

# **PRABUDDHA BHARATA** *or AWAKENED INDIA*



**APRIL  
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Started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896

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# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

APRIL 2003

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Cover: Temples in Dakshineswar seen from the Ganga. The divine site of the first 'awakening'.

उत्तिष्ठत  
जाग्रत  
प्राप्य  
वरान्निबोधत ।

# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!

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No. 4

## Traditional Wisdom

### DISCRIMINATION

ध्यायतो विषयानुंसः सङ्गस्तेषूपजायते ।  
सङ्गात्सञ्जायते कामः कामात्क्रोधोऽभिजायते ॥  
क्रोधाद्भवति संमोहः संमोहात्स्मृतिविभ्रमः ।  
स्मृतिभ्रंशाद्बुद्धिनाशो बुद्धिनाशात्प्रणश्यति ॥

Dwelling on objects, man feels an attachment for them. Attachment gives rise to desire, and desire breeds anger.

From anger comes delusion; from delusion, the failure of memory; from the failure of memory, the loss of discrimination. From the loss of discrimination results (spiritual) death. (*Bhagavadgita*, 2.62-3)

One may enter the world after attaining discrimination and dispassion. In the ocean of the world there are six alligators: lust, anger, and so forth. But you need not fear the alligators if you smear your body with turmeric before you go into the water. Discrimination and dispassion are the turmeric. Discrimination is the knowledge of what is real and what is unreal. It is the realization that God alone is the real and eternal Substance and that all else is unreal, transitory, impermanent. And you must cultivate intense zeal for God. You must feel love for Him and be attracted to Him. (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 140)

The misery that we suffer comes from ignorance, from non-discrimination between the real and the unreal. We all take the bad for the good, the dream for the reality. Soul is the only reality, and we have forgotten it. Body is an unreal dream, and we think we are all bodies. This non-discrimination is the cause of misery. It is caused by ignorance. When discrimination comes, it brings strength, and then alone can we avoid all these various ideas of body, heavens, and gods. (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 1.157)

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## ∞ This Month ∞

**Service for Inner Growth**, this month's editorial, discusses some factors that convert service into a tool for spiritual transformation.

**Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago** features a report on Sri Ramakrishna's birth anniversary celebration at Belur Math on 8 March 1903; and a piece on sincerity from 'News and Notes'.

In the fourth instalment of his gripping account of the early days of the Ramakrishna Mission's work in Arunachal Pradesh, **Half a Decade in the Enchanting Environs of Along**, Swami Kirtidanandaji recounts some more interesting student-related incidents. A former editor of this journal, the author is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order and lives in Vivekananda Ashrama, Ulsoor, Bangalore.

In **Seeing God in a World of Many Religions** Fr Francis X Clooney, SJ analyses Swami Brahmanandaji's teachings on Chosen Deity; underlines the guru-disciple relationship it fosters; and observes rightly that a Christian can keep pure and simple his commitment to Jesus Christ, but he 'need not protect this fidelity through defensiveness or fear or a sharp dismissal of other traditions' spiritual riches'. The learned author is a Professor of Theology at Boston College, Massachusetts. Besides being a pioneer in the relatively new field of Comparative Theology, he is a reputed Western scholar on Hinduism and is well versed in both Sanskrit and Tamil.

Emphasizing that living a spiritual life alone can conduce to world peace, Swami

Gautamanandaji discusses in **Basics of Spiritual Life** some important questions like what is spiritual life, divine grace, pranayama, postures, occult powers and the question of food. President of Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, the author is a trustee of the Ramakrishna Math, and member of the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission.

On board the ship during his return from the West in 1897, Swami Vivekananda had a phenomenal dream near the island of Crete that can make one doubt the historicity of Jesus Christ. In his research article *Non Fascit Saltum: Swami Vivekananda's Cretan Vision*, Philip Rosoff-Horne traces the origin of the order of 'Therapeutae' to the holy community that flourished in pre-Buddhist, Greek times, which, in turn, had its roots in the Pythagorean community that prevailed 600 years earlier. Marshalling historical facts, the author examines afresh the historicity issue and underlines the need to die to our petty self and resurrect ourselves in the higher Self. The author is a probationary brahmacharin at the Vedanta Society of Sacramento.

**Kaṭha Rudra Upaniṣad** is the first instalment of a translation of this important Sannyasa Upanishad by Swami Atmapriyanandaji, Principal, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur. The elaborate notes are based on Upanishad Brahmayogin's commentary.

**Glimpses of Holy Lives** features some inspiring incidents from the lives of Umapati Shivacharya, a South Indian saint, Surdas, a North Indian saint, and Janaka, the illumined king.

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# Service for Inner Growth

## EDITORIAL

In the last editorial we discussed different kinds of service corresponding to different selves in the human personality and their relative merits. Now we shall examine the factors that convert service into a tool for spiritual growth.

### The *Bhagavadgita* Analysis of Service

The guna-based analysis of the *Bhagavadgita* is a veritable guidebook for human development. In its seventeenth chapter Sri Krishna classifies dāna into three types. Dāna means gift and, by implication, what we offer to others, including service of various kinds.

The inferior (tamasic) kind of service is that which is offered without respect or with disdain to an unworthy person at the wrong place and time.<sup>1</sup> The mediocre (rajasic) kind of service is offered grudgingly and with the expectation of a return of favour or the meritorious fruit of the act. (17.21) The superior (sattvic) kind of service is offered with a feeling that it is one's duty to give. Such an offering is made to a worthy person who can make no return and at the right time and place. (17.20) Sri Shankara includes under this category even gifts made to those who can return the favour.

### Factors That Transform Service into a Spiritual Discipline

Clearly, it is the superior kind of service that can help us in our inner growth. The following factors emerge from the *Gita* analysis. Service should be offered (1) to a worthy recipient; (2) at the right time and place; (3) without expectation of a return of favour; (4) without desire for the fruits of action; and (5) with due respect to the recipient.

While the first two factors can be fulfilled with a little discrimination, the last three fac-

tors demand training and persistent self-effort. These factors really determine whether service ends up as a mere activity or helps our inner growth. We shall discuss the third and fourth factors together and then move on to the fifth.

### Service Is Only a Means

The central theme of Vedanta is that man is essentially divine but is not conscious of it because of ignorance. The goal of life is to realize this divinity. According to Sri Shankara, a fool who does not strive towards this goal is a suicide since he kills himself by holding on to the unreal.<sup>2</sup>

It is our mental impurities gathered over many years, nay, births, that cloud our perception and make the unreal appear real to us. So Self-knowledge calls for purification of the mind, which is possible by spiritual practices, or sadhanas. In the *Bhagavadgita* Sri Krishna gives a threefold prescription for purification: 'Sacrifice (yajna), service (dāna) and austerities (tapas) should not be relinquished, but should be performed with detachment and without craving for the fruits of action. They purify the wise. This is my best and firm conviction.'<sup>3</sup>

So service is an important means for inner purification. When coupled with sacrifice and austerities, it becomes a powerful tool to flush out mental impurities. This point needs to be borne in mind if we look upon service as a means to inner growth.

### Service as Worship

By accepting our service the receiver affords us an opportunity to exercise our selflessness and helps us in inner purification. Any expectation of a return from the recipient

is therefore meaningless. Rather the giver needs to be grateful to the recipient and not vice versa. Swami Vivekananda held a twofold ideal before his followers: *ātmano mokṣa* (one's own liberation) and *jagat hita* (welfare of the world). Service activities of the Rama-krishna Mission have this twofold ideal for their basis. Done in this spirit, service becomes transmuted into worship of God inherent in the illiterate, the downtrodden, the diseased, the suffering, the world-weary and the spiritually inclined. Swamiji's words throw light on how this is possible:

Look upon every man, woman, and everyone as God. You cannot help anyone, you can only serve: serve the children of the Lord, serve the Lord Himself, if you have the privilege. If the Lord grants that you can help any one of his children, blessed you are; do not think too much of yourselves. Blessed you are that that privilege was given to you when others had it not. Do it only as a worship. I should see God in the poor, and it is for my salvation that I go and worship them. The poor and the miserable are for our salvation, so that we may serve the Lord, coming in the shape of the diseased, coming in the shape of the lunatic, the leper, and the sinner.<sup>4</sup>

No beggar whom we have helped has ever owed a single cent to us; we owe everything to him, because he has allowed us to exercise our charity on him. It is entirely wrong to think that we have done, or can do, good to the world, or to think that we have helped such and such people. It is a foolish thought, and all foolish thoughts bring misery. We think that we have helped some man and expect him to thank us, and because he does not, unhappiness comes to us. Why should we expect anything in return for what we do? Be grateful to the man you help, think of him as God. (1.77)

### The World Does Not Need Our Help

Our sojourn in this world lasts at best a few decades. Millions of people come into this world and leave it without even creating a ripple. The drama of the world goes on unmindful of our entry or exit. Death is a great leveller.

King's or pauper's, the body has just one course: return to dust. As they say, when the game of chess is over, the king and the pawn go back to the same box. It is the mind that grows and assumes another body fit for its further evolution. So letting our life become just body-centred does not really make much sense. The less our life is centred on body—ours as well as others—the better for our inner growth.

The knowledge that the world can very well get on without us will make us sober. When we understand that the world does not really need our help, we can work better, without attachment. Nor has the world been created for our enjoyment. Swamiji's words drive home this point forcefully:

It is a weakness to think that anyone is dependent on me, and that I can do good to another. This belief is the mother of all our attachment, and through this attachment comes all our pain. We must inform our minds that no one in this universe depends upon us; not one beggar depends on our charity; not one soul on our kindness; not one living thing on our help. All are helped on by nature, and will be so helped even though millions of us were not here. The course of nature will not stop for such as you and me; it is, as already pointed out, only a blessed privilege to you and to me that we are allowed, in the way of helping others, to educate ourselves. (1.89)

### We Can Only Straighten Ourselves

It takes a long time—most of our lifespan—to understand that we cannot change the world but can only change ourselves. The story is told of a wise man in his sixties. He said, 'When I was twenty years old, I thought the world was not as it should have been; I should do my bit to change it. I prayed: "O God, grant me the strength and wisdom to change the world.'" When I was forty I began to understand how futile my attempt was. Then I thought that maybe I should narrow down my field. I prayed: "God, grant me the strength to change those around me.'" The fu-

tility of this also was borne home to me by the time I was sixty. Wisdom then dawned on me. I prayed: "O God, grant me the strength to change myself." The world will continue to be what it is—a bundle of dualities: pleasure and pain, praise and blame, profit and loss, and so on—despite our efforts to straighten it. Comparing this world to a dog's curly tail, Swamiji explains with a parable how this world will remain as kinky as it is; it cannot be straightened even with superhuman attempts. (1.77-9) Then what is the utility of service? Apparently to help others, but only to help ourselves, to further our inner growth. In other words, working in this world we can only straighten ourselves. Says Swamiji, 'The world is a grand moral gymnasium wherein we have all to take exercise so as to become stronger and stronger spiritually.' (1.80)

### We Are Mere Carriers of Help

If the world is not going to change, do we then keep quiet seeing other's suffering? Far from it. That brings us to another important attitude that can elevate service to a spiritual discipline: We are just instruments in the hands of the Divine. Sri Krishna advised Arjuna to be just an instrument and fight the war.<sup>5</sup> This attitude can also foster detachment while doing work and free us from work-related misery. Over to Swamiji:

When you have trained your mind and your nerves to realize this idea of the world's non-dependence on you or on anybody, there will then be no reaction in the form of pain resulting from work. When you give something to a man and expect nothing—do not even expect the man to be grateful—his ingratitude will not tell upon you, because you never expected anything, never thought you had any right to anything in the way of a return. *You gave him what he deserved; his own Karma got it for him; your Karma made you the carrier thereof. Why should you be proud of having given away something? You are the porter that carried the money or other kind of gift, and the world deserved it by its own Karma. Where is then the reason for pride in you?* There is nothing

very great in what you give to the world. When you have acquired the feeling of non-attachment, there will then be neither good nor evil for you.<sup>6</sup> [emphasis added]

### Respect for the Recipient

The fifth important factor in transforming service is respect for the recipient. This becomes spontaneously possible when we do service in a spirit of worship of God dwelling in the recipient. In the *Bhagavata* God-incarnate sage Kapila underlines the futility of worshipping God in images, disregarding His presence in His creation: 'If one disregards Me present in all beings as their soul and God but ignorantly offers worship only to images, such worship is as ineffective as sacrificial offerings made in ashes.'<sup>7</sup> Therefore, worship Me in all beings by offering respect (*māna*) to all beings and service (*dāna*) to them in a spirit of friendliness (*maitri*) and an attitude of non-separateness (*abhinna-kaṣṭu*); for I am the one Self in all beings and have made a temple for Myself in all of them.<sup>8</sup> What is important is an attitude of oneness in God. That leads to an important corollary: Service done with discrimination based on caste, creed, and so on is anything but a spiritual discipline.

### Service and Love

Service becomes effective only when prompted by selfless love towards the object of service. In his inspiring letter to his Madras disciple Dr Nanjunda Rao, Swamiji spells out some essentials for success: 'Purity, patience, and perseverance are the three essentials to success and, above all, *love*.'<sup>9</sup> These factors are significant in the field of service too. Purity of mind and disinterested, undemanding love can bring about a remarkable improvement in the quality of service, besides ennobling the one who serves.

Nowhere else is this fact more evident than perhaps in the ideal life lived by Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. Adored as one whose life and character were pure, one who was pu-

rity incarnate,<sup>10</sup> she was the spiritual consort of Sri Ramakrishna, married to him when a child of just five. Her life in Dakshineswar (and later in Syampukur and Cossipore) was one of devoted service to her husband, his mother and his disciples and devotees. Though she was married to Sri Ramakrishna, her pure mind was free from any monopoly or special claim over him. There were times in Dakshineswar when she could see him only once in two or three months, though she lived in an enclosure hardly ten metres from his room. She would console her mind by saying, 'O mind, are you so fortunate that you can see him every day?' Sri Ramakrishna in turn looked upon her as Divine Mother Herself and could brook no disrespect to her. Theirs was a marriage that consummated not at the physical but at the spiritual level. It was her immaculately pure mind and God-centred love that made her a willing helpmate in Sri Ramakrishna's mission of raising humanity from materialism to a life anchored in divinity. After Sri Ramakrishna's passing, she continued serving the fledgling Order founded in his name and her countless children who flocked to her for spiritual solace. The unique lives of this spiritual couple were a vindication of the Upanishadic dictum, 'a husband/wife is not loved for the sake of the husband/wife, but for the sake of the Self within.'<sup>11</sup>

### Unselfishness the Main Melody

By now it is clear that unselfishness is the main melody of service. No definition of unselfishness could be crisper and more concise than Swamiji's: 'There is one thing which is the world and another which is God; and this distinction is very true. What they mean by world is selfishness. Unselfishness is God.'<sup>12</sup> His inspiring words can goad anyone to practise this noble virtue:

The motive for name and fame seldom brings immediate results, as a rule; they come to us when we are old and have almost done with

life. If a man works without any selfish motive in view, does he not gain anything? Yes, he gains the highest. Unselfishness is more paying, only people have not the patience to practise it. It is more paying from the point of view of health also. Love, truth and unselfishness are not merely moral figures of speech, but they form our highest ideal, because in them lies such a manifestation of power.<sup>13</sup>

\* \* \*

In sum, if service has to further our spiritual growth it has to be done with love and detachment, without expectation of a return. Above all, it needs to be remembered that service is only a means to an end: the realization of our potential divinity. \*

### References

1. *Bhagavadgita*, 17.22.
2. *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 4.
3. *Gita*, 18.4-5.
4. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3.246-7.
5. *Gita*, 11.33.
6. CW, 1.90.
7. *Yo mām sarveṣu bhūteṣu santam-ātmānam-iśvaram; Hitvārcān bhajate mauḍhyād-bhasmanyeva juhōti saḥ.*  
—*Bhagavata*, 3.29.22.
8. *Atha mām sarveṣu bhūteṣu bhūtātmanānāṁ kṛtālayam; Arhayed-dāna-mānābhyān maitryābhinnena cakṣuṣā.*  
—*ibid.*, 3.29.27.
9. CW, 6.281.
10. *Pavitraṁ caritaṁ yasyāḥ pavitraṁ jīvanam tathā; Pavitratā svarūpīnyai tasyai kurmo namo namaḥ.*  
—Swami Abhedananda's hymn to Sri Sarada Devi.
11. *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, 2.4.5.
12. CW, 1.87.
13. *ibid.*, 1.32.





# Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago



April 1903

## Birthday Anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna Dev, Belur Math

On Sunday, March the 8th last, the sixty-seventh birthday anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna was held at Belur Math. The arrangements for the reception of many thousands of visitors, and for the feeding of the poor had been well carried out. And the shrine containing the picture of Sri Ramakrishna was particularly beautiful with flowers and palms. Here parties of people came for music and worship throughout the day, and there was ample space under the great awning with which this part of the lawn was covered. Before noon arrived a party of Kali-Kirtan and sat under the jack-tree behind the Math, chanting the praises of the Divine Mother. Later came the worshippers of Sri Gauranga and added their chanting and dancing to the whole.

Amongst the faces of Sri Ramakrishna's immediate disciples—now alas! growing noticeably fewer every year—old Gopaler-Ma, and the senior Sannyasins were conspicuous.

But on the bank above the Ganges, at the south-east corner of the grounds, only a bed of *tulsi* plants, growing within a brick enclosure, marked the spot where his own disciples had looked their last on the face of one who but a year ago was present at this feast.

The absence of Swami Vivekananda's face and voice, that absence which can never again be made good, has given a sad pre-eminence to this ... birthday of the Master. New days dawn in India, and the festival will doubtless continue year after year through many a century. But already the book of the Blessed Life is closed, the story that lies at the heart of each new evangel is an accomplished fact.

