

# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

*or* AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order  
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



**Spirituality in Changing Times**  
**January 2015**

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started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896**



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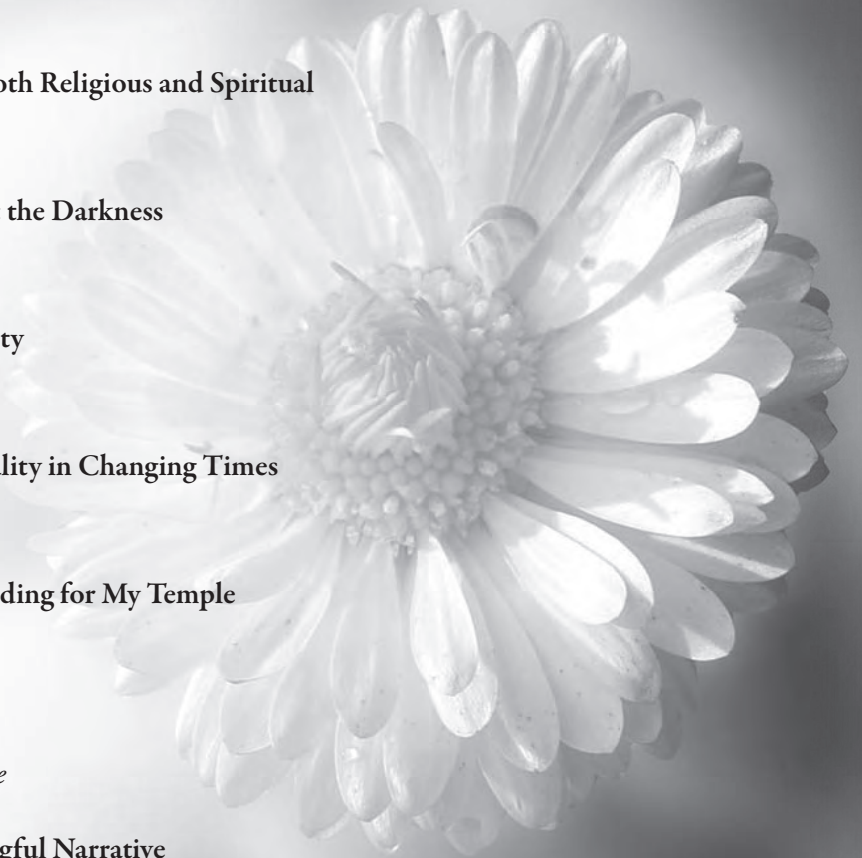
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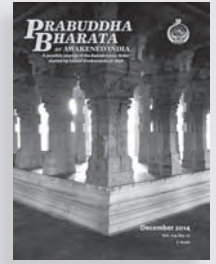
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## TO OUR READERS

**R**ELIGION HAS ALWAYS BEEN an issue of interest, equally to those for and against it. Swami Vivekananda upheld the value of religion in the world, particularly in India. He believed that all good in India can be done only through religion. We live today in one of those times in history when the very utility of religion is being questioned. But, as it is said, this too will pass. It is on this hopeful note that we start this year of Prabuddha Bharata.

In its age of 119 years, this journal has seen various phases of religious belief and the growth of religious movements and institutions. It has carried in its pages, pioneering thoughts of persons who were pivotal in forming new discourses on religion. Stepping into its 120th year, this journal welcomes newer deliberations on the human effort to connect with the divine, called religion.

Has religion changed or has it taken different hues? This issue tries to find answers to these questions and also address the bigger concern of the function of religion. When the young increasingly find religion to be far removed from their everyday struggle for survival, we found it necessary to analyse the question of religion in a way that would be accessible to all.

Humanity is facing many challenges at this point in time. One of the greatest challenges—though it may seem something straight out of science-fiction—is whether humanity will sur-

render to machines, will Artificial Intelligence take over? At this juncture, the highest point in the evolution of human beings, that of transcending the body-mind complex, particularly through religion, needs to be revisited on a deeper level.

From this issue, we start a new column, Manana. Oftentimes, revolutionary thoughts elude our attention and remain hidden in some book, which does not see much circulation. In Manana, we would bring to you a two-page extract from such thought-provoking books, some of which might prove epochal in the future.

We thank our subscribers and readers for having supported us for these 119 years. We invite them to send us letters, giving their feedback, and also expressing their views on issues, which find place in the pages of this journal. We thank the staff of the journal for ensuring a smooth ride. We are grateful to all the authors, reviewers, photographers, artists, publishers who have sent their books for review, reviewers, proofreaders, copyeditors, advertisers, patrons, donors, web page designers, and well-wishers. Their support and encouragement has ensured that gems of wisdom and insights of depth have reached the minds of countless, month after month, year after year.

# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत ।

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

## Maitrayaniya Upanishad

January 2015  
Vol. 120, No. 1

### मैत्रायणीय उपनिषत्

ब्रह्मयज्ञो वा एष यत्पूर्वेषां चयनं । तस्मात् यजमानः चित्त्वैतान् अग्नीन् आत्मानं  
अभिध्यायेत् । स पूर्णः खलु वा अद्धाऽविकलः सम्पद्यते यज्ञः । कः सोऽभिध्येयोऽयं यः  
प्राणाख्यः तस्योपाख्यानं ॥ १ ॥

*Brahma-yajno va esha yat purvesham chayanam. Tasmāt yajamanah chitvaitan agnin atmanam  
abhidhyayet. Sa purnah khalu va addha'vikalah sampadyate yajnah. Kah so'bhidhyeyo'yam yah  
pranakhya tasyopakhyanam.* (1)

The building up of the sacrifices mentioned earlier was truly a sacrifice to Brahman. Therefore, after the building of these sacrifices, the sacrificer should meditate on the Atman. Thus the sacrifices would certainly become complete and flawless. Who is he who should be meditated upon? He who is called Prana. There is this story about him.

बृहद्रथो वै नाम राजा विराज्ये पुत्रं निधापयित्त्वेदं अशाश्वतं मन्यमानः शरीरं वैराग्यं  
उपेतोऽरण्यं निर्जगाम । स तत्र परमं तप आस्थायादित्यं उदीक्षमान ऊर्ध्वबाहुः तिष्ठति । अन्ते  
सहस्रस्य मुनेः अन्तिकं आजगामाग्निः इव अधूमकः तेजसा निर्दहन्न इव आत्मविद् भगवान्  
शाकायन्यः । उत्तिष्ठोत्तिष्ठ वरं वृणीष्वेति राजानमब्रवीत् । स तस्मै नमस्कृत्वा उवाच । भगवन्  
नाहं आत्मवित् त्वं तत्त्ववित् शुश्रुमो वयं स त्वं नो ब्रूहीति । एतद् वृत्तं पुरस्ताद् दुःशक्यं  
एतत् प्रश्नं ऐक्ष्वाकान्यान् कामान् वृणीष्वेति शाकायन्यः । शिरसाऽस्य चरणौ अभिमृशमानो  
राजेमां गाथां जगाद ॥ २ ॥




*Brihadratho vai nama raja virajye putram nidhapayittvedam ashshvatam manyamanah shariram vairagyam upeto'ranam nirjagama. Sa tatra paramam tapa asthayadityam udikshamana urdhvababuh tishtati. Ante sahasrasya munih antikam ajagamagnir iva adhumakah tejasa nirdahann iva atmavid bhagavan shakayanyah. Uttishtottishta varam vrinishveti rajanam abravat. Sa tasmai namaskritva uvacha. Bhagavan, naham atmavit tvam tattvavit shushrumo vayam sa tvam no bruhiti. Etad vrittam purastad duhsbakyam etat prashnam aikshvakanyan kaman vrinishveti shakayanyah. Shirasa'sya charanau abhimrishamano rajemam gatham jagada.* (2)

A king named Brihadratha, having established his son as the king and considering this body as impermanent, became dispassionate and went into the forest. There he performed severe austerities and stood with uplifted arms gazing at the sun. At the end of a thousand days, the honourable knower of Atman, Shakayanya, blazing like fire without smoke, came near the ascetic. He said to Brihadratha, 'Arise, arise, ask for a boon.' Brihadratha saluted Shakayanya and said, 'O Revered sage, I don't know the Self. We have heard that you know the Self. Please tell us about the Self.' Shakayanya replied, 'Such things were discussed in the past. This question is very difficult to answer, O Aikshvaka, ask some other desired thing.' Touching the feet of Shakayanya with his head, Brihadratha uttered these words.

