



# Prabuddha Bharata

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Arise! Awake! And stop not till the Goal is reached.

## INTEGRAL VISION OF VEDIC SEERS\*

*"Truth is one: sages call It by various names"*

त्वमग्न इन्द्रो वृषभः सतामसि

त्वं विष्णुरुमायो नमस्यः ।

त्वं ब्रह्मा रयिविद्ब्रह्मणस्पते

त्वं विधर्तः सचसे पुरंध्या ॥

त्वमग्ने राजा वरुणो धृतव्रत-

स्त्वं मित्रो भवसि दस्म ईडयः ।

त्वमर्यमा सत्पतिर्यस्य संभुजं

त्वमंशो विदधे देव भाजयुः ॥

त्वमग्ने अदितिर्देव दाशुषे

त्वं होत्रा भारती वर्धसे गिरा ।

त्वमिळा शतहिमासि दक्षसे

त्वं वृत्रहा वसुपते सरस्वती ॥

1. O Agni, you are Indra, the most generous among the virtuous.<sup>1</sup> You are Viṣṇu praised (*urugāya*) and worshipped by many. O Brahmanaspati, you are the knower of wealth. You are Brahma, the sustainer (*vidhartah*) endowed with all-knowing wisdom.

*Rg-Veda 2.1.3*

2. O Agni, you are King Varuṇa the upholder of laws. You are the adorable Mitra, the subduer of enemies. You are Aryaman, the all-pervading Lord who protects the virtuous. You are luminous Aṁśa, the giver of the fruit of sacrifice.<sup>2</sup>

*Rg-Veda 2.1.4*

3. O luminous Lord, you are the all-pervading Divine Mother (Aditi) appearing as Hotrā and Bhāratī who are magnified by our praise. You are the timeless (*śatahimā*) Ilā, giver of boons. You are Sarasvatī, the controller of wealth and destroyer of sin (*vṛtrahā*).<sup>3</sup>

*Rg-Veda 2.1.11*

\* Selections from the opening hymn of the second Maṇḍala of *Rg-Veda* where one God (Agni) is identified with all other deities, male and female. Here Agni does not evidently mean 'fire' but the supreme divine Reality. This shows how wrong it is to give a literal or naturalistic interpretation to all Vedic Mantras.

1. *Satāmasi vṛṣabhah*. According to Sāyaṇa *vṛṣabha* (bull) means one who showers blessings.

2. According to Sāyaṇa Aṁśa is the Divine Person in the solar orb. Cf. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1.6.6.

3. Hotrā, Bhāratī, Ilā and Sarasvatī are Vedic goddesses of wisdom. The meaning that Sāyaṇa gives to these deities seems far-fetched.

## ABOUT THIS NUMBER

This month's EDITORIAL discusses the two main types of meditation: subjective and objective.

In the ADDRESS given by Srimat Swami Vireswaranandaji Maharaj, President-General of the Ramakrishna Order and Mission, on 30 December 1979 at the New Delhi Ramakrishna Mission centre, some of the main ideals of the Ramakrishna Movement have been briefly dealt with.

In the third and concluding instalment of the PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD Swami Budhananda gives important practical hints on how to make the presence of God a reality in everyday life.

It is now being increasingly recognized that myths are symbolic vehicles of transcendental experience. There are, however, different ways of understanding myths. Dr. Leta Jane Lewis of California State

University, Fresno, follows the spiritual method in understanding Hindu myths and symbols in THE SPIRITUAL ASPECT OF MYTHOLOGY.

Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya was a mercurial and tragic character in the religious reform movements of the late nineteenth century. However, his passionate search for Truth, his open sincerity and patriotic zeal endowed him with a halo of greatness. A moving, vibrant account of his tempestuous life and the influence of Swami Vivekananda on it is given by Swami Jitatmananda in BRAHMABANDHAV UPADHYAYA AND SWAMI VIVEKANANDA.

In the thirteenth instalment of IS VEDANTA A PHILOSOPHY OF ESCAPE? Dr. Vinita Wanchoo continues her trenchant analysis of the place of ethics in Vedanta.

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## TYPES OF MEDITATION—I

(EDITORIAL)

Before we begin the study of different types of meditation it is necessary to keep in mind two important points. One is that meditation is not just ordinary concentration but a special type of internal concentration.<sup>1</sup>

The second point is that meditation is not an entirely independent discipline but a stage in concentration common to almost all spiritual paths. Each path of *sādhana* or spiritual discipline begins in a different way. But every path has a stage which corresponds to meditation. The name given to this common stage varies from path to path. But whatever be the name given, it

means some form of meditative awareness.

Patañjali's Yoga begins with purification of mind, posture and breath control followed by withdrawal of mind from external objects (*pratyāhāra*) and fixing the mind (*dhāraṇā*) at a particular centre. Then comes meditation (*dhyāna*). The path of *Jñāna* begins with hearing scripture (*śravaṇa*) and reflection (*manana*). This leads to enquiry (*nididhyāsana*) which corresponds to meditation. In the path of Bhakti, the aspirant moves from prayer, singing of hymns and worship to meditation which is known under different names like *abhyāsa* (Rāmānuja), *smaraṇa* and *bhāvanā*. Even in the path of Karma one finds the need to maintain self-awareness in the midst of work. In fact the Zen masters speak of

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1. This point was discussed in detail in July 1980 and in some of the subsequent editorials.



'action meditation', 'walking meditation', etc. Buddhism gives more importance to meditation than any other religion does. In Christianity the main spiritual discipline is called prayer. It consists of several stages or 'degrees'. First comes vocal prayer, then discursive prayer (which corresponds to *manana* or reflection in Vedānta), then affective prayer (prayer proper, done with intense longing). Then follows the fourth degree of prayer which is variously called Prayer of Simplicity, Prayer of the Heart, etc. This fourth degree corresponds to Hindu meditation or *dhyāna*. In Islamic mysticism (Sufism) also meditation, known under different names, plays a central role.

In every path the aspirant begins with a large number of thoughts in his mind. These gradually get reduced, and he reaches a stage when there exists only a single *pratyaya* or thought in his mind. This is the state of meditative awareness. It is the common highway which every aspirant has to travel in order to realize God or the Supreme Self. Beyond this common path lies the luminous realm of the Spirit.

Then why are there so many different techniques of meditation? These are really techniques of *dhāraṇā* or fixing the mind. They are like different gates which open to the same highway. These techniques only teach you how to *begin* meditation, they only open different doors to meditative awareness. But they do not teach you how to *maintain* meditation, which is something you have to learn through practice.

This does not, however, mean that the goal of meditation is the same for all. The goal is determined by the beginning, that is by the *dhāraṇā* technique that you follow. Each technique of *dhāraṇā* leads you *through* meditation to a certain experience. The beginnings and ends of meditation are different. But the process of meditation itself is the same in so far as a single thought is maintained. The nature of this single thought (*pratyaya* or *vṛtti*) may also vary

from person to person. For instance, one may meditate on Śiva or Kṛṣṇa or Jesus or an impersonal object like light or sky or sun. Nevertheless, the essential meditative process—the maintenance of a single *pratyaya* or *vṛtti*—is the same whatever be the object meditated upon.

Meditation thus acts as a great junction where all spiritual paths converge, meet, go together for a short distance—and then diverge again to their respective goals. Meditation may also be compared to a broad road having several tracks or 'lanes' marked on them for the guidance of motorists. Each meditator keeps to his own 'lane' but all the lanes are parts of one great highway.

#### *Meditation—subjective and objective*

Meditation is of two types: subjective and objective. Objective meditation is concentration of mind on an object. The object may be the form of a deity, light, sky, etc. or some qualities like love, compassion, strength or one's own self objectified. Consciousness is focussed on the object by an effort of will. Objective meditation is called *upāsanā*.

Subjective meditation is called *nididhyāsana* or *ātma-vicāra*. Here there is no focussing of consciousness or effort of will. It is rather an attempt to seek the source of consciousness, to trace one's 'I' back to its roots. It is a process in which the ego, instead of rushing towards objects as it constantly does, withdraws into its own original source—the Ātman.

The majority of spiritual aspirants find *nididhyāsana*, subjective meditation, difficult to practise. They succeed in tracing their 'I' back only up to a certain point. To penetrate further backward is possible only for a mind which is properly sharpened through training and strengthened by the observance of continence. *Upāsanā* or objective meditation gives the mind the necessary training. After practising *upāsanā*

for some time it becomes easier to practise *nididhyāsana*. In fact, Madhusudana Sarasvati in his *Advaita Siddhi* classifies aspirants for *Jñāna* into two groups: *kṛtopāsti* (those who have attained proficiency in *upāsanā*) and *akṛtopāsti* (those who go directly to enquiry without practising *upāsanā*).

According to Maṇḍana and some of the earlier schools of Advaitins, *upāsanā* can give rise to direct realization of Nirguṇa Brahman (the Absolute without attributes). But Śrī Śaṅkara and his followers hold the view that *upāsanā* will lead only to the realization of Saguṇa Brahman (Reality with attributes). Śaṅkara states that the benefit derived from *upāsanā* is either worldly prosperity (*abhyudaya*) or 'gradual liberation' (*krama-mukti*). In other words, *upāsanā* is only a preparation for *nididhyāsana*. On the other hand, Śrī Rāmānuja holds the view that *upāsanā* can lead to full liberation. He even identifies it with Bhakti.

The difference between *upāsanā* and *nididhyāsana* as two different disciplines has also been clearly pointed out by Rāmātīrtha in his well-known commentary on *Vedānta Sāra*.<sup>2</sup> Vidyāraṇya too has made this distinction by describing *upāsanā* as *vastu-tantra* (object-oriented) and *nididhyāsana* as *karṣaṇa-tantra* (subject-oriented).<sup>3</sup>

A similar distinction is found in Buddhism. Buddhist meditations are of two types. One is *samatha* (Skt. *śamādhi*) or mental concentration of various kinds leading to different mystic experiences. Tibetan Buddhists are specialists in this kind of meditation. These meditation techniques existed even before Buddha who himself practised them. But he was not

satisfied with them because they did not lead to total liberation. He regarded these mystic states only as 'happy living in this existence' (*dittha-dhamma-sukha-vihāra*) and nothing more. According to him mystic experiences are created or conditioned by the mind. He therefore went further and discovered the other form of meditation known as *vipassana* (Skt. *vipaśyanam*) or 'insight'. It is an analytic method which involves constant mindfulness and awareness of all experiences, good and bad. It is not a withdrawal from life but an attempt to understand life and thus enlarge one's self-awareness. The most authoritative scripture for *vipassana* is the *Satipatthana-Sutta* included in the Buddhist *Tripitaka*. [The 'choiceless awareness' technique of the well-known contemporary teacher J. Krishnamurthy comes close to this method.] It was more or less a similar distinction between objective and subjective meditations that gave rise to the two schools or Japanese Zen: Soto and Rinzai.

What is common to both subjective and objective meditation is a distinct awareness of a higher centre of consciousness, the higher Self. In both, awareness is not allowed to move too far away from this centre. But whereas in objective meditation a circle of consciousness is created around the centre and there is a struggle to shut out distracting thoughts from this inner circle, in subjective meditation there is no such struggle: the aspirant just holds on to his 'I' centre. Strictly speaking, *nididhyāsana* is not meditation though it is translated that way. It is more correctly called 'self-enquiry' and belongs to the path of knowledge (*jñānamārga*). It will be studied in its proper context later on. Here we are concerned only with *upāsanā*.

*Need for combining subjective and objective meditations*

It is however important to keep in mind that these two types of meditation are not

2. उपासनानां ज्ञानाद् भेदं दर्शयति मानसव्यापार-  
रूपाणीति । निदिध्यासनाद् भेदमाह सगुणेति ।

*Vidvanmanoranjanī on Vedānta Sāra* 1.12

3. वस्तुतन्त्रो भवेद् बोधः कर्तुतन्त्रमुपासनम् ।

*Pañcadaśī* 9.74



mutually contradictory. They actually complement each other and can be practised together.

Most of the meditation techniques taught to aspirants are *upāsanā*s. Spiritual initiation (*dīkṣā* or *upadeśa*) usually means initiation into some form of *upāsanā*. In the path of Bhakti this is the only type of meditation practised. Even those who study books on Advaita seldom attempt self-enquiry in practice, and remain satisfied with objective meditations. But though *nididhyāsana* is mainly followed in the path of Jñāna, there is nothing wrong in following it in the path of Bhakti also. Indeed it is better or even necessary to combine self-enquiry with *upāsanā*.

One of the aims of *upāsanā* is to establish a living relationship with God, 'an eternal relationship between the eternal soul and the eternal God', as Swami Vivekananda puts it. The ordinary ego of which we are all so painfully aware is not eternal but is constantly undergoing change. Only the Ātman, our true higher self, is unchanging and eternal. This means that, in order to establish a truly loving relationship with God, it is necessary to be aware of one's higher self. Self-enquiry leads the aspirant away from the ego towards his true self.

There is a second reason why a combination of objective and subjective forms of meditation is desirable. Meditation is usually done at a definite centre of consciousness, by which is meant the point where the aspirant is able to feel his higher self or Ātman. It is there that the mind is to be fixed first, and it is there that the chosen deity is to be worshipped. What most aspirants attempt is to visualize a point of light or a lotus in the region of the heart or the head. But many people find this too unreal or abstract. A little *nididhyāsana* or self-enquiry will, however, greatly help in locating the centre of the true self and make the lotus or light meaningful and real. Before the aspirant starts his actual

meditation if he spends a few minutes in tracing his 'I' back to its source, he will find it easier to fix his mind at the right centre of consciousness. And every time the mind wanders away from this centre he may apply the same method. Once the mind is tied down to the true centre of consciousness, meditation on one's chosen deity becomes easy. This is a much better form of mind control than the conventional ones. Those who do not feel intense devotion will find this combination of *nididhyāsana* and *upāsanā* helpful.

Then there is a third point in favour of such a combination. *Upāsanā* increases one's power of concentration but does not necessarily increase one's power of self-control to an equal degree. As a result the aspirant may find it difficult to remain unaffected by the contact of other people and the cares and distractions of his daily work. *Nididhyāsana* enables him to abide in his real abode within and remain calm and unaffected by his environment.

Further, it prevents the aspirant from mistaking strong imaginations and hallucinations for genuine spiritual experience, as often happens in those who practise only objective meditation. A true spiritual experience transforms one's consciousness and produces some knowledge of the higher self. Self-enquiry is necessary to recognize this. Lastly, combining *nididhyāsana* and *upāsanā* satisfies both the head and the heart.

### *Upāsanā in the Vedic period*

It is possible that even during the early Vedic period there were independent thinkers and groups of people who practised meditation as their chief spiritual discipline. That was perhaps how Sāṃkhya and Yoga systems developed independent of the Vedas.

In Vedic literature *upāsanā* first appears as a part of rituals in the Brāhmanas (the part of the Veda which deals with rituals). The emphasis then was on sacrificial rites

(*yajñā*). In the Brāhmaṇas we find a few meditations prescribed along with these rites. The sacrifice was regarded as most important and sufficient in itself to produce the desired results. The meditation that was practised along with it was only an auxiliary part of it and had no independent existence. The purpose of such meditations was to gain some additional merit and their omission in no way affected the sacrifices. This kind of *upāsanā* was called *āṅgāva-baddha* meaning 'connected to parts (of the sacrifice)'.<sup>4</sup>

Gradually, *upāsanā* got separated from the rituals. In the Āraṇyakas we find meditations replacing actual sacrifices. But the meditations still resembled the sacrifices. They were mostly symbolic representations of external rituals. The whole external rite was, as it were, transferred to the mind. These *upāsanās* may therefore be called 'substitution-meditations'. A well-known example is found in the very beginning of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* which is an Āraṇyaka as well as an Upaniṣad. Here the sacrificial horse is to be meditated upon as identified with the Cosmic Being (Virāt or Prajāpati), the horse's head standing for the dawn, its eye for the sun, its *prāṇa* for the air and so on.