One thing only remains to us, the disciples of these—that we lift higher than ever that mighty banner of the synthesis of faiths that they entrusted to us; that we grow brighter daily in our realization of the light they threw upon us; and that in life and death alike we prove our will to seal with clear proof the great doctrine of strength and manhood that they taught us.

To some, the *tulsi* plants growing in the shadow of the Bel-tree may have seemed as tokens of sorrow: but to us, amidst the fresh green of the spring time, and the sight of steamer after steamer discharging its load of holiday-makers, they only spoke, with a deeper voice than ever Israel heard, the words that are actually true, difficult as mourners may find it to believe in the hour of apparent sunset, 'Arise! Shine! For thy light *is come* and the glory of the Lord *is risen* upon thee!'

\* \* \*

Worship of great men is the expression of the heart's deepest admiration for their life and conduct. And is not this the strongest incentive to do as they themselves did? \*

## Sincerity

Be sincere with yourself, whatever the temptation may be. Say nothing to others that you do not think, and play no tricks with your own mind. Of all the evil spirits aboard in this mysterious world, insincerity is the most dangerous. \*

—News and Notes

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# Half a Decade in the Enchanting Environs of Along

SWAMI KIRTIDANANDA

## Part 2: The Curtain-raiser (*continued*)

Then, there was the problem of students who could not make the grade, however much they tried. Everyone is not fit for everything. One may be proficient in arts, another in science, or as Swami Vivekananda put it, one in scavenging and another in ruling the country. Put the latter in the former's place, and he would fail as miserably as the former would in the latter's position. Each is great in his own place, as he said. Not recognizing this fact is the bane of modern education, the main cause of the increasing number of dropouts and misfits in society. We need to acknowledge the fact that there are differences in the IQs of students, in their aptitude and temperament, and make suitable adjustments and alterations in the system of education, provide the necessary opportunities for each to develop in his own way, according to his capacity and inclination. Here it is not a case of status, as it is usually made out to be.

### Misfits to School Curriculum

Take, for example, the case of a particular boy at our Along school. I found him to be below average, and was definite that it would be a sheer waste of time and energy if he were to be forced to continue with the routine curriculum in the school. I explained the situation to him and suggested that he take up a job in our kitchen. He would earn some money and also become skilled at something to fall back upon later in life, if necessary. If he so desired, he could study privately side by side, for which I would make the requisite arrangements. If he

picked up and made sufficient progress, he could join his classmates again subsequently. He saw my point, but was reluctant to accept my suggestion. His main objection was genuine: his erstwhile comrades would look askance at him and treat him contemptuously as a mere servant boy, not their friend and companion as before. I said: 'All right, if you feel so, just to show you and your friends that there is nothing derogatory in doing the kitchen work, I shall, on any Sunday or holiday, when I am free, do everything I am asking you to do in the kitchen. Then, you would be satisfied that there is nothing wrong in what I am asking you to do, wouldn't you?' The reply he gave was astonishing, though not entirely devoid of reason. He said: 'No, no, Swamiji, that is not what I mean. When you go and work in the kitchen, even if it is for a day, the whole of Along town will talk about it: Look, how great Swamiji is! He is the head of the institution and yet does not feel the least compunction to do such a menial job. But if I go to work in the kitchen, they will only call me *Bahadur* (a pejorative term used for the cooks in that area, who were mostly of Nepalese origin).' However, I cajoled and persuaded him to take up the work. He did it for a month and was very jubilant when he got his first pay packet and could buy a suitcase and other items with it to take home. But the people at home chided him when they heard the story: 'We have sent you to the Ramakrishna Mission to study in the school, and not to work in the kitchen. That you can do right here at

home. If Swamiji insists, you come away, and look after the fields.' So, he was back again in the classroom, but left of his own accord when he found he could not cope with the school syllabus. I met him years after, in 1993, when I paid a visit to Along after nineteen years at the invitation of the then swami-in-charge there. He was well settled in his village and looked quite happy and satisfied. We had a good laugh recalling the incident.

### **Honesty an Independent Virtue**

But this boy had a bright side to his character. He was truthful and honest to the core. When I first saw him on arrival at Along, he had been assigned the duty of cleaning the quarters that had been specially constructed for the use of the swami-in-charge, my predecessor. The swami was not there at the time, because of his having taken ill all of a sudden. He had been absent for three months or more already. The quarters were made of bamboo, with no facility for locking. The table drawer also had been left unlocked for some reason, and there was some cash in it. But this boy, though he had been cleaning the whole place all these three months or more, had not touched it. He could easily have done it, as there was none to watch or take him to task. It had just never occurred to him that he could do anything of the sort. I was astonished.

### **Evils in Society—An Explanation**

Though he remained the same honest, truthful boy ever after, things had changed in the case of many other children, once they were exposed to modernization and modern education. The one question the elders of the community commonly put to me was: 'What is this, Swamiji? We have started sending our children to schools so that they will become better persons. But what are we seeing? They have started stealing, lying, robbing, cheating, and indulging in all sorts of misdemeanours that were unheard of in our society previously. We thought things would improve af-

ter your school started functioning. Not much change is seen in their behaviour as far as this aspect of education is concerned.'

They had a point. My usual reply to them was: 'Oh! That is nothing to be wondered at. Previously, in tribal societies there was nothing to steal or lie about. There was not this big disparity between the rich and the poor that we find in modern societies. Everyone had the minimum number of things: the rich and the poor went about in the same type of dress and ate the same food; and if the rich had anything extra, they shared it with others. For example, the *mithun*, the prized treasure of the community, was in a way the measure of things in judging the richness of a person. The richest had the largest number of them in their possession, and the animals were left free to roam about. Nobody ever thought of stealing them. And when they were sacrificed on any special occasion, which in fact was the only reason for its existence in the community, all shared the meat equally. Moreover, there was not much variety in cooking or in dress for people to be greedy about. Now, the boys and girls know there are so many things to enjoy in life. Some possess more than others. So, naturally, those who are left out feel that they should also have the same privilege and advantage. And the result is the evils you speak of. It is a necessary stage in the development of one's personality. Nowadays there are so many things that children can never have their fill—an endless dazzle of materials, every day a new product. Once your children have enjoyed these things to the full, of their own accord they will begin to think of higher things—morality, religion and spirituality. Now, our objective is to fulfil their material and intellectual needs so that they have the necessary means to have the best things in life; and along with them, provide the necessary atmosphere for their development in morality and spirituality, too. We do not aim to force anything on them, but let things grow spontaneously, like the seed growing into a plant in a natural way and pro-

ducing the best of flowers and fruits. The evils you mentioned—dishonesty, jealousy, and the like—are just an intermediary stage, and a necessary evil we have to put up with, before the dawn of higher things. It is not that they were not there in your society earlier. They were all hidden previously in the sub-conscious mind. Now they are coming out and finding expression externally. Better that they do so, instead of being a canker within, eating into one's vitals. When the boy or girl realizes for himself or herself that virtues like honesty and truthfulness are more rewarding, they will of their accord try to follow them in their life. It is no use forcing them to do so. However, don't you see the tremendous transformation taking place unobtrusively in your children studying in our institution?

What I told them was in consonance with Swami Vivekananda's thinking. Whenever people come to me complaining about the evils stalking our society, corruption in all strata of society, red-tape, snobbishness, and so on, I quote what Swami Vivekananda told an English lady who told him after hearing one of his lectures, 'I admire India, Swamiji!' 'Why?' he asked. 'Because there are no criminals there, as in the West!' Swami Vivekananda said with a sigh: 'How I wish it were otherwise!' For, as he explained in several of his lectures in India and in his letters, the goodness that we saw before Independence was all a sign of *tamas*, a moribund condition akin to death, if not worse; and a period of intense activity, *rajas*, with all its evils, is required before one can pass on to the stage of *sattva*, the perfect state of tranquillity and calmness, which outwardly resembles the state of *tamas*. He would have been the happiest to see the tension and turmoil that we are witnessing everywhere today. The convulsions that are rocking our society are in fact a sign of living, not death like the previous stage. When cooking is going on and things are boiling in the pot it is only confusion that we see. But when the prepared dishes are served on the dining table it is all or-

der and beauty. That is the condition in India now. Things are in a ferment. When they settle down, we will see what a great country it is. I ask the wiseacres who complain and say that things were better off in pre-Independent India: For whom was it better? For a minuscule minority. The majority were immersed in deep darkness and dire poverty, in absolute inertness. I quote in this connection Swami Vivekananda's advice to one of his class friends, who wanted to know how he could progress in spirituality. Swamiji asked him: 'Can you tell a lie?' 'No,' his friend said, quite surprised at the question. Swamiji said: 'Then first learn to tell a lie!' Swamiji said in explanation later on that he was joking, but at the same time, he meant what he said. He said he knew his friend was too *lazy* to do anything, even to tell a lie, and he wanted him to be active and strong. For, as the Upanishads emphasize again and again, there is no salvation for a weakling.

### Students' Transition on Joining Our School

All the same, I was often myself stricken with doubt whether we were doing the right thing; in the process of giving them a modern education, whether we were not plucking them out of the soil in which they were rooted and planting them elsewhere in a foreign soil to the detriment of their innate simplicity and open-heartedness. I can never forget the spontaneous outburst of joy and happiness that greeted us whenever we went along the countryside. The tribal children and people cheered us with raised hands, and loud shouts of laughter: 'Swamiji *ayyo!*' in their language or in broken Hindi, with which they were just becoming conversant. And that ethereal natural smile that lighted their angelic cherubic faces! So artless and innocent! And contagious! Many of the children over 10 or 12, and with not a scrap of cloth on their bodies! Yet there were no inhibitions of any sort, no shyness or sense of shame! Enter our school, and within a year or two, if not days, all that was gone! In its

place was a serious glum look! What happened to that beautiful smile of theirs? The new children had to be taught everything, from brushing their teeth to taking a bath and combing their hair. I had taken on that job myself, as I enjoyed doing it. Every morning, at 5 or 5.30, I would be there in their dormitory to wake them up. Each boy had a cot. As soon as he got up, he had to make his bed; then sweep the floor below his cot; and wipe it with a wet cloth; and then go about his morning ablutions. Normally this was done with the alacrity of an athlete as soon as I entered the dormitory.

I mentioned earlier that Bomi Lingi, my 'Self-satisfied' *Atmaram*, had come of his own accord from his far-off village. One morning I found this fellow unwilling to get out of his bed. He got up all right, but was glued to his seat, with his bed sheet covering the lower limbs. I asked him to get up. My words had no effect. I shouted at him thinking that he was deliberately disobeying me. But he did not care. Then, suddenly, when once I had turned aside, he rushed from his bed and ran, striking a Balakrishna (Child Krishna) pose, his hands covering his private parts. The fact was that he was without clothes on his body. He had thrown off his shorts and shirt before going to bed, unaccustomed as he was to them in his village and irksome as they were to him. He was feeling shy to appear before me in that condition. *Shyness had slowly entered his consciousness in the few days he was with us.*

### Conscious Efforts for Uninhibited Joy

Another boy, Jarken Gamlin, who was a mere child at that time but now is a colonel in the army, if not a brigadier, was to play the part of the *Mahabharata* hero Karna. The make-up man was to dress him in a silken dhoti as the role demanded. Obviously he was to remove his shorts and shirt for the purpose. But he was stricken with a sense of shame to do that, particularly before me, though he had underwear on. It required a lot of cajoling on

our part to persuade him to oblige. Was it for the better or worse? Was it progress or regress? Who is to tell? Or shall we say that the uninhibited joy of theirs was not really part and parcel of their being? If it were so, it could never have been lost. It was a *given* thing (God-given, one may say; all the same, a *given* thing). So naturally it was lost. It had to be regained by effort and struggle. Education was the process through which it had to be done. Something akin to what Swami Brahmanandaji Maharaj, the first President of our Order once said to somebody who asked him, 'Ramakrishna has given everything to you in the spiritual realm. Then why are you undergoing so much hardship with your life of austerity, prayer and meditation?' Brahmanandaji's reply was, 'True, Ramakrishna has given everything, but now we are trying to make it our own.'

### 1 April Pranks

Though the spontaneity of expression was gone and the innate natural smile was missing, it is not as though everything was drab and dull in the institution. There was much fun and frolic among the children themselves, and the institution also provided enough opportunity for them to express themselves and display their talents in various fields. For instance, to come back to this boy, Bomi Lingi, again. He was a funny fellow. One morning when I went to the dormitory as usual, I found all the boys looking at one another with mocking smiles. When all the other boys were asleep the previous night, Bomi Lingi had gone and caricatured everyone's face by painting with ink moustaches and other odd things. Each one thought that the others' faces alone had been painted! It was the First of April.

### A Hilarious Interlude

Another boy, Loya, studying in standard I, though not doing well in the class, had a good sense of humour, like Bomi Lingi. He

would often joke with me freely. Once he had gone with his friends to a picture depicting various episodes of the *Mahabharata*. One of the incidents was the story of Rukma, the brother of Rukmini, traditionally hailing from those very regions of Arunachal Pradesh. Rukma was opposed to the marriage of his sister to Krishna, whom she had chosen in her heart as her beloved on just seeing his picture. Krishna came on receiving her missive through a friendly messenger. He married her according to the *gandharva* type of marriage allowed for kshatriyas, the warrior class. While he was carrying her off in a chariot, Rukma confronted him with his army. However, Krishna managed to hold him captive, but let him off after partly tonsuring his head. The next day Loya, after relating to me the whole story, said: 'Swamiji, why don't you also shave your head *half* like Rukma? You would look very nice!'

### Improving Children's Handwriting

Kindergarten children too were not very much behind in playing pranks on us. Beautiful handwriting was one of the things we emphasized. And childhood is the best time to develop it, as we all know. Of the various methods adopted for the purpose, I thought that the old method of writing over and over again on a slate was the best. But as slates were outdated, I thought the same method could be followed in the copybooks as well. Even when engaged in talk the children could without any strain write repeatedly a fixed number of times, say twenty-five or thirty, on the printed letter or word. In course of time they would be able to write in a similar fashion. But it was not to their liking. Writing over and over again on the same letter or word was tiresome and boring. So, they would scribble and scrawl over the lines of the letters to create the impression that they had done the job as we wanted and hoodwink us into thinking that they had written the words or letters the required number of times. Our wits were pitted against theirs,

as it were, even in a small matter like this, little cherubs though they were and we grown up. A way out was, of course, found to their satisfaction and ours. They were asked to get our signatures every time they had finished copying. It was a relief to them also. For, then, they could get up now and then instead of being confined to their seats for long.

### 'Writing' and 'Drawing'

In the biology class, I invariably used the words 'write the figures', instead of the correct expression 'draw the figures', when sketches of the heart or some other part of the body or plant had to be drawn. In the English classes they would have been told the correct expression and chastised whenever *they* made the mistake. Now, when I myself had made the mistake, they would have a dig at me: 'Write the figure, Swamiji? Write the figure?' I would correct myself and say, 'Yes, *draw* the figures.' Once I did not want to give in. I resorted to some sort of sophistry to defend myself. I said simply, 'When you *draw* the figure, you simultaneously *write* it also, don't you? Maybe language-wise it is wrong. But technically it is all right.'

### Judging Children by Elders' Standards

Living with children is an education in itself. We learn more than we teach. One of the first things I learnt was that we ourselves are to blame for the poor response we get from them. I am inclined to think that *we* were very often to blame for the change in the demeanour of the tribal boys. We judge them from our own standards as grown-ups and we look at their actions through the eyeglass of our own preconceived notions and prejudices. Once some older boys in another educational institution of ours in Madras (now Chennai) of which I subsequently became in charge, had indulged in some act of indiscretion. I was charging them with all sorts of wild allegations as if they had hatched up a plan to destroy the institution itself, when they told me

plainly: 'None of these things were in our minds, Swamiji. It is all your imagination. We acted in a fit of emotion without any definite worked-out plan. *You* are giving us suggestions and ideas. We shall act accordingly next time.'

### **'Swamiji, Teach Me How to Control the Mind!'**

One Kenge Kamsi, a police sub-inspector when I last heard about him in 1993, was always restless. Otherwise he was a good boy, kindly and sympathetic to others' suffering. Once during the holidays, a few small boys who could not go home because of the long distance they had to cover had gone to a picture in town. After the show was over, he found them stranded because of a heavy downpour. He brought them back to the hostel, three kilometres away, carrying each one on his shoulders, though he had to make two or three trips to do that. But sitting quietly in the class for any stretch of time was torture for him. From the ventilator in the classroom, he could see whether I was in the veranda or not. Then he would step out of the classroom. Once I happened to come out of my office room to find him roaming about in the veranda listlessly, quite carefree. I asked him to get back to the class. He stared at me with a mocking smile. Or so I thought he did, and gave him a slap on his face. Till today I regret my action, for that was a *natural* smile on his face.

On another occasion, the boys were enjoying themselves in the playground below on a Dipavali night exploding firecrackers. After the display was over, the rest returned to the hostel, but this boy, along with four others, quietly slipped away from the playground to see a picture in the town. On the way they met our cook. They were quite sure that he would inform me. They warned him not to. However, he did inform me without mentioning the names of the boys. The names, however, were not very difficult to find out. We could

easily spot the absentees from the empty beds in the hostel, as each one had his own specified bed to sleep on. It was not the first time that Kenge Kamsi was doing it, unlike the others. So, I thought enough was enough, and it was time to send him away from the hostel. I told the warden swami to take the necessary action, with clear instructions that he should not allow him to see me. For I knew my own nature. By morning my temper would have cooled down, and he would take advantage of it, as he had done so many times earlier. As I had expected, I saw him coming up slowly in the early morning. I was steeling my heart to chide him severely and ask him to go way. But before I could say anything, he blurted out: 'Swamiji, teach me how to control the mind!' What could I do? I could not help bursting into loud laughter. 'Why?' I asked. His reply was remarkable for its ingenuity and originality. He said, 'You see, I did not want to go. But I could not control myself. If you had taught me how to control my mind, I would not have made that mistake at all.' How true it is, I thought. Had not Swami Vivekananda also expressed a similar view when he said 'We advise the children not to tell a lie or steal, but never teach them how not to do it. We must do that instead of simply moralizing.'