भगवन् अस्थि-चर्म-स्नायु-मज्जा-मांस-शुक्रः-शोणित-श्लेष्म-अश्रु-दूषिका-विण्मूत्र-वात-  
पित्त-कफ-सङ्घाते दुर्गन्धे निःसारेऽस्मिन् शरीरे किं कामोपभोगैः? काम-क्रोध-लोभ-मोह-  
भय-विशाद-ईर्ष्या-इष्ट-वियोग-अनिष्ट-सम्प्रयोग-क्षुत्पिपासा-जरा-मृत्यु-रोग-शोकाद्यैः अभिहते  
अस्मिन् शरीरे किं कामोपभोगैः? ॥ ३ ॥

*Bhagavan asthi-charma-snayyu-majja-mamsa-shukra-shonita-shleshma-ashru-dushika-vinmutra-  
vata-pitta-kapha-sanghate durgandhe nihare'smin sharire kim kamopabhogaih? Kama-krodha-  
lobha-moha-bhaya-vishada-irshya-ishta-viyoga-anishta-samprayoga-kshutpipasa-jara-mrityu-  
roga-shokadyaih abhigate asmin sharire kim kamopabhogaih?* (3)

O Revered sage, in this foul-smelling, inconsequential body, which is a mass of bones, skin, muscle, marrow, flesh, semen, blood, mucus, tears, rheum, faeces, urine, wind, bile, and phlegm, what is the point of enjoying desires? In this body afflicted with desire, anger, greed, delusion, fear, despondency, envy, separation from the desired, union with the undesired, hunger, thirst, old age, death, disease, sorrow, and the like, what is the point of enjoying desires? 

## *Do We Need Religion?*

**R**ELIGION IS A COLLECTIVE phenomenon and like every other group behaviour, has its dissidents. They do not want to be bound by a set of practices, beliefs, or adhere to set patterns. They want to be free of any avowals and keep their beliefs and paths fluid, and go beyond scriptures, codes, or manuals. They question the very need for religion.

Group behaviour has been questioned since the birth of humankind. For every group of cave dwellers, who lived and fended for themselves, there were always a few who preferred to stay away from the crowd. They loitered around alone searching for hidden clues to innovation in Nature and were content with the little they came across as food. Every innovation, invention, discovery, revolution, movement has had voices opposing them. There is always another angle to anything under the sun. Religion is no exception.

All isms have had opponents. Religion has its share too. But the question of the necessity of religion has been raised for a long time now. The language and arguments keep changing but the contention remains the same: Religion is not necessary. If it is so vile a thing, why does it keep coming up? Like any other evil propensity of the human mind like stealing, cheating, or killing, why are human beings not unanimous on the futility of religion? That is because we are hard-wired to be religious. We may not always say it in so many words, but adulation is an expression integral to the human psyche. How can we be sure of that? Just look at people who claim

to be non-religious. They almost always end up forming groups with the main purpose of decrying religion or anything even remotely religious. There are countless atheist organisations, agnostic groups, and people who do not want to be 'religious' but 'spiritual'. All these people are doing the same thing religions do: have a precept, a following, and propagate one's beliefs. In effect, these people are being very 'religious' about their non-religiousness! The only difference is that they apparently do not believe in God, any avatar, saint, prophet, or messenger. That the main leader of such groups eventually assumes a God-like stature is quite conveniently ignored.

Probably the most pivotal argument of the non-religious is that religions are illogical. The question whether religion should remain is linked to rationality. This argument has serious flaws. First, it considers all religions or faith systems to be illogical, which is wrong. Second, and more important, it presumes that all human actions are logical. All our day-to-day activities are based on an illogical presumption that we will be alive tomorrow. When it is certain that we will die one day and do not know the exact date of death, would it not be logical to be certain about the uncertainty of our life and therefore, not plan for decades? This is only one example of the illogical mindset human beings have. Love, anger, hatred, and ambitions are some other examples of the human avenues of illogical and irrational behaviour. Yet, when it comes to matters of religion, we are too occupied with arguments of logic.

Religion is everywhere. For some it is religion or God. For some it is money. For some it is sports, movies, books, or music. For some it is people, fame, or power. Almost all of us are religiously bound to something close to our hearts. That is our religion. That is our calling. So, what is the harm if it is God for some people? How many raise slogans or start associations denouncing people who are 'religious' about movies and watch them at an insane pace? None. That makes one wonder if those opposed to religion are in fact helping the religious build a strong belief. Over the last few centuries, thinkers have both discounted and upheld religion. The discourses for and against religion have always been in vogue and not even once did religion die. Because deification, respect for and fear of the unknown, and hero worship are ingrained in human behaviour.

Another argument against religions is that they are at best safeguarding ethical behaviour and a good society can always enforce ethical values without being religious. Though this stance sounds great, a little thinking makes us to see through it. Why would someone be ethical if there is nothing to be attained from it? In the race for the survival of the fittest, why would one spend one's efforts in arresting the pace of growth by binding oneself to an ethical behaviour, if it did not 'ennoble' one or did not take one closer to one's true divine nature? There would be no reason for ethics without a belief in a link of the human beings with the supra-normal divine. Religion is the only human avenue that enables human beings to ponder on the farthest reaches of nature beyond the apparent human paradigm.