The next stage in the evolution of *upāsanā* is found in the Upaniṣads. Here meditations are in no way connected to rituals nor even symbolically resemble them. They directly deal with Brahman, the ultimate Reality. But Brahman is a transcendent principle which cannot be known through the ordinary senses and mind. So the great sages of the Upaniṣads used various familiar objects of the phenomenal universe like the sun, *ākāśa*, *vāyu* (air), water, *prāṇa*, *manas* (mind), words, etc. to represent Brahman.<sup>6</sup>

4. Cf. *Brahma-Sūtra* 3.3.55.

5. ॐ उषा वा अश्वस्य मेध्यस्य शिरः . . .

*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.1.1

However, what the sages attempted was not mere concentration of mind on one of these symbols. In that case it would have become only a form of the yogic exercise known as *dhāraṇā*. What they actually did was to connect each symbol to a certain framework of meaning—a spiritual formula. *Upāsanā* in the Upaniṣads are meditations on these spiritual formulas. These formulas are devices to guide the mind from the symbol to Reality. When a mind which is sufficiently purified meditates on such a formula, its true meaning—the ultimate Reality—will be revealed to it. These meditation formulas were called *vidyās*.

So then, *āṅgāva-baddhas* (in the Brāhmaṇas), substitution-meditations (in the Āraṇyakas) and *Vidyās* (in the Upaniṣads): these were the three stages in the evolution of *upāsanā* during the Vedic period. Śrī Śaṅkara says that lower *upāsanās* do not deserve to be called *vidyās*.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore *vidyās* represent the highest forms of *upāsanā*. The entire knowledge of the Upaniṣads came out of the meditations of the great Ṛṣis on these *vidyās*. It was through these meditations that they discovered the great truths that underlie the phenomenal universe. A scientist tries to understand the ultimate truth through a series of steps, meticulously analysing each step. But in ancient India the sages went straight to the Reality with the help of certain mental paradigms. Says Deussen 'That India more than any other country is the land of symbols is owing to the nature of Indian thought, which applied itself to the most abstruse problems before it was even remotely in a position to treat them intelligently.'<sup>8</sup>

6. See Paul Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1966), pp. 99-125.

7. Śaṅkara, commentary on *Brahma-Sūtra* 3.4.52.

8. *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads*, p. 120.



*Vidyās* are paradigms of Brahman. In ancient India each teacher developed his own concept model of Brahman and taught it as a meditation technique to his disciples. That was how so many *vidyās* came into existence. Some of the Upaniṣads, especially *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, *Chāndogya* and *Taittirīya*, are a rich storehouse of these *vidyās*. The importance attached to the *vidyās* was so great that the *Brahma-Sūtra* has a whole section dealing exclusively with them.<sup>9</sup> The *vidyās* really hold the key to the Upaniṣads, and no man can properly understand the Upaniṣads without understanding the *vidyās*.

The *vidyās* are said to be thirty-two in number,<sup>10</sup> but many more must have been known to the ancient sages. Among these *gāyatrī-vidyā*, *antarāditya-vidyā*, *madhu-vidyā*, *śaṇḍilya-vidyā* and *dahara-vidyā* are well known. It is beyond the scope of the present article to deal with these *vidyās* in detail. They are to be learnt directly from competent teachers who have attained illumination through them. But long before the beginning of the Christian era the lineage of Vedic Ṛṣis had ended. And in the absence of a living tradition, the *vidyās*

ceased to be practised and their true inner meaning was soon forgotten.

One major cause for the neglect of the *vidyās* was the rise of Buddhism and its influence on Hindu thought. A second reason was the crystallization of Hindu philosophy into six schools or *darśanas*, and the triumph of the Advaita system. Nondual experience was originally sought through a gradual expansion of consciousness attained by the practice of *vidyās*. But gradually the goal became more important than the means. Vedānta neglected its mystical roots, became more speculative and polemical, and thus moved farther away from life and experience. A third reason for the neglect of the *vidyās* was the popularity of Yoga and, later on, of the Tantras.

Under the influence of Yoga and Tantra new techniques of meditation were developed during the Middle Ages which survive to this day. Meditation techniques in modern times are strongly influenced by Yoga and Tantra. We are now witnessing a great revival of mysticism. Ancient methods are being adjusted to suit the needs of modern aspirants. Some enterprising people are experimenting with new techniques of meditation.

We shall next discuss the traditional methods of meditation which are still surviving and are suitable for modern times.

(To be concluded)

9. *Brahma-Sūtra* 3.3.

10. Cf. K. Narayanaswami Aiyar, *The Thirty-two Vidyās* (Madras: The Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1962). Also cf. Swami Gambhirananda, 'Upaniṣadic Meditation', in *The Cultural Heritage of India* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1965), vol. 1.

Every way is a kind of Yoga, but the systematized Yoga accomplishes the work more quickly. Bhakti, Karma, Raja and Jnana Yogas get over the ground more effectively. Employ all powers—philosophy, work, prayer, meditation. Crowd on all sail, put on full steam, and reach the goal. The sooner, the better.

—Swami Vivekananda

## AN ADDRESS OF SRIMAT SWAMI VIRESWARANANDAJI MAHARAJ

GIVEN ON THE OCCASION OF THE RELEASE OF THE SOUVENIR 'THE RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT' ON 30 DECEMBER 1979 AT THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION, NEW DELHI.

I shall mention a few of the main ideals that have been cherished and put into practice by the Ramakrishna Mission.

The first one is the harmony of religions. Sri Ramakrishna practised the ideals preached by different religions and by different sects in Hinduism and came to the conclusion that all religions led to the same goal, to God-realization. This was not a new ideal in this country. As early as the R̥g-Vedic times the R̥ṣis expressed the idea thus—*ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti* ("Truth is one, sages call It by various names"). And from that era it has come down to the present day and has been reiterated several times in the history of this nation. Śrī Kṛṣṇa taught the same truth through the *Gītā*. Śaṅkara also harmonized all the different sects in Hinduism that were prevalent in his time by starting the tradition of *pañca-devatā-upāsanā* (worship of the five deities) before worshipping any deity. In this modern age Sri Ramakrishna has given a practical demonstration of this great ideal. This is one of the greatest ideals which the modern age requires, not only in India but all over the world. He has proved it in a scientific way, by actually practising the different religious ideas and proving that all religions finally lead to the same goal, to God-realization. This is the scientific proof that is required in this age, and he has given it.

Any other idea which is discordant to this great ideal, which this country has cherished for centuries, will only retard the progress of this nation and bring about disunity and disintegration of its life. However, it will not be able to do any permanent harm, but will in due course go down

with the great upsurge of the nation's true ideal of harmony. We can be sure that the present note of disharmony will not be able to do any great mischief. Ultimately, in this age such discordant notes will get drowned in this great upsurge of the harmony of religions.

Another idea that Sri Ramakrishna held before the nations of the world was the oneness of humanity. Behind everyone, every individual, there was the same Ātman. To whatever creed, race or caste one belonged, whether one was educated or illiterate, whether one was rich or poor, behind every one there was the same Ātman. From this angle of vision, he found that humanity was one and that there was no need for any discordant feeling of animosity among nations, races, different classes or castes. With this idea he also wanted us to work for the social uplift of the poorer and backward sections of humanity. In our country particularly we have to raise the backward people, give them education and raise their economic standard. This kind of social work he asked us to do according to the great ideal he gave to the world, 'Serve Jīva as Śiva'. If we serve people with the idea of serving Śiva, with the idea that in everyone there is the same Ātman, we will not only be doing social good, but will also be helping ourselves towards God-realization. Through such an attitude social service will be raised to the standard of *upāsanā* or *pūjā*. If we can realize God by worshipping Him in a stone image, by inspiring divinity in it, through the ritual of *prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā*, can we not attain God-realization by worshipping Him as already manifested in human beings? There is no need for *prāṇa-*



*pratiṣṭhā*. He is already present in every human being. Only if we change our angle of vision and do service, it will help us also to attain God-realization.

That is the twofold ideal which Swami Vivekananda has held before this organization—*ātmano-mokṣārtham jagad hitāya ca* ('For one's own liberation and the welfare of the world'). This great ideal is required today in our country to uplift the backward people, to give them education, to give them the culture which they have been denied by the higher castes, or by the higher strata of society. The backwardness of the masses has been a great weakness in our nation. And Swamiji particularly wanted that the masses be raised, and he has given his own plan to raise their economic condition which is very necessary. Swamiji wrote, 'Did not our Gurudeva say, "An empty stomach is no good for religion"?' And he also wrote, 'I do not believe in a God or religion which cannot wipe the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth.' That shows that we must do something to raise the condition of the vast masses of poor people in our country, for their good, for our own good, and for the good of the nation.

In this respect I shall tell you of an incident in the life of Swamiji. When he was in America, he was staying with a gentleman who happened to be a friend of the multimillionaire John D. Rockefeller. Rockefeller had heard much about Swamiji from his friend; but he had never called on Swamiji to see him nor had he attended his lectures. But one morning suddenly he came to the place where Swamiji was living and, without waiting to be announced, went straight to Swamiji's room. Swamiji was then writing a letter. After some talk, Swamiji told him ultimately, 'The money that you earned is not yours. You are only a trustee. The money belongs to the poor, and you are merely a trustee of that money.' But Rockefeller was not a man to listen to

advice from anybody. He suddenly left the room in a huff and went away.

But something happened. After about a week he came again. Swamiji was in the same room, writing letters as before. Rockefeller put before Swamiji a paper which told of his plans to donate an enormous amount of money to finance some orphanage or other charitable public institution, and said, 'Well, there you are. You must be satisfied now, and you can thank me for it.' But Swamiji coolly replied without even raising his head, 'It is for you to thank me.' Rockefeller left the room suddenly without further talk. So this idea was put into the great millionaire, and it worked in him, and all the Foundations created by him were more or less inspired by this personal touch with Swamiji. He has not mentioned Swamiji's name, but he has admitted that he was inspired by this kind of idea.

I would like on this occasion to appeal to all our people, especially to our industrialists in this country, to rise to the occasion and try to improve the condition of backward people, remembering Swamiji's idea that they are also trustees of the money which they have earned and that they hold it for the benefit of the poor. I shall not say that they should spend their whole income but that at least some part of it should be spent for the backward classes. It will be of great benefit not only to the nation and to the poor, but ultimately also to themselves. If the common people, who form a large section of the nation, are left in poverty, it is sure to affect the whole nation including all the business people indirectly. Blood must circulate throughout the whole body. If it does not, then that part of the body where the blood does not flow gets withered and gangrene may set in, endangering the life of the whole person. Similarly, wealth should flow throughout the body-politic of the nation. Otherwise, if any part of the nation is left out, then it will jeopardize the life of the

whole nation. So this idea should not be forgotten by the rich, for their own sake, even from a selfish standpoint.

In this connection I would like to tell you one small incident. The Ramakrishna Mission did relief work in Andhra Pradesh after the dreadful cyclone. It took up rehabilitation and constructed many houses for the poor whose houses had been destroyed. After that, a few of the rich people of the locality and from Hyderabad got together and are now busy helping the poor sections to improve their lot under a scheme called 'Grama-shree'. That is a very good and healthy sign. If this inspires people all over the country, then the economic uplift of the country will be achieved in no time.

As you find from the souvenir *The Ramakrishna Movement*, the Ramakrishna Mission has been doing some kind of work in this direction, both in the remote back-

ward villages and in the urban areas. But from the standpoint of the great and vast need of the nation, what the Ramakrishna Mission has achieved, I would say in all humility, is only microscopic. This slow progress will not be very helpful unless it is quickened by people from all strata of life. Everyone must try to build up the nation. The Ramakrishna Mission might have at best shown the way. That is all. But to achieve the goal, the whole nation will have to take it up. There will be hope for this nation only when various societies, organizations and people from various strata of life take to this kind of work of reconstruction of the country on a national basis as preached by Swamiji. So I again appeal to all the rich people in this country to come forward and help raise the backward people, for the good of the nation, and ultimately for their own good.

May Sri Ramakrishna help us in realizing this ideal is my great prayer to Him.

## PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

SWAMI BUDHANANDA

In Holy Mother's life we find a unique example of living in the reality of God's presence. Of course, as she herself said, Sri Ramakrishna was none other than God Himself.

After the death of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother was disconsolate. When according to the custom of the Hindus, she as a widow was about to remove her bangles, Sri Ramakrishna appeared before her and said, pressing her hand, 'What are you doing? I have just gone from this room to another,' and she never removed her bangles all her life, though it was against the very rigorous discipline of the society in which she lived. She was not a law-breaker by any stretch of the imagination.

But how could she pose as a widow when she knew for certain that her husband was alive, that he had only moved from one room to another? She even saw him once in a while. If you had God as your husband, what fear would you ever have of being a widow?

Even this vision did not bring her the needed consolation. She then went on a long pilgrimage to Vrindaban and other places. As she was going by the train, she rested her arm on the window and slept. Sri Ramakrishna appeared near the window and told her, pointing to the golden amulet on her arm, that it might be lost if she rested her arm on the window.



While in Vrindaban, which is associated with Śrī Kṛṣṇa's life on earth, her feelings of grief so increased that it appeared she would be broken to pieces. One day while she was weeping and weeping, Sri Ramakrishna appeared before her and said tenderly, 'Well, my dear, why do you weep so much? Here I am. Where indeed could I have gone? It is just like walking from this room to another.'

After these visions and assurances her flow of tears lessened, but the pangs of separation were still there; they just flowed in different channels.

In *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, a scripture of the Hindus in which Śrī Kṛṣṇa's life is detailed, we read that when Kṛṣṇa suddenly disappeared from amidst the *gopīs* after he had sported with them for some time, these cowherd lasses were so overpowered with grief and forgetful of everything else that they began to search for him everywhere. But after being defeated in this they entered into deep meditation on Kṛṣṇa. So deep was their meditation and feeling of identity with him that each one of them took herself to be Kṛṣṇa and began to impersonate his various ways.

Exactly the same thing happened with the Holy Mother. She became so much imbued with the Ramakrishna-spirit that she drank water, chewed betel leaf, and answered questions exactly in Sri Ramakrishna's manner and accent. In fact, all her gestures and postures of that time resembled those of Sri Ramakrishna.

The presence of Sri Ramakrishna thenceforth became so vivid and real in her life that she never bemoaned his loss. On the contrary, she was filled with supreme bliss.

In her chapel she worshipped Sri Ramakrishna in her own simple manner, which gave the impression that the Person she worshipped was not a distant awe-inspiring one but the nearest and dearest one of the household. She said that when she made the food offerings she actually saw a ray of

light coming from the picture and touching the offering, indicating acceptance. There is a religious concept in India that if the worshipper knows how to worship, the deity becomes living.

Once while Holy Mother was going to Jayrambati, her village home, in a bullock cart along with her household members, the party stopped on the way under a tree for lunch. Holy Mother always carried a picture of Sri Ramakrishna wherever she went. She never took food without worshipping him in the picture and making offering to him first. Now it so happened on that day that while the earthen cooking pot was lifted from the improvised oven, it fell and broke. Holy Mother had extraordinary presence of mind. Without wasting time she promptly set Sri Ramakrishna's picture on a straw and taking some cooked food from the top of the heap and a little curry she said to Sri Ramakrishna in a voice of extreme urgency: 'Now please come quickly and finish your lunch. This is how you have got things done today. What can I do?'

Such was the fact of God's reality and familiarity with her, that she could make this statement of fact: 'The vision of God is like a fruit in my palm; whenever I wish I can see Him.' Eventually a time came when people recognized that God's presence and her presence had become one and the ground on which she walked became holy; the places of her birth and stay became places of pilgrimage.

#### 4

Now, do we realize how life flows on? It flies. How long a time is left in each one's hand we just do not know. Yet life continuously brings challenges of various types. But the greatest challenge of life is this fact of God. And this challenge has to be met with another challenge from our side, by taking God into every act we do,

by doing every act for His sake alone. This can be done, for people have done so. Do not doubt this.