That is the reason we dispensed with the prescribed moral science classes. Of what use are they when the children are observing us day in and day out and watching our movements closely, judging whether our actions are in accordance with our words or not? We keep watch over them with our *two* eyes, but they focus *three hundred* eyes on us. Often we forget this simple truth. That is why Swami Vivekananda said, 'If you want to transform anybody, don't lecture him about it. You just go and live with him for a few days. If you have some fire within you, he will automatically catch it.'

*(to be continued)*

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# Seeing God in a World of Many Religions

## Swami Brahmananda's Teaching on the Chosen Deity

FR FRANCIS X CLOONEY, SJ

### Introduction

There have always been many religions, but in recent years we have had to reflect and pray a great deal about what this plurality means and how it affects our understanding of ourselves and God. Even in America and Europe, people of different religious traditions are meeting each other with increasing regularity. We live as neighbours and meet in many different contexts, some formal but also in the ordinary course of school and work and recreation. Even when we pray we tend to be much more conscious than before of how others pray and have found God—or how they name the ultimate religious reality. Most of us recognize that we need to be willing to learn religiously from one another in a healthy, positive fashion that respects our similarities and differences. Yet even if we are well disposed to religious diversity, we may also be uncomfortable with a lazy tolerance that can creep up on us: 'Live and let live; I will respect what you say if you respect what I say, no matter what it is; deep down we all mean the same thing anyway.' Such an attitude closes the door on true learning; it is a sure way to missing religious opportunities.

Recently I had occasion to return to some of the basic writings of the Ramakrishna tradition, ranging from *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* and the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* to the teachings of Swami Vivekananda and influential swamis from the early years of the Mission. Their wise reflections on religion and its meaning in the context of pluralism continue to help us towards a balanced and disciplined spiritual attitude towards religious diversity. This essay is devoted to just one example of

this wisdom: *A Guide to Spiritual Life*<sup>1</sup> (henceforth *Guide*) by Swami Brahmananda, the illustrious first President of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission; and, within that book, his teaching on the concept of the *ishta*, the 'Chosen'—the 'Chosen Deity', or 'The Chosen Ideal'.<sup>2</sup> I will also have occasion to refer to a companion volume about Swami Brahmananda, Swami Prabhavananda's *The Eternal Companion: Brahmananda: His Life and Teaching* (henceforth *Companion*).

The *Guide* is a small but wise book, appealingly translated by Swami Chetanananda (to whom those of us who do not know Bengali must be very grateful!) and offers us a glimpse of Brahmananda's practical guidance to seekers after spiritual growth. In the *Guide* Brahmananda repeatedly returns to the notion of 'Chosen Deity', indicating how different people will have their own preferred representations of the Divine which they meditate on with singular devotion, while yet recognizing that others may worship God according to other names and forms. In the glossary at the end of the *Companion*, Shiva and Vishnu are given as examples of possible Chosen Deities: 'When worshipped as the Chosen Deity, Shiva is the total Godhead, the supreme Reality. . . . As the Chosen Ideal of the Vaishnavas, Vishnu represents not only the preserver aspect of the Personal God but the Personal God himself.'<sup>3</sup> For a long time I have been aware of the roots of the teaching on 'Chosen Deity' even in texts as ancient as the classical Yoga system of Patanjali, where focusing on a Deity is recognized as a useful instrument in disciplined meditation. Swami Brahmananda's teachings have helped me to trace the de-



velopment of the idea; and to see its specific relevance in the modern world; how it is very fruitful for us to realize that people think about, visualize and relate to God in different ways that are really different meditation practices. If we see the connection between varied representations of God and disciplined spiritual practice, it becomes possible to esteem the subjective element in religious experience without reducing our ideas and images of God to a series of merely subjective presentations. In the following pages I will simply recount what I have been learning from Brahmananda's teaching itself, and from its likely context. Since I am only a friendly 'visitor' to the Ramakrishna tradition, it may be that some of the points that interest me will seem familiar or even obvious to those learned in the tradition, and some of my conclusions odd or unexpected, but I trust that the learned readers will bear with me patiently.

### Some Relevant Background on the Chosen Deity Ideal

We can of course take it for granted that the early disciples learned and perfected their particular ways to God through the teaching and direct guidance of Sri Ramakrishna. In the *Companion*, for instance, we learn that Brahmananda himself was vividly taught the meaning of Chosen Deity by Sri Ramakrishna. The following moment in his experience, when he was still the impressionable young Rakhali, nicely illustrates his relationship to Sri Ramakrishna, and also locates the Chosen Deity teaching in his own experience:

Rakhali was sitting absorbed in the hall of the temple experiencing an ecstatic joy. Sri Ramakrishna approached him in ecstasy and gave him a special mantra for his own use. 'Look,' said the Master, 'there is your Chosen Deity!' Rakhali in ecstatic vision saw his chosen aspect of the godhead standing before him, living and luminous, with a smile playing on his lips. When Rakhali gained his external consciousness and saw Sri Ramakrishna, he prostrated at his feet with loving devotion.<sup>4</sup>

This kind of personal experience must have been most persuasive in inculcating the Chosen Deity ideal in the minds and hearts of the early swamis. While nothing replaces the value of this experience and conversations with those who have been introduced to the practice, we can also look to written sources for information. For instance, although the term 'Chosen Deity' does not appear many times in the *Gospel*, we find there references which indicate the traditional background for the ideal and practice of the Chosen Deity. The following discussions indicate a particular ritual source, the *shava* sadhana or 'corpse ritual':

Mr Choudhury: Sir, is it not possible to have the vision of God without the help of a guru?

Master: Satchidananda Himself is the Guru. At the end of the *śava sādhanā* [corpse ritual], just when the vision of the Chosen Deity<sup>5</sup> is about to take place, the guru appears before the aspirant and says to him, 'Behold! There is your Chosen Deity.' Saying this, the guru merges into the Chosen Deity. The guru is the thread that leads to God.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly,

Girish: The guru and the Chosen Deity. I like very much the form of the guru. I am not afraid of him. Why should it be so? I am afraid of ecstasy. At the sight of ecstasy I run away.

Master: He who is the Chosen Deity appears in the form of the guru. The aspirant practises meditation on a corpse. When he obtains the vision of his Chosen Deity, it is really the guru who appears to him and says, 'This is that', that is to say, he points out to the disciple his Chosen Deity. Uttering these words, the guru disappears into the form of the Chosen Deity. The disciple no longer sees the guru.<sup>7</sup>

In viewing a corpse, the practitioner is confronted with the sheer and horrifying facts of death and decay, and yet by persevering in meditation is enabled by the guru to obtain a vision of God that transcends death. The *shava* sadhana, corpse meditation, is drawn from the tantric tradition, and is described in texts such as the *Nila Tantra*. I am unfamiliar with the ritual, but I presume that this kind of medi-

tation would normally take place in the cremation grounds. I am not an expert in the tantras, but have found relevant and illuminating this note from Arthur Avalon's *Serpent Power*:

In the successful Shavāsana the Devī, it is said, appears to the Sādhaka. In Shavasādhana the Sādhaka sits astride on the back of a corpse (heading the north), on which he draws a Yantra and then does Japa of Mantra with Shodhānyāsa and Pujā on its head. A corpse is selected as being a pure form of organized matter, since the Devatā which is invoked into it is the Mahāvidyā whose Svarūpa is Nirguna-brahman, and by such invocation becomes Saguna. The corpse is free from sin or desire. ... The Devatā materializes by means of the corpse. There is a possession of it (Āvesha)—that is, entry of the Devatā into the dead body. At the conclusion of a successful rite, it is said, that the head of the corpse turns round, and, facing the Sādhaka, speaks, bidding him name his boon, which may be spiritual or worldly advancement as he wishes. This is part of Nīla Sādhana done by the 'Hero' (Vira), for it and Shavāsana are attended by many terrors.

There are some resemblances between this corpse ritual and the ideal of the Chosen Deity as presented in Brahmananda's teaching. We shall observe the similarity where appropriate in the next section, but here I will mention the basic points: The importance of meditation and the purification of the 'place' of meditation, be it a corpse or the meditator; visualization, by means of the yantra, along with the use of a mantra; the appearing of the Deity during that meditation, in that place; the turning of the face of the corpse, of the Chosen Deity, towards the meditator; the acquisition of what one desires, the *ishṭa*; the interplay between the nirguna and saguna, what is without form and what has forms. In the corpse ritual and in the *Gospel* texts just cited, the properly instructed meditator is able to see beyond death, to see his or her familiar Chosen Deity. While I cannot suggest—I lack sufficient information—that teachers like Brahmananda were consciously drawing on the corpse ritual

as a source for their teaching on the Chosen Deity, it seems clear that such earlier, specific and difficult practices are an important part of the traditional background that gave his teaching its specificity and power.

### Brahmananda's Teaching on the Chosen Deity

In the *Guide* Brahmananda refers frequently to the ideal of the Chosen Deity as many as twenty times; there is even a whole chapter on the topic. The chapters record teachings from 1913 to 1922, and Brahmananda's message seems consistent throughout. In this section I will describe what I understand to be the main points in his teaching.

First, Brahmananda insists that meditation on one's Chosen Deity is of great value for those learning how to meditate, particularly as they wrestle with distractions: 'Try diligently to check this mad outward rush of your mind. You can do this successfully if you do not try to meditate as soon as you sit down. First draw the mind back from its external pursuits by means of discrimination and lock it up inside, at the sacred feet of your Chosen Deity.'<sup>9</sup> This is a difficult but necessary process. Early on in the *Guide*, in answering a question about how to control the mind, which wanders during meditation, he says, 'You must bring the mind under control again and again and engage it in meditation on the Chosen Deity. ... you must engage the mind forcibly in contemplation of the Chosen Deity. It is like swallowing a bitter medicine to get rid of fever. Slowly spiritual joy will flow within you.'<sup>10</sup> But later in the book, in advising young monks, he also suggests that the beginning of focused meditation can be made gentle and joyful by focusing on the benign face of the Deity: 'When you practice meditation, first think of the blissful form of your Chosen Deity. That will soothe your nerves. Think that he is looking at you with a smiling face and with joy.' (115) Once begun, the process expands fruitfully: 'One should begin practice accord-

ing to one's own mode of sadhana [spiritual practice]. After becoming established in that, one can take up other paths and experience the same bliss of God. Don't be emotional. Control your feelings. Japam [repeated repetition of one's mantra] becomes tasteless if it is not connected with the thought of the Chosen Deity.' (115) Even this meditation can be undertaken gradually, as best one can: 'If you cannot visualize the full form during meditation, start with only one part. First concentrate on the lotus feet of the Deity.' (115)

Second, as is already clear, Brahmananda's teaching on the Chosen Deity is specific and practical. In chapter 27, which is devoted primarily to the Chosen Deity ideal, he recommends the following steps: 1. Hold the mind firmly to the feet of your Chosen Deity. 2. Visualize your Chosen Deity as facing you in the heart, visualize the Deity as you see him/her in a picture, but while thinking of him/her as 'living, luminous, and blissful'. This particular instruction, to envision the Deity as facing towards oneself, seems at least to echo the experience referred to by Avalon: From the material body the Deity rises up and faces towards the meditator. 3. Next, concentrate on your Chosen Deity in the heart, that is, in the *anahata chakra*. 4. Recite your mantra while meditating on your Chosen Deity. Contemplate your mantra and your Chosen Deity together, word and form, the name and the named. (98-9) While what is personally appropriate figures significantly in this meditation—this works for me, this gives me joy—contemplating the Chosen Deity is nevertheless a quite specific and structured way of meditating.

Third, I wish to highlight one detail from the previous paragraph by noting Brahmananda's insistence that the visualization of your Chosen Deity is always connected with the recitation of the mantra; indeed, 'There is no difference in meaning between the mantram and the Chosen Ideal. They mean the same thing. He is your all in all.'<sup>11</sup> According

to the glossary in the *Companion*, the mantra is a particular name of God corresponding to the Chosen Deity of the disciple. '... the mantram, regarded as one with God, represents the essence of the guru's instruction to his disciple.' (296) The mantra is a guide for correct meditation: 'You must not let the Chosen Ideal leave your mind—meditation and mantram must go together. However your experience of the mantram shows that you are proceeding along the path.' (264)

To link the act of meditation with a mantra is, of course, an ancient tradition. Ritual actions have always been accompanied by words. In explaining Vedic rituals, for instance, the Mimamsa theorists insisted on the harmony of ritual action with words, the mantra. Even today temple worship includes both reverent acts before images and words to be recited. So too, as we saw in the quotation from Arthur Avalon, the corpse ritual includes a kind of visualization—the drawing of an abstract design on the corpse—along with the recitation of the mantra, and the location of both within the body. But the emphasis on mantra seems also to have a broader theological significance that is of particular importance today: the balancing of visualization and spoken word may be taken as signifying a balance of heart and head. What one does religiously, however devotionally intense, must also be intelligible, appropriate to mind as well as heart. Most of our religious experience, most of the time, should be able to be articulated in words; it should be present to the mind and, insofar as possible, intelligible to it.

Fourth, although this meditation is instructive and helpful for beginners, it is not just for them. Committing oneself to meditation on the Chosen Deity charts a path for spiritual advancement, even to what Brahmananda sees as the highest forms of Self-realization: 'In meditation you should think of the form of the Chosen Deity as effulgent. Imagine everything is shining through his lustre. Think of him as a conscious Being. This kind of medita-

tion gradually turns into meditation on the formless aspect of God. Your awareness will be filled with God-consciousness. Then, when the knowledge-eye opens, you will see God face to face.<sup>12</sup> Brahmananda explains this as progress from meditation which is helped by forms and qualities (saguna) to meditation without any such helps (nirguna); one begins with a clear and specific image of one's Deity, and thereby begins a journey towards a transcendental state where the Self and world are shown to be one, although even in the end it is God that one sees 'face to face'. This too reminds us of Avalon's words: The Deity's proper form is without qualities, though in the course of meditation the Deity will appear to the meditator with qualities. In the *Companion*, Swami Prabhavananda cites interestingly similar words about the progress of meditation, stressing even more vividly the process of interior puja:

First worship the Chosen Ideal mentally with flowers, incense, etc. and then practise meditation and mental japam. ... As you meditate on your Chosen Deity, think of him as bright and effulgent, and that everything shines because of his light. Think of him as living and conscious. As you continue thus, the form of your Chosen Deity will gradually melt into the formless, into the Infinite. Then will follow a vivid sense of the Living Presence, until, finally, the eye of wisdom will open and the Infinite will be directly perceived.<sup>13</sup>

Another passage describes the beginning and end of the process very clearly, identifying the highest state and then three stages leading up to it:

The highest sadhana [spiritual practice] is to experience the Atman [Self] all the time. The stage prior to this is meditation. At that time the aspirant feels that only God and he exist. In deep meditation he sees the form of his Chosen Deity and cannot continue his japam. In the stage prior to meditation, the aspirant glorifies God, chants his name, and at the same time thinks of his form. [Finally,] the last method is the ritualistic worship of God embodied in an image or symbol. These are all different stages of evolu-

tion of the mind. [But] each person begins his spiritual journey from where he is.<sup>14</sup>

We can then trace a chronological progression: First, external, ritual worship, perhaps before the image of one's Chosen Deity; second, recitation, prayer, glorification of God, who is represented by this image; third, interior meditation on God as this Chosen Deity, within one's heart; fourth, the realization of the unity of one's own Self and this Deity. In another place, Brahmananda puts it this way: 'The aspirant must begin his spiritual practice by offering mental worship to his Chosen Ideal God with form. Then he must meditate on His shining form and gradually let this form melt into the Formless. God is with form, He is without form, and He is beyond both.'<sup>15</sup>

Fifth, and finally, I wish to note a point that is so central to Brahmananda and his tradition that it might just as well have been listed first: his emphasis on the role of the guru. Although meditation on the Chosen Deity is a personal matter appropriate to each person individually, identifying the Chosen Deity and the corresponding mantra is not a private choice. Brahmananda emphasizes, rather, that the role of the guru is indispensable, and that it is the guru who 'selects' the Deity for the disciple. To get beyond a restless shifting from deity to deity and to find the appropriate Chosen Deity, the seeker must rely on a teacher: 'The guru selects the mantram and the Chosen Deity according to the nature of the disciple.'<sup>16</sup> A real guru is one who, through meditation, can see the Chosen Deity of a disciple, and instruct him or her accordingly. (64)

For the guru to be able to identify the Chosen Deity for the disciple, a serious preparatory process must be gone through: 'Before initiation the guru and the disciple should test each other for a long time.' (50) For the guru, it is a spiritual achievement to discern the disciple's Chosen Deity. Brahmananda explains this with reference to his own experience: 'There is much work involved in initiating a

disciple. I have to meditate long hours to select the Chosen Deity of each disciple. One day a man came to me for initiation. I thought that if I could know his Chosen Deity in meditation, I would initiate him, otherwise not. After one hour's meditation, I saw the form of a Deity and later came to know from him that that was his favorite Deity.' (50) Notice that while a person's 'favorite Deity' may coincide with his or her Chosen Deity, this is not to be taken for granted. Likewise, as I have already mentioned, the process of meditating on the Chosen Deity, once identified, is also quite specific and not left entirely to the devotee's preferences; the teacher is of great importance in learning how to approach the Deity.