What has religion given us? Of course, it has caused torrential bloodshed. It has made one human being stand against another for centuries. It has caused hatred, ill-feeling, rancour, and has led to some of the most diabolical, vile, and horrendous practices humankind could conceive of.

But has not religion produced any good? Why is it that most of the inventions or discoveries of humankind were by religious persons? Why do we see that radical, world-changing thoughts took shape in heads that bowed to God? Because they could see beyond the human complex. They could visualise and perceive a bond between the individual and the cosmic. Religion propels the human mind to harness infinite power and to bend nature, external and internal, to supra-human possibilities. The impossible becomes possible through religion. It is the ladder which enables one to peep beyond the wall of name and form.

If religion is so good, then why the debate? Religion is good but the religious often are not. Our half-understandings and passion without vision lead to the blind leading the blind. God does not need certificates of approval. The human craving for approval extends itself to the need for approval of one's faith by many. If you believe in something other than what I believe in, or worse, if you are against my belief, you can see my knife at your throat! Such catholicity would soon lead to a situation where there would not be many people left to understand! So, religion is not to blame, our convoluted and dogmatic understanding of it is to be blamed.

The way out: Believe and let believe. Have a religion of your own if you will but let others have theirs too. Don't get carried away by your innate desire to be accepted. Rather, feed to others' desire for acceptance. Faith in the infinite would enable you to do wonders with the finite. Acknowledging others' expanse of mind, you can get your views acknowledged. The drive for religious belief should not be for acceptance or propagation but for peace and fulfilment. That would be logical, humane, and would help us outgrow our human boundaries and blur the difference between humanity and divinity, between the apparent and the real.

# Spirituality in Changing Times

Swami Smaranananda

**W**HAT IS SPIRITUALITY? According to Vedanta, the ancient Indian philosophy, the only Reality at the base of all this phenomena is the Atman in microcosm and Brahman is the same Reality in macrocosm. All perceived objects, including the mind are only matter, which is changing and therefore, impermanent. The Indians of old came to the conclusion that matter and spirit both together represent the whole of Reality, though matter has no permanence, while the spirit is eternal, unchanging, and pure. To experience this within ourselves is the goal of life. Thus unalloyed Consciousness penetrates in and through all beings.

In the book *Why God Won't Go Away*, the authors write: 'The transcendent state we call Absolute Unitary Being refers to states known by various names in different cultures—the Tao, Nirvana, the *Unio Mystica*, Brahman-atman—but which every persuasion describes in strikingly similar terms. It is a state of pure awareness, a clear and vivid consciousness of *no-thing*. Yet it is also a sudden, vivid consciousness of *everything* as an undifferentiated whole.'<sup>1</sup>

What do changing times represent or indicate? Is there any fundamental change? Really speaking, human beings fundamentally remain what they were. The search for happiness continues. The main question is where to find the real happiness. Looking for it in various material things goes on as usual. But the tragedy is that

they hardly find it. Human beings realise in the course of time that mere money and sense-enjoyments, material things, cannot give happiness, because they are ephemeral. But, at the same time, some thinking people try to find the answers though often such a search becomes futile.

Time is a relative factor. It *is* and *is not*. Change is inherent in all material things. So *time* also changes, and these changes are inexorable. What is important is how we adjust ourselves to these changes. Apart from being connected to the realisation of our real Self, the Atman, religious values are closely related to ethical and social values. Unfortunately, we tend to bend these values to our political and social inclinations. These have nothing to do with real religion.

At the same time, the influence of changing times on social and political values cannot be avoided. So what is needed is the right type of political and social religion, broad as the ocean,

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**Time is a relative factor. It *is* and *is not*. Change is inherent in all material things. So time also changes, and these changes are inexorable.**

---

devoid of dogmatism and fundamentalism. If education takes this course, it can free itself from atheism and religion, a social necessity and can be practised by all.

The Sanatana Dharma, as taught by the rishis of yore is a balanced outlook on religion, which enables us to live a life of fulfilment. Religion had two aspects: *Abhyudaya*, worldly prosperity

---

Swami Smaranananda is a Vice President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission.



and *Nishchreyasa*, the highest good. Later on in the course of history these aspects could not adjust themselves to the invasive forces of false religious values, which in turn gave rise to organised religion. What is needed is not organised religion but organised moral values and higher social values.

As pointed out in the beginning of this article 'religion will not go away'. Swami Vivekananda puts it clearly: 'Truth does not pay homage to any society, ancient or modern. Society has to pay homage to Truth or die.'<sup>2</sup> Therefore, with changing

times society has to give way to higher values in life through the right education, which can be brought about only by the efforts of thinking people. May such people ponder over it!