We must give God the feeling that He is being felt. We must cry for Him a real cry. We must practise His presence, fall in His presence, if fall we must, and rise in His presence. We must do everything in His presence. It is His absence that is dire calamity. Why, if we die in God's presence that is salvation itself.

We may not be able to imitate those whose hallowed names we have mentioned. Our limitations are many and situations are different. It is no defeatism to have a sense of realism and waking view of things in religion or in anything else. But it is good to remember that there is not a situation where God is not. Therefore, it is possible to practise the presence of God, for no place in the universe is God-forsaken. Only some people may have forgotten God for a while.

Certain simple things every one of us can do, should do and must do in regard to the practice of the presence of God; and this practice will gradually but surely fill us with strength, consolation, joy and inspiration. (1) First, let us feel the tremendousness of the fact of God. (2) If God is, and we also are, there must be a relationship between the two. We must discover this relationship and cultivate it in ways most suitable to us. (3) *Remembrance of God is the one way of growing in that relationship.* Hindus believe in a joyous approach to God, in not always only sighing and weeping. One may, of course, weep once in a while. When tears come not even a hero can block them. Weep then without any sense of shame before God. But God, who made these beautiful flowers and painted the feathers of birds in such plentiful variety, did not surely want Himself to be approached always in a bleak way. It is possible to have fun with God—though some religious people seem to faint at the

idea. Great mystics exchanged jokes with God. (4) There should be a variety in our approach to God—not always reading only Thomas Aquinas!—so that spiritual life may not become too monotonous, dreary and prohibiting. Therefore God should be remembered in a variety of ways, in as great a variety of ways as one may invent.

Sri Ramakrishna said to Keshab Chandra Sen and other devotees:

Do you hear how melodious that music is? One player is producing only a monotone on his flute, while another is creating only waves of melodies in different *rāgas* and *rāginīs*. That is my attitude. Why should I produce only a monotone when I have an instrument with seven holes. Why should I say nothing but 'I am He! I am He!' I want to play various melodies on my instrument with seven holes. Why say only 'Brahma! Brahma!' I want to call on God through all the moods, through *sānta*, *dāsyā*, *sakhyā*, *vātsalyā* and *madhura*. I want to make merry with God. I want to sport with God.<sup>31</sup>

In *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* the traditional variety of ways of remembering God is taught in this verse.

Śravaṇam kīrtanam viṣṇoh  
smaranam pādasevanam;  
Arcanam vandanam dāsyam  
sakhyam ātmanivedanam.

Hearing the glories of God, chanting His name, remembrance, worship, adoration, fellowship, self-surrender—these are the various ways of remembering God and practising His presence.

To these traditional methods, for socially conscious modern man Sri Ramakrishna has taught the great *jīva-śiva* worship. This is worship of man looking on him as God going about. Swami Vivekananda has interpreted this gospel as his revolutionary gospel of service.

<sup>31</sup>. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1947), pp. 1003-04.



So the fourth thing we must do in regard to the practice of the presence of God is to keep variety in our approach to God.

(5) Fifth, in order to practise the presence of God we have to train our three powers, that of imagination, that of emotion, and that of action. 'Today's imagination will become tomorrow's realization,' says Swami Turiyananda, one of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Therefore to start with let us constantly imagine that God is here and now though we may not see Him. Let us know for certain that God is all love, and therefore all love is God's. Whatever love we deprive God of, that love will cause us sorrow and pain. Therefore more and more our powers of emotion should be made to flow to Him. Everyone acts. Action is the very breath of our life. Let every action be for His sake and then we will be breathing or living for Him. Do not be afraid to live for God. What fear has a gun of bullets which are shot through it? We are but instruments. Why become anything else and lose the glory of being used by God?

(6) Lastly, let us not go anywhere alone. People go to parks with their dogs and talk to them endlessly, and with so much affection, and yet it is possible to go to the park with God also and converse with Him. Most of us talk to ourselves anyway. Sometimes this habit becomes morbid and people have to be shut up in mental homes. But if we think that God is always with us in our heart, and talk our heart out to Him, it will bring us great solace and peace. Brother Lawrence says when you are in inner trouble, call on the Lord who is sleeping and He will wake up and rebuke the waves to stillness.

When we are in doubt, pain, trouble, confused, let us shut our door, go deep into our heart and place before the Lord there our problem and ask Him counsel. Never take any problem to anybody before you have taken it to the Lord in your heart. And you will be surprised how few problems you have to take to anybody. Sri Ramakrishna says if you carry the Divine Mother in your heart, you will not be able to do any wrong action even if you are in a bad place.

There are an infinite number of ways in which one can cultivate inner association with God and grow in that association.

In the *Durgā Saptasati* the sage addresses the Divine Mother thus: 'When called to mind in a difficult pass you remove fear from every person. When called to mind by those who are in well-being, you endow them with very auspicious inclinations.'<sup>32</sup>

This is the most precious secret for practising the presence of God. In troubles, when blows fall on the neck we will cry to Him. He will respond no doubt and help us through. But creative spiritual work is done when we are not in any specific trouble but we earnestly remember God, call on Him, cry to Him. This endows us with a type of mind which spontaneously gravitates to reality. When we have this mind, it is no longer believing as Brother Lawrence said, it is seeing.

(Concluded)

32. दुर्गे स्मृता हरसि भीतिमशेषजन्तोः ।

स्वस्थैः स्मृता मतिमतीव शुभां ददासि ॥

*Durgā Saptasati* 4.17

# THE SPIRITUAL ASPECT OF MYTHOLOGY

DR. LETA JANE LEWIS

India's beautiful spiritual mythology can constitute a serious obstacle to the Westerner who is developing an interest in Vedānta. If he takes this mythology too literally, as many people do, he can be so shocked that he will lose interest in India's great spiritual tradition before he has investigated it. Demanding what he believes to be absolute truth and absolute reality from religion, the average Westerner sees no excuse for worshipping anyone or anything that cannot be verified historically. So he draws back in amazed disbelief when he discovers that there is no good evidence for the historicity of India's favourite divine incarnations, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, whose inspiring stories are told in the mythological epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. He is saddened to read that one of the most competent authorities on Indian philosophy and religion, Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, actually states that Kṛṣṇa is a composite of three legendary figures rather than one historical person.<sup>1</sup> He is further taken aback when he encounters India's many gods, some of whom impress him as being very beautiful and some of whom seem very strange to him with their many heads and arms. Some grotesque gods have such deformities that he cannot imagine how a child born with them could hope to survive. Although he thinks that the elephant-headed Ganeśa is more humorous than repulsive, he cannot take him seriously. He wonders how this funny little fellow, with an elephant's head on a human body could manage to function. He abhors the worship of the Śiva liṅgam, a phallic symbol which is meaningless to him.

And, finally, he is horrified that these unreal gods and goddesses are worshipped and reverently housed in temple shrines.

The Westerner with a superficial knowledge of Indian mythology may conclude that it is only folklore, which everyone knows is fictitious, rather than religion, which is the Lord's own truth. He may think that the worship of mythological figures conforms to Webster's definition of superstition as 'an irrational abject attitude of mind toward the supernatural, nature, or God, proceeding from ignorance, unreasoning fear of the unknown or mysterious, morbid scrupulosity, a belief in magic, or chance, or the like.'<sup>2</sup>

If, however, the occidental inquirer consults scholarly sources, he is sure to find statements suggesting that this point-of-view is too narrow. Expert mythologists are now setting forth the theory that many myths express hidden truths about man's relationship to the cosmos. For instance, Mircea Eliade writes, '... in reciting or listening to a myth, one resumes contact with the sacred and with reality, and in so doing one transcends the profane tradition, the "historical situation".'<sup>3</sup> Thus, Eliade believes that in reaching reality, one must transcend the historical situation, which some Westerners take to be the chief criterion of reality. Heinrich Zimmer, a foremost authority on Hindu mythology, specifically warns that 'it would not do to seek to constrain the Oriental conceptions into the delimiting frames familiar to the West. Their profound strangeness must be permitted to expose to us the unconscious

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1. Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 2 (New York; Macmillan Co., 1958), pp. 493-94.

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2. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, fifth edition.

3. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York; Sheed and Hard, 1952), p. 59.



limitations of our own approach to the enigmas of existence and of man.<sup>4</sup> In other words, scholarly research suggests that the problem with Indian mythology must be in the inquirer rather than in the mythology itself.

The respectful study which Indian mythology deserves should probably begin with India's ancient scriptures, the Vedas, which are dated approximately between 2500 B.C. and 600 B.C. and which contain the earliest references to the Indian gods and goddesses. Careful analysis of the Vedas makes it clear that, in spite of the proliferation of gods and goddesses, there was no real polytheism in India even in ancient times. One Sanskrit scholar, Swami Prabhavananda, explains:

Casual visitors to this ancient land carry away with them the impression of an elaborate polytheism. True it is that India has always had many gods—but in appearance only. In reality she has had but one god, though with prodigal inventiveness she has called him by 'various names'.<sup>5</sup>

With reference to the sections of the Vedas called the Samhitās, the Swami writes:

The Samhitās are collections of mantras, or hymns, most of which sing the praises of one or another personal God. Sometimes the god is conceived as little more than a magnified man. In one hymn, for example, Indra, the god of rain, has a body clad in golden armour, is very strong, and descends to earth, where he lives and eats with his votaries, fights and overcomes their enemies the demons, and establishes his dominion. Similarly Varuṇa, in another hymn, is described as a mere nature god, presiding in anthropomorphic form over air and water. But, again, the god—even at times the same god that was

just now so much a man—becomes nothing less than the Supreme Being, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent—and that within which the visible world is contained.<sup>6</sup>

Max Müller coined the word 'henotheism' for this elevation of one god after another to become the one supreme God who creates and sustains the universe. According to the Vedas, however, even this one God is not the ultimate divine reality. In the words of Swami Satprakashananda:

... the deities mentioned in the Vedas ... were neither supernatural beings nor deified forces and phenomena of nature, but different manifestations of Nondual Brahman, 'the One without a second'. Indeed, the prevailing note of the Samhitā part is not polytheism, henotheism, or even monotheism, but absolute monism or nondualism.<sup>7</sup>

The mythology of the Samhitās embodies the concepts presented in the philosophical portion of the Vedas, the Upaniṣads. The highest, most comprehensive, truth set forth in the Upaniṣads is nondual. But Vedāntic sages recognize that gradations of philosophical truth are inevitable because Brahman, the absolute, nondual Reality is only partially revealed to the vast majority of us. In Swami Prabhavananda's eloquent words, the experience of Brahman is 'so utterly impersonal, so devoid of anything describable in human terms, as to be suited only to the greatest saints, and to those only in their most strenuous moments'.<sup>8</sup> We see Brahman through a sort of spiritual fog. At first our perception is very vague, but our vision gradually becomes clearer as the fog dissipates. Brahman is always the same; it is our perception that varies. Since this nondual ultimate Reality, of course, admits no other, all that we experience in the

4. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 12.

5. Swami Prabhavananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962), pp. 34-35.

6. Ibid., p. 31.

7. Swami Satprakashananda, *Swami Vivekananda's Contribution to the Present Age* (St. Louis: The Vedanta Society, 1978), p. 212.

8. *Spiritual Heritage*, p. 35.

apparently finite universe must be Brahman imperfectly understood. We first see Brahman, the all-inclusive reality, not as spirit but as matter. When our vision clears a little, we see Brahman as an external personal deity; then, with greater clarity, as the all-pervasive personal God in whom we live, move, and have our being; and, finally, we know Brahman as undifferentiated divine existence, consciousness, and bliss. We then know that the true Self, the Ātman, is one with this absolute spirit, Brahman. Brahman is divine, so we are divine.

In worship, as in nondual absorption, the divine is experienced as blissful consciousness, which is much fuller and more intense than our ordinary consciousness. On the spiritual level of mythology, characters such as Rāma and Sītā embody this consciousness in exemplary lives to give us an idea of our own unrealized divinity.

Humanity has projected its own nature, both human and divine, into myths. When the gods are conceived of as having ordinary human weaknesses, it is because we have attributed our weaknesses to them. And when the gods display saintliness and wisdom, it is because these qualities also are part of our nature. The myth of the great god Śiva is an example of both human and divine projection. In the *Atharva-Veda*, Śiva (there known as Rudra) is 'dark, black, destroying, terrible'; he is the fierce god who is implored 'not to assail mankind with consumption, poison or celestial fire'.<sup>9</sup> But in the Upaniṣads, Śiva proclaims his own divinity as follows: 'I alone was before (all things), and I exist and I shall be. No other transcends me. I am eternal and not eternal, discernible and undiscernible, I am Brahma and I am not Brahma.'<sup>10</sup> To

the advanced saint, Śiva even personifies the absolute Brahman. He is also the compassionate one who drank the poison which threatened to destroy the world and who broke the fall of the Ganges on his matted locks so that it would not devastate the land with its raging current.

We make our own gods. When they are divine, it is because there is divinity within us, their creators. In an exquisite passage, George Santayana says that our personal conceptions of Jesus and the Virgin Mary come from within us, not from history, although it is perfectly possible that the historical Jesus and the historical Mary were as we imagine them.

The Christ men have loved and adored is an ideal of their own hearts, the construction of an ever-present personality, living and intimately understood, 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>11</sup>

A Vedantist would say that the Christ spirit within countless Christians has been projected into the Christ men have loved and adored. Santayana continues:

The Virgin Mary, whose legend is so meagre, but whose power over the Catholic imagination is so great, is an even clearer illustration of this inward building up of an ideal form. Everything is here spontaneous sympathetic expansion of two given events: the incarnation and the crucifixion. The figure of the Virgin, found in these mighty scenes, is gradually clarified and developed, until we come to the thought on the one hand of her freedom from original sin, and on the other to that of her universal maternity. We thus attain the conception of one of the noblest of conceivable roles and of one of the most beautiful of characters.<sup>12</sup>

9. John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 296.

10. Ibid., pp. 296-97.

11. George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), p. 116.

12. Ibid., pp. 116-17.



Myths are not confined to completely fictitious characters. They also grow up around actual historical persons like Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the Buddha, making it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. Was Jesus really born in a manger? Did angels sing and the star of Bethlehem appear in the sky on the night of his birth? Was Mary actually a virgin then? She may indeed have been, but, like Jesus, Kṛṣṇa and the Buddha are said to have been conceived without human fathers. Their mothers, too, are supposed to have learned of the coming divine births through supernatural annunciations. Several centuries before Jesus' birth Kṛṣṇa was taken away and hidden from a wicked king, who sought to kill him for fear of losing his life and his throne. In Kṛṣṇa's case, as in Jesus', the cruel king is reported to have slain many innocent children in the hope that the divine child would be among the victims. Can it be that the same myths and fragments of myths became attached to Jesus, Kṛṣṇa, and the Buddha?

Although, as far as we know, the Kṛṣṇa of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* was not a historical personality, he had all the characteristics usually attributed to divine incarnations. Perfect from birth, he came into the world not to satisfy personal cravings but for the good of humanity. He wanted to help mankind end its suffering and attain pure bliss in the Ātman. Unlike ordinary people, he was always fully aware of his divine identity; he even appeared in his cosmic form to the frightened Arjuna. Such a figure is too great spiritually, too transcendent, to be the product of even our finest projections. It would be impossible to imagine a Kṛṣṇa without knowing a Kṛṣṇa. Only a divine incarnation could have furnished the model for the Kṛṣṇa of the *Gītā*, so one must have existed approximately when the *Gītā* was composed. The incarnation's name and exact dates are, therefore, not needed to prove his historicity.

And who knows? Perhaps the historical divine incarnation's personal identity actually was that of the Kṛṣṇa of the *Gītā*.