Brahmananda also notes that one of the culminating achievements in meditation is to realize the actual identity of the guru and the Chosen Deity. Once again echoing teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Brahmananda indicates that the guru too must be interiorized by the seeker, who must eventually come to identify the guru and the Chosen Deity—not just in theory, but in actual meditation.

The guru should not be looked upon as an ordinary human being. His physical body is the temple in which the Lord resides. If the guru is served with this attitude, one attains love and devotion for him, which can then be directed toward the Lord. One should meditate on the guru in the thousand-petalled lotus of the brain [in the *sahasrara chakra*] and then merge the guru into the Chosen Deity. (120)

He continues a reference that alludes to the corpse ritual (*shava sadhana*): 'Sri Ramakrishna used to say: "The guru appears before the disciple in a vision and points ahead, saying, 'Look, there is your Chosen Deity.' After this the guru merges into the Chosen Deity." Really, the guru is not different from the Chosen Deity.' (120) This echoes the *Gospel* passage cited earlier:

He who is the Chosen Deity appears in the form of the guru. The aspirant practises meditation on a corpse. When he obtains the vision of his

Chosen Deity, it is really the guru who appears to him and says, 'This is that', that is to say, he points out to the disciple his Chosen Deity. Uttering these words, the guru disappears into the form of the Chosen Deity. The disciple no longer sees the guru.<sup>17</sup>

Even in the earlier stages of meditation, one can aim towards this realization of the unity of guru, Deity, and self: 'As you meditate on your Chosen Deity in the heart, similarly, before you begin your spiritual practices, meditate on your guru in the heart. Think that the guru and the Chosen Deity are one. Then merge the form of the guru into the form of the Chosen Deity. After that repeat your mantram and meditate on the Chosen Deity.'<sup>18</sup>

### Adapting the Ideal of the Chosen Deity in the Modern World

In this section I wish simply to observe the accommodation of the Chosen Deity ideal in the modern world. We have seen that the Chosen Deity ideal is rooted in specific rituals and personal experiences, and that it is presented as a disciplined, precise practice by Brahmananda. There is a passage from the glossary to the *Companion* that reminds us of the traditional boundaries of the Ideal. On the one hand, 'The latent divinity which is within each human soul becomes awakened by repetition of the mantram and meditation on the aspect of Godhead which it represents. The aspect of Godhead which is worshipped by an aspirant is called his "Chosen Ideal".' On the other, 'This does not mean, however, that an aspirant can worship God in one aspect today and another aspect tomorrow. It is imperative that he should hold to his Chosen Deity. ... Devotion to one Ideal is absolutely necessary for the beginning in his practice of religious discipline.'<sup>19</sup>

Yet this is a flexible ideal, one that has a future and can be adapted. In one passage, Brahmananda himself invites his listeners to make their own choice: 'Choose the aspect of

God which most appeals to you, and when you feel a growing devotion toward that one aspect when you feel a steadfast love toward your Chosen Deity, you will love God in all his aspects.<sup>20</sup> To supplement this passage, I wish to offer just one more example of how the teaching on the Chosen Deity was extended over time. In *Seeing God Everywhere*, Swami Shradhananda, who lived and taught for many years in California, USA, offered a fresh presentation of the ideal of the Chosen Deity, an explanation which seems to give the seeker much more initiative and responsibility:

When we are interested in seeking God, we should first settle upon which God we are seeking, because different pictures of God are given in different religions, and even in the same religion different concepts of God are found. Further, the emotional and intellectual constitution of each mind is different; it is only natural that different people will approach God in different ways. If the seeker cannot decide which particular idea of God to meditate on among the innumerable concepts of the Divine, he or she should seek the guidance of a competent spiritual teacher. If this question is not settled, one's spiritual life is bound to be confused.<sup>21</sup>

This admission of personal preference places the ideal in the context of people making personal choices about how to worship in a situation of wider religious pluralism; if one

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cannot decide on a Chosen Deity by oneself, then one should consider consulting a teacher.

The Chosen Deity ideal offers rich insight into the traditions that have made the Ramakrishna Order a living and vital spiritual community for more than a century. I find it very interesting and edifying to see how the ideal of

the Chosen Deity, rooted in old ritual practices which may seem quite puzzling to people today, was adapted first by Sri Ramakrishna and then by his disciples to fit changing circumstances. Used by teachers blessed with spiritual wisdom and prudence, the Chosen Deity ideal has functioned as a help to beginners in meditation and a strong link between gurus and disciples. It offers a way of making the religious tradition flexible enough to be suited to the needs of individual devotees, while yet also serving as a way to draw individuals into a deeper and richer spirituality that goes beyond their individual concepts and tastes.

### **A Concluding Christian Reflection**

In the preceding sections I have tried to stay as close as possible to the teachings of Brahmananda, and to learn from him about the Chosen Deity ideal. Let me extend my comments briefly by saying what the Chosen Deity ideal suggests to me as a Christian.

Clearly, the concept itself can be of great help to the Christian, simply as a guide to spiritual growth and meditation. As we Christians hear about how Brahmananda guided his disciples in meditation and showed them how to begin to see God and then see more and more deeply, we are encouraged to review the prac-

tices of meditation in our own tradition: How do we Christians lead people from what is comforting and familiar in their religious experience to encounters in which God may graciously choose to face them directly? Certainly, those of us who are asked to guide people in prayer and meditation can learn much

from the Chosen Deity ideal about how to balance fidelity to tradition with responsiveness to the needs and tastes of individuals. So too, the close connection between the guru and the Chosen Deity is of interest to the Christian, for in our tradition Jesus is the Great Teacher. In

India, I have met Christians who testify to the role of Jesus as their God and as their Guru in the spiritual journey toward God. Some would say that for the Christian Jesus is the only Guru—God and Teacher perfectly united.

We Christians should also be prompted to think about how we pray. Of course, it is at the core of Christian faith to focus on Jesus, and it is a revered tradition for us to pray before a crucifix or other image of Jesus. Just as the tradition of the Chosen Deity is rooted in specific ritual practices, Christian devotion to Jesus has for many centuries had deep roots in contemplating the crucified and suffering Jesus. Today we are still encouraged to hold an image of Jesus in our minds and hearts when we pray, and to place ourselves in his presence, for a face-to-face encounter: what has the Crucified One done for us, and how shall we respond to him? Venerable Christian traditions of spirituality, both East and West, teach methods of visualization that seem akin to learning to see the Chosen Deity. I think, for instance, of the Orthodox devotion to icons, and of my own Jesuit tradition of contemplating Jesus in various scenes of his life according to the methods suggested by St Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*. Although these Christian practices are not quite the same as the spirituality related to the Chosen Deity, the similarities are rich enough to merit attention.

As long as we keep the whole teaching on the Chosen Deity before us, and in that way resist reducing it merely to a matter of choosing a deity—in a kind of spiritual consumerism—it will be very helpful for Christians to learn from Swami Brahmananda, to think of Jesus as our Chosen Deity and, by extension, to think of ourselves as ‘a people chosen to meet God as this Chosen Deity’. This is so particu-

larly in the situation of religious pluralism where we find ourselves. While we Christians do not want to think of Jesus as merely ‘our choice’ for a God, we must admit that we choose, and keep choosing, to see God in and through this Jesus who seems so very familiar to us. Just as a guru in the Ramakrishna Order might give to various disciples various possible presentations of God as their Chosen Deity, we Christians certainly believe that we have been given Jesus as the visible form of God in our midst, and we keep this tradition alive in our teaching and worship.

While we might also believe that Jesus can become the Chosen Deity for all people, most of us today are also aware that this ‘preference’, however deeply it might be felt, cannot be imposed on people without respect for how they have found and seen God already. A

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fruitful way for us to make our God known to all may be simply to show that we have personally found peace and joy through envisioning the face of Jesus as the face of God. Perhaps we will be able to hear anew the words our Teacher spoke about his disciples and his Father: ‘Father, the glory that You have given me I have given to them, so that they may be one, as You and I are one. I in them, and You in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that You have sent me and have loved them even as You have loved

me.<sup>22</sup>

I close with one more reference to Brahmananda's teaching in the *Guide*, a bit of wisdom that should help us all as we deepen our personal commitments in a world of so many religious possibilities. In one passage he mentions that during meditation people may find other deities impinging upon their vision of their own Chosen Deity; they should not exclude these other images harshly, because they are not obstacles to spiritual advancement:

Question: What shall I do if, while meditating on my Chosen Deity, other forms of gods and goddesses appear before me?

Brahmananda: Know it to be a very auspicious sign. At that time think that your Chosen Deity is appearing through those forms. He is one, and again he is many. Visualize your Chosen Deity, but if he appears to you in another form, enjoy that divine vision. After some days you will see that those forms will merge into your Chosen Deity.<sup>23</sup>

This advice casts out fear. As a Christian, I will be concerned to keep pure and simple my commitment to Jesus Christ, but I need not protect this fidelity through defensiveness or fear or a sharp dismissal of other traditions' spiritual riches. Brahmananda's words encourage us to keep looking ahead, and into our hearts, trusting that God's familiar face will not be lost to us as we meet God more deeply, today. \*

### Notes and References

1. *A Guide to Spiritual Life: Spiritual Teachings of Swami Brahmananda*, trans. Swami Chetanananda (St Louis: Vedanta Society, 1988). I will

also have occasion to refer to its companion volume, *The Eternal Companion: Brahmananda: His Life and Teaching* by Swami Prabhavananda (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1970).

2. For the sake of consistency, in my citations from *The Eternal Companion* I substitute 'Chosen Deity' for 'Chosen Ideal'. Both terms translate *ishta* or *ishta devata*.
3. *Companion*, 300.
4. *ibid.*, 25-6.
5. Both passages are from the English translation of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942). In both, I have substituted 'Chosen Deity' for 'Ishta'.
6. *Gospel*, 184.
7. *ibid.*, 843.
8. Arthur Avalon [John Woodroffe], *The Serpent Power* (Madras: Ganesh & Co, 1950), 204.
9. *Companion*, 234.
10. *Guide*, 46.
11. *Companion*, 144.
12. *Guide*, 119.
13. *Companion*, 202.
14. *Guide*, 140.
15. *Companion*, 261.
16. *Guide*, 48.
17. *Gospel*, 843.
18. *Guide*, 101-2.
19. *Companion*, 293-4.
20. *ibid.*, 208.
21. Swami Shraddhananda, *Seeing God Everywhere*, ed. Pravrajika Vrajaprana (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1998), 11.
22. *The Gospel according to John*, 17.22-3.
23. *Guide*, 101.

### Common Source

The light of the gas-lamp illuminates various localities with varying intensity, but the sustenance of light, namely, the gas, comes from one common store. So the religious teachers of all lands and of all ages are but so many lamps through which the light of the Spirit streams constantly from the one almighty source.

—*Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*, 149-50



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# Basics of Spiritual Life

SWAMI GAUTAMANANDA

**M**any countries observed 11 September 2002 as the 'Rededication Day' to fight terrorism everywhere in the world. While speaking at a special meeting at the American Consulate in Chennai that day, I referred to the other 11 September event of the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, when Swami Vivekananda made an impassioned appeal to the world community to fight 'fanaticism and bigotry behind both pen and sword'. It has now been proved that fanaticism and bigotry were the two demons responsible for the 11 September 2001 tragedy in New York. How prophetic were Swamiji's words! At the end of the Consulate meeting, the Consul General expressed wonder at the coincidence of Swamiji's lecture on the same day in 1893.

Several other meetings under the banners of different religions, including Islam, are being held all over. The main theme in these meetings is the need for liberal interpretation of their respective tenets to stress love, sympathy and the brotherhood of humanity.

Under these circumstances, many educated and cultured men and women have begun to feel the necessity of spiritual education, value orientation, and a system to educate human beings in love and service of their brethren, instead of training them merely to compete and conquer. It is in this context that we are led to think about the basics of spiritual life.

## What is Spirituality?

Before doing anything it is always a good idea to have an intellectual grasp of what we intend doing. Thus, before we begin our spiritual life, we should ask ourselves what we mean by spiritual life. Spiritual life means I

should feel that I am a spiritual being; I am the Atman, in contrast with the usual feeling that I am the body. This Atman is infinite Life (immortality), infinite Knowledge and infinite Bliss.<sup>1</sup> To be spiritual is, therefore, to feel that we are immortal, infinitely blissful, and endowed with infinite Knowledge.

## Occult Powers

The extraordinary powers manifested by several so-called spiritual people—do they not indicate spirituality? Occult powers like prophesying, curing diseases and mind reading have nothing to do with spirituality. Sri Ramakrishna illustrates this fact with two examples. First, about a yogi who killed an elephant and revived it after a while. A wise man who witnessed this asked him, 'What did you achieve spiritually by killing and reviving the animal?' 'Nothing,' was the reply. Second, about a yogi who walked on the Ganges. Again, a wise man gave him a coin and told him, 'What you have achieved is worth just this small coin, the cost of a boat ride across the river.' Spiritual aspirants must steer clear of occult powers; they are detractors in spiritual life.

## Spiritual Inclination

The next question before us is this: Is spiritual aspiration something natural or otherwise? Many so-called modern psychologists would say that the inclination for an introspective life is something abnormal. But the sages of India point out that just as it is natural for a rich man who has lost all his wealth through some misfortune to desire to become rich again, even so is the desire in man to seek his real nature, the Atman, when by his ignorance he has lost his knowledge of immortal-

ity. That we struggle for long life (immortality), limitless knowledge and limitless joy is proof enough that we have lost something of this infinite Life, Knowledge and Bliss, the intrinsic nature of our true Self. That explains the conclusion reached in the *Chandogya Upanishad*: 'The Infinite alone gives joy, there is no joy in the finite.'<sup>2</sup>

### How Ignorance Came About

The next question would be, when and how did this Atman get into ignorance and lose its knowledge of immortality? We identify ourselves with our body and call ourselves Gautama, Gajanana, and so on. It is as funny as somebody saying that his name is

***What are spiritual practices? They are disciplines by following which we can get out of this hypnotism of calling ourselves the body and experience our identity with the Atman.***

Fiat or Ambassador just because he travelled in these cars for a few hours! So do we, who as the immortal Atman operate our body and mind from inside, base our identification on our bodies. When and how did we get into this ignorance? Our sages say that as our thinking itself is clouded in ignorance, the question how or when we got into this ignorance cannot be answered. For example, when we are in a dream, we can never know when and how we entered the dream. A wonderful word used in Sanskrit for this unknowableness is *anirvacaniya*. True, ignorance must have had a beginning, but logic cannot explain when or how it came about.

It is clear now that real spiritual life means we should feel that we are not this body-mind complex, but the ever-existing, infinitely joyful Atman. This calls for slow and steady dehypnotization of our mind from thinking that we are bodies, and asserting our-

selves as the immortal Self. This constant remembrance of our divinity is what is achieved through methodical and systematic spiritual practice.

### Spiritual Practices

What are spiritual practices? They are disciplines by following which we can get out of this hypnotism of calling ourselves the body and experience our identity with the Atman. Intellectually we understand that we are souls, but yet do not know it as a fact. Our mind needs to be prepared to receive this knowledge, which should become an unshakeable faith and experience. The mind can be prepared by the practice of universal spiritual values common to all higher religions, like straight-forwardness (*satya*), love for fellow men and creatures (*ahimsa*), honest living (*asteya*), pure character (*brahmacharya*), simple living (*aparigraha*), serving the poor and needy and seeing God in them, regular

prayer, *japa*, meditation, keeping holy company, and practising discrimination. Regarding prayer, we start with ritual worship, then we rise higher and higher from *puja* to the repetition of a divine name, then to mental worship and ultimately realize '*Soh'am brahma, I am the Divine*.'<sup>3</sup>

### Purification of Mind

What is meant by purification of mind? A purified mind is free from desires; the least disturbed and hence highly concentrated; and full of yearning to realize the object of meditation. Sri Ramakrishna explains how a purified mind gets attracted to the Atman. While a powerful magnet attracts needles, a needle covered with a lump of mud does not feel the attraction. For the mud-covered needle to be attracted to the magnet, the mud has to be washed away. Then naturally it will be attracted to the magnet. Even so, purged of all

selfish desires, a pure mind gets attracted to God and helps the aspirant realize Him through intense yearning.

### The Question of Food

Meditation requires a healthy body. That brings us to the next question: What food should a spiritual aspirant take? Usually, whatever food one is used to from childhood, whatever food conduces to a sense of peace, health and strength of mind, can be considered proper. The quantity of food, however, should be light and taken at regular intervals.

### Posture

Meditation is always practised in a sitting posture as the *Gita* says, 'Sitting in a posture, one should meditate to purify one's mind.'<sup>4</sup> The next question is this: Are other asanas required for spiritual practice? Certainly meditation does not require all the eighty-four or more asanas that are usually practised for physical health. According to Patanjali, only that asana is really important in which the aspirant can sit steadily for, say, a couple of hours.<sup>5</sup> Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi also said that one should practise a steady posture so as to meditate without any disturbance for at least a couple of hours. The psychology behind this sitting posture is that for deep thinking the spine is to be kept straight. Hence the sitting posture is important. A few more asanas can also be practised, if necessary, to maintain good health. There is no need to practise *neti* and *dhauti kriyas*, as Sri Ramakrishna himself specifically said that they were not necessary for a spiritual life.