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# I am Spiritual but Not Religious

Swami Chetanananda

BUT NOT

IN THIS EVER-CHANGING WORLD we are accustomed to changes in both the macrocosm and the microcosm. Day turns into night without fail. Seasons follow each other. Time changes every being and every thing. Sinners become saints and some saints fall from spiritual heights. History records the rise and fall of great empires. Eating habits change; modes of dress change according to the seasons. Social customs and educational systems are constantly in a state of flux. We must learn to adjust to all of these changes if we are to live harmoniously in this world. If we do not, there will be constant friction and suffering, with no peace and happiness.

In this world of change there is one thing that remains constant: Brahman, Atman, or God, the divine ground of Being. Truth does not change. Christ said, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.'<sup>1</sup> Prophet Mohammed said, 'They will enter the Garden of Bliss who have a true, pure, and merciful heart.'<sup>2</sup> Will these statements ever change? Will the ten commandments of Moses and the eightfold path of Buddha ever change? Both Krishna and Patanjali said that the mind can be controlled by the constant practice of meditation and detachment. Will this method of controlling the mind ever change?

At the heart of all religions lies truthfulness, purity, renunciation, love, devotion, compassion, forgiveness, unselfishness, non-violence, self-control, humility, and so on. That inner core remains

the same even as rituals, ways of worship, and religious practices evolve over time. For example, the Catholic mass used to be conducted in Latin only, but now many churches conduct it in the local language. Likewise, the ancient Vedic sacrifices are no longer practised as they were long ago.

The human body goes through six changes: it is born, exists, grows, develops, decays, and dies. Throughout all of this the Atman or pure Consciousness that dwells within all of us remains the same. God's knowable attributes—goodness, truth, beauty, being, awareness, bliss, love, creativity, and power—remain the same. The *Katha Upanishad* tells us: 'There is One who is the eternal Reality among non-eternal objects, the one [truly] conscious Entity among conscious objects, and who, though non-dual, fulfils the desires of many. Eternal peace belongs to the wise who perceive Him within themselves—not to others.'<sup>3</sup>

This is the gospel truth: People all over the world and in all religions are trying to attain eternal peace. It cannot be bought in the market, so people follow religious paths and practise spirituality to reach their goal. Religious paths are many but their goal is God or the ultimate Reality that is called by various names, such as Buddha, Jesus, Allah, Ishvara, and so on. In this modern age, Ramakrishna experienced God in different religions and proclaimed: 'As many faiths, so many paths.' As the ocean is the final destination of many rivers on different continents, so the goal of all religions is God. Religions are different paths to reach God, but they are not God.

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Many modern young people do not care for organised religion but still seek spirituality. There is a movement in the West called SBNR, meaning 'spiritual but not religious'. This phrase is used to identify a spiritual path that does not take recourse to traditional or organised religion. Though this term is used across the globe, it is prominent in the US.

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**SBNR consider traditional organised religion moribund, corrupt, old-fashioned, a 'comatose religion' and want the fresh air of eternal spirituality.**

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Some think of religion as 'people's beliefs and opinions concerning the existence, nature, and worship of a deity or deities, and divine involvement in the universe and human life.'<sup>4</sup> Some say religion is 'an institutionalized or personal system of beliefs and practices relating to the divine' (ibid.). Again some look at religion as 'a set of strongly-held beliefs, values, and attitudes that somebody lives by' (ibid.). The Latin roots of *religion* are *religio*, which means 'reverence for gods or holiness', and *religare*, meaning 'back to or bind with God'. The word 'spiritual' means 'relating to the soul or spirit, usually in contrast to material things,'<sup>5</sup> or 'relating to religious or sacred things rather than worldly things' (ibid.), or 'connected by an affinity of the mind, spirit, or temperament' (ibid.).

Once during an interfaith conference in St Louis I faced some strong arguments from people of the SBNR community. Their slogan was: 'We love Jesus but hate religion.' This movement is a protest against organised religions and a wake-up call for religious leaders, but it is hard to say what precisely its philosophy is. Some of these people are disillusioned by the luxurious living and immorality they see among some religious leaders; the bloodshed in the name of

religion; and the corruption, commercialism, politics, and power struggles in religious institutions. Seeing such hypocrisy in their places of worship shook their faith and they stopped going to church. They have become tired of having their unique identities reduced to bureaucratic codes by religious institutions.

Some people in the SBNR movement claim to be moral and ethical, more than those religious leaders whom they call hypocrites. Some are free thinkers who do not like doctrines, dogmas, and creeds. They reject the Christian doctrine of original sin—indeed, they reject the concept of sin altogether. They do not like their spiritual natures to be squelched or denied. They see their version of spirituality as a way to be free from the strictures of religion. They consider traditional organised religion to be moribund, corrupt, old-fashioned, a 'comatose religion'—they want to breathe the fresh air of eternal spirituality.