The other Kṛṣṇas: Kṛṣṇa the king, the darling baby Kṛṣṇa, and Kṛṣṇa the enchanting cowherd boy, may all have been figures in legends which attached themselves to the divine incarnation of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Kṛṣṇa, the cowherd boy who steals the hearts of his devotees with his captivating smile and flute, may not have danced in the meadows of Vrindaban. But that does not matter to his devotees. They say that Kṛṣṇa did not need to dance in Vrindaban, for he will always dance in their hearts.

Mythological characters like Kṛṣṇa, Rāma, and Śiva have brought multitudes of Indian devotees closer to God. Because it is impossible to imagine spirit in the abstract, personifications like these are important aids in people's spiritual lives, as are images and symbols of various sorts. As Swami Vivekananda says:

All of you have been taught to think of an omnipresent God. Try to think of it. How few of you can have any idea of what omnipresence means! If you struggle hard, you will get something like the idea of the ocean, or of the sky, or of a vast stretch of green earth, or of a desert. All these are material images, and so long as you cannot conceive of the abstract *as* abstract, of the ideal *as* the ideal, you will have to resort to these forms, to these material images.<sup>13</sup>

Devotees throughout the world create images of the historical and mythological divine incarnations, saints, and deities in whom they feel a holy presence. They do this for much the same reason that a lover keeps his sweetheart's photograph on the desk before him. The picture is a reminder of the beloved person, not, of course, the actual person. Indian devotees neither think of stone images as the actual personalities whom the images represent, nor do they

13. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1968), vol. 2, p. 40.



worship the images as stone. As Swami Vivekananda explains, such worship would be contrary to human nature:

Is there any God? Is there anyone to be loved, any such one capable of being loved? Loving the stone would not do much good. We only love that which understands love, that which draws our love. So with worship. Never say... there is a man in this world of ours who worshipped a piece of stone....<sup>14</sup>

The Swami further explains the use of images in India:

The man is before the idol, and he shuts his eyes and tries to think, 'I am He; I have neither life nor death; I have neither father nor mother; I am not bound by time or space; I am Existence infinite, Bliss infinite and Knowledge infinite; I am He, I am He.... I am Existence Absolute, Bliss Absolute; I am He, I am He.' This he repeats and then says, 'O Lord, I cannot conceive Thee in myself; I am a poor Man.'... This poor Hindu sits before that idol and tries to think that he is That, and then says, 'O Lord, I cannot conceive Thee as spirit, so let me conceive Thee in this form'; and then he opens eyes and sees this form, and prostrating he repeats his prayers. And when his prayer is ended, he says, 'O Lord, forgive me for this imperfect worship of Thee.'<sup>15</sup> A curious round stone is the emblem of Viṣṇu, the omnipresent. Each morning a priest comes in, offers sacrifices to the idol, waves incense before it, then puts it to bed and apologizes to God for worshipping Him in that way, because he can only conceive of Him through an image or by means of some material object. He bathes the idol, clothes it, and puts his divine self into the idol 'to make it alive'.<sup>16</sup>

Those who officiate at the dedication of an image in a temple pray that the Lord may come and live in it. Then the devotees who worship there feel that the Lord is present in the image in much the same way that the spirit is present in the body.

Like true devotees all over the world,

the Hindu who kneels before an image worships the one God in spirit and in truth.

When the devotee kneels before the image ardently praying, 'Lord, Lord, reveal thyself to me,' he may feel a holy presence. The one to whom he prays, perhaps Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, or Kālī, may appear to him in a vision and even speak to him. Are such visions the hallucinations of schizophrenics? People who insist that Jesus came and spoke to them frequently end up in mental institutions. Some of the mentally deranged even believe that Jesus commanded them to commit murder. But Jesus would do no such thing, and no true devotee would carry out such an order.

The distinguishing feature of a genuine vision is the elevation of consciousness which accompanies it. Those who have felt a divine presence in legitimate visions manifest it spontaneously in their lives. They are saner and more compassionate after the experience than they were before. The touch of God has a softening effect, and it purifies the heart.

Some sages say that God in His infinite compassion takes the form the devotee loves, that He assumes the form of a Kṛṣṇa, a Kālī, or a Jesus Christ much as water freezes into the different shapes of ice, snow, and hail. Sri Ramakrishna taught that divine incarnations, like blocks of ice floating on the ocean, retain their personal identities for the sake of their devotees instead of disappearing in the undifferentiated Brahman. Perhaps these holy ones as well as living and departed saints can appear to us through some subtle faculty. Our five senses and even our best scientific instruments tell us little of the finer workings of our psyches and of the universe in general. It may be that when the devotee's consciousness rises through prayer and meditation he can experience the presence of the saints and other divine personalities who are always on that level of consciousness. If we climb (or take the elevator) to the

14. Ibid., vol. 6 (1969), p. 51.

15. Ibid., vol. 8 (1964), pp. 210-11.

16. Ibid., vol. 6, p. 25.



penthouse on the roof, we will meet the people who live there.

The essential feature of a vision, however, is not the personality of the holy man or woman who appears to the worshipper. The essential feature is the divine consciousness—the grace—which communicates itself to him.

Visions and related experiences can have various logical interpretations, none of which contradicts the others. We are the Ātman, Brahman-within-the-Creature, but we are not aware of it. The Ātman is much more intense consciousness than our ordinary consciousness, which is a little ray of the Ātman. In other words, we have a spiritual superconsciousness which the little limited ego does not usually experience. But when prayer and meditation become deep and sincere, the devotee's level of consciousness can rise. Then intense spiritual consciousness can penetrate the surface consciousness bringing ecstasy and bliss. A divine presence is felt; a vision is seen or a voice heard. It may be that the devotee's own mind interprets this spiritual presence as that of Jesus, Śiva, the Buddha or any holy person he especially loves. The vision is seen because the area of the mind which is the source of all symbols has been stimulated. Thus, spiritual visions can come from the devotee's higher consciousness. Or they can be produced externally because God in His grace takes the form the devotee loves. Perhaps different visions have different causes. But in a certain sense there is only one cause. There is only one spiritual consciousness, Saccidānanda, absolute Existence, absolute Consciousness, and absolute Bliss. Since there is no spiritual consciousness outside of Brahman, Brahman is the ultimate source of all true visions whatever their immediate cause. The air in our lungs, which becomes part of us, is not different from the air outside. Similarly, the divine within (Brahman-within-the-Creature) is identical with the

divine outside. Since there is only one divine existence, no valid distinction can be made between the divine within and the divine without.

A legitimate vision or other spiritual experience derives its reality from the living spirit which animates it. The vision is real even when the historicity of the divine incarnation, saint, or god who appears in the vision cannot be definitely established. The divine presence experienced by the devotee worshipping before the image of Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, or Rāma is the same divine consciousness, the same holy spirit, which lived in the historical Jesus and Buddha.

Spiritual life deteriorates when we place such emphasis on the body that we forget that the spirit is only temporarily associated with it. In the West we commonly say that we have souls, implying that we are bodies which possess souls. Vedānta puts it the other way, saying that we are spirits inhabiting bodies. The spirit animating Jesus' body gave it worth; even *his* body would have been nothing without the spirit. We burn or bury bodies from which the spirit is gone. When Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me,'<sup>17</sup> the 'I' of which he was speaking was the 'I' to which he referred when he said, 'I and my Father are one.'<sup>18</sup> This 'I', the one divine Existence, also spoke through the Buddha and through Kṛṣṇa. It speaks through Kālī, Śiva, or Rāma to the devotee kneeling before the image. The one infinite spirit, which is the way, the truth and the life, mercifully appears in many forms for the sake of spiritual aspirants with different spiritual ideas. It is not restricted to any one individuality. When Sri Ramakrishna had a vision of Jesus, Jesus walked up to him, entered his body, and disappeared. Although these two supremely great souls may seem

<sup>17</sup>. John 14.6.

<sup>18</sup>. John 10.30.

to have been separate individuals, they were—and are—identical on the only level that really matters, that of the spirit. The poet who wrote the following lines knew his Kṛṣṇa to be pure radiant spirit:

Meditate, O my mind, on the Lord Hari,  
The Stainless One, Pure Spirit through and  
through.  
How peerless is the light that in Him shines!<sup>19</sup>

Although the Lord can appear in many forms, He is not restricted to any of them. He always remains the same.

Idolatry is worshipping the physical, whether it is clay or flesh and blood, instead of the spiritual. It does not necessarily involve image worship or any other specific kind of worship. Even Jesus and the Buddha can become idols if too much emphasis is placed on the bodies associated with them. We make idols of our friends and relations when we love them for personal rather than spiritual reasons.

The complete independence of the divine existence from anything physical is demonstrated by Sri Ramakrishna's experience of the nondual absorption, *nirvikalpa samādhi*. Sri Ramakrishna began worshipping the mother goddess Kālī in her image in the Dakshineswar temple when he went there as a young priest. As time went on, he developed profound love for Kālī, came to feel her presence wherever he was, and saw her in many gracious feminine forms. At the height of this spiritual relationship, he became infused with her blissful consciousness. Although his consciousness was then pervaded with divine consciousness, he retained a slight sense of ego which prevented total absorption. At this critical point in Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual life, the austere nondualist monk Totapuri (Nangta) appeared to help him. Describing the events

that followed Totapuri's arrival, Sri Ramakrishna himself said:

Nangta began to teach me the various conclusions of the Advaita Vedānta and asked me to withdraw the mind completely from all objects and dive deep into the Atman. But in spite of all my attempts I could not altogether cross the realm of name and form and bring my mind to the unconditioned state. I had no difficulty in taking the mind from the objects of the world. But the radiant and too familiar figure of the Blissful Mother, the Embodiment of the essence of Pure Consciousness, appeared before me as a living reality. Her bewitching smile prevented me from passing into the Great Beyond. Again and again I tried, but She stood in my way every time. In despair I said to Nangta: 'It is hopeless. I cannot raise my mind to the unconditioned state and come face to face with Atman.' He grew excited and sharply said: 'What? You can't do it? But you have to.' He cast his eyes around. Finding a piece of glass he took it up and stuck it between my eyebrows. 'Concentrate the mind on this point!' he thundered. Then with stern determination I again sat to meditate. As soon as the gracious form of the Divine Mother appeared before me, I used my discrimination as a sword and with it clove Her in two. The last barrier fell. My spirit at once soared beyond the relative plane and I lost myself in *samādhi*.<sup>20</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna had experienced the divine consciousness in the form of Kālī. But when he severed Kālī with the sword of discrimination, the non-essential form vanished leaving only the spirit, the divine consciousness in which his ego and plurality disappeared.

Without the image of Kālī, Sri Ramakrishna would probably have progressed more slowly toward this ultimate realization. The worship of Kālī in her image concentrated his mind on the divine, making it relatively simple for him to go beyond the goddess herself to the spirit she embodied for him.

The initial experience of nondual absorption was often repeated and became inter-

<sup>19</sup>. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1973), p. 924.

<sup>20</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 29.



spersed with visions of Kālī, Kṛṣṇa, and other holy figures. Knowing from experience that the divine assumes forms, Sri Ramakrishna did not deprive himself of the joy of dualistic worship even after *nirvikalpa samādhi*. In teaching his disciples, he emphasized the fact that God can be worshipped either with form or without form. But since the nondualistic vision is very difficult to attain, he taught that almost everyone should worship God with form. And because he knew that one divine spirit, one God, is worshipped by the devotees of all religions, he effortlessly extended his devotion beyond Hinduism to Islam and Christianity. One day at a friend's house he caught sight of a lovely painting of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus on her lap. Overwhelmed with love for the Christ child, he spontaneously entered into deep meditation and had an ecstatic vision of the divine child's luminous form.

Sri Ramakrishna knew how easily a devotee could be tempted to think that his own spiritual ideal, his Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, or Jesus Christ, is beyond all comparison, and how easily he could then conclude that this ideal is the one source of salvation for all mankind. Such an attitude would naturally lead to bigotry and intolerance of other faiths. But if he were to grow sufficiently in understanding to realize that the followers of other religions also worship the divine spirit he worships, the devotee would be able to appreciate their ideals and forms of worship. Using a little effort, he would be able to transfer his own religious experience to other situations. For instance, the Hindu, in his creative imagination, could transfer his love for the baby Kṛṣṇa to the baby Jesus, not permanently, but long enough to feel kinship with Christians who adore the Christ child.

Because they know that the spirit alone gives life, the Vedāntic sages do not try to convert anyone. And because they realize that conceptions of the divine vary with

spiritual aspirants' backgrounds, they hope there will never be a universal religion with a universal mythology. Sri Ramakrishna, for example, recommended different spiritual practices to aspirants with different personality types and degrees of development. In defence of this undogmatic approach he told the following parable:

God Himself has provided different forms of worship. He who is the Lord of the Universe has arranged all these forms to suit different men in different stages of knowledge. The mother cooks different dishes to suit the stomachs of her different children. Suppose she has five children. If there is a fish to cook, she prepares various dishes from it—pilau, pickled fish, fried fish, and so on—to suit their different tastes and powers of digestion.<sup>21</sup>

Because many stomachs are too weak to digest the pickled fish of abstract thought, myths are used to present Indian cosmology. These myths are projections of actual human experience in spite of the fact that no one could possibly remember the creation. In *nirvikalpa samādhi* the greatest sages experienced the undifferentiated divine Essence, Brahman, as the ultimate Existence. They then realized that all creation has its being within Brahman. So India's great creation myths teach that Brahman is the source, the so-called 'clay', which gives substance to all things. One Upaniṣad compares the universe emanating from Brahman to a spider's web issuing from a spider. According to these myths, periods of involution, in which there is no finite universe, alternate with periods of evolution, in which universes appear, evolve through countless ages, and finally disappear. This alternation of periods of evolution with periods of involution is beginningless and endless.

In one of the favourite Indian creation myths, the spirit of God hovers over the waters prior to creation much as it does in Genesis. At the end of the period of in-

<sup>21</sup>. Ibid., p. 81,

volution, when all is still in the undifferentiated state, Viṣṇu (the spirit of God) is asleep upon the cosmic ocean. That is, he reclines on one of his mounts, the enormous serpent Ananta, who rests upon the cosmic ocean, which it also represents. In spite of the apparent individual differences, Viṣṇu, the snake Ananta, and the cosmic ocean are not separate entities. They are Viṣṇu, who personifies the absolute Existence, in which there are no differences. When creation is about to begin, Viṣṇu puts forth from his navel a lotus of a thousand pure gold petals, stainless and effulgent. Upon this lotus sits Brahmā, the Creator God, who is an emanation from Viṣṇu. Then with Viṣṇu's energy working through him, Brahmā proceeds to create the universe. When creation is finished, Viṣṇu pervades and sustains the universe which evolved from him.

Brahmā, the creator, is one of the strange gods with several heads and arms which some Western novices in Indian mythology have difficulty understanding. Brahmā has four heads, one facing north, one facing south, one facing east, and one facing west, so that he can watch all points of the compass while creating the universe. In his hands he holds his sceptre, or a spoon, or

a string of beads, or his bow, or a water jug, and the Veda. He uses these four arms (which symbolize his power) and his several instruments for his various characteristic activities, which he can carry on simultaneously.

The Śiva liṅgam belongs to a different creation myth. Like Viṣṇu's votaries, Śiva's votaries think of him as the one supreme God. They think of the liṅgam as representing the power by which Śiva creates, preserves, and destroys the universe. They do not think of the liṅgam in terms of a phallic symbol. To Śiva's devotees, it represents the great God in his many aspects, of which creation is only one.

The conscientious study of Indian mythology thus makes clear the error in the snap judgement that the worship of mythological figures conforms to Webster's definition of superstition as 'an irrational abject attitude of mind toward the supernatural, nature or God, proceeding from ignorance, unreasoning fear of the unknown or mysterious, morbid scrupulosity, a belief in magic, or chance, or the like.' Far from being irrational, this worship proceeds with the clearest reasoning. It is not abject. It is inspired by knowledge, not ignorance, and there is absolutely no fear involved in it.