### Pranayama

Now, what role does pranayama occupy in spiritual practice? Sri Ramakrishna said that for concentration and meditation, a real love of God is sufficient to make prana flow

uninterruptedly. But those who lack this love, have to calm down their restless mind to an extent before attempting meditation. This is done by a simple pranayama: drawing in the breath by the left nostril in one unit of time, retaining it inside the lungs for four units and expelling it by the other nostril in two units; and again repeating it with the right nostril—this makes one round of pranayama. Usually three to five such rounds are enough to sufficiently calm the mind for meditation. Simply retaining air for a long time inside the lungs has nothing to do with pranayama. One of our revered monks, Swami Yatiswaranandaji, used to jokingly say, 'Does the football bladder become a yogi because it retains so much of air for a long time?'

### Divine Grace

Next comes a very important question in spiritual life: How does divine grace descend on us? According to Sri Ramakrishna, divine grace is like the wind that is ever present to help the movement of boats on water, pro-

***How does divine grace descend on us?***

***According to Sri Ramakrishna, divine grace is like the wind that is ever present to help the movement of boats on water, provided their sails are unfurled.***

vided their sails are unfurled. The spiritual aspirant's faith, devotion and prayer are the unfurled sails that catch the wind of divine grace and help him move easily towards the goal of realization.

### How Long Will It Take?

How long will it take to reach the goal? In other words, how long has one to practise? Sri Ramakrishna answers with an example: The boatman struggles very hard holding fast to the rudder and furls the sail to control the boat's movement around a curve in the river.

But, once the curve is negotiated, he lets go of the rudder. He does not struggle anymore with the sail and takes things easy. Similarly, the turbulent period of youth is like negotiating the boat around the curve. Controlling the senses from outward tendencies during one's youth and turning the mind towards spiritual realization is a tough job that calls for intense prayer, devotion and meditation. Only then do the senses come under control, and the seeker acquires a natural inclination for contemplation and meditation. Only then does he get a reprieve from hard spiritual practices. As

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Swami Yatiswaranandaji put it, 'Then sadhana becomes rather easy.' The final success comes when inner yearning is aroused in the heart of the aspirant. Then all work becomes worship of God. This attracts God's grace, which breaks all bondage and grants him God-realization. Thus we see that all spiritual practices are only secondary means to get God's grace, which is the primary means to break the bonds of ignorance. According to Sri Krishna, 'This maya of Mine is divine and made up of the three gunas; it can be crossed over only by those who take refuge in Me.'<sup>6</sup>

### **The Illumined Soul**

An illumined person will be a personality ideal to everyone, young and old, men and women, because of his unique and infectious fearlessness, courage, freedom and joy. Swami Vivekananda said that we should strive to attain this self-enlightenment (*atmano*

*moksha*) and also to serve others who are in bondage (*jagat hita*). A survey of the present-day world convinces us of the necessity of *jagat hita* everywhere. In other words, we are in need of humanists along with scientists and technologists and ruthless politicians who have brought humanity to the brink of destruction. Therefore, when spiritual life takes its rightful place in everyone's life, it would make for a happier and more secure world than it is now. Sri Ramakrishna is the harbinger of that philosophy of life humanity needs most today. Swami Vivekananda wrote in his

famous hymn to Sri Ramakrishna: '*Saṅpāda tava śrīpāda bhava goṣpāda vāri yathāy; Premārpaṇa samadarśana jaga jana duḥkhā jāy*, O Lord Sri Ramakrishna, your holy feet are the wealth that transforms the ocean of unbearable sufferings of life into a small mud puddle.

You are the giver of love and the teacher of same-sightedness. May the miseries of the world disappear forever.'

May we follow the spiritual path shown by Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda to reach God, the goal of our lives, and by His power help others also in their struggle to reach Him. \*

### **References**

1. *Satyam jñānam anantam brahma*. —*Taittiriya Upaniṣad*, 2.1.1.
2. *Yo vai bhūmā tatsukham, nālpe sukhāsti*. —*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 7.23.1.
3. *Prathamā pratimā puṣā japastotrādi madhyamā; Uttamā mānāsī pūṣā so'ham brahmetyuttamottamā*.
4. *Bhagavadgita*, 6.12.
5. *Sthira-sukham-āsanam*. —*Yoga Sūtras*, 2.46.
6. *Gita*, 7.14.

Imperfect past makes future tense.

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# Non Fascit Saltum: Swami Vivekananda's Cretan Vision

PHILIP ROSOFF-HORNE

At the beginning of the year 1897, as Swami Vivekananda was sailing across the Mediterranean Sea on his way back to India after his first trip to the West, he had an astounding dream. A venerable old man appeared before him and said:

Observe well this place that I show to you. You are now in the island of Crete. This is the land in which Christianity began. ... I am one of that ancient order of Theraputtas (Therapeutae) which had its origin in the teachings of the Indian Rishis. The truths and ideals preached by us have been given out by the Christians as having been taught by Jesus; but for the matter of that, there was no such personality of the name of Jesus ever born. Various evidences testifying to this fact will be brought to light by excavating here.<sup>1</sup>

Swamiji referred to this astonishing vision many times thereafter though he never used it to question others' belief in a historical Jesus. To quote Sister Nivedita, '... while his vision exercised an undeniable influence over his own mind, he would have thought it insanity to offer it as evidence to any other. The function of such an experience, if admitted at all, was to his thinking, subjective alone.'<sup>2</sup>

Let us assume that this dream was a valid vision. Our attempt in this essay will be to explore its possible veracity and to consider the history of early Christianity in this light. First, we will offer a description of the Therapeutae and their origin in the Hellenic tradition. Second, we will ask why, of all places, Crete would be the birthplace of Christianity. And third, we must then briefly outline the historical antecedents of the Christian religion—as it is practised today in churches around the

world—in order, perhaps, to understand what it might mean to say that there never was a historical Jesus. Through this it is hoped that we will see that the tradition of Christianity is much older and deeper than the personality of Jesus and the history of the Hebrew people.

## The Therapeutae

Who were the Therapeutae? Before we begin this exploration, we must, unfortunately, dispense with the etymology given for the word in the *Life of Swami Vivekananda*: 'The word *Therapeutae* unmistakably means "Sons or disciples of the Theras", from *thera*, an elder among the Buddhist monks, and *putra*, which in Sanskrit means "son".<sup>3</sup>

The word *Therapeutae* is from the Greek and has an etymology older than the life of Buddha. The earliest use of the word occurs in Homer (c 900 BCE) and meant 'to do service, to be an attendant'. Hesiod (c 800 BCE) uses the word to mean 'a servant of the gods'. This last meaning is the one commonly used by Plato, who lived in the first generation following Buddha, two hundred years before Ashoka sent Buddhist missionaries to the West.<sup>4</sup> There is also a medical sense to the word, and Aristotle uses a variation of it to mean 'to cure an illness' (Liddell and Scott, *Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford University Press). Philo of Alexandria, our only source for the Therapeutae, gives us both etymologies for the word.

The true meaning or etymology of the words, Therapeutae and Therapeutrides [literally, 'healers,' male and female], (is) that they profess an art of healing better than that practised in the cities—for the latter cures only the bodies,

while theirs treats also souls ... or else they are so called because they have been taught ... to worship the Existent who is better than the Good, purer than the One and more primal than the Monad.

(Note that the words Existent, Good, One and Monad are more or less synonymous with Brahman and are terms of an Advaitic philosophical tradition begun in the West by Pythagoras, and Parmenides and culminating in Plato.)

There are two other reasons for the implausibility of the Buddhist etymology for the word *Therapeutae*. It is highly unlikely that the Jewish community, given their historically insular nature, would have frequented them as teachers. Also, if the *Therapeutae* had been a Buddhist community, Philo, their chronicler, would certainly have mentioned that fact; by his account, they were clearly a non-sectarian community.

Our primary source of knowledge about the *Therapeutae* is the Jewish writer Philo of

***In just a few pages, Philo of Alexandria paints a beautiful picture of pure and noble men and women living lives of solitary contemplation in search of unification with the divine Source of all. But the inevitable question arises: Where did this tradition arise?***

Alexandria (c 20 BCE–50 CE) who paints a beautiful portrait of their religious community, which was located some distance from Alexandria near Lake Mareotic. Jews at the time of Philo had become Hellenized, and, having lost their knowledge of Hebrew, only knew their own scriptures through the Septuagint (Greek) translation of the Bible. Throughout his works Philo shows a much greater knowledge of classical Greek philosophy than he does of the *Old Testament*. This has led scholars to believe that he had received a thoroughly Hellenic education and only re-

turned to his Hebrew roots at the end of his life. Most of Philo's writings are an attempt to reconcile the Hebrew tradition to the dominant Hellenic culture; but his great love was clearly Hellenic spirituality, which had its first rational expression in the teachings of Pythagoras and was most widely disseminated by Plato. Like all educated Hebrews at the time of Jesus (and by comparison, the educated Hindus at the time of Ramakrishna) Philo was a Western educated Jew; and like Swamiji, that modern Colossus of Rhodes, he attempted through Platonic exegesis of Hebrew scriptures to span the wide waters that separated Eastern philosophy and tradition from Western. By juxtaposing the best of the *Old Testament* with the highest of Hellenic mystical thought, by showing how the stories of the *Old Testament* could be interpreted allegorically using the much more sophisticated philosophical models of the Greek tradition, Philo was trying to arrive at the universal in spiritual life.

The *Therapeutae*, as Philo described them, were men and women dedicated to realizing the one spiritual Reality that is the support of all creation.

The *Therapeutae* ... aim at the vision of the Existent, and soar above the sense-perceptible sun and never abandon this post which leads to perfect happiness. ...

(They) come to this service neither through force of habit nor on the advice or exhortation of others but because they have been ravished by a heavenly passion (and) are possessed like Bacchants and Corybants [that is, ecstatic bhaktas] until they behold the object of their longing.

They give up all property in a responsible way. Rather than simply abandoning their possessions, they settle them in a profitable way on their kinsfolk and friends so that others who still have worldly desires might profit and have some means by which to fulfill those

desires. They then move out of the urban setting because 'every city, even the best governed, teems with tumult and indescribable disturbances that no one could abide (in) after having been once guided by wisdom'.<sup>6</sup>

They found a place near Mareotic lake,<sup>7</sup> which was neither too cold nor too hot, and clustered their houses about a hundred yards from one another so that they could enjoy solitude and yet be close enough to participate in community life. They are neither contiguous as in towns, since close proximity is troublesome and displeasing to those assiduously striving for solitude, nor yet far apart because of the fellowship to which they cleave, and in order to render each other aid in the event of piratical attack.

In each house there was a shrine room (called *monasterion* in Greek, the first use of that word in spiritual literature in the West) in which they brought neither food nor drink but only holy books. The aspirants spent the mornings and evenings in prayer, and the rest of the day in study and singing of holy songs. 'They always remember God and never forget him, so that even in their dreams no images are formed other than the loveliness of divine excellences and powers.'<sup>8</sup> In the evening, after their prayers, the aspirants take their one meal a day of bread and salt and hysop (a bitter green). Wearing only a simple linen cloth, the Therapeutae lived an austere and God-centered life.

Six days out of the week these holy men and women spent in isolation. On the seventh, they gathered together in the communal building for common prayer, worship and singing. The men and women were separated by a partition so that all might participate in the Sabbath festival without distraction. During the Sabbath festival, an elder expounded some holy text. 'He makes no display of clever rhetoric like the orators or sophists of today, but after close examination he carefully ex-

pounds the precise meaning of his thoughts, which does not settle on the edge of the audience's ears, but passes through the hearing into the soul.'(47)

Every seven weeks (because seven is a perfect number and because seven squared is even more perfect, that is, seven days in the week times seven weeks—a numerological way of thinking which was common among the spiritual groups that were influenced by the Pythagoreans and which has continued through the Western esoteric tradition to the modern day) the Therapeutae celebrated a special festival which lasted throughout the night. During this festival, the devotees themselves did all of the work 'since they consider the possession of servants to be entirely con-

***As far as we know, the earliest similar community of like-minded spiritual aspirants was founded 600 years before Philo of Alexandria by the teacher Pythagoras in the town of Crotona in the arch of the Italian boot.***

trary to nature. For nature has created all men free, but the acts of injustice and greed of some who have energetically pursued inequality, the beginning of mischief, harnessed the power over the weaker and fastened it on the stronger.' (53)

Then, after a discourse by one of the learned elders, a few men or women sang hymns in praise of the deity with the members of the congregation singing the refrains at appropriate places. They ate their communal vegetarian meal after which

they ... sing hymns to God composed in many metres and melodies ... and full of inspiration they sometimes chant processional odes (while executing) the choral dance ... and men and women alike are filled with divine ecstasy, (and) sing hymns of thanksgiving to God their Saviour ... the soprano of the women blending

with the bass of the men producing true musical concord ... exceedingly beautiful are the thoughts, exceedingly beautiful are the words, and august the choristers, and the end goal of thought, words, and choristers alike is piety. (56)

Finally after a night of singing hymns to God

they continue till dawn intoxicated with this exquisite intoxication and then, not with heavy head or drowsy eyes, but more alert than when they came to the banquet, with hands stretched heavenward they pray for a joyous day, truth, and acuity of thought. And after the prayers they retire each to his own sanctuary once more to ply the trade and cultivate the field of their wonted philosophy. (57)

Finally, Philo says: 'They (the Therapeutae) have lived in the soul alone, citizens of Heaven and the universe, truly commended to the Father and Creator of all by virtue, which has secured for them God's friendship in addition to the most fitting prize of nobility, which excels all good fortune and attains to the very summit of joy.' (57)

In just a few pages, Philo of Alexandria

***Pythagorean communities scattered throughout the Mediterranean world survived far into the Christian era—until the Holy Roman Church began to persecute and destroy all things pagan—and were an inspiration to other like-minded communities for at least a thousand years, if not, consciously or unconsciously, until the modern day.***

paints a beautiful picture of pure and noble men and women living lives of solitary contemplation in search of unification with the divine Source of all. But the inevitable question arises: Where did this tradition arise? History is not a series of stops and starts, but an unbro-

ken chain of cause and effect: *historia non fascit saltum* (history does not make leaps). So, since our main concern is to try to understand what validity, if any, there might be to Swamiji's vision in which a rishi of this spiritual group claimed both that it was the true forerunner of Christianity and that there was no historical personage of Jesus, we must go further back to try to find the true root of the tradition that gave rise to this exemplary religious community that flourished at the time of Jesus.

### The Pythagoreans

Christianity is a fusion of classical Hellenic culture and a Hebrew cult. It is unsure whether the Therapeutae were members of the diasporic Jewish community that resided in Alexandria at that time, because nowhere in his account does Philo make mention of *any* practices of any particular sect. They must have clearly had an openness to different forms of spiritual practice since Philo says that each of the members of the community 'retire(s) each to his own sanctuary once more to ply the trade and cultivate the field of their wonted philosophy'; that is, each member has his own unique spiritual practice. Be that as it may, after so many generations spent living in what was at that time the intellectual centre of the Mediterranean world, the Hebrew community was much more identified with the dominant paradigm of the Greek philosophical/religious tradition than with their nomadic Mosaic roots. So, if we need to find the fount of this Therapeutic religious community, we must look to the Hellenic spiritual tradition.

As far as we know, the earliest similar community of like-minded spiritual aspirants was founded 600 years before Philo of Alexandria by the teacher Pythagoras in the town of



Crotona in the arch of the Italian boot.<sup>9</sup> Surrounding the master were several hundred students, both male and female (a shocking idea to the people of the time), who spent their days in the study and contemplation of the underlying principles of creation leading to a realization of the oneness of all existence. They lived abstemiously, and shared all goods in common (as did the early Christians). At that time, the dominant spiritual practice the world over involved the sacrifice of animals on an altar; the Pythagoreans were forbidden to kill (or consume) any animal unless it had harmed a man, but were allowed to worship before altars that had never been stained with blood. Pythagoras believed in reincarnation of the soul and would tell his followers of his previous lives; his followers believed that he was an incarnation of the god Apollo. According to the Pythagoreans, the goal of all human life is to escape from the cycle of birth and death through the practice of virtue, which is defined as the harmony of the soul within itself and with God. This harmony is achieved through wisdom, which is an understanding of the profound truths that underlie the phenomenal world—and wisdom teaches a man modesty and moderation in all things. In fact, Pythagoras himself is credited with inventing the word *philosophy*, which means 'love of wisdom'. Pythagoras thought that the word *sophia* ('wisdom'), which was then in common use, was pretentious. One could not *have* wisdom; the best that one could do was to *love* it. No individual man is great enough to contain 'wisdom' as no man can circumscribe God. In much of the Hellenic world, the words *philosophy* and *Pythagorean* were synonymous.

A new student in this community began his discipleship by purifying his body through abstinence and self-control, and his mind through study. During his first five years in the community he maintained an absolute

'Pythagorean silence'. There were four subjects in the curriculum: geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music. First they studied mathematics both because it trained the mind in logic and clarity of thought and expression, and because it was the fundamental principle of the other three disciplines. The Pythagoreans believed that the whole number was the divine order that lay underneath all phenomena; scientists today follow the same premise. Music was studied and performed because it is the most perfect manifestation of these numerical relationships in that the tones of the musical scales follow whole number ratios (for example, if you exactly halve a string tuned to A, you get the note A', an octave higher; other regular fractions yield other

***Certainly the compilers of the gospels knew that it would be harder to 'sell' their cult in Rome if the villain of the tale was a Roman, so they made a little change. In this as in many other instances, the gospels, as history, do not stand the test of truth.***

common musical intervals). By analogy, since the planets also move in geometrically determined whole number relationships, as they travel they will also produce a pitch depending upon their speed of movement and their distance from the earth (which was considered to be the centre of the *kosmos* [a word also coined by Pythagoras]); therefore the entire universe of fixed and moving stars (that is, planets) are 'singing' as they travel. The Pythagorean who has achieved harmony of soul is always aware of this universal *anahata* sound. Thus, through the medium of whole number relationships, the most profound of the Pythagorean students achieved the highest realization of human life, that all of creation is One indivisible interrelated whole,

and that 'Thou are that, Shvetaketu.'

