at it.

*Me:* What other way should I look at it?

*Swami:* It is a good way. Hang on! When things grow difficult, hang on!

*Me:* What will happen when all spirituality goes?

*Swami:* That is the very time to hang on, when everything seems dry. When a sailboat goes out to the ocean, it is all smooth sailing at first; it is easy. But when the boat hits rough waters, the sailors must hang on and push ahead. The difference is that with the sailboat, one is not sure of the end. Here one can be sure. Be a hero! Are heroes made by success or by their failures?

*Me:* By their failures.

*Swami:* That is right. Hang on through thick and thin, in spite of everything.

*December 1958*

Swami was speaking about the possibility of Richard Nixon running for president in the next election.

*Kathleen (passionately):* How terrible it would be if we had him for president!

*Swami (fixing her with a questioning smile):* Why should you care so much?

*Kathleen:* That's right. I am the witness. I neither like nor dislike him.

*Swami:* No. If you had no likes or dislikes, you would be dead. Without them, you would be a blank. Have likes and dislikes, but don't become entangled in them. Even great souls have likes and dislikes, but there is no glue in them; they don't get stuck.

*August 7, 1959*

In the back office, Swami was speaking of the Divine Mother and of how the whole universe was really She.

*Swami:* I once saw the whole universe as the tremendous, tumultuous play of living energy. That is the way things really are—everything is the tumultuous and joyous play of living energy, both good and evil.

*Me:* Why is it that it is more pleasant not to work than to work?

*Swami:* It is the nature of man to be self-indulgent. One must force oneself to work. Only those who are highly advanced spiritually can afford to act according to their preferences; for others the mind must be kept alert or it will create trouble for itself. Responsibility keeps the mind alert. I don't think you people have any idea what dangers there are in the spiritual path. One must be extremely cautious and extremely alert.

*Me:* What kind of dangers?

*Swami:* Are you really unintelligent?

*Me:* You mean the mind can turn?

*Swami:* Of course.

*March 1954*

*Swami:* Do your best, every day your best. Don't torment yourself. I do not believe in that. What is the sense in making resolves and not keeping them? So much energy is lost in regret. Just do your best—that is all. You will be surprised how things will open up.

*January 6, 1957*

*Swami:* When Holy Mother blessed a person, no obstacle in the whole universe could obstruct his progress. She herself said so.

*Me:* My! How lucky the people were who knew her.

*Swami:* Yes, but that power still exists. That love is always there. Only now one has to know how to find it. Holy Mother came to prove that there was such a protective power that one could call on.

August 2, 1953

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*Mara:* What is the benefit of worshipping in a congregation? I mean what is the sense of worshipping with a group, as they do in the [Hollywood] center?

*Swami:* Why do you feel you are worshipping with a group? You go to the Temple to worship individually—what if there are a few other people there?

*Mara:* Then why not worship at one's own shrine?

*Swami:* What is your own small shrine? How much devotion have you that you should have created any atmosphere in your own shrine? You people have a little bit of devotion, and you want the big thing! Be realistic. Where the Lord is worshiped by many devotees for years, an atmosphere is built up. You can benefit from that. It is also good to be with others who are thinking good thoughts. The mind is collective. My idea is that one should meditate once a day in one's own shrine—that is also beneficial—and once a day in a temple, where the presence of the Lord is strong. Only a fool and an egotist wouldn't go to a public shrine; the Lord is there! Even after years you can build up only a small thing in your own shrine.

*Mara:* But often you speak disparagingly of “bell-ringing” [a traditional part of Hindu ritualistic worship].

*Swami:* You are only trying to rationalize your own laziness. You know that we have daily worship upstairs in the monastery. How can you think I disparage bell-ringing? Lazy people!

November 2, 1953

*Swami:* Cheer up! Let the lion of Vedanta roar. Be happy. Make a hole in the world. This troublesome world is just a thin crust; poke a hole through it and the thick, sweet honey of Brahman will pour out.

*Me:* How can I make a hole?