## BRAHMABANDHAV UPADHYAYA AND SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

SWAMI JITATMANANDA

I have no home, no wife, nor children. I roamed from place to place. At last getting tired I thought of establishing a retreat on the banks of the Narmada and spending the rest of my life in meditation in that sequestered vale. But a voice spoke out in the recess of my heart. However much I tried to ignore the voice, with every attempt to forget, it rang up with greater resonance in my heart. What was that voice?—India will be free once again. It is not the time to

meditate in solitude. You have to get yourself involved in the storms of life.<sup>1</sup>

These autobiographical lines give us a glimpse into the struggle between con-

<sup>1</sup>. Yogesh Chandra Bagal, *Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya* (Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishat 1371 B.E.), pp. 67-68.



templation and action which was the essence of Brahmabandhav's life.

That was Brahmabandhav—a spiritual seeker as well as an intrepid fighter, wrestler, soldier; an orthodox Hindu Brahmin as well as an iconoclastic Brahmo and Christian neophyte; an austere, all-renouncing monk and a fiery freedom-fighter; an Indian Christian preaching Christianity in India as well as a Hindu Catholic preaching Advaita Vedānta in England. In short, his life was a bundle of paradoxes and dichotomies, at the base of which was always a basic integrity of character and a wonderful openness of mind ever ready to absorb whatever was great and good. It was this resilience and dynamism to move undaunted in quest of truth that brought him eventually to Ramakrishna-Vivekananda and made him one of the great forces of nascent Bengal after Vivekananda.

Behind this restless drifting of Brahmabandhav was the *Zeitgeist* of the age. Mid nineteenth-century Bengal was the worst of times and the best of times. The lure of the West and the neo-English education after Macaulay had drawn brilliant intellects like Michael Madhusudan, Reverend Krishna Mohan Banerji and others who, under the direct inspiration of Derozio, not only became Christians but paraded the Calcutta streets with Christian slogans and in the height of their neophytic anti-Hindu drive threw beef into the orthodox brahmins' houses as an expression of their emancipation from old superstitions.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand Debendra Nath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen and others under the leadership of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, started a crusade against this arrogant Westernization of Hindu intellectuals, by reforming Hinduism in the new garb of Brahmo religion. It was Keshab who, in fact, led

young intellectuals like Narendra (later Swami Vivekananda), Bhavani (later Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya) and others towards the God-intoxicated priest of Dakshineswar. At this period Bhavani met Ramakrishna a number of times at Dakshineswar. He was also quite intimate with Narendra during those days. But he was following a different path. While Bhavani was adhering to Keshab's and Pratap Chandra Mazoomdar's reformation-oriented religion, Narendra was desperately searching for God under the guidance of Ramakrishna. While Bhavani was confirming his allegiance to Brahmo monotheism, Narendra was realizing the highest truths of Advaita Vedānta at the galvanizing touch of Ramakrishna. While Bhavani was drifting from one religion to another during the 1880s and 1890s, Narendra was roaming barefooted across the Indian subcontinent realizing the tragedy and glory of the Great Mother, India, and sailing to the West in order to burst upon it with the light and glory of the East.

Bhavani Charan Bandyopadhyaya was born in 1861 in the Hooghly district of Bengal, in an orthodox brahmin family full of the traditional Hindu culture of Bengal. His early school education was at Hooghly and Chinsura. By the age of thirteen when he had the sacred thread ceremony, Bhavani had already read the *Rāmāyaṇa* thirteen times and *Mahābhārata* seven times. An unusually brilliant boy, Bhavani would sail across the Ganga every afternoon after school hours to Bhatpara, the famous seat of Sanskrit learning in Bengal, in order to learn the language. Side by side with learning, Bhavani built up a robust and stony physique and acquired proficiency in swimming, wrestling, gymnastics, football and cricket. Over and above all, Bhavani had a strong urge to become a soldier. To achieve this end he fled thrice from his home before the age of seventeen. Once when some Armenian and English youths were insulting

2. Kumud Bandhu Sen, *Girishchandra* (Calcutta: General Printers and Publishers, 1363 B.E.), p. 28.



the Hindu women having their bath in the Ganga, Bhavani with his followers attacked and injured some of them. Fortunately he was saved from police action.

His college days began in the Metropolitan College of Calcutta. Already young Bhavani had fled once to Etawah in U.P. with his two friends in order to be a soldier and to drive out the foreigners. Bengal, especially Calcutta, was warming up with nationalistic feelings. The fiery patriotic speeches of S. N. Banerjee inflamed Bhavani's innate patriotism. He visited Ananda Mohan Basu, another nationalist leader, and confided to him his desire to join the struggle for Independence. The volcanic spirit in him drove him once again to Gwalior for a soldier's life. But he had to come back. Life slowly took a different course and the aspiration for a soldier's life drove him, perhaps without his knowing it, to the Brahmo fold from where Bhavani was to begin the great peregrination of his life.

During his college days at Calcutta Bhavani became a class friend of Narendra with whom he spent days in youthful activities. His spiritual tendencies led him to Ramakrishna. In the dress of a wrestler with only a loin cloth tied round his waist, Bhavani one day walked all the way to Dakshineswar. When Ramakrishna saw him, he exclaimed, 'Ah, I see you are a hero.' Hero, indeed, he later became in the Bengal of early twentieth century. Ramakrishna also gave him a 'God-appointed mission', as he loved to think in his last days. To his boyhood friend Gour Govinda Gupta, Brahmabandhav confided that one day Ramakrishna had told him, 'You play my horse, and I will ride on you.' Ramakrishna, in ecstasy, rode on young Bhavani.<sup>3</sup> Brahmabandhav often thought, though with a sense of tragedy and failure, that Rama-

krishna wanted him to be a carrier of his message, to which he failed to respond in the early years of life.

Failing to respond to Ramakrishna's call, Bhavani soon drifted on the stormy ocean of life, sometimes aimlessly as a rudderless ship. He became a staunch follower of Keshab and Pratap Mazoomdar and joined the Brahmo Samaj which gave an opportunity for the expression of his organizing and literary talents. He joined the youth wing of the Brahmo Samaj known as the 'Band of Hope' and became its secretary. In the bracing company of young Brahmo intellectuals Bhavani soon established two youth organisations: 'Eagle's Nest' and 'Concord'. Hirananda, the Sindh youth, who came into contact with Sri Ramakrishna, became a member of the Eagle's Nest. In 1886 the Concord Club was established under the chief patronage of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, and William Wilson Hunter became the Secretary. Many Indian and European wits of contemporary Calcutta were members of the club. Its chief activities were physical training, sports, music and oratory, and discussions on history, philosophy and economics. From the same club was published a journal named *Concord*. Bhavani's uncle Rev. Kalicharan Banerji became its editor. The club was abolished by the end of 1887. It was during this *Concord* period, nearly six months after Ramakrishna's passing away, that Bhavani was formally initiated into Brahmo religion by Gour Govinda Roy in January 1887.

In 1888 Bhavani started for Sindh. His aim was to preach Brahmo religion. In October 1888 when Hirananda established his school, the Union Academy, Bhavani became the teacher of Sanskrit and leader of extra-curricular activities. At this period Bhavani's father fell ill in Multan. Bhavani rushed to nurse him. There Bhavani's innate love for Christ was suddenly inflamed after reading Bruno's *Catholic Faith*. His devotion to Christ had already been deeply

<sup>3</sup> Manoranjan Guha, *Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya* (Burdwan: Siksha Niketan, 1383 B.E.), p. 28.



ingrained when he earlier had attended Keshab's classes on the Bible. Slowly his mind turned towards monastic life. He was already considered saintly because of his pure and austere life. In search of a God-centred life Bhavani began to frequent Sikh Gurudvaras and even the mosque of Shah Abdul Latif in Sindh where he began to learn Muslim songs and incantations. Gradually his mind began to dwell on the co-eternal existence of the Father and the Son in Jesus, his crucifixion for the sake of love and his resurrection for the redemption of mankind. This rising adoration of Christ began to be expressed in his words and actions. His powerful personality made a deep impact on the minds of young students of the orthodox Hindu areas in Sindh. Guardians of the school became alarmed. Bhavani resigned from the school in 1890. A schism between belief and action was impossible for as daringly outspoken and downright honest a soul as Bhavani's. Hirananda tried to dissuade him, his brother Hari Charan wrote him from Calcutta not to take the next inevitable step. But all was in vain.

On 26 February 1891 Bhavani got baptized into Christianity by the Protestant minister Rev. Hitton at Hyderabad. But Bhavani's catamaran was yet to find a shore in the choppy sea. Although a Protestant, he avoided Anglicanism lest his love of Christ should get identified with the Caesar-worship of the English rulers of India. Born and brought up in liberal Hindu and Brahmo societies, Bhavani soon felt the smothering limitations of a Protestant Christianity. The next step was obvious. After six months, in September 1891, Bhavani was baptized into the Catholic faith in Karachi by the Jesuit father Theophilus Perig. In his irrepressible Hindu way of thinking Bhavani justified this shifting to Catholicism by explaining that it was a 'Kasthalic Dharma' or a universal religion for all times and places. 'Kasthalic' was Bhavani's own

Sanskrit coinage. The Hindu mind and the Indian emotion behind the man did not die despite his new cloak of an alien religious denomination. On the night of his conversion to Catholicism when census men asked him about his religion, Bhavani answered, 'Write down my name as an Indian Catholic.'

He also realized that he must accept the monastic life, as it was the monk who was the keeper and custodian of religion in India. True to his conviction, in December 1894 he took monastic vows and renamed himself Brahmabandhu ('lover of God') which was subsequently changed to Brahmabandhav. His original brahmin title Bandyopadhyaya too was retained in a different form—Upadhyaya.

Within three years Brahmabandhav emerged as an ardent preacher of Catholic Christianity in India. His follower Reva Chand had already followed the leader into the Christian fold. In January Brahmabandhav started publishing *Sophia* ('wisdom'), the monthly journal for propagating Christianity and counteracting anti-Christian forces in India. *Sophia*, as we will soon see, was associated with one of the stormy chapters in his life. Like the others of his class Brahmabandhav also began with the belief that Christianity represented what was best and acceptable in Hinduism and that this was the panacea for all the evils India had been ignorantly indulging in for centuries. But he had another distinct voice of his own. He believed, as opposed to other Christian preachers, that it was only with all the customs, rules and traditions of Hindu India that Christianity could be firmly founded in the native soil. Brahmabandhav wanted his Christ to be installed in Benares. 'We are Hindu Catholics,' the announcement came in *Sophia* (July 1897). In the May 1898 number of *Sophia* he announced his plan of founding a Catholic monastery in India. Soon he plunged into action. With his lone follower Reva Chand, now known as Swami Amalananda, Brahma-



bandhav founded the 'Kasthalic Math' near Jabalpur on the banks of the Narmada. One more novice came.

But his Hindu brand of Christianity was courting displeasure from the Catholic superiors in India. Already in 1896 Brahmabandhav stirred Madras with his anti-Advaita speeches. In 1897 he created a furore in Bombay. The *Madras Mail* of 23 March 1896 and the *Bombay Catholic Examiner* of 17 April 1897 flashed these two events. But more than his speech, it was his strange appearance as a Hindu monk, shaven-headed, barefooted, and with a flaming turban, preaching Christian philosophy in fluent Sanskrit and English that attracted the people. The writer in *Madras Mail* wondered that such a Father de Nobili was available those days among the Christian missionaries in India.<sup>4</sup> Brahmabandhav's integrated spiritual life, his austerity and his stupendous sincerity brought awful reverence from his people and equally awful jealousy from his incompetent superiors. Naturally when *Sophia* announced the idea of a Hindu type of Christian monastery on the Narmada, Father Jaleski, the 'Delegate Apostolic', the chief Catholic authority in India, gave him resistance. Brahmabandhav thought of going to the Pope to get approval for his Math. But a sudden illness prevented him and the Math was given up.<sup>5</sup>

The wheel of Brahmabandhav's life was moving faster. His innate asceticism and his undoubtable sincerity as a monk was driving him to a life which he himself could not envisage at this stage.

In the meanwhile, right from the middle of 1894, Brahmabandhav's life was a combination of a tempest and seething cauldron. He was at war against the new force of

Hindu revivalism ushered in by his boyhood friend Vivekananda only a year before in the Chicago Parliament of Religions. He decried the archaic systems of the Arya Samaj and the mystical-theosophical cult of Annie Besant. Even the Brahmo Samaj, the haven of his youth, was not spared. In the June issue of *Sophia* (1894) he mercilessly indicted the Brahmo Samaj for installing Christ above the gods and goddesses of Hinduism which the Samajists were trying to reform. This, he opined, was the worst affront on Hinduism. Brahmos worked like renegades and they must accept the inevitable penalty of history—either self-surrender or self-annihilation.<sup>6</sup> It is a pity that the same verdict was to bounce back upon his own life only a few years later.

By the June of 1894 the news of Vivekananda's stupendous success was pouring in through Indian newspapers. A Calcutta reception was going to be held in honour of this success. A sudden conflagration of hope and rebirth was felt in moribund India. The tide of Hindu Revivalism was in high flood. The Hindu Vivekananda riding the chariot of Advaita was opening the gates for a larger rejuvenation of Indian life. Christian missionaries raised a furore in the United States against Vivekananda and Advaita which threatened to sweep them off from their shop-keeping Christianity of original sin and priestly redemption. Missionaries in India obviously got more scared than their American counterparts. The impetuously neo-Christian Brahmabandhav dragged himself into the fray. In an article on 'Hindu Revivalism' (*Sophia*, June 1894) he indirectly criticised Vivekananda by telling that the man who extols his country above truth is a conspirator against God. In *Sophia* of August 1895, Brahmabandhav categorically announced that the primary aim of Catholic mission-

4. Sankari Prasad Basu, *Vivekananda O Samakalin Bharatvarsha*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Mondal Book House, 1977), p. 340.

5. Guha *Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya*, p. 27.

6. *Vivekananda O Bharatvarsha*, vol. 1, p. 223.



aries in India was to drive out Advaita from the country, as it inspired a kind of salvation in complete annihilation of ego which was like a death to human life.

In the August 1896 issue Brahmasbandhav criticized the character of Kṛṣṇa for his immoral behaviour with the Gopīs in Vrindaban. In the October issue of 1896, the *Sophia* editorial made a caricature of Advaita in practical life. Advaita encouraged all sinners and evil-doers, the editorial alleged, for a freeplay of all their evil propensities. It taught the scoundrel to remain complacent with his inner divinity in spite of his heinous crimes. In the Advaita system eleven cricketer-gods would play against another eleven cricketer-gods without the least need of an umpire god. A drunkard-god would live in perfect harmony with another without any need of a police-god. Brahmasbandhav wondered if Indians had become stark mad before accepting such a dangerously impractical doctrine. The only way for India was to scatter abroad, Brahmasbandhav asserted, the ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas and other Catholic philosophers.

In the March 1897 issue of *Sophia* Brahmasbandhav raised his voice directly against the tumultuous ovation that Vivekananda had received. The attacks continued. Soon (in the June 1897 issue) he attacked *Prabuddha Bharata* and in the July and September issues of *Sophia* he attacked *Brahmavadin* for their propagation of Advaita. In September *Sophia* published an article by one Gopal Chandra Sastri, entitled *Can Hinduism Be a Universal Religion?*, which expatiated that Buddha and Mahāvīr, Rāmānuja and Vallabha, all had rejected the earlier religions of their motherland and preached new doctrines. If the 'national religion' is beautiful, then the 'rational religion' (anti-Advaita Christianity) is certainly great. In the very next number of *Sophia* (October) he protested against characterizing Rama-

krishna as an incarnation of God. He criticized Ramchandra Dutta and Vivekananda who 'most hypocritically extolled Ramakrishna as an incarnation.' Ramakrishna was certainly a great soul, Brahmasbandhav reminisced, and he had a deep sense of sin and once had sternly rebuked a devotee named Kedarnath who had called him 'God'.<sup>7</sup>

But mere writing in *Sophia* was not enough for Brahmasbandhav. From the beginning of 1895 he, in fact, chased Annie Besant and lectured against her ideas whenever and wherever she would preach theosophy. In 1897 he even paraded the streets of Calcutta with his saffron clad Christian monastic followers, and chanted the name of Christ in the typical Kirtan fashion to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals.<sup>8</sup>

The Christianizing power over his essentially Hindu mind was, however, reaching its limit. The moment of reversal came surprisingly in the July 1898 issue of *Sophia*. Brahmasbandhav's admirers heard in disbelief a distinctly Hindu note in his Christian chorus:

By birth we are Hindus and shall remain Hindu till death ... Our thought and thinking is emphatically Hindu... It is extremely difficult for us to learn how to think like the Greeks of old or the scholastics of the Middle Ages. Our brains are moulded in the philosophic cast of our ancient country.