Pythagorean communities scattered throughout the Mediterranean world survived far into the Christian era—until the Holy Roman Church began to persecute and destroy all things pagan—and were an inspiration to other like-minded communities for at least a thousand years, if not, consciously or unconsciously, until the modern day. Pythagoras himself is credited as the founder of science and philosophy in the West. His influence is so vast that—like the music of the

***The pagan understanding that all divinities are simply various manifestations of the one underlying reality is a truer and more practical monotheism. So the schoolboy myth that Judeo-Christianity brought monotheism to a pagan world floundering in the perdition of polytheism is not exactly true.***

spheres, unheard since we hear it all the time—we are unaware of how much Pythagoras' teachings influence our nearly every conscious action in the modern world. But more to our point here, the model of contemplative societies like the Therapeutae—where serious spiritual aspirants can live lives of quiet study of, and communion with, the divine ground of all creation, the One, the Logos, Brahman, God—had its beginning at the school of Pythagoras, incarnation of Apollo.<sup>10</sup>

### Jesus in History

But, what of the claim of the rishi who came to Swamiji that night off the coast of the island of Crete? History confirms the existence of the Therapeutae and the tradition from which they came. Less easily confirmed is the statement of the rishi: 'The truths and ideals preached by us have been given out by the Christians as having been taught by Jesus; but for the matter of that, there was no such per-

sonality of the name of Jesus ever born.'

Certainly for the last 200 years, many reputed scholars have claimed that there was no historical Jesus. They have largely been ignored by the faithful. But it *is* true that we have no historical evidence whatsoever for the existence of Jesus. In fact, the more one uses *historical fact* as a touchstone by which to gauge the gospels, the more one comes to realize that they are more alloy than pure gold. One small example will suffice: Pontius Pilate is presented sympathetically in the gospels as a benevolent Roman who is loath to crucify Jesus. He 'washes his hands' of the affair and accedes to the wishes of the evil Jews who want to crucify the Son of God. In reality, Pontius Pilate was the only man in the history of the Roman Empire's 250-year occupation of Palestine who was recalled for his horrific atrocities. In Rome, he was censured and stripped of

his honours and holdings. There he passes out of history but one can imagine that he died in poverty and shame. Certainly the compilers of the gospels knew that it would be harder to 'sell' their cult in Rome if the villain of the tale was a Roman, so they made a little change. In this as in many other instances, the gospels, *as history*, do not stand the test of truth.

The earliest historical reference to Jesus is in Josephus' *History of the Jews* (93 CE). But the passage is considered spurious by most critics since the style of the Latin is not the same as the rest of Josephus' work, and also because it would have been unlikely that Josephus, who takes great pains to flatter both the Romans and the Jews, would praise a Jesus who was reviled by them both. In the end, we have no reliable historical evidence for the existence of Jesus.

What I would propose is an even more radical solution to the problem. The Therapeutic rishi can be considered correct if we

take him at his word. The truths, ideals and *practices* of modern Christianity are simply the most current phase of a Western spiritual tradition already thousands of years old at the time of Jesus; *the historical existence of a personality named Jesus is unimportant*. In order to understand this we need a very simple overview of the history of the Hellenic tradition and then an enumeration of the pagan spiritual practices at the time of Jesus. From this we will see that the Christian religion *as it is practised* has clearly more in common with its pagan than with its Hebrew tradition.

### The Hellenic Tradition

The Hellenic tradition began on the island of Crete, where we find the earliest remains of high civilization in the northeastern Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup> The civilization was so old that by the time of Homer, it had achieved a mythic status. Archeologists date the flowering of Cretan civilization at approximately 3400 BCE.<sup>12</sup> Their palaces were huge and had running water, sewage and drainage systems, gardens, and so on. The complexity of their urban infrastructure must force us to re-evaluate the belief that Bronze Age man was primitive. It is a historical rule that every culture, when it is in the ebb tide of its normal flux between high culture and chaos, mythologizes the previous golden age. So for the Greeks, the Cretans were thought to have been a magical race; the myth of Atlantis is considered a cultural memory of the Minoan civilization. They worshipped the bull and snake and the number three (like the Pythagoreans, 2800 years later). Their mother goddess figure had snakes coiled in her hair and rearing up above the back of her head (compare the iconography of Shiva and Buddha). The bull and the horns of the bull are

seen frequently in the artefacts. The symbol of the Roman cross and the Greek cross and the swastika are common. Like primitive peoples everywhere, the Cretans offered flowers and libations to their gods— who were many. The mother goddess was surrounded by images of flora and fauna— she was a fertility icon, as are most early deities; and, like Isis and later the Virgin Mary, is often depicted with the divine child in her arms. 'Contemplating this ancient image, we see through it Isis and Horus, Ishtar and Tamuz, Cybele and Attis, Aphrodite and Adonis, and feel the unity of prehistoric culture, and the continuity of religious ideas and symbols, in the Mediterranean world.'<sup>13</sup> This civilization at Crete was the earliest high culture in the Hellenic world.

***While the evidence for the historical existence of Jesus is non-existent, the accounts of the doings of his disciples, and the fact of the rapid spread of the new cult of his name is easily verifiable. Could a group of relatively illiterate Jews have concocted a fable of such power that it swept the Mediterranean world and inspired thousands of men and women to tremendous acts of virtue and heroism?***

Approximately 1000 years later was begun the city of Mycenae on the mainland of Greece. This is the city where 1200 years later Agamemnon would lead the expedition to Troy, the event that marks the beginning of a unified Hellenic culture. It is evident from the remains that this city was a Cretan colony on the Greek mainland. The highest early flowering of Hellenic civilization was on Crete and from there it spread to the rest of the northeastern Mediterranean. And thus, Hellenic culture can be seen as a product of the golden age of Crete, 5400 years ago. If, as we will show later, Christianity is no more than the

latest wave of this Western Sanatana Dharma, then that tradition could be considered to have its origin on Crete. Is this what the rishi meant when he told Swamiji that the island of Crete is the birthplace of Christianity?

### The Philosophical Basis of Christianity

When we examine the basic tenets and practices of modern Christianity, we are forced to conclude that they come predominantly from the pagan and not the Hebrew tradition. Immortality of the soul was not a Hebrew concept. It was Greek. Because there was no immortal Soul, the Heaven/Hell dichotomy was also by necessity not Hebrew,

***A paradigm is often more powerful than a person. What is tragic is that because the early Christians, in the unthinking zeal of their faith and in their fanatic desire to achieve complete religious dominion over mankind, assiduously destroyed the writings of the thinkers who came before them, they also lost the story of the origins and evolution of their own religion.***

but Greek. Transubstantiation of the body and blood into God was a part of Dionysian ritual and would have been a blasphemous idea to the Hebrews. It was Greek. Faith is more important than adherence to The Law and ritual was a Greek idea; a saviour who purifies you of your sins—Greek; a God who died and rose from the dead—Egyptian and Greek; a God who descends into Hell and then from there ascends to Heaven—Greek (Herakles, Odysseus, Dionysus, Orpheus, Mithras, and so on); a celibate priesthood—Greek; monasticism—Greek; the ritual of the Mass—Greek; the music used in the ritual of the Mass—Greek, not Hebrew (the standard pagan modes, metres and melodies were retained, the words were

changed to suit the new religion). The cathedral is shaped like the Roman basilica (that is, the pagan temple). The cross (both Eastern Orthodox style and Roman Catholic style) we find in Minoan Crete. The use of images—*anathema* in Judaism that it merits its own commandment—is thoroughly pagan. The all-compassionate and long-suffering mother was Isis, or Demeter—Greek; the use of systematic philosophical language to discuss matters of religion *outside of exegesis of The Law*—Greek; most early Christian theology was the attempt to reconcile the Jesus character to Platonism — Greek; procession with the image of the god from the temple through the city and back to the temple (a practice common to all Latin countries today) — Greek. The hierarchical organization of the Holy Roman Church is the same as the bureaucracy of the Roman Empire. The dates and practices of both Christmas and Easter (the two main Christian holidays) — Greek; virgin mother and the virgin birth — Greek; the image of the mother and child — Greek. The list could continue.

We are hard pressed to discover any Hebrew roots to the Christian tradition other than the birth community of Jesus (if there was, indeed, a historical Jesus); the surety of the coming destruction of the world (which, during the last two thousand years, has seemed to be perpetually imminent); the heavy emphasis on Sin; and pseudo-monotheism. We are taught that Christianity brought a belief in one God to a culture overwhelmed by a multiplicity of deities. But this canard does not withstand investigation. All of the pagan writers took as their basic assumption that the various gods and goddesses were manifestations of the one underlying divine reality. Clearly, Plato's insistence on one underlying divine substratum devoid of form or quality

presumes this, and Herodotus, in his account of his perambulations throughout the Hellenic world in the fifth century BCE takes great pains to enumerate the deities worshipped in each locale and to show how they all point to the same reality though they may differ in names and forms. His unstated premise seems to be, God is one, different sages describe It differently. It was this premise that allowed of the great catholicity of belief in Pagan culture.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, in the *Old Testament*, we read over and again how Jehovah is the one God, and that all other gods are false gods. This presumes that there are many gods and goddesses, but that Jehovah is the only true God. The perpetual Christian emphasis on heresy and the ineluctable duality of good and evil actually points to a *practical* belief in a variety of powers or divinities. The pagan understanding that all divinities are simply various manifestations of the one underlying reality is a truer and more practical monotheism. So the schoolboy myth that Judeo-Christianity brought monotheism to a pagan world floundering in the perdition of polytheism is not exactly true.

When the great apostle of the new cult, Paul, while travelling the world expounding the new religion, denied that circumcision (the ritual necessary to become a Jew) and The Law were prerequisites for accepting the 'good news' (gospel) of the teachings of Jesus, the stage was set for the world of the Roman Empire to adopt a new saviour. Stripped of his Judaism, Jesus could be pasted onto the dominant paradigm of Greco-Roman paganism as the new Dionysus, the new Orpheus, the new Mithras, the new Osiris, and so on.

While the evidence for the historical existence of Jesus is non-existent, the accounts of the doings of his disciples, and the fact of the rapid spread of the new cult of his name is easily verifiable. Could a group of relatively illiterate Jews have concocted a *fable* of such power that it swept the Mediterranean world and inspired thousands of men and women to

tremendous acts of virtue and heroism? It is unlikely, although one does have the modern example of the Mormon church, where just such a scenario *has* occurred in which a charismatic leader has concocted such a compelling mythology that millions of adherents take it for gospel. Were Mithras, Osiris and Dionysus real people or just fabulous constructs? And Shiva? Rama? Krishna? In our historically-minded time, historicity is assumed to be an important prerequisite to authentic religion. But is it really necessary? To quote George Santayana, 'The Christ men have loved and adored is an ideal of their own hearts—out of the fragments of story and doctrine connected with a name. This subjective image has inspired all the prayers, all the conversions, all the penances, charities and sacrifices, as well as half the art of the Christian world.'<sup>15</sup>

And many times in the *Complete Works* Swamiji states clearly that what is important in spiritual life is principle *not* personality. 'Every one of the great religions in the world excepting [Vedanta], is built upon such historical characters; but [Vedanta] rests upon principles ... [if] any one or more of our prophets are proved not to have been historical, it does not injure our religion at all; even then it remains firm as ever, because it is based upon principles, and not upon persons.'<sup>16</sup>

A paradigm is often more powerful than a person. What is tragic is that because the early Christians, in the unthinking zeal of their faith and in their fanatic desire to achieve complete religious dominion over mankind, assiduously destroyed the writings of the thinkers who came before them, they also lost the story of the origins and evolution of their own religion. As surface dwellers cannot survive in the pressurized environment at the bottom of the ocean, and the creatures who dwell there explode on being brought to the surface, for lack of the accustomed tons of pressure, so too, bhaktas who are impelled by the power of their myths cannot survive in the presence of jnanis whose practice is to explode myths in

their sincere search for truth (and vice versa). So too, the powerful faith of Christianity could not survive in the environment of open inquiry that was the hallmark of the Greco-Roman world. But, did Jesus really exist?

First, although this writer thinks that the question is unimportant it is probably likely that such a man walked the earth if only because we can see the effects of his life. Nothing but the explosion of a shakti bomb of sincere spirituality could have resulted in the force of faith that has continued these two thousand years.

But it is likely that the Jesus we know bears little relation to the man himself. Let us say that Paul and the leaders of the early church fashioned a bullet of the proper calibre to fit the rifle of the ancient Western religious tradition and then filled it with the formless mass of gunpowder that was the deep spirituality of the actual lived life of Jesus of Nazareth; then was fired the shot heard round the world. Thus, when looking to the Jesus who graces tens of thousands of cathedrals, chapels, churches and shrines the world over, we can say that he both existed and did not exist, and that the question of his existence or non-existence pales in importance to a life of faith lived by the individual worshipper.

And so, what of Swamiji's vision? What we have seen is that the question of whether there was ever a historical Jesus is relatively unimportant. What is important is that the religion that has been promulgated in his name is but the latest manifestation of the Western Sanatana Dharma, which we know was in full flower at least 5400 years ago during the Minoan golden age. The venerable rishi who came to speak with him could indeed have been a member of a group of sincere spiritual aspirants that flourished at the geographical site of the birth of Christian asceticism and whose traditions we can trace to the Pythagoreans, those truly Vedantic rishis, who lived approximately 600 years before the time of the Therapeutae and have been influential ever

since. This Western Sanatana Dharma has always worshipped a deity who dies and is resurrected to a new life of Heavenly bliss after passing through the torments of Hell. Periodically when the faith in the old myth was dying, it was given a new face and, after a period of infernal conflict between the old faith and the new, was resurrected phoenix-like, with a shining new form to give renewed spiritual sustenance to newly inspired spiritual aspirants. Thus, Herakles became Dionysus, who became Orpheus, who became Mithras, who became Jesus.

The Ishta as a death/resurrection symbol is a powerful universal archetype for all spiritual aspirants. Sadhana is the process of discarding the samskaras that *captiv*-ate us—that both imprison and console. It is hellishly painful to pry off the old time-worn life patterns that keep us bound; but only by passing through these *petites mortes*, only by dying over and over again can we rise above and achieve final liberation. Through this process we die to our old selves, our bound selves, and then are reborn to levels of greater awareness, of higher Self. We play through this cycle of small deaths and rebirths until we arrive at the final dying and the ultimate resurrection in which we come to identify with the Self rather than the self, in which the spirit and the flesh are one as they were with our Lord and Saviour, Jesus, the Christ, who died for our sins and rose again to give even the most pernicious among us the possibility of eternal Life, for His is the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen. \*

### Notes and References

1. His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1, 2000; 2, 2001), 2.158-9.
2. Sister Nivedita, *The Master as I Saw Him* (Calcutta: Udbodhan Office, 1972), 275.
3. *Life*, 2.159.
4. The only evidence that Buddhist missionaries were sent to the West comes from inscriptions

on the columns of Ashoka; so far as I can find, there is no reference to these missionaries in any Western writing. This is strange in that contemporary Mediterranean scholars took great delight in cataloguing and describing the many religions and cultures which made up the melting pot of their world.

5. *Philo of Alexandria, the Contemplative Life, the Giants, and Selections*, trans. and ed. David Winston (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1981), 43.
6. *ibid.*, 45.
7. Later, in this same region lived many of the desert fathers, the first dedicated ascetics of the Christian tradition—another proof for the possible validity of the rishi's claim that Christianity is actually a continuation of the Therapeutic tradition.
8. *Philo of Alexandria*, 46.
9. It could be argued that before recorded history, throughout the Greek peninsula, there were communities of priests and contemplatives at the various places of pilgrimage such as Eleusis and Delphi.
10. This summary of the life and teachings of Pythagoras is taken from Will Durant, *The Life of Greece*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1939), 161-7.
11. It is worth noting that five years after Swami-ji's vision, and two years after his passing

away, excavations were begun on Crete and the Minoan civilization was discovered.

12. Thus, the Minoan civilization is contemporaneous to, or slightly earlier than, the Indus Valley civilization.
13. *Life of Greece*, 13.
14. Until the Christian era we do not have one account (as far as I can find) of religious persecution. On the contrary, we have many accounts of Persians sending offerings to Greek deities, and Greeks honouring the gods and goddesses of each locale they invaded.
15. George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outline of Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Dover Publication, 1955), 116.
16. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3.183-4.

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## Transformation

A dialogue between a recent convert and an unbelieving friend: 'So you've been converted to Christ?' 'Yes.' 'Then you must know a great deal about him. Tell me, what country was he born in?' 'I don't know.' 'What was his age when he died?' 'I don't know.' 'How many sermons did he preach?' 'I don't know.' 'You certainly know very little for a man who claims to be converted to Christ!'

'You're right. I'm ashamed at how little I know about him. But this much I know: Three years ago I was a drunkard. I was in debt. My family was falling apart. My wife and children would dread my coming home each day. Now I've given up drink; we're out of debt; ours is a happy home. All this Christ has done. This much I know of him!'

*To really know. That is, to be transformed by what one knows.*

—Anthony de Mello, SJ, *The Song of the Bird*, 129-30

## The Method of Early Advaita

Dr Michael Comans. Motilal Banarsidass, 41-UA Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar  
New Delhi 110 007. 2000. xxiv + 492 pp. Rs 495.

Method plays a very important role in the study and understanding of any subject. In Vedanta, particularly, methodology is given due priority. The book under review is a study of the methods adopted by four major early Advaitic thinkers, namely Gauḍapāda, Śaṅkara, Sureśvara and Padmapāda. Prof Comans, of the University of Sydney, is of the opinion that there is a single method in the hermeneutics of liberation in Advaita Vedanta (more specifically that of Śaṅkara), the method of negation. It is the principal way to solve the problem of the unknowability of Brahman. The other important method, namely, that of implication or indication (*lakṣaṇa*), is its another form.