*Swami:* Make your mind rest on Brahman. Dwell on Him. Know that in Him is all that the heart craves—all sweetness and love. All joy. Feel His presence. He is here.

October 7, 1954

I came into the office to talk with Swami at 7:00 p.m. after I had meditated.

*Swami:* Please come in. Sit down. Is your meditation better?

*Me:* For a while it was; now it is no more.

*Swami:* If it was for a while, then it will be again.

*Me (on the verge of tears):* I think there is no hope.

*Swami:* Have you any alternative?

*Me:* No.

*Swami:* Then don't talk that way. Others have found it; why shouldn't you? . . . You know it is there.

*Me:* I don't know it is there.

*Swami (forcefully):* Forget all that. You are told to know it. You are not supposed to do original research. (*Smiling*) Don't give up in midstream. You will be all right and (*very sweetly*) you are not alone.

[A Disciple's Journal is available at [www.kalpatree.com](http://www.kalpatree.com).]



## *A Solution from Swami Madhavananda*

### **John Schlenck**

Most thinking people who have an interest in religion wrestle with the problem of evil in God's world at some point in their spiritual lives. With many, it is an ongoing struggle.

For me, the problem took a particular form some two or three years after I came to Vedanta. Though brought up an agnostic and initially attracted to *jnana-yoga*, I felt the need to worship and pray to a personal God and was drawn to the idea of God as Mother. For some time I thought of worshipping Kali. But my teacher felt this would not work for me because I was not brought up in that tradition. He suggested that I meditate on Holy Mother Sarada Devi. I was willing to try that, but was somewhat resistant to the idea of Divine Incarnation. Gradually my doubts coalesced around the question, "How can I worship an incarnation of the very God who created this terrible world?" If Ramakrishna / Holy Mother / Jesus / Krishna is God, is he/she ultimately responsible for all the suffering and moral evil in the world? If so, how can I worship that?

### **A Wonderful Opportunity**

Just then (1960-1961) many guest swamis visited our Center (The Vedanta Society of New York). The particular reason was that the revered General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Madhavananda, was staying across town at the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center. He had come to the United States for brain surgery. Nearly all the swamis in America came one by one to see him, and since there was not room to accommodate them at the R-V Center, they stayed at our Center. This was a wonderful opportunity for us—to meet and get to know so many swamis.

I put my question to every swami who came. None of their answers gave me real satisfaction. Then Swami Madhavananda paid us two visits. Invited by Swami Pavitrananda, our teacher, who knew him intimately and was like a younger brother to him, Swami Madhavananda came to dinner and afterward met with members of our Center for informal question and answer sessions in our newly created Vivekananda Room upstairs.

The first thing that struck one was the austerity and simplicity of his bearing. There was no attempt to please or impress anyone. He went directly where he was to go, without looking left or right. Then, when he spoke, everyone was struck by his razor-sharp mind. It was obvious that the tumor requiring surgery had not affected his thinking capacity. He could dispose of any question with a few appropriate words. I asked him my question. His immediate answer I don't remember. Then someone else asked another related question. After answering that question he turned to me and said, "The Incarnation is of the beneficent aspect."

This answer shed new light on my problem, and the more I thought about it, the more satisfying it seemed to me. I didn't need to burden the object of my worship with all the other divine aspects. I could specifically worship the loving, saving aspect.

### **"The Milk Comes through the Udder"**

Sri Ramakrishna said, "Infinite are the ways of God's play, but what I need is love and devotion. I want only the milk. The milk comes through the udder of the cow. The Incarnation is the udder."<sup>1</sup>

Is this a cop-out? Is it just an easy way to get God off the hook? It depends on one's point of view. If one is trying to construct a complete and logical theology, it may seem simplistic and incomplete. But if one's main concern is getting on with one's spiritual life, it is eminently practical. There is no need to understand everything about the totality of God before undertaking spiritual practice. In fact, it is better not to try to wrap God in a neat package. You end up with a conceptual structure, not God, and you may get stuck in that structure. God is to be realized, not defined.