We are, proud of the stability of the Hindu race. Many a mighty race did rise and fall, But we continue to exist... We are Hindu Catholics.

The explosion in *Sophia* was enough to raise the ire of the Western missionaries. Increasing Hinduization of the paper almost ensured its rejection in the missionary circles. After eight more issues *Sophia* stopped publication, that is after March 1899. Brahmasbandhav's life in Sindh ended

7. Ibid., pp. 341-47.

8. Bagal, *Brahmasbandhav Upadhyaya*, p. 19.

after the closure of the periodical. In early 1900 he shifted to Calcutta and again revived *Sophia* as a weekly journal. After thirteen issues, Jaleski, the Delegate Apostolic in India, banned its use among Catholics in India. Brahmabandhav desperately appealed to the higher Catholic hierarchy, but in vain. The primary reason behind the indictment against *Sophia* was, however, not its increasing Hindu flavour but its rising note of nationalism. *Sophia's* political commentaries on the Boer War in South Africa and the Boxer Rebellion in China were not palatable to the preachers of King's religion in India. Above all, *Sophia's* criticisms of Christian missionaries in China acted like tinder to the fire. Jaleski at once sent a circular among the Catholics to cut off all connections with *Sophia*.<sup>9</sup> Brahmabandhav, with his conscience clear, found himself a lonely Christian on Indian soil. He stood confounded like the latter-day Greek who was persecuted by the medieval Christians for having uttered, 'There must be many ways to so great a mystery as this.'

At this crucial moment Brahmabandhav suddenly turned to his much-maligned friend Vivekananda. One day he came to Belur Math in order to meet Vivekananda. Here is a reminiscence of the occasion by Dr. Bhupen Datta, Swamiji's own younger brother :

One day a feast was arranged for the devotees at the Math. I too was invited there. Suddenly we saw Upadhyaya coming to the Math by boat. Swamiji at once came down to the landing ghat and asked Upadhyaya, 'Is it true that they have excommunicated you?' Upadhyaya said, 'Yes.' Then both of them discussed together for one hour inside a room. Upadhyaya partook of the *kichudi* served in the feast.... They [some Brahmo leaders] came to invite Swamiji to speak on the death anniversary of Ram Mohan. Swamiji could not be present on the occasion although he had agreed to go there. Upadhyaya

was also present on the occasion. He told me [later]: A huge crowd assembled at the name of Vivekananda.... Upadhyaya returned to Calcutta the same afternoon in the same boat with us<sup>10</sup>

Contact with Vivekananda deepened and Brahmabandhav, perhaps without his knowing it, was getting inflamed by the fire in his friend. Then came another meeting with Vivekananda. He wrote:

Once again I came across Vivekananda by the side of Hedua Park in Calcutta. I said to him, 'Brother, why are you keeping silent? Come, raise a stir of Vedanta in Calcutta. I will make all arrangements. You just come and appear before the public.' Vivekananda's voice grew heavy with pathos. He said, 'Brother Bhavani, I will not live long (it was just six months before his death). I am busy now with the construction of my Math, and making arrangements for its proper upkeep. I have no leisure now.' At the pathetic earnestness of his words I understood that day that his heart was tormented with a passion and pain. Passion for whom? Pain for whom? Passion for the country, pain for the country. The knowledge and culture of the Aryans were being destroyed and crushed. What was gross and un-Aryan was deflating what was finer and Aryan. And yet there is no response, no pain in your heart?—this [callous indifference of his countrymen] evoked a painful response in Vivekananda's heart. The response was so deep that it struck at the root of the conscience of America and Europe. I think of that pain and passion in Vivekananda, and ask, who is Vivekananda? Is it ever possible that passion for the motherland becomes embodied? If it is, then only one can understand Vivekananda.

As years rolled on, Brahmabandhav gradually realized with wonder what a great transformation his friend had already brought in his own life. Hemchandra Ghosh, the 'Supreme Commander' of the famous 'Bengal Volunteers' who met both Vivekananda and Brahmabandhav, narrates his reminiscences of the latter:

9. Guha. *Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya*, p. 29.

10. Balai Deb Sharma, *Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya*, Introduction, p. 13.



I have seen leaders like Brahmabandhav who felt glorified to introduce themselves as the products of Swamiji's influence. Brahmabandhav told us in 1906 (nearly one year before his death): 'It was Vivekananda who opened my eyes. Although he was my friend and classmate, and we were of the same age, I feel proud to consider him as my "Guru", as the awakener of my consciousness.... This Brahmabandhav is the creation of Vivekananda.'<sup>11</sup>

The most significant moment in Brahmabandhav's life burst upon him like a revelation on July 5, 1902. Brahmabandhav wrote:

For a few days I went on a trip to Bolpur. On my return as I stepped down at the Howrah Station, someone said, 'Swami Vivekananda passed away yesterday.' At once an acute pain, sharp like a razor—not the least exaggerated—thrust into my heart. When the intensity of the pain subsided, I wondered, 'How will Vivekananda's work go on? He has, of course, well-trained and educated brother-disciples. Why, they will do his work!' Yet an inspiration flickered in me: 'You give your best with whatever you possess by trying to translate into action Vivekananda's dream of conquest of the West.' That very moment I vowed I would sail to England. So long I never even dreamt of visiting England. But on that day at the Howrah Station I decided I must go to England and establish Vedānta there.

Shortly afterwards, Brahmabandhav sailed with a sum of only twenty-seven rupees and a monk's saffron robe to England. Unknown and inexperienced, initially he suffered from acute poverty and even thought of taking refuge in the work-house in London which sheltered penniless vagabonds. Fortunately Cardinal Vaughan came to his help. And then he lectured in Oxford and Cambridge on Hindu Vedānta. After seven lectures were over scholars from both the universities met and offered a chair for teaching Vedānta in Oxford by any competent Hindu scholar. Brahmabandhav returned trium-

phantly, but despite his repeated effort could not arrange to send any scholar for the continuity of this cultural invasion.

After the England trip Brahmabandhav's feeling grew deeper. He wrote:

Then I understood who Vivekananda is. He whose inspiration can drive a humble person like me across the seas, is not, really, an ordinary man.... It was all like a dream that such a great work was accomplished by me. All these were miracles brought about by the inspiration and power of Vivekananda behind me—this is what I believe. That is why sometimes I think, who is Vivekananda?

No one could yet fully realize who Vivekananda was. The cosmic power that worked through his eternally-pure and magnificent body and mind was beyond the comprehension of common minds. 'That amazing size of him,' wrote Josephine Macleod, 'no one could ever touch his sides, top or bottom.' Vivekananda engulfed Brahmabandhav. All the previous antagonisms were forgotten. He looked up with a reverential love and affection for his once-rejected friend:

Swamiji! I was your friend in youth. How much of merry-making I have enjoyed with you! With you I went on picnics and spent hours in talks and conversations. But then I never knew that there was a lion's strength in your soul, a volcanic love for India in your heart. Today with all my humble strength I have come to follow your way.... In the midst of this fierce struggle, whenever I get torn and tossed, whenever despondency comes and covers my heart, I look up to the great ideal you set forth, I recollect your leonine strength, meditate on the unplumbed depths of your passion—then all at once my weariness withers away. A divine glow and a divine strength comes from somewhere and fulfils my mind and heart.

Vivekananda led him to Ramakrishna. The same Brahmabandhav who ignored Ramakrishna in his youth and rejected his divinity as an incarnation, now unequivocally announced the transcendence, manifested

11. Reminiscences of Hemchandra Ghosh. from the private collection of Br. Sankar,

divinity, and the epoch-making power that Ramakrishna was to his transformed consciousness. Brahmabandhav did not fight shy to speak out his new revelations, just as he had not spared him earlier. There was never any schism between his heart and his lips. In one of the most powerful reminiscences on Ramakrishna, Brahmabandhav revealed the unique variety and Incarnation-power of Ramakrishna. He found in Ramakrishna the saving power in this iron age, that once appeared as Kṛṣṇa:

Today, he whom we know as Ramakrishna is the great promise of the new age.... He came to manifest in his own life the ancient ideals of life, the knowledge and the erudition of the Hindus, and made them dynamic.... That is why your Vedānta hoisted its flag in America, your scriptures have been glorified in England.

The reminiscence is a series of raptures in which Brahmabandhav describes in most sublime words Ramakrishna's immaculate purity, his constant absorption in God, his unprecedented experiment with religion, his excellence in devotion, and above all his historic role as saviour of a decadent India. Keshab and Ram Mohan failed to bring the fruit 'as they had no basis in the direct realization of God.' 'Bhagavan Ramakrishna', Brahmabandhav announced, 'was born to resist the annihilation of Indian society in these moments of revolution.'

With tears in his eyes Brahmabandhav remembered the unforgettable moments of Ramakrishna's love:

This wretched soul was intimately related to the God-man.... Do not boast of your relation with anyone. A worm is a worm even though it lives in the hairs of a queen.... I have been blessed by his holy company. He placed his blessed feet on this sinful body of mine. He loved this unfortunate soul by placing his holy fingers on my cheeks.

The post-Vivekananda period of Brahmabandhav's life was a scene of the return of the native to his once-rejected home. After

moving like a whirligig in an alien world of faiths and allegiances he finally moved with irresistible power to his life's goal—the motherland. The five more years that Brahmabandhav lived after Vivekananda was a veritable hurricane of nationalistic thoughts, ideas and actions. From December 16, 1904, he started the publication of the *Sandhya*, the most conflagratory daily of his times. Brahmabandhav's pen rang notes of passion, satire, tragedy and love that inflamed the sleeping conscience of an enslaved race. Its language was simple, colloquial and sometimes full of rustic virility. Like a messiah he spoke not only to the gentility but also to the commoners and plebians with whom he felt a strange proximity of soul. *Sandhya* became the chief attraction of Bengal twilights, and was at the root of the nationalist movement of Bengal in 1905. Prabodh Chandra Sinha, Brahmabandhav's onetime comrade and biographer, wrote:

*Sandhya's* appeal was primarily to commoners. Its colloquial dialect, its whims and humour created a stir in the shopkeepers, buyers, clerks, school teachers and the students, coolies of the Bengal street. Everyone would weep, laugh and sometimes get inflamed with terrible anger against an alien government. Everyone would wait eagerly for *Sandhya* to reach their doors.<sup>12</sup>

The Bengal public saw in Brahmabandhav's fiery personality a remnant of his departed prophet-friend Vivekananda. Prof. Benoy Sarkar, an eminent intellect of those days, wrote afterwards of his first meeting with Brahmabandhav:

I saw him for the first time: a man in saffron-ochre, barefooted, dressed in the style of a monk. He wore no shirt, but only a saffron skirt. A new world opened to me through this figure. Until then I saw none of Vivekananda's monks. It was Brahmabandhav who was the first modern Bengali monk in my experience.... A

12. Prabodh Chandra Sinha, *Upadhyaya Brahmabandhav*, pp. 84-85.



person worth imitating. His walk and look only showed that he was caring a fig for the world.

An inborn monk, Brahmabandhav was temperamentally austere and pure. Once when travelling overnight in a train he threw away his pocket watch feeling that it was, although a necessity, a burden on a monk's life. In England, even after acquiring fame, he refused to lecture on ticket from the audience. And to this ochre of renunciation was added the flame and fire of Vivekananda's patriotism, that drew to him all the greatest nationalists of his time—Aurobindo, J. C. Bose, C. R. Das, Nivedita and others. A historian of the Bengal revolution remarked afterwards, 'Two flames were kindled from Vivekananda's funeral pyre. One was Sister Nivedita, and the other was Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya. One must view these two flames either separately or together in order to know the entire nationalistic era of Bengal.'<sup>13</sup>

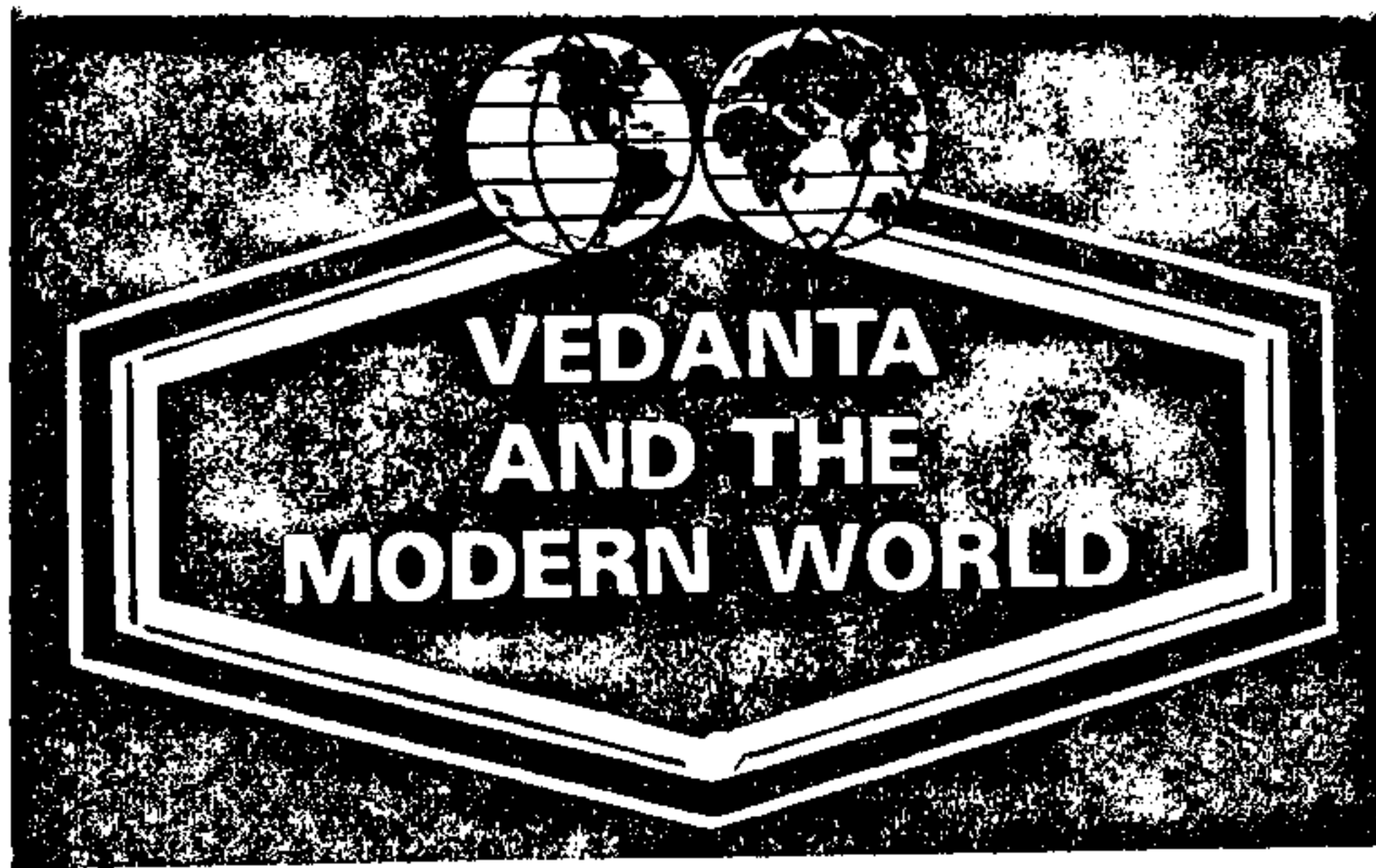
The sky of Bengal was darkening with an ominous fury. Brahmabandhav's *Sandhya* fanned the flames of revolution in Bengal. Although he categorically denounced active insurrection and opined that Bankim's *Ananda Math* was a failure because it gave primacy to social action over spiritual contemplation, the British rulers got scared of *Sandhya's* anti-government satires and subtle propaganda. And when in July 1907 Brahmabandhav formally re-entered the

Hindu fold by observing the necessary formalities at the Kalighat temple, government suspicion against him increased. Anticipating an ominous future Brahmabandhav prayed to the Divine Mother that he might not be condemned to die in an English prison. Soon three anti-government articles (published in *Sandhya*) entitled 'Ekhan Theke Gechi Premier Daye' and others brought an instant reaction from the government. The office of *Sandhya* was ransacked by police and Brahmabandhav and the printer were arrested. On 23 September 1907 Brahmabandhav's trial began. To his lawyer C. R. Das he clearly told, 'Chitta, not a single word of untruth in the court of the foreigners.' He himself gave the statement: '...I do not want to take any part in this trial because I don't believe that in carrying out my humble share of the God-appointed mission of Swaraj I am in any-way accountable to the alien people.'<sup>14</sup>

The long trials made him sick. Brahmabandhav was hospitalized in Campbell Hospital. His illness increased. Brahmabandhav declared, 'The foreigners will put me to prison. Before that I shall throw this worn-out body like a torn shoe and go home to my Mother.' Mother answered the prayer of Her long-lost son. While on bail on 27 October 1907 Brahmabandhav passed away. Ten thousand people followed the hero to the cremation ground, and sang paeans of praise as the tongues of funeral fire leapt heavenward.