Some people claim themselves to be 'spiritual but not religious' although their characters are questionable. Pointing to them, Huston Smith tried to clarify the word 'religion' in his book *Why Religion Matters*:

A cloud has descended over the very word itself. ... Uncontaminated, religion is a noble word; deriving as it does from the Latin *religio*, to re-bind, the word targets what religion is essentially about. But because it challenges the prevailing worldview, it has lost some of its respectability. Mention the word in public and its sins are what jump first to mind. Still, it is difficult to argue that religion has nothing to be said for it, which leaves us with Tonto's remark when, on entering a barn with the Lone Ranger, he took several good sniffs and pronounced, 'There's got to be a horse in here somewhere.' Enter the word spirituality to name (without specification) what is good about religion. Being no more than a human attribute, spirituality is not institutionalized, and this exempts it from the problems

that inevitably attend institutions—notably (in religious institutions) the in-group/out-group tensions they tend to breed. ...

It is a bad sign when spiritual, an adjective, gets turned into a noun, spirituality, for this has a dog chasing its own tail. Grammatically, spirit is the noun in question, and spiritual its adjective. Spirituality is a neologism that has come into existence because spirit has no referent in science's world, and without grounding there, we are left unsure as to what the word denotes.<sup>6</sup>

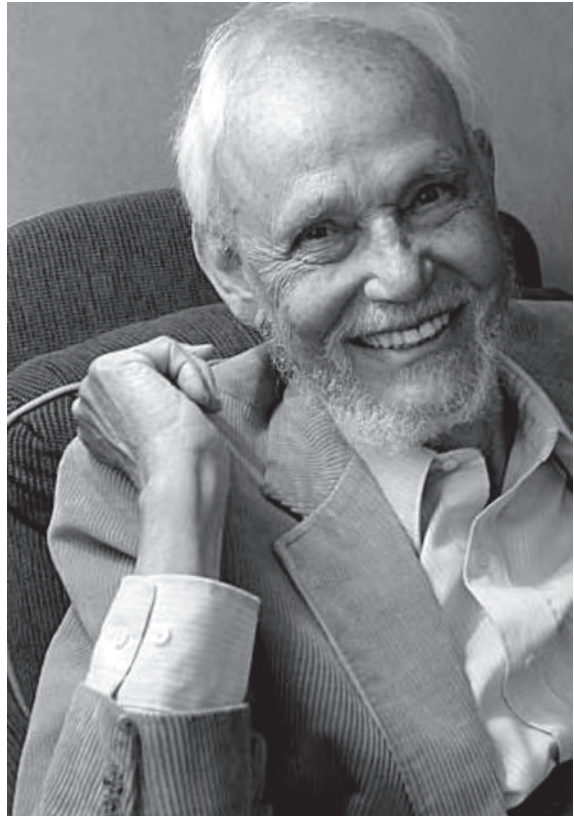
Most members of the young generation are busy pursuing their careers and seeking enjoyment. They have no time to think of God, and they lead a godless life. The Internet is diverting their minds to the external world and making them restless. The world is moving too fast and people try desperately to keep up. They have little time to study seriously or to think deeply. You are considered to be behind the times if you do not have a mobile phone or a tablet-computer. All around us we see that people are more involved with these modern gadgets than with God or spiritual life.

Every morning when one opens the newspapers one sees fighting and killing going on all over the world. One of the main causes of this is religion. Religion is supposed to bring peace and joy to the world, but it is bringing misery and death instead. Swami Vivekananda once said: 'Religion, the great milch cow, has given many kicks, but never mind, it gives a great deal of milk.'<sup>7</sup> One should not blame religion; the blame should go to those who use religion for their own selfish purposes. Swamiji also said: 'Can religion really accomplish anything? It can. It brings to man eternal life. It has made man what he is, and will make of this human animal a god. That is what religion can do. Take religion from human society and what will remain? Nothing but a forest of brutes' (3.4).

Organised religions around the world are often deeply connected with politics. That is why Swamiji emphatically said that the Ramakrishna Order should have no connection with politics. He cautioned his Western followers in particular:

If you want to be religious, enter not the gate of any organized religions. They do a hundred times more evil than good, because they stop the growth of each one's individual development. Study everything, but keep your own seat firm. If you take my advice, do not put your neck into the trap. The moment they try to put their noose on you, get your neck out and go somewhere else. ... [Religion] is only between you and your God, and no third person must come between you. ... If you and I organize, we begin to hate every person. It is better not to love, if loving only means hating others. That is

*Huston Smith (b. 1919)*





not love. That is hell! If loving your own people means hating everybody else, it is the quintessence of selfishness and brutality, and the effect is that it will make you brutes (1.474).