In recent years, especially since reading Jack Miles' *God: A Biography*,<sup>2</sup> it has occurred to me that Swami Madhavananda's (and Sri Ramakrishna's) solution to my problem is, in a way, polytheistic. I don't have to concern myself with God the Creator of the Universe. I need only seek Holy Mother's love and grace. Of course, I have to believe that she is living and has the

1. Swami Nikhilananda, tr., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1952), p. 257.

2. Miles, Jack, *God: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1996)

power to transform me. She is not simply a great human being who lived and died at a particular time. She is an ongoing source of power and grace. And her grace is not different from the grace of Sri Ramakrishna—or Jesus or Krishna or Buddha. But it is the milk of grace that is sought and worshipped. I don't need to concern myself with other aspects of divinity. And I can also think of that grace as within me, waiting to be uncovered, a birthright waiting to be claimed.

In Miles' very original work, he studies the God of the Bible as the protagonist of a great epic, a character who develops over time. A Vedantist is reminded of Vivekananda's "Evolution of the Conception of God," and his saying that the personal God is the human reading of the Absolute. The Biblical God is indeed a complex character with many and sometimes contradictory aspects. Trying to contain and resolve all these aspects in one personality creates certain problems which the polytheist doesn't face. On the other hand, it could be said that this complex and contradictory character reflects humanity's own contradictions and complexities. This is a nice thought, and no doubt true. But does it help one to overcome one's weaknesses and realize one's divine potential?

Vedanta, fortunately, doesn't require all of us to believe in the same conception of God. In fact, it says that because each person is different, each will and should have a different conception of God. Each of us is to select a path, a discipline, that best helps him or her to grow spiritually. And as we grow, our ideas of God also grow. For some, a particular concept is helpful; for others *no* conception of God is needed—one has only to develop character through steadfast practice.

### **Help from My Own Teacher**

Concerning the overall problem of evil, I also received much help from my own teacher, rather in accord with my agnostic upbringing. Swami Pavitrananda would recall an incident he had witnessed. One day a devotee came to Swami Shivananda in great anguish and asked, "Why is there so much evil in the world?" Shivananda replied with great compassion, "I cannot tell you why there is evil in the world. But I can tell you how to get out of it."

We don't need to know all the answers in order to proceed with our spiritual lives. This flexibility, this emphasis on practice and realization rather than doctrine, is one of the strong points of Vedanta, especially as taught by Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples. Theories, doctrines, forms are not rejected; they are useful for some aspirants. But they are made to serve the spiritual needs of the devotee. □

## Book Reviews

### **MEDITATION AND ITS PRACTICES: A Definitive Guide to Techniques and Traditions of Meditation in Yoga and Vedanta by Swami Adiswarananda**

**Skylight Paths, Woodstock, Vermont**

**472 pages**

**hard cover**

**\$34.95**

**2003**

We are fortunate to have this comprehensive work from one of our own swamis who has been with us since the late sixties and who became head of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center in New York after the passing of Swami Nikhilananda. A life of scholarship and practice obviously lies back of this very satisfying product, which ought to be a basic text for all our American Vedantists.

After an introductory part devoted to discussion of the meaning of meditation, its goal and benefits, and the traditions that develop and recommend it, the author focuses on what he calls the three key factors in all meditation, regardless of their other differences (which can be many). These are “(1) the object of concentration in meditation; (2) the center of consciousness where the mind is held during meditation; and (3) the method employed to invoke concentration” [69]. He warns immediately that these are not to be changed: one must be firmly rooted.