The Advaitic method is *śruti*-centred and requires a link between the teacher and the taught. This link is what is called tradition. Thus, in the Advaitic tradition, Self-knowledge is received from the scripture and the teacher.

The Upaniṣads (they stand for *śruti* in the context), one of the three constituent basic texts for Advaita Vedanta on which leading Advaitins have commented, provide a three-fold method for Self-knowledge: *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana*. These are to be practised until immediate knowledge of Reality arises. But to a person of clear vision, *śruti* provides this knowledge instantaneously. *Śruti* is not just a map that works as a mere guide; it is like a mother who leads the child to the cherished goal. Śaṅkara's view (and Sureśvara's) that Brahman is known directly from the Upaniṣads (see Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 4.1.2) is controverted by Maṇḍana and Vācaspati, who maintain

that Upaniṣadic knowledge is indirect. Of course, *sādhana-catuṣṭaya* and *sannyāsa* are treated as parts of the preparation for Self-knowledge; they serve to mature Self-knowledge. It may be noted here that Śaṅkara restricts the option of *sannyāsa* to brahmins only, but Sureśvara extends it to the other two twice-born castes also.

The Upaniṣads hold that Reality is beyond normal perception and not graspable by ordinary language. According to Śaṅkara, words function only in four ways: they refer to (1) a generic class, (2) a quality of a thing, (3) an action, and (4) a relationship. But Reality is beyond these four categories. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (2.3.6) clearly declares, 'not this, not this'. This persuades Advaitins to use the negative method. But the Upaniṣads also use positive expressions for Reality, as in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, 2.1: *satyaṁ jñānam anantaṁ brahma*. Therefore the method of negation is to be closely connected with the method of indication. Here the Self or the Reality is indicated through the secondary or implied meaning of a word or a sentence. According to the author these two methods form a single method revealing the Absolute: negation-cum-indication. It negates the unreal and points to the Real. The negative way is treated at times as an intermediary step to the positive method of indication. As such it includes two other methods used by Advaitins, namely superimposition (*adhyāropa*) and de-superimposition (*apavāda*). The method of repetition (*prasaṅkhyāna*) is also treated as having the negative function of removing obstructions to seeing what is directly revealed by *śruti*. But Maṇḍana in his *Brahmasiddhi* advocates the theory of repeated



meditation.

The Upaniṣads use several techniques (*prakriyās*) to reveal the acosmic Brahman. For example, the discussion on Brahman as the cause of the world (*kāraṇa-kārya-prakriyā*) in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (3.1); the analysis of the three states of experience (*avasthā-traya-prakriyā*) in the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*; and the exposition of the five sheaths (*pañca-koṣa-prakriyā*) in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.3).

The Advaitins agree with the Mimāṃsikas that so long as the literal meaning makes sense, one need not resort to an implied meaning. But since Brahman is beyond words, implied meaning has to be resorted to. Advaitins make use of *lakṣaṇa* (more specifically, *jahad-ajahad-lakṣaṇa* or *bhāga-tyāga-lakṣaṇa*) to determine the meaning of a sentence. It has been used with greater acumen by the later Advaitins, but one cannot say that Śaṅkara was unaware of this method or has not used it. In his commentaries on the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.1), the *Kena Upaniṣad* (2.3) and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.16.3) he uses this method. His commentary on that portion of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* is a great piece of exegetical writing. He defines *satyam* as freedom from change; *jñānam* means Brahman is not insentient; and *anantam* negates limitation. These definitions are obviously not literal but suggestive. In his well-known and perhaps the only non-commentarial work *Upadeśa Sāhasrī* (18.29) Śaṅkara uses the word *lakṣayeyuh*.

The usage of *jahad-ajahad-lakṣaṇa* is very important in the Advaitins' hermeneutics of the Upaniṣads. They define it as where a part of the direct meaning is given up and a part of it is retained. The *Vedānta Paribhāṣā* defines it as '*yatra hi viśiṣṭa vācakaḥ śabdāḥ ekadeśam vihāya eka deśe vartate*'. In the context of the sentence 'That thou art' (*tat-tvam-asi*), the essence of *tvam* (the ego, of sorrowful nature) as pure Awareness is retained while the finitude of the ego entity is abandoned. Likewise, the remoteness of *tat* (That) is abandoned and pure Consciousness is retained. The verb *asi* (art) here is

co-referential (*sāmānādhikaraṇya*). Only through its use is the undivided sense (*akhaṇḍ-ārtha*) known, as both terms under reference mean the 'pure inner Self'.

The author does not concentrate on Gauḍapāda's method. Gauḍapāda in his *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā* makes a mention of *samādhi*, in which Brahman is revealed and the person is in the state of *asparśa yoga*. (3.37) Control of the mind, creation (using the examples of clay and iron), and conceptual understanding are stated as forming a method to understand the highest Truth, that is, *ajāti*. Śaṅkara, his grand-disciple, does not treat Yogic *samādhi* as a means to liberation (see his commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.4.7). Sureśvara (and possibly Maṇḍana) have of course included *samādhi* as an important means to salvation.

Sureśvara advocates the method of reasoning on the principle of continuity and discontinuity (*anvaya-vyatireka*) for grasping the liberating meaning of the *śruti* sentence, especially *tat-tvam-asi* (see his *Naiṣkarmyasiddhi*, 2.9). This method is used to (1) ascertain a relation of cause and effect, (2) establish the necessary condition for a valid inference, and (3) establish the independent existence of a particular object. This third type is unique to Advaitins. Sureśvara shows the independent existence of the seer (*dṛk*) from the object (*dṛśya*). According to him the witness (*sākṣin*) is continuously present in contrast with the object witnessed. This argument is also known as *vyabhicāra* (deviation) and *avyabhicāra* (non-deviation) reasoning.

Sureśvara also suggests three steps to understand the *mahāvākyas*: (1) co-referentiality (*sāmānādhikaraṇya*, as mentioned above), (2) relation of the qualifier and the qualified (*viśeṣaṇa-viśeṣyatā*), and (3) indication (*lakṣya-lakṣaṇa-sambandha*).

The fourth Advaitin discussed in the book under reference is Padmapāda (also known as Sanandana). He concentrates upon superimposition (*adhyāsa*) in the *Pañcapādikā*

(his commentary on Śaṅkara's *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*). According to him the study of the Upaniṣads is commenced in order to attain the knowledge of the oneness of the Self so as to remove the superimposition, the cause of all misfortune. He defines *adhyāsa* as that which appears in something else (*atadrūpe tadrūpāva-bhāsaḥ*). He also shows its possibility and demonstrates the way in which it actually exists. The removal of *avidyā* leads to freedom (salvation). At the stage of *jīvanmukti*, the impression of *avidyā* remains, as the scent lingers even after the flower is removed. The *jīvanmukta* continues to transact in the empirical world. The concept of *jīvanmukti* helps us understand the correct implication of the distinction between *vyavahāra* and *paramārtha* (the world and the Beyond).

The book also discusses the teachings of the four *ācāryas* in general. It is closely based on source literature. The book contains eight chapters in addition to a 'postscript on method', bibliography and index. The first three chapters are concerned with the teachings of Gauḍapāda. They refer to most of the verses of the *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā*, and one chapter specifically deals with Mahāyāna Bud-

dhisim's influence on Gauḍapāda's thought. The following three chapters discuss Śaṅkara's teachings. Two topics have been given fuller treatment: (1) Śaṅkara's understanding of the nature of God (*īśvara*) has not been given sufficient attention except by scholars like Rudolf Otto and Paul Hacker. The author holds that *saguṇa brahman* is *īśvara*, but not exactly, and that the distinction between Brahman as *īśvara* and Brahman as the unconditioned Absolute is more fluid in Śaṅkara than in some of his successors; (2) Śaṅkara view of the *śruti*'s role in leading to liberation. The discussion on method shows exactly how and to what extent Śaṅkara understands the Upaniṣads to be a revelation about Brahman. The final two chapters are devoted to an explication of the teachings of Śaṅkara's two best-known disciples, Sureśvara and Padmapāda.

Though written by an overseas scholar, the book exhibits good textual expertise. It is useful for students of Advaita and also for lay people who seek to develop a spiritual orientation. \*

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## The Zen Master and the Christian

A Christian visited a Zen master and said, 'Allow me to read you the Sermon on the Mount.' 'I shall listen with pleasure,' said the master. The Christian read a sentence and looked up. The master smiled and said, 'Whoever said those words was truly an enlightened man.' This pleased the Christian. He read on. The master interrupted and said, 'Those words come from a Saviour of mankind.' The Christian was delighted. He read on to the end. The master then declared, 'That sermon was pronounced by someone radiant with Divinity.'

The Christian's joy was boundless. He left, determined to return another day and persuade the master to become a Christian.

*On the way back home he found Jesus standing by the roadside. 'Lord,' he said excitedly, 'I got that man to confess you are divine!'*

*Jesus smiled and said, 'And did it do you any good except inflate your Christian ego?'*

—Anthony de Mello, SJ, *The Song of the Bird*, 121-2

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# Kaṭha Rudra Upaniṣad

TRANSLATED BY SWAMI ATMAPRIYANANDA

## Synopsis

This Upaniṣad<sup>1</sup> belongs to the *Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda* and describes the procedure for *sannyāsa*, the duties of a *sannyāsin*; defines *brahmacarya* (celibacy); explains the fruit of *brahmajñāna*, the sevenfold division of one attributeless (*nirviśeṣa*) Brahman and ends with an aphoristic statement about the essence of all Vedanta.

## Peace Chant<sup>2</sup>

ॐ सह नाववतु । सह नौ भुनक्तु । सह वीर्यं करवावहे । तेजस्विनावधीतमस्तु मा विद्विषावहे । ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

Om. May He (the Supreme Spirit, or Brahman) protect<sup>3</sup> us both<sup>4</sup> [by illumining us about the real nature of knowledge]. May He protect us both [by revealing to us the fruits or application of this knowledge]. May we both strive together. May our learning be powerful and illuminative.<sup>5</sup> May there be no disharmony between us. Om Peace, Peace, Peace!<sup>6</sup>

## Study of *brahmavidyā*

### ब्रह्मविद्याध्ययनम्

देवा ह वै भगवन्तमब्रुवन् । अधीहि भगवन् ब्रह्मविद्याम् । स प्रजापतिरब्रवीत् ॥१॥

1. Well, then,<sup>7</sup> the gods (*devas*) told Bhagavān Prajāpati:<sup>8</sup> ‘Lord (Bhagavan), teach us *brahmavidyā* (knowledge of Brahman).’ He, Prajāpati, said [in reply, as follows]:

### Exposition of *sannyāsa* [as] a limb (integral part) of *brahmavidyā* (Knowledge of Brahman)

### ब्रह्मविद्याङ्गसंन्यासनिरूपणम्

सशिखान् केशान्निष्कृष्य, विसृज्य, यज्ञोपवीतं निष्कृष्य, ततः पुत्रं दृष्ट्वा, त्वं ब्रह्म त्वं यज्ञस्त्वं वषट्कारस्त्वमोङ्कारस्त्वं स्वाहा त्वं स्वधा त्वं घाता त्वं विधाता । अथ पुत्रो वदति । अहं ब्रह्माहं यज्ञोऽहं वषट्कारोऽहमोङ्कारोऽहं स्वाहाहं स्वधाहं घाताहं विधाताहं त्वष्टाहं प्रतिष्ठास्मीति । तान्येतानि अनुब्रजन्नाश्रुमापातयेत् । यदश्रुमापातयेत्प्रजं विच्छिन्द्यात् । प्रदक्षिणमावृत्यैतच्चैतच्चानवेक्षमाणः प्रत्यायति । स स्वर्गो भवति ॥२॥

2. Removing the hair including the tuft and discarding it, removing the sacred thread, and looking at one’s son [one should utter the following words]: ‘You are the Veda, you are the sacrifice, you are *vaṣatkāra*,<sup>9</sup> you are *Om*, you are *svāhā*,<sup>10</sup> you are *svadhā*,<sup>11</sup> you are the protector (sustainer) and you are the creator.’ Then the son says,<sup>12</sup> ‘I am the Veda, I am the sacrifice, I am *vaṣatkāra*, I am *Om*, I am *svāhā*, I am *svadhā*, I am the protector (sustainer), I am the creator, I am the divine architect, I am the basic support.’ Following those [words of exhortation by the father and] these [words of acceptance by the son], [the father] while departing, should not shed tears.<sup>13</sup> Should he shed tears, [the line of] progeny will be severed. Circumambulating clockwise [his village or kith and kin] and not looking at this and that,<sup>14</sup> he [then] departs. He is then

fit for higher [spiritual] spheres.<sup>15</sup>

(to be continued)

## Notes

1. In the *Sannyasa Upanishads* (vol. 1 of the Adyar Library series 'Minor Upanishads', no. 3, 1912), some additional passages occur on page 31. These, however, are not being considered here for two reasons: (i) most of the ideas in these so-called additional passages are repetitions of those contained in the main text of the Upaniṣad and (ii) the principal commentator of the 108 Upaniṣads, namely, Upaniṣad Brahmāyogin, does not seem to have taken cognizance of these 'additional' passages nor has he commented upon them.
2. Chanted by the teacher and the student at the beginning of the study (*vidyārambha*).
3. The translation follows Śaṅkara's interpretation in his commentary on the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. The word 'protect' occurs twice in the first two sentences. Śaṅkara interprets the first as protecting by illuminating the mind with an understanding of the real nature of knowledge (*vidyā-svarūpa-prakāśanena*), and the second as protecting by revealing the fruits of knowledge (*vidyā-phala-prakāśanena*). In modern terms, we may say that the first is the science of knowledge, while the second is the technology.
4. 'Both' means the preceptor (*guru*, or *ācārya*) and the disciple or student (*śiṣya*, or *vidyārthin*).
5. The word used in the original is *tejas*. Śaṅkara interprets it as strength. It is interesting to see how the Upaniṣadic sages wanted education and learning to endow one with strength of character.
6. The repetition of the word 'Peace' three times is to ward off the three kinds of misery (*duḥkha-traya*): (i) *ādhibhautika* (misery due to beings, say wild animals, serpents and cruel humans; (ii) *ādhidaiivika* (misery due to natural calamities like earthquakes and floods, which are ordinarily beyond our control); (iii) *ādhyātmika* (misery relating to one's own body and mind, that is to say physical and mental illnesses). In order that *vidyā*, or learning, be effective, both the teacher and the taught ought to be free from all these three kinds of misery. Hence the word *śāntiḥ* ('Peace') is chanted three times, to ward off the threefold misery.
7. The indeclinable participles *ha* and *vai* indicate recalling of some well-known past event.
8. Prajāpati or Brahmā is the Creator God and omniscient. He is thus the first Teacher.
9. An exclamation used while making oblation to a deity (*deva*).
10. Another exclamation used while making oblation to a *deva*.
11. An exclamation used while making oblation to departed ancestors or manes (*pitṛs*).
12. Upaniṣad Brahmāyogin comments on this passage as follows: Just before renouncing the world, the father tells his son: 'Whatever I have performed in my life and whatever remains to be fulfilled—I leave all that to you.' The son responds by saying: 'Whatever of the Vedas and so on you could study or not, I will fulfill the rest of it.' The idea is that on the eve of renunciation the father bequeaths to his son (called *ātmaja*, or self-reborn) or disciple, his intellectual and spiritual legacy to be fulfilled, preserved and propagated.
13. The idea is that the renouncer should not feel any sorrow or unfulfilled desire, for whatever remains unfulfilled at the time of departing from *samsāra* has been fully handed over to his son.
14. The act of renunciation is complete only when the renouncer does not look back at what he has left behind. The idea is that he does not feel the least attraction for, or pull towards, the objects he has renounced.
15. That is, he attains eligibility for *brahmaloka* and, ultimately reaching it, gets emancipated from the world of repeated birth and death. The idea is that the person who takes to *sannyāsa* attains higher spiritual evolution and ultimately gets liberated when all his desires are fully destroyed.

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# ☞ Glimpses of Holy Lives ☜

## Liberation for a Thorny Bush!

Umapati Shivacharya was a jnani who lived in Chidambaram (Tamil Nadu). Being in a spiritual trance most of the time, he was not given to traditional observances expected of a brahmin. Thinking that he deliberately flouted Hindu religious norms, the local brahmins were angry with him. They forbade him from living in the village and entering the famous Nataraja temple.

Shivacharya lived in a small hut outside village limits. A low-caste man named Pethan Samban supplied to him his basic needs and also took care of him in a general way. One day when Pethan was carrying to the hut a bundle of firewood on his head, Lord Nataraja Himself met him on the way in the guise of a brahmin in charge of the temple. He wrote a verse on a palm leaf and asked him to hand it over to Shivacharya.

Shivacharya was overwhelmed with the first line of the Tamil verse: 'A note from the servant of devotees, the Lord of Chidambaram'. A divine thrill passed through his body as he read the verse: 'A note from the servant of devotees, the Lord of Chidambaram, to one who has set up a new establishment, namely Umapati Shivacharya. You are to initiate Pethan, disregarding his caste and to the surprise of all people.'

Overwhelmed with joy, he initiated Pethan into sannyasa. In due course he also gave him *nayana diksha*, transmission of spiritual power through the eyes. Immediately after this, Pethan vanished into a holy light. Shivacharya himself was immensely surprised at

this and marvelled at Pethan's wisdom.

Shivacharya's enemies observed the sacrificial offerings he had used for the initiation and complained to the king that Shivacharya had burnt Pethan to death for some transgression.