Generally religions begin with the life and teachings of an avatar or a prophet. After the passing away of those great teachers, their disciples and followers form various denominations or sects according to their understanding. At present there are numerous Christian denominations in the US and Canada. Around the world Islam has splintered into dozens of sects. Recently the king of Saudi Arabia cautioned fundamental Muslims not to interpret the Koran to suit their own needs and to mislead others.

Each person has her or his own idea of religion. Some of those ideas are strange and vague, and some are narrow and fanatical. Bertrand Russell remarked that he didn't consider himself to be a Christian just because he was born in a Christian country and Christian family. He is a true Christian who follows the life and teachings of Christ implicitly. While in the West, Swamiji presented the ideal of a universal religion and redefined religion in the following ways:

'Religion is the manifestation of the Divinity already in man' (4.358). 'Religion is realisation; not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming' (2.396). 'The old religions said that he was an atheist who did not believe in God. The new religion says that he is the atheist who does not believe in himself' (2.301). 'Religion is the realization of Spirit as Spirit' (9.278). It is hard to argue against Swamiji's definitions of religion.

To a Vedantin, religion is the body and spirituality is the soul. The body cannot function without the soul and the soul can do nothing without the

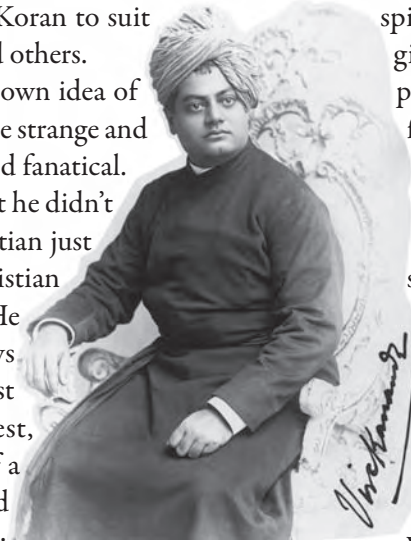
body. It is spirit and matter. Brahman or pure Consciousness manifests itself through the body-mind organism. This Brahman is the Spirit, or the Self. Only those who dwell in that Spirit or God-consciousness are truly spiritual. Most people live on the physical, sensate, mental, or intellectual planes. Only one among millions lives on the spiritual or transcendental plane. When a person says, 'I am spiritual', it is hard to say what she or he means. To a Vedantin, every being is spiritual, from the creator Brahma down to an ant, because Spirit or Consciousness dwells in all.

According to some Vedantins, religion and spirituality are intertwined. Religion is connected with external practices such as rituals, worship, fasting, vigils, prayers, singing, chanting God's name, and so on. Spirituality is connected with practising internal disciplines such as hearing, reflecting, and meditating. Both help human beings to experience their true divine nature. Here are a few examples of the relationship between spirituality and religion:

The flesh of a juicy apple develops slowly, protected by its skin. The flesh would rot without the skin, and the skin would dry up without the flesh. Spirituality is like the flesh of an apple, and religion is like the skin.

The gross human body consists of flesh and bone, and the subtle body consists of the mind, memory, ego, and intellect. Consciousness animates both external and internal human systems. This body-mind organism can be compared with religion and consciousness with spirituality.

After experiencing the divinity within, the ancient teachers of Vedanta declared that each soul is potentially divine. All beings are more or less



spiritual—not only saints, but also sinners, robbers, and murderers. The same Consciousness is manifested in birds and beasts, insects and plants. The difference among them is the difference in the degree of manifestation of Spirit or Consciousness.

The golden rule of all religions is based on this philosophy of oneness of the Godhead and the unity of existence:

Buddhism says: ‘Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.’<sup>8</sup>

Christianity says: ‘Do to others what you would have them do to you.’<sup>9</sup>

Islam says: ‘No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brothers that which he desires for himself.’<sup>10</sup>

Hinduism says: ‘Whatever you consider injurious to yourself, never do to others. This is the essence of dharma [righteousness].’<sup>11</sup>


The problem is that we talk about religion, spirituality, and God, but we do not practise either religion or spirituality. The Vishnu Purana says: ‘There are some people who neither do their duties nor practise religion, but repeat, “God, God”. They are enemies of God, because God has to take a human form to demonstrate true religion to them.’