The objects of meditation are of several kinds. The *Ishtadevata* (*ish*, to desire; *deva*, form of God) is a natural and popular object. Adiswarananda quotes Swami Vivekananda: “Each one sees God according to [one's] own nature; and this vision, conditioned by our own nature, is our *Ishta*” [78]. Similar to this is meditation on a Divine Incarnation, God present in a human being to satisfy human need [83]: real people, far superior to our imagination of a form of God [85]. More intimate is meditation on God as one's inmost Self and Teacher, a direct but difficult approach to the Unmanifest [87], and more extensive is meditation on the levels of cosmic being as the body of God [92]. Then there are meditations on words and sounds, beginning with the sacred word *Om* embracing all levels of existence [95] and leading to the transcendental substratum of all states of consciousness [99]. A long treatment of the *Gayatri*, “Mother of mantras” [137], takes us through it part by part (and gives attention to the motherhood of God) before laying out the stages of meditation on it. The Vedic “great sayings,” the *mahavakyas* of the *sannyasa* initiation, receive equal care one by one, including Shankara's instruction on how to meditate on them.

The part of the book that treats of the centers for meditation deals with three of the topmost chakras: the heart, “where we first feel the light of the Divine” [174], the space between the eyebrows, where opens “the mystic spiritual eye. . . capable of perceiving the timeless Reality” [181], and the



crown of the head, representing the brain, “where individual consciousness meets with the all-pervading universal Consciousness” [182]. Close descriptions are given, with instruction on how to meditate in each center, and relating these practices to both dualistic and nondualistic approaches.

The second half of the book is given to a thorough investigation of the methods of concentration and covers such topics as place and geographical orientation, posture, exercise and diet, as well as self-analysis, worship, *japa* (repetition of a sacred word) and *pranayama* (breath control). These details are followed by an inspiring description of progress in meditation and how to overcome obstacles. The author points out that it is possible to stumble unprepared into altered states of consciousness while remaining intellectually and/or morally unreconstructed.

### **Transformation of Character the Sign of Advance**

Profound transformation of character is “the most certain sign” of true advance in the spiritual life. “Behavior in everyday life” indicates one’s attainments [347]. It must always be “conducive to the welfare of all beings . . . what an aspirant truly thinks, feels, and experiences is best verified by [one’s] actions and reactions” [351] and by a general sense of that person’s presence and personality. The personality becomes integrated as we are liberated from “all that is false and imaginary in us. . . from self-created inner polarization, division, and distraction” stemming from egocentricity. Unenlightened, we tend to be “compulsive because. . . unable to be creative” [355]. But creativity and spontaneity begin to characterize our personality just as improved health shows in our body [352]. The mind and the senses come under control and one is freed from the various lusts but steadfast in devotion to truth and longing for God. One comes more and more to experience inner bliss, which Swami Adiswarananda sets enticingly before us in the words of those who have attained.

The book is well designed, each topic developed through its subsections, thoroughly explained and supported by copious drafts on scriptures and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda and other famous teachers, and enlivened by stories from the Upanishads. In spite of its esoteric and unavoidably difficult (because ultimate) material, the book talks to us clearly and comfortably. Yet this is not achieved by omission or oversimplification. A whole education in Vedantic theory and practice lies within its nearly five hundred pages, meticulously annotated and including a glossary and a bibliography, as well as a detailed index. (The very last pages of the volume are advertisements for other books by Skylight, which I recommend to the reader’s attention.)

—Beatrice Bruteau

**THERE IS NO MESSIAH and You're It: The Stunning Transformation of Judaism's Most Provocative Idea**  
**by Rabbi Robert N. Levine, D.D.**  
**Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont**  
**170 pages      hard cover      \$21.95      2003**

The Jews, who gave us the concept and the word messiah (*mashiach*, anointed one), have not been altogether happy with the idea, themselves. They have had a number of claimants to the title, some of whom have been the cause of serious, life-changing disasters for the Jewish people. The centuries-long persecution by "Christians" (Messianists), background to the Shoah, we all know, but a couple of other outstanding instances may not be so well known. Bar Kochba, accredited by Rabbi Akiva around 135 C.E., led a revolt against the Roman Empire, the final result of which was that the Temple Mount was turned into a Roman worship site and the Jewish People were driven out of the city of Jerusalem, which was renamed Aelia Capitolina. This was the beginning of the "wandering Jew," having no homeland, no secure place of rest.