13. Girija S. Roychoudhury, *Bhagini Nivedita O Banglái Biplabbad*, p. 68.

14. Bagal, *Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya*, p. 49.



## IS VEDANTA A PHILOSOPHY OF ESCAPE?—XIII

DR. VINITA WANCHOO

(Continued from the February 1981 issue)

### ABSENCE OF ETHICS AND ITS CAUSES (Continued)\*

#### *Absence of ethics and intellectualism*

Another factor in ethics is the sense of moral responsibility in the individual. The critic says that there can be no ethics in Advaita as its intellectualism means neglect of the will. But it is necessary to understand that Vedāntic psychology differs from the modern in emphasizing the subjective elements of mind instead of its motor-active phase.

According to Hindu psychological schools, the greatest expression of mind lies in its total illumination, which is achieved ... by the subjective method of concentration and meditation and consequent total integration. Greatness of mind can be judged not by its ability in action but rather by its integration and unification.<sup>1</sup>

Vedānta does not hold *avidyā* to be mere intellectual error, but an ignorance involving false desire or *kāma*, producing false action or *kama*; similarly, *jñāna* is a 'self-finding' which is not purely intellectual, because it is achieved by renunciation of false desire or by ethical effort. If, as Deussen holds,

the essence of 'morality is transformation of will', then moral regeneration is only possible through true knowledge, as in Vedānta. Truth, however imperfectly grasped, is the only source of good; and ethics and all other perceptions depend on knowledge.

Vedāntic intellectualism is not 'much learning' devoid of practical value, as has been stressed before. But Vedānta does not make the mistake of modern pragmatism in converting the proposition 'all truth works' into the proposition 'all ideas which work are true'. The saving value of Vedāntic gnosis, the truth of that experience, lies in its power to satisfy the complete nature of man. Truth is known by action,<sup>2</sup> not merely by cognition, and both have to be confirmed by feeling or realization. The powerful influence of Vedānta rests on this fact that

Vedāntic speculations had more than a mere textual basis. They were designed to meet the case of the teacher to whom some function or mission was entrusted for the welfare of the world.... Those who had been eminent in knowledge were empowered, even when it was complete, to preserve the sense of individuality, without laying up fresh fruits.<sup>3</sup>

\* In the previous instalment, 'Absence of ethics and pantheistic mysticism' and 'Absence of ethics and loss of individuality in Vedānta' were discussed under this heading.

1. Swami Akhilananda, *Hindu Psychology*, p. 11.

2. In spite of Advaita's doctrinal rejection of karma as *sādhana*, action is an indispensable part of its discipline with reference to *sattva-suddhi*.

3. Estlin Carpenter, *Theism in Medieval India*, p. 341.



*Absence of ethics and the doctrines of karma and punarjanma*

The critics denounce the law of karma as a law implying determination of the present by the past, hence productive of fatalism. But fatalism in the sense of determination by some outside, mysterious, uncontrolled power has no place in Vedānta. It denounces those materialists and atheists who proclaim the rule of chance or accident, and instead postulates self-determination of the individual by the laws of karma and *punarjanma* (rebirth). Though rejecting the conception of a God who despotically fixes the 'fate' or 'lot' of each man, neither does Vedānta suggest an impersonal and mechanical working of a godless universe: it believes that God *does* rule the universe, but not capriciously, being guided by these moral laws which form His nature.

As Vedānta distinguishes the past (*prārabdha*), present (*kriyamāṇa*) and future (*saṁcita*) aspects of karma, it does not wish to ignore the element of determination in human life. But it gives support to morality in the form of self-determination at two levels. At the level of the empirical ego or Jīva, the pattern of his internal and external conditions is made in accordance with his own past karma, and at the level of the transcendental self or Ātman also it is the self alone which remains undetermined by anything (*svarāt*). Vedānta distinguishes *kartā* (agent), *karma* (action) and *phala* (result) in the moral sphere and allows primacy to the *kartā* over the *karma*, and voluntary choice of his own ends by the *kartā* (*abhyudaya* or *mokṣa*). Even when beings are said to be determined by their own nature<sup>4</sup> and a distinction of divine and demoniac<sup>5</sup> natures is made, that is not to be understood as the doctrine of predestination of some to good and others to evil, but as

the operation of an earlier karma producing these differences of nature.

The problem of freedom and necessity in moral life is faced in Vedānta. *Prārabdha karma* appears as destiny, *vidhi* or *daiva*, but is not all-powerful. At the empirical level Vedānta advances the other hypothesis of *puruṣakāra*, which does not displace fate or *prārabdha*, but makes it operate.<sup>6</sup> The theological form of the argument is that unless such freedom of effort be conceded, the injunctions and prohibitions of scripture will be valueless; that is, karma, according to Vedānta, only determines the outlines of the present life (*varṇāśrama*), which is the sphere of continuous action within certain limitations of circumstances and opportunities, allowing full scope to freedom of moral choice and moral activity.

What is most essential to morality is the philosophical conception of the 'bonds of action' or the 'endless consequences of conduct'; ethics demands that every defect and gift should find a positive desert, and some way in which it was earned.<sup>7</sup> The karma doctrine is certainly a necessary product of the theory of retribution. It was satisfying to Vedāntic logic as a principle regulating life in an orderly manner, while having salutary effects on socio-moral life. But the 'legalism' which equates penalties and awards for vices and virtues in an arith-

6. According to the *Vṛmitrodaya*, one theory is that *daiva* alone, another is that *puruṣakāra* alone, and a third theory of the wise is that both together, determine the success or failure of action. The analogy for the third is that rain (*daiva*), cultivation (*puruṣakāra*) and proper season (*kāla*) together give a full harvest. Even in the case of unfavourable destiny heroic, vigorous people never bend before it but by their effort either check it or gain dignity by their undaunted facing of that destiny—

प्रविफलस्तु तेजस्वी न दैवमनुवर्तते ।

न स दैव विपन्नार्थः कदाचिदवसीदति ॥

7. Samuel Johnson, *Oriental Religions*, pp. 110-11.

4. *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 3.33.

5. *Ibid.*, 16.1 ff.



metrical equation, ignoring the higher element of mercy, does not predominate in the karma doctrine. Its origin may have been in the idea of recompense, but the moral sense of Vedānta was strong enough to transform it into the superior conception of reformation. Release depends upon what is done in this mundane life. The sense of moral responsibility is kept alive for the unknown future. Karma effectively connects morality with the goal of life. Also, the balance of circumstances and agent in determining responsibility and the connecting of responsibility with the inner attitude in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, are psychologically correct in developing a sense of responsibility in the individual.

The critic who equates karma with 'fate' or pure determinism by past action, 'as we are so must we act', declares that there is no scope in it for the idea of duty. But the above interpretation explains how Vedānta has been able to reconcile it with duty or dharma, which is the part of the individual's karma to be discharged and worked out in the right spirit (*niṣkāma*). The critic now advances the objection<sup>8</sup> that even if the karma doctrine allows for moral activity, the motive of duty, goodness, and altruism of any type is wholly selfish—practising virtue in order to acquire merit.<sup>9</sup>

It may be noted at the outset that the idea of merit in future is the lowest motive for performance of duties, yet even it purifies the daily round by conveying dimly the idea of the basic unity of life, inter-relatedness of all its members, from which comes

the desire to assist all life towards enlightenment. And theoretically, a reconciliation of duty (*niṣkāma karma*) and the hedonistic or beatific results (*abhyudaya* or *mokṣa*) of virtue is possible along the following lines. Ethical theory distinguishes between the intention and the motive of an act, the former being the knowledge of intermediate steps and results necessary to reach the object of desire and the latter being the desire to obtain that end. The doing of duty may have certain consequences in the future, but that does not prevent its operation as a correct motive of the good act. The critic may not reasonably insist that unless the Vedāntin is ignorant of the results of his acts (in the shape of *abhyudaya* or *mokṣa*) he cannot be said to have been truly moral or to have acted out of a sense of duty.<sup>10</sup> The Vedāntic conception of *niṣkāma karma* may be judged as a true conception of duty for its own sake, even in the context of the laws of karma and *punarjanma*.

The critic declares that the fatalism of the karma and *punarjanma* doctrines has involved Vedānta in the negative problem of deliverance from bondage, or escape. This charge has been examined earlier,<sup>11</sup> and is but one side of the picture, the other being the actual process of deliverance as one of moral effort or righteousness. Certainly the doctrine does not minimize the importance of morality in human life, nor does it dismiss lightly the difficulties of overcoming the world. It is a hypothesis

8. See the instalment in the January 1981 issue, where this objection was discussed from a different angle.

9. For example, Lala Lajpat Rai in *Arya Samaj*, p. 87, argues that an energetic and active life is preferable to passive acquiescence in the decrees of fate, in as much as destiny is the consequence of acts. A life of virtuous activity will secure the soul a good destiny and the opposite will help to store up bad karma.

10. Cf. P. S. Sivaswamy Aiyer, *Evolution of Hindu Moral Ideals*, p. 162: The moral imperative has three elements in it, according to the Nyāya analysis—knowledge of the act's being the means to a desirable end (*isti-sadhanata-jñanam*), knowledge that the act will not be followed by more harm than good (*balavad-nisthananubandhitva-jñanam*), and knowledge of the feasibility of the act (*kṛti-sadhyatā-jñanam*).

11. See the instalment in the September 1980 issue, pp. 388-90.



conducive to the advancement of individual and social life; a powerful incentive to habitual right conduct; for example, there are instances in the epics and poetry where characters raise the question, for what sin am I suffering in this manner, and their conclusion is, I will sin no more.<sup>12</sup>

If the moral and spiritual values of doctrines can be judged by their applicability to the daily life of the people, then there is positive and direct correlation of the doctrines of karma and *punarjanma* with these higher values. Judging by the more external standard of 'survival value' we find that in all periods of social and political revolution these doctrines have not only survived, but

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12. Paul Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads*, p. 314; cf. F. M. Müller, *The Vedānta Philosophy*, p. 87: Whatever we may think of the premises of karma (Deussen calls it a mythical statement of a truth unattainable by intellect), its influence on human character is marvellous. The motive of goodness is given by the thought that suffering is paying off of debts and laying by of moral credit for the future. There can be no doubt that the karma doctrine has met with the widest acceptance and helped to soften the suffering of millions and not only to encourage them in endurance of present evils, but in their efforts for future improvement.

have been turned towards the cause of progress and unity. The alleged fatalism of these doctrines has not prevented Vedānta from meeting any practical crisis. Political and religious movements for defence of faith and culture have not been discouraged or prevented by belief in these doctrines. However, it must be added that these doctrines have been combined with the doctrine of grace. The emphasis of the Upaniṣads and the *Vedānta-Sūtra* is on the doctrine of karma, but the *Bhagavad-Gītā* admits the religious motive, based on the redemptive nature of *kṛpā* (mercy), within the psychological and moral effect of karma. All the Ācāryas hold God to be the supreme Creator and Controller, but not arbitrary in the exercise of His omnipotence; the emphasis of the theists is on salvation by grace, and the influence of the karma doctrine appears in the idea of the *sādhaka* deserving grace by good deeds and devotion, by purity of life and character. Thus for the unphilosophic masses, who might find the inexorable justice of karma and *punarjanma* too hard to bear, the doctrines of grace and mercy provide a softening and palliative effect.

(to be continued)

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## REVIEWS AND NOTICES

THE SEVEN MYSTERIES OF LIFE: BY GUY MURCHIE. Published by Rider and Company, 3 Fitzroy Square, London W1P 6JD. 1979. Pp. xi+690. £9.95.

Guy Murchie deserves congratulations for this strikingly original and magnificent work. A seasoned journalist and writer on popular science will not spend seventeen long years on a book unless he is convinced of its importance. What is the important thing that he has achieved in this massive 700 page volume? It is nothing less than a grand summation of all the mysterious facts of Life and a bold new interpretation of the scientific view of the universe. By one

mighty sweep of his magic pen Guy Murchie brings before the readers the vision of the universe teeming with life.

The reader is first of all introduced to a startling concept: the earth is a huge living organism. Life pulsates through every atom. Plants and animals represent only a tremendous upward thrust, a special manifestation, of this cosmic principle of life which is present everywhere. This looks like a modern version of Greek Hylozoism or Hindu Pantheism. But Murchie marshals a formidable array of evidence in support of his view. 'This is incredible but literally true,' he says, and he is supported by a large number of

the world's eminent scientists in modern times.

And within the bosom of this all-pervading Life, which itself is a mighty mystery, are hidden seven great mysteries which thinkers all over the world have pondered from very ancient times. The bulk of material, forming the third part of the book, is devoted to a study of these mysteries. But before that the reader is introduced to hundreds of astonishing facts about the two dimensions of life—body and mind—in the first two parts.

The first part 'Body' begins with a chapter on animal kingdom. This is followed by chapters on plant kingdom, micro-organism, the human body, sex and gene. The second part 'Mind' begins with a chapter on senses. Here the author discusses, apart from the usual five sense-organs, other internal 'senses' such as the sense of time, sense of fear, spiritual sense, etc. Next follow pages packed with interesting information on a variety of subjects like group mind, consciousness, brain, memory, intelligence, sleep, dreams, hypnosis and E.S.P.

The third part brings together the seven great mysteries of life. The first mystery is the abstract nature of the universe. We usually associate abstraction with mathematics, painting and music. But to Guy Murchie every being is the concrete manifestation of an abstract concept. 'Would you believe that a common bird's egg contains a song neatly tucked away in chemical notation and packed into its genes?' he asks. Puzzling, isn't it? But then this is only the beginning of the endless conundrums that Nature confronts you with.

The second great mystery of life is the inter-relatedness of all creatures from bacteria to man. The third great mystery is the omnipresence of life in the universe. Minerals, magnets, stars, planets, sea beaches, sand dunes, glaciers, rivers, storms, fire—all are instinct with life. Here you learn about the 'mind of an electron', 'social life of black holes', 'metabolism of the earth' and other mind-boggling concepts. The fourth great mystery is the polarity principle—polarity of the sexes, of good and evil, of pain and joy, etc. The fifth great mystery of life is transcendence. Here the author opens three doors to transcendence—time, space and the self—and devotes an entire chapter to the mystery of death and a fascinating chapter to evolution.