When the king came there to investigate, Shivacharya showed him the verse the Lord had given him and said that immediately after initiation Pethan merged into a divine light.

The king was surprised. He wondered if Shivacharya could likewise give deliverance to a nearby thorny bush. Shivacharya gave *nayana diksha* to the bush. And lo, the bush too immediately disappeared into a pure light!

The king was astonished and said, 'This must be some black magic. You said you got this note from Lord Nataraja. Let's go to the temple and ask Him.' When Shivacharya pointed out to the king the ban imposed on his entry into the temple, the king said it would not matter since he himself was accompanying Shivacharya.

Hearing this the entire town assembled at the temple to see what was in store for Shivacharya. When special lights were waved to the Lord on the king's arrival, everyone was amazed to see Pethan and the thorny bush on either side of the Lord.

Everyone was astounded at Shivacharya's greatness. The scholars and brahmins fell at Shivacharya's feet and asked to be pardoned. They brought him back to the village with due honour. \*

## Trapped in the Heart!

Surdas was a blind saint from North India. The story goes that Lord Krishna appeared before Surdas and granted him a

boon. Surdas said he did not like to see anything after beholding the Lord and asked to be deprived of sight. The Lord granted him the

strange boon, but Surdas continued to behold his Lord within.

Surdas once decided to go to Vrindaban, the place sanctified by the Lord's childhood pranks and play. All along the way, Surdas sang the names of the Lord, keeping time with cymbals in hand. Utterly free from body consciousness, Surdas was deeply absorbed in his Lord and his holy names. He was now standing on the edge of a cliff; one more step and it would be his final jump.

Deeply bound to His devotees, the Lord does not desert them, however. Surdas heard a sweet voice, 'Surdas, don't proceed further.' Surdas was captivated by the voice sweeter than sweetness itself. He asked, 'May I know who you are?' 'Well,' the shepherd boy said, 'They call me Gopala.' 'Why did you ask me to stop?' asked Surdas. 'Uncle, there is a deep gorge before you. One more step and you will fall,' said the boy.

Surdas recognized his Beloved and asked Him, 'But I would like to go to Vrindaban. Won't you take me there?' And Surdas thought, 'Now I'll catch Him, the One whom

even the yogis cannot catch in deep meditation.' The boy replied, 'I would most certainly like to accompany you, but I have to tend my cows.' 'Well,' Surdas said, 'in that case, take me to the road to Vrindaban.' The boy said, 'Of course, that I shall do.' 'Please lead me by your hand,' said Surdas. 'No,' said the boy, 'but you may hold the staff I use to guide the cows.'

Surdas held one end of the staff and wondered, 'How will I catch the Lord? I must touch Him somehow.' He began singing the Lord's holy names. Captivated by the melodious songs, the Lord began to dance and was soon absorbed in the songs.

In the meanwhile, Surdas gradually inched his grip towards the other end of the staff till he caught the Lord's hand. 'Surdas, leave Me alone,' exclaimed the Lord. 'You naughty fellow,' smiled Surdas, 'come with me to Vrindaban. Physically You may leave me, but be trapped in my heart.' The Lord smiled and enthroned Himself in Surdas' heart forever. \*

### Nothing Can Burn Me!

**K**ing Janaka was a man of Self-knowledge. He was also called Videha, one devoid of body consciousness. Though surrounded by palace and luxury, he was detached at heart, *knowing* that he was not the body but the eternal Atman.

Great sages visited the king and learnt from him words of wisdom. Once many sages and saints gathered at his palace for a spiritual assembly. Sage Yajnavalkya, the king's guru, was to address this gathering of wise men. Though it was time to begin the discourse, Yajnavalkya waited for the king's arrival.

The audience whispered among themselves, 'Yajnavalkya need not show so much deference to the king. Why should he make us all wait? Probably he expects to be honoured with riches by the king and does not want to of-

fend him by commencing the discourse.' The king arrived shortly and the discourse began.

Sensing what went in the minds of his audience, Yajnavalkya thought they should be shown the spiritual greatness of Janaka. With his yogic power he made fire engulf the palace. The sages started running here and there their staffs and water pots in hand. Janaka was the only one calmly seated.

Yajnavalkya asked him, 'Janaka, don't you see your palace burning and all the sages have taken to their heels?' The king smiled and said, 'Nothing in this world is mine. The palace may burn. But it cannot burn me, the immortal Self.'

Yajnavalkya withdrew the fire by his power, and the sages returned to their seats, wiser about the king's spiritual wisdom. \*



# Reviews



*For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA  
publishers need to send two copies of their latest publications.*

**35 Golden Keys to Who You Are and Why You're Here.** *Linda C Anderson.* New Age Books, A-44 Naraina Phase 1, New Delhi 110 028. 2002. xvi + 450 pp. Rs 395.

The human mind has for long been eager to know 'Who am I?' and 'Why am I here?'. Similar other questions have always pricked the mind of every thinking person and led him to find answers, whole or partial, through various ways taught by religions.

Interestingly, this same subject matter has been dealt with somewhat extensively in Linda C Anderson's *35 Golden Keys*. Anderson seems to have come across a new faith called Eckankar (or just ECK, meaning Holy Spirit), whose guiding principle has been God consciousness and the strong realization that God loves everyone very dearly. However, there are very few similarities between the Vedic religion of the Hindus and this faith Anderson espouses and under whose influence and teachings he has written this book.

The book is easy to read and divided into thirty-five chapters so as to facilitate a better understanding of ECK, a faith started by Paul Twitchell in 1965. Each chapter is, in fact, a key with which the reader can unlock answers to questions like 'Who am I?' and 'Why am I here?'. The introduction describes the author's longing to know more about true love, about herself, and about belonging to her true self. She then sees a blue light in a vision which guides her to ECK and makes her accept it.

ECK teaches that an individual's true home is in God. His aim is to become fully awake, aware and useful to God. In fact, his destiny is to become someday God's co-worker. According to this faith, a human being is a soul, a divine spark that is above ideas of gender, race or creed.

Anderson strongly recommends the guidance of a living spiritual teacher. According to her, the current ECK spiritual teacher, the Mahanta, is Sri Harold Klemp, a soft-spoken American who writes

and lectures and leads a normal life.

The chapter 'Some People Know Who They Are' vividly brings out through a series of interviews with people belonging to different segments of society how ECK has helped them find a new meaning in their lives and add a new dimension to their spirit of working with others in a group. It underlines a very important aspect of our life: we all have a purpose in life and that we are all here to learn, grow and love.

The book grows interesting as one proceeds. The chapter 'The Holy Spirit Is with You Now' tells us how the Holy Spirit is guiding our lives and saving us from troubles. 'God Loves You', 'You Don't Have a Soul' and 'You've Lived Before' bring out vividly God's eternal love for his creation. In His unequivocal love God has divided His divinity, as it were, and exists as different souls in different bodies.

Anderson has been an avid ECK practitioner of the faith for more than two decades. As a result, though the book is exhaustive, the material is well arranged and makes it reader-friendly. This is a good book for those who want initiation into contemporary spirituality and know more about their existence on earth.

*Santosh Kumar Sharma*

**Mystic Science of Vāstu.** *NH Sahasrabudhe and R D Mahatme.* Sterling Publishers, A-59 Okhla Industrial Area, Phase 2, New Delhi 110 020. 2000. xvi + 179 pp. Rs 150.

Nowadays many books are being published on *vāstu śāstra* since there is a sudden spurt in the interest of the general public in how they can live best in an Indian way.

The speciality of the book under review is that it has stressed the importance of *yoga śāstra*, astrology, *tantra*, that is, the *upāṅgas* (sub-branches) of *darśana śāstra* in *vāstu śāstra* studies. The authors have tried to demystify the occult garb of *vāstu*

*śāstra* by being systematic and scientific, though the scope of the book does not allow too much elaboration on the sub-branches mentioned.

The first three chapters '*Vāstu Puruṣa Maṇḍala*', 'Forces, Fields and *Vāstu*' and 'Cosmic Energy and *Vāstu*' give a lucid picture of how the north-south geomagnetic flux (*jaivika ūrjā*) and the east-west solar flux (*prāṇika ūrjā*) create energy dynamics which affect every aspect of human life through forces and fields. *Jaivika ūrjā* is unidirectional on the north-south axis while *prāṇika ūrjā* moves through 360 degrees due to movement of the earth around the sun. So every one of the eight directions (main and sub) has a different source-sink combination of energy, creating different influences on human dwellings that need different treatment. Hartmann's grid and aura of directions need more clarification.

Chapters 4 and 5 '*Yoga Śāstra Concepts in Vāstu Science*' and '*Vāstu-doṣa* and Yogic Remedies' deal in detail with *yoga śāstra* influence on *vāstu* equaling *idā* with the *candra nāḍi*, *piṅgalā* with the *sūrya nāḍi* and *suṣumnā* with the *brahma nāḍi* associated with directions. The flow of *prāṇa* in the body as per *yoga śāstra* is correlated to the five elements governing existence and *vāstu-nābhi* is the cosmic navel connection between the microcosm (*vāstu*) and the macrocosm (nature). These ideas are lucidly dealt with and need serious reading. The insight into *yoga-vāstu* is worth exploring. Remedial actions through different rituals in the deficient directions are interesting. In these chapters some reference to the sources that present these ideas would have been helpful; for example, *vipassanā* technique to remove *vāstu-doṣa*.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8, '*Astrology in Vāstu Analysis*', '*Vāstu Jyotiṣa*', '*Vāstu-doṣa* and Remedial Action', though interesting, demand some knowledge of *jyotiṣa śāstra*.

Chapter 9, '*Tantra, Mantra and Yoga in Vāstu Science*', describes the principles of karma, laws of nature as given by Rishi Kaṇāda and then dwells elaborately on the removal of *doṣas*, difficulties in *vāstu*, by the help of crystals, metals, *mantras* and *yantras*. It gives some practical remedies like the use of mirrors, water bodies and pyramidal roofs in such removal.

Chapter 10, '*Energy Concept in Temple Architecture Today—The Vāstu View*', deals with the designing of mosques, churches and gurdwaras.

Chapter 12, '*Industrial Structure*', gives *vāstu* analysis for an industrial unit and deserves careful

reading.

Chapter 13, '*Vāstu in Practice*', gives some practical applications in specific buildings. Chapter 14 shows the 'past and future 50 years for India as per *vāstu śāstra*', but seems to belong more to astrology.

Chapter 15, '*Vāstu Śāstra* and Event Manifest' contains stray thoughts on the applications of *vāstu*. Chapter 16 and 17, '*Glimpses of Traditional Vāstu Śāstra*', dwells on *vāstu* for the different castes as per qualities and work of individuals.

Some ground rules which can be formulated during the planning stage itself based on *vāstu śāstra* principles are given in the last chapter '*Vāstu Śāstra Guidelines*', as a fitting conclusion.

Overall, the book is a serious and systematic presentation of a thorough study of *vāstu* in itself and in relation to *yoga*, *jyotiṣa* and *tantra* and needs multiple readings to get a good grasp. Both being engineers of repute, the authors deserve praise, though an architectural background to bring light on modernity would have been helpful in proposing architectural design applications in the light of *vāstu*.

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### Hindu Scriptures (A Brief Anthology).

Swami Harshananda. Ramakrishna Math, Bull Temple Road, Bangalore 560 019. 2001. 50 pp. Rs 12.

The author rightly observes in the preface of the book that the sublime principles taught by the great religions of the world have saved humankind when they have been understood properly and followed sincerely. According to the Hindu tradition, a shastra, or scripture, is that which protects if it is sincerely followed. The present book consists of useful guidelines for a good life, which means maintaining internal peace and harmony.

Normally, the conceptual framework for Hindu scriptures consists of the *shruti*, or Veda, the *smṛiti*, or the epics, Puranas, and so on. The book is divided into eight chapters, following this pattern.

The first chapter consists of important mantras and prayers from the *Rigveda*. *Veda* means knowledge or wisdom. The four verses from the *Rigveda* which have been quoted contain exhortations of rishis for maintaining harmony and unity.

The second chapter consists of a brief introduc-



tion of the Upanishads and a few mantras from different Upanishads. The Upanishads contain esoteric and sacred knowledge, and are considered to be the source of all moral and spiritual values of human beings.

In the third chapter some important verses from the *Bhagavadgita* have been considered. The chapter also contains the verses (with translations) describing a person of steady wisdom (*stitha prajna*).

The next chapter deals with the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and the sixth chapter contains some verses from the *Bhagavata*. The seventh chapter is about Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*. The last chapter is about the bhakti aphorisms of Narada.

This book is quite useful to those interested in understanding the universal moral and spiritual values of Hinduism.

Dr R I Ingalalli

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**The Myths of Death, Rebirth and Resurrection: The Wisdom of the Serpent.** Joseph L Henderson and Maud Oakes. New Age Books. 2001. xx + 262 pp. Rs 275.

The book under review touches a very poignant part of every individual. Ever since his transformation from a beastly to a civilized life, man has been haunted by ideas of death, rebirth and even resurrection. As a sequel, almost every religion of the world has its own theories of death, rebirth and resurrection. The book has addressed itself precisely to this aspect.

The first part of the book is an introduction by Joseph L Henderson, who touches upon the chapters to be discussed in length by Maud Oakes, the main author of this book. Henderson acknowledges at the very beginning the fear of death inherent in every individual's psyche, and proposes valid reasons for the existence of the ideas of death, rebirth and resurrection. He also focuses on the cos-

mic pattern related to death and rebirth. In this context, the well-known dance of the Hindu deity Shiva is mentioned.

Henderson shows the descent of the Sumerian goddess Inanna in the chapter 'Death and Rebirth as Cycles of Nature'. Inanna descended to the underworld—the land of no return, experienced death and achieved the impossible return to life again. The chapter also shows the Seven Virgins being transformed from trees—a transformation of the cycles of nature to the human state.

The chapter on 'Initiation as a Spiritual Education' traces the earliest sources of knowledge concerning the ritualistic behaviour of prehistoric man, and attempts to show evidences of rites of passage performed to initiate the young into spiritual life. Similarly, the chapter on 'Initiation as Psychic Liberation' shows how the process leads to a total transformation of the initiated.

In the second part of the book, the explanations put forth by Maud Oakes are more vivid and specific. They deal with a whole range of religious beliefs, aspects of which are dealt with in brief by Henderson. In the chapter 'Death and Rebirth as Cosmic Pattern' she deals extensively with the Dance of Shiva (Hindu, 1500-1000 BC). It also has sections on the same myth relating to different faiths of the world other than Hindu; for example, the Ragnarok (Icelandic, thirteenth century) and the Death of the Skeleton Mower (Egyptian).

Similarly, the chapters dealing with myths relating to death and rebirth as cycles of nature, initiation as spiritual education, initiation as liberation and myths of resurrection deal with a whole lot of myths prevalent in different regions and religions of the world. The chapters are supported by drawings and picture plates that help the reader grasp their contents in full. In addition to this, the book has useful notes, references and an index.

This scholarly work is helpful to those interested in unravelling the mythical intricacies of death, rebirth and resurrection as found in the religious literature of the world. It is also a treasure house for researchers.

Santosh Kumar Sharma

A young salesman was finally admitted to the office of the president, who chided him, 'Young man, you should feel flattered that I allowed you to come in here. I turned down five salesmen today.' 'I know,' replied the young salesman, 'I was all five of them.'

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## ❧ Reports ❧

**Awarded.** Gold medals for standing all-India first in Purva Madhyama (Secondary) and Uttara Madhyama (Higher Secondary) examinations 2002; to two students of Vivekananda Veda Vidyalaya, Belur Math; by Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan, New Delhi.

**Inaugurated.** A paediatric wing at Vivekananda Polyclinic, Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Lucknow; by Srimat Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission; on 7 December 2002.

**Visited.** Ramakrishna Ashrama, Rajkot; by Sri Bhai Mahavir, Governor of Madhya Pradesh; on 1 January 2003.

**Visited.** Ramakrishna Mission, New Delhi; by Sri Shyamal Dutta, Governor of Nagaland; on 9 January.

**Visited.** Ramakrishna Mission, Along; by Mr Mukut Mithi, Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, and Mr Kento Ete, Minister for Power, Government of Arunachal Pradesh; on 10 January. They participated in the centre's annual celebrations.

**Laid.** Foundation stone for the proposed temple at Ramakrishna Math, Ichapur; by Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission; on 17 January (Swami Turiyanandaji's birthday).

**Inaugurated.** The annual celebrations of Lokashiksha Parishad and the Blind Boys' Academy at Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur; by Sri Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal; on 18 Jan-

uary. The Chief Minister also participated in a seminar on 'Biodiversity and Agriculture' organized by the Ashrama.

**Visited.** Ramakrishna Mission, Port Blair; by Sri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Prime Minister of India; on 19 January. He participated in a function organized in this connection.

**Inaugurated.** The newly built guest house at Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Midnapore; by Swami Smarananandaji, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission; on 29 January.

**Distributed.** 18 kg of rice each to 4132 drought-stricken families of Tanjavur and Tiruvarur districts by Ramakrishna Math, Chennai; 350 saris and 350 dhotis to the poor and needy in and around Bangalore by Vivekananda Ashrama, Ulsoor; utensils and clothes to 127 families of Gollalapalem village and assorted garments to 280 families in Gondapalem village, by Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Visakhapatnam. The families had lost their homes to fire accidents.

**Distributed.** 3500 blankets to needy people affected by this year's severe winter throughout the country, by the Ramakrishna Mission headquarters. In addition to this, the following centres gave away blankets and clothing to the poor: Ramakrishna Mission, Along (500 blankets); Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh (68 blankets); Ramakrishna Mission, Limbdi (210 blankets and 160 woollen garments); Ramakrishna Mission TB Sanatorium, Ranchi (365 blankets); Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Vrindaban (300 blankets and shawls). \*