Another tragic case is that of Sabbatai Tzi in the seventeenth century, announced by a prophet named Nathan, who so promoted him that thousands of families left their homes and businesses in Europe and traveled to Constantinople, only to find that their promised messiah had converted to Islam and that the whole project of reclaiming the Holy Land was off.

Neither of these men set out to deceive and exploit people. They themselves were persuaded to their messiahship by their respective agents. Bar Kochba tried to free his people from the Roman yoke, and for a while looked like succeeding, but was militarily defeated. And Sabbatai, poor man, suffered from what we now recognize as bipolar affliction and was not properly responsible for his behavior. And there have been more than a dozen others (see *The Jewish Messiahs*, by Harris Lenowitz), the most recent being Rebbe Menachem Schneerson of Brooklyn, a truly remarkable man.

### **Projecting Our Yearning**

The curious thing is, says Levine, that people are so addicted to the Messiah idea that they continue to invest in it, and in the current exponent of it, even after disappointments and major cataclysms. They invent mysterious explanations for why God allowed events to turn out as they did, and then they go back to believing and waiting for the right messiah to come (or come again).

This is the first theme of Rabbi Levine's book, and he develops it to expose our willingness to project our yearning for a safe, free, prosperous,

happy life onto a divinely provided, and perhaps somewhat magical or supernatural, figure who will *accomplish this for us*. This view holds that we are not capable of effecting the desired state of affairs and therefore have no responsibility in the matter except to wait faithfully and to prepare by devotion and obedient works.

It is at this point that Levine jerks the rug: *There is no such Messiah!* Stop believing in these fables and do something about the situation.

And then he begins to declare what he really wants to say: Of course you want a better life. We all want a better life. And the myth of the Messiah (which no less an authority than Maimonides held was an ineradicable article of faith) expresses this longing and these values. But when you project it onto someone else, then you actually break faith with the great values and with the insight that God is striving—through the Creation—to manifest these values.

### **We Must Rouse Our Own Divine Fire**

The second theme of this exciting book—and here a Vedantist sees close parallels to Vivekananda’s teaching—is that we ourselves have to be the promised Messiah, and we can. We all can, each in one’s own way. And we all must. Each of us singly, all of us together, personally and institutionally and universally. The messianic People are to be “a light to the nations,” but every People is a light to every other People in some way, the original divine sparks being scattered throughout the cosmic reality. We must rouse our own divine fire and fan it to others, accepting in return their nourishment of our flame.

Therefore, urges Rabbi Levine, rescue your inspiration but dismiss your superstition. It’s not going to be Somebody Else; it’s going to be—got to be—You. There is genuine truth in your messianic longing, but you yourself must fulfill it through your own divine creative energy. In this way Rabbi Levine transforms the ancient and continuing hope into a powerful motivation for us all in our quest for a secure, free, creative and meaningful life.

The book is eminently readable, relating a fascinating history that many do not know and which gives helpful understanding of our own times and our own feelings. Every spiritual tradition has its variety of messianic zeal to which Levine speaks his earnest word: Don’t project it. Don’t impose it. Don’t wait for it. Work for it. Strategize for it. Advocate for it. Practice it. It has a meaning, and this meaning is an empowering revelation not only of God’s Creation-Intention but of your divinely created creative ability. Go for it!

—Beatrice Bruteau

## *Letters*

### **An American Vedanta Movement**

Bravo! This issue (*American Vedantist*, Volume 9, No. 3, Fall 2003), of all you have done, has set out the very idea that there is an American Vedanta movement, started that day in September 1893 when Swamiji (Swami Vivekananda) hailed us out of our sleep, “Sisters and Brothers of America!” That phrase is not just a salutation; it is a hail and a family greeting from his heart. He was glad to see us! His hail also told us we had Brothers and Sisters living in India, and so it is.

Theodore Chenoweth  
El Verano, CA

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SWAMI YOGESHANANDA became a monastic member of the Vedanta Society of Northern California in 1945. At present he is working in Atlanta with a group started by the Chicago Vedanta Center. It now has its own premises and is known as the Vedanta Center of Atlanta.