The sixth great mystery of life is the germination of worlds by which the author means the super-abundance of life and the astonishing diversity of creativity. Modern explosions in knowledge, speed, education, etc. are all manifestations of

the tremendous creative power inherent in life. The seventh mystery is Divinity. This is the ultimate mystery. Under this heading the author discusses, among other things, his faith in progressive divine revelation through a series of great prophets: Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, Mohammed. A beautiful idea.

Those who are familiar with Eastern thought will of course notice that Guy Murchie does not deal with the mystery of transcendent consciousness, the Atman or Brahman of Vedanta. He does not venture into the uncharted realm of pure Spirit, the ultimate Reality beyond body and mind, beyond time and space, beyond relativity. The key to solve all mysteries lies there. But this would mean going beyond science, even beyond philosophy. Guy Murchie takes you to the very boundaries of science. He does all he can to stretch science to its utmost limits, and then leaves you to ponder deeply over the ultimate Cause of the universe.

All those who are interested in science and life, will find this one of the most stimulating books published in recent years. There is not a single page of dull discussion or dry theorizing in it. Even the best informed person will find in it many things which are startlingly new. Two other noteworthy features of the book are a subtle humour and scores of eerie drawings.

Though the book is the result of the author's years of exploration in science and philosophy, it has the exquisite features of a work of art. Reading it is like listening to the symphony of Nature which reaches the crescendo in the last pages. And when you close the book you will still hear the billion-throated voice of Nature singing through eternity.

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DEATH, INTERMEDIATE STATE AND  
REBIRTH IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM: TRAN-  
SLATED BY LATI RINBOCHAY & JEFFREY HOPKINS.  
Published by Rider and Company, 3 Fitzroy  
Square, London W1P 6JD. 1979. Pp. 86. £ 2.95.

When in 1959 Tibet was invaded by Chinese forces, a vast tide of homeless Tibetan lamas and laymen flowed into India and then across the world in search of refuge. As they left the Land of Snows they carried with them the vast treasury of Tibetan wisdom—religious, literary, artistic, medical, scientific. True to their religious



principles, they have transformed what to them was a personal disaster of the most heart-rending sort into an opportunity to practise *dāna pāramitā* (perfection of charity), by opening their treasury for the enrichment of the world. Rider and Company has been of significant service in the process of disseminating these riches by publishing several valuable books on Tibetan lore. *Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth* is a recent publication which discusses the various stages involved in death and rebirth. The book contains a remarkable Foreword by the Dalai Lama, a Preface by Jeffrey Hopkins; and the main text is a translation of the Tibetan *Lamp Thoroughly Illuminating the Presentation of the Three Basic Bodies—Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth* by Yang-jen-ga-way-lo-drö, an eighteenth century yogi-scholar of the Gelugpa order of Tibetan Buddhism. A commentary is given on the text by the translators.

There are four levels of Buddhist tantra, each successive level being of increasing profundity and meant for increasingly competent aspirants: Action, Performance, Yoga, and Highest Yoga. Our text belongs essentially to the last and supreme form of tantra (*Anuttarayoga-tantra*) which aims at stopping death, rebirth, and the intermediate state (*bardo*) between the two, and at transforming these states into Buddhahood (death is transformed into *dharmakāya*, intermediate state into *sambhogakāya*, and rebirth into *nirmāṇakāya*). In order for the yogi to perform this profound transformation, he must first of all be well acquainted with all the stages—physiological and psychological—involved in the process of death, transition to the intermediate state, and rebirth. The present text acquaints the reader with these stages through descriptions of what happens and what is experienced. The highly subtle yogic techniques used to give *experiential* acquaintance with, and finally mastery over, these stages are of course not given here; for ultimate success in this yoga requires a very rare competence: vast compassion, realization of emptiness (*sūnyatā*), etc. But it is within the reach of all to accommodate their perspective on life to an understanding of these spiritual states; and therefore, say the translators, this text is being presented in English translation.

Consisting as it does of technical discussions on *prāṇas*, *nāḍis*, 'vital drops' and the four (Buddhist) elements, this text presupposes some acquaintance on the part of the reader with Tibetan concepts and attitudes. It is a specialized text requiring dedicated study. Hence, it is not recommended to casual inquirers. It will be

welcomed, however, by all students of things Tibetan, and it is noteworthy that the number of such students has grown enough in the last two decades to merit the publication of such technical studies by popular publishers like Rider. And to all those many aspirants who have found inspiration in the *Bardo Thödal*, this new book will provide further insight into the mystery of death.

The study of thanatology is nowadays becoming a serious discipline, especially in America, contributing much to our understanding of death. The book under review should be especially useful in this field, suggesting new areas of research and new methods of experimentation. It will also be of great value to those interested in Tibetan physiology and psychology—fields in which comparative studies with the corresponding Hindu and modern Western disciplines would be of great value.

In short, this scholarly work is a most welcomed contribution to the fields of Tibetan studies, thanatology, physiology, and psychology. Through it people will find that, to quote the late Swami Ashokananda of the Ramakrishna Order, 'there is nothing more stimulating in life than death.'

SWAMI ATMARUPANANDA  
*Mayavati*

SRI NISARGADATTA MAHARAJ PRESENTATION VOLUME 1980: EDITED BY SUDHAKAR S. DIKSHIT. Distributed by Chetana Pvt. Ltd., 34 Rampart Row, Bombay 400 023. 1980. Pp. 80+53. Price not mentioned.

This volume is a fitting offering of love and devotion on the occasion of the eighty-fourth birthday of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj—a living saint in the crowded locality of Khetwadi, Bombay. His method of spiritual guidance is simple, direct and appealing to every one. He dislikes miracles and yet he has been performing miracles by putting most wayward listeners on the right path of self-knowledge. The present volume, which is a collection of tributes to Sri Maharaj, also contains some articles describing transformations individuals have undergone after listening to him in one or more of his question-answer sessions. The volume contains articles both in English and in Marathi, which are well arranged. The book opens with an article by Sudhakar S. Dikshit. Here is his appraisal of Sri Maharaj: 'He speaks bluntly, upbraids sharply, but with his powerful words he sweeps away the mental debris of his visitors—moral cant, ritualistic religion and philosophic pretensions of various



sorts. He is brutally straight-forward, completely devoid of sugar-coated civility, but in reality he has no desire to assert or dominate. He is what he is, because he is steeped in *jñāna* and he talks from the plane of true awareness where the human soul is merged into the oversoul—the Brahman.'

The book contains an article by the late Maurice Frydman which is an attempt to assess the 'Nisarga Yoga'—a simple way shown by Sri Maharaj to attain perfect peace. To delve into the sense of 'I' in order to reach its source is the essence of the Nisarga Yoga. Whoever is puzzled by his very existence as a conscious being and earnestly wants to find his own source can grasp the ever-present sense of 'I am' and dwell on it assiduously and patiently, till the clouds obscuring the mind dissolve and the heart of Being is seen in all its glory.

Among the other notable contributors Sri Appa B. Pant, David Richardson, Sri Jnanananda Bharati Swaminah, Sein, Lucy Cornelssen, Dr. Riviere Joffroy and Advocate L. V. Deshpande deserve special mention. Not only is Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj eulogized by these noteworthy writers but a lucid exposition of his teachings is also given here. Sri L. V. Deshpande has epitomized the philosophy of Sri Maharaj in a Sanskrit poem 'Kim Māyā'. Under the title 'Brahma and maya' it appears in the English section also.

The philosophy propounded by Sri Maharaj is the perennial philosophy of India—the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta.

Though the book is mostly meant for nourishing the brotherhood among the disciples, it also introduces Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj to the larger public.

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**THE BHAGAVAD-GITA:** TRANSLATED BY ANTHONY ELENJIMITTAM. Published by Aquinas Publications, Mount Mary, Bandra, Bombay 400 050. 1979. Pp. 152. Rs. 6.

The wholeness of an individual's social life consists basically of three factors: awareness of his spiritual dimension; capacity to take up responsibilities; and lastly, ability to exercise both his 'freedom for action' and 'freedom from action'. All these three constitute the central message of the *Gītā*. The *Gītā* has never failed its student—be he a rationalist, a devotee, a contemplative, or even a monk—in providing the inspiration and perspective that makes human life

whole. Fr. Anthony Elenjittam is one who has derived inspiration and practical benefit from the *Gītā*. He writes in the Introduction: 'The only justification I have in making a new translation and paraphrasing the *Bhagavad Gita* is the fact that it has helped me to find the way to a religion of enlightenment and philosophical calm assurance of the Path which I want to share....'

The author is fairly well known at least in some parts of India for his earlier books such as *The Hero of Hindustan* (Subhas Chandra Bose); *St. Francis of Assisi, the Bhakti Yogin*; *Buddha's Teachings*; *The Philosophy of Yoga Patanjali*; *The Upanishads*; etc. Though born and brought up a Christian, he has dedicated himself to the great cause of working to foster a more sincere inter-religious understanding and harmony. In his present work he has surpassed his earlier works on the Upanishads and Pātāñjala Yoga, retaining almost intact the inspiring rhythm and directness of the Divine Dialogue. All the eighteen chapters with translation of each verse have been included. Wherever possible he has added a comment, drawing attention to the relevance of the verse to our daily life and also to parallel ideas in different religions. Exclusion of the verses in Devanāgarī has hardly affected the total quality of the book, and we hope it will be warmly received by all lovers of the *Gītā*, as also those needing a simple, faithful translation of it.

SWAMI ATMARAMANANDA  
Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama  
Ranchi

**VEDANTIC GNOSIS:** BY ANTHONY ELENJIMITTAM. Published by Aquinas Publications, Mount Mary, Bandra, Bombay 400 050. 1979. Pp. 92. Rs. 4.

The author of this little book is a Catholic priest of the Dominican Order who has devoted several years to the cause of inter-religious understanding (even before the idea became popular) and the service of the poor. A generous heart, lifelong celibacy and monastic discipline, and years of study and experience in dealing with human problems—these are the factors that have shaped his life and endowed him with a rare wisdom. It is this wisdom that he has tried to share with the readers in the form of a series of meditations in this book.

These reflections cover a variety of themes like happiness, liberation, the psycho-spiritual structure of human personality, the three states and *turiya*, sex, passions and emotions, sublimation of instincts, and similar subjects. Many of the



author's observations are original but most of them are supported by references to scriptures. There is a harmonious and delightful blending of Hindu and Christian thought throughout the book. What strikes the reviewer most is the author's deep sincerity and candid fervour. This is a meaningful little book for all those who seek meaning in life.

P.B.

## NEWS AND REPORTS

### RAMAKRISHNA MISSION HOME OF SERVICE, VARANASI

REPORT FOR APRIL 1979 TO MARCH 1980

The Home of Service continued its tradition of service to the poor, diseased and distressed through the following wings for both men and women.

The *Indoor General Hospital*, which has 200 beds, admitted a total of 4,680 cases, of which 34.31% were given free treatment. Surgical cases numbered 1,723. Thirteen patients were picked up from the roadside. The *Outpatient's Department*, including its branch at Shivala, treated 2,28,631 patients (55,696 new and 1,72,935 repeated cases). Daily average attendance was 730. The total number of surgical cases was 3,632. The *homoeopathic sections* of the Home of Service and its Shivala branch served 35,130 cases (7,509 new and 27,623 repeated cases). The *Clinical and Pathological Laboratory* conducted 25,526 tests of various kinds. A total of 3,172 X-ray exposures was taken in the *X-ray and Electrotherapy Department*.

The two *Invalids' Homes* for helpless and old invalid men and women maintained 20 men and 28 women. The men were mostly old retired monks of the Ramakrishna Order who, having served the Ramakrishna Math and Mission for long years, had come to spend their last days in holy Varanasi. The women were helpless poor widows who had none to look after them.

Pecuniary and material help was given according to the funds available to poor and helpless persons and to poor schoolboys.

**Immediate Needs:** Due to the ever-increasing cost of all commodities, maintenance, etc., the financial position of the Home of Service is not very good. Therefore the beneficent public is requested to give generously in order to allow the Home of Service to continue its long and inspiring tradition of service to God in man. Funds are needed (1) for maintenance of the 200 beds of the hospital; (2) to meet the accumulated deficit of Rs. 2,46,188.77; (3) for construction of

more staff quarters; (4) to expand the dairy for the benefit of the patients; (5) to endow hospital beds (cost of endowment: Rs. 30,000, though partial endowments of Rs. 10,000 or Rs. 5,000 are also thankfully accepted); (6) to endow the seats in the Invalids' Homes, at the same rate as hospital-bed endowments.

Donations may be sent to: The Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service, Luxa, Varanasi-221 001.

### CENTRE VEDANTIQUE RAMAKRISHNA 77220—GRETZ, FRANCE

REPORT FOR 1980

Each Sunday of the year there was a public lecture or some other programme at the Centre, and every Saturday night, a talk on 'The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna'. The Centre as usual provided full retreat facilities for devotees, friends and acquaintances of the Ramakrishna Movement who wished to benefit from the Ashrama atmosphere and company of the Swamis. The number of people attending Sunday lectures grew during the year, as did the number of retreatants. Special celebrations were held on the birthdays of Sri Ramakrishna, Buddha, Jesus, Sri Krishna, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Shankara, Ramana Maharshi and the Holy Mother, as well as Durga Puja, Kali Puja and Shiva Ratri.

*Védanta*, the Ashrama's quarterly magazine in French, was sent to about five hundred subscribers. In three volumes it published a translation of M's original English translation of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. In order to keep the modest annual subscription fee at 50 Francs in the face of rapidly rising costs of production, the Ashrama members now compose the texts for the magazine themselves with an electronic machine purchased for the purpose.

During the year the number of active members of the Centre increased by 12%, making a total of 188. Membership dues continue at 250 Francs per year. Members receive *Védanta* free and are allowed to use the Ashrama's lending library and to participate in various membership activities.

## LAST PAGE : COMMENTS

### *The Panchayati Raj*

Some twenty-five years ago Pandit Nehru spoke of the three pillars of village life in India: the school, the National Extension Service Blocks and the Panchayat. These were supposed to serve as chief centres of activity for three areas of rural development: education, agriculture and administration respectively.

As a unique autonomous institution of village administration the Panchayat has existed in India from very ancient times. For centuries it remained the strong base of the pyramid of power in India. When the country was rocked by the internecine wars of kings, invasions of barbarians and conquests, the villages of India provided great stability to the country's economy. The Muslim and British rulers left the Panchayat system untouched.

It was only after Independence that the importance of Panchayats in national reconstruction was officially recognized and for the first time an attempt was made to integrate them into the democratic power structure. Democracy becomes effective only when there is mass participation in the administrative process. In a vast country like India where the majority of people live in villages, an elected Assembly or Parliament alone cannot ensure this. Local self-government at village level is necessary to take democracy to grassroots level. It was the recognition of this truth that led to the formulation of the Panchayati Raj ideal soon after Independence.

The main roles assigned to Panchayati Raj institutions are three: function as the non-official terminals of the executive branch of the Government; provide village leadership; create local initiative for rural development. However, their performance in these fields has not been satisfactory. Several individuals and official committees have studied this problem. The Ashok Mehta Committee has stressed the great importance of Panchayati Raj institutions and has strongly recommended decentralization of administrative power. But the Dantwala Committee has, while discussing the role of planning in India, pointed out that 'unless and until adequate safeguards are provided against the likelihood of the dominance of the Panchayati Raj institutions by the vested interests, giving them a decisive voice in the preparation of microlevel or grassroot plans, one of its major objectives, namely, removal of poverty, exploitation and unemployment will not have much chance of being realized.' It is clear that if the Panchayats are to work efficiently within the democratic framework without losing their essential autonomous nature, the present socio-political culture prevailing in this country must change.

In most Third World countries the Western-style democracy with many political parties and their endless bickerings has not been a success. There is no immediate possibility of Panchayati Raj being tried as a political alternative in India, but the experiment in this line now being conducted in Nepal will be watched here with interest.

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