One of the critics of the SBNR movement remarked:

What’s all this “spiritual but not religious” clap-trap? Saying you’re spiritual but not religious is like saying you love food, but hate cooking. ... You can’t be bothered to study food and a meal ... This just means the person is too lazy to look beyond their adolescent bias. They are too lazy to learn what it means to be truly religious. They are too smug and shallow and immature to ever regard anything greater than themselves as greater than themselves. ... They have dismissed religion before they have even seriously considered it or studied it.<sup>12</sup>

It is said that an atheist thinks of God more

than a theist does. She or he constantly thinks that there is no God and thus thinks of God in a negative way. This is like a person whose mouth burns whether biting into a chili intentionally or accidentally. One should appreciate the atheists, agnostics, sceptics, and now the SBNR community, who keep religion alive by constant thinking, talking, writing, debating, challenging, and criticising. They expose the hypocrisy of religious imposters. If there is any truth in religion, it must be questioned and opposed: Truth will finally triumph.

The bottom line is that a person is judged based on her or his character. The character is formed by that person’s tendencies, which originate from actions and thoughts. If a person’s actions and thoughts are good, her or his character is bound to be good and vice versa. We all love perfection and we all seek to be perfect. This perfection comes through sincere religious and spiritual practices. Practice makes a person perfect. 

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# *Spirituality in a Secular World*

**Swami Atmarupananda**

**S**ECULARISM AS A STATE POLICY is seen by some as a wonderful innovation that has brought freedom from oppression to people both religious and non-religious. By others it is seen as a form of state persecution of religious tradition aimed at the eradication of religion itself from society. Still others see it as a manipulative tool used by cynical politicians to placate minorities and gain their votes. And there are those who merely see it as a way of avoiding the whole sensitive topic of religion so that a society can get on with its real business of education, development, and providing security along with general modernization.

However differently people may view it, and however differently it might have been interpreted and applied by different countries, modern secularism as a political concept has a short history and very rapid success, spreading to many countries around the world, countries with widely varying histories and cultures and governmental systems. It has achieved a powerful presence in the world, and now is unavoidable, at least for the time being, affecting people in all countries, even those that are not secular, like Saudi Arabia or Israel or Bhutan.

Here, I want to discuss the possibilities for living a spiritual life in a secular world, but first it will be useful if we examine the concept of secularism so that we understand better what we are dealing with.

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## ***The Rise of Secularism***

Modern secularism goes back to the European Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> As a modern state policy it was first enshrined in the American Constitution, or to be more precise, in the Bill of Rights attached to the Constitution.<sup>2</sup> There in the first amendment it is stated: ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.’<sup>3</sup> The precise meaning of that statement and all of its implications have been debated among the American people and in the American courts for more than two hundred years, but its essence has had a profound effect on the whole world. And that essence is: the government should neither establish an official religion nor support nor favour a particular religion.

Until modern times, all civilisations of the world had been explicitly religious, having a religious core, and governments in general sought legitimacy through a formal tie to—or sometimes identity with—religious authority.<sup>4</sup> State authority was clothed in religious insignia and blessed with religious ritual. America intentionally severed that tie, but without discouraging religion.

A large majority of Americans look on the principle of secularism as a great achievement, liberating citizens from religious tyranny. The prior experience in the West had been that the joining of religious authority with state authority prevented the free exercise of the individual conscience. Religious authorities decided issues of public morality, religious authorities decided matters of acceptable belief, religious authorities



A French Salon Where Philosophical Discussions Took Place during the Enlightenment

decided what books could be read and what ideas could be taught and even what scientific theories were acceptable, and religious authorities decided on punishment for deviation from orthodoxy, often including death by torture.

Starting with the Reformation in Western Europe, freedom of conscience—the individual conscience—became more and more prized. Once freed from the domination of Rome, however, Protestant countries established their own particular brand of Protestantism as the state religion, so religion was still not separated from state power. Then came the European Enlightenment, when a more radical view of the freeing of the conscience was developed—the freeing of the conscience from religious authority altogether. This didn't necessarily mean the freeing of the conscience from religion itself, though some like Voltaire sought that, but it did mean

at least freeing the individual conscience from institutional religious authority.

The 'American experiment', as the new form of democracy was called, came as a logical conclusion of this freeing of the individual conscience, and in turn became the beginning of the modern movement towards governmental secularism.

In the twentieth century, for the first time in history, as pointed out by Arnold Toynbee, some countries tried to establish nations based on the *negation* of religion, as in the various communist and some of the fascist experiments.<sup>5</sup> But in America, secularism never meant the negation of religion. There, most religious people and religious institutions have supported the idea of secularism, because the historical experience in the West has been that, just as unchecked political power corrupts, so giving political power to religious institutions corrupts religion as well.

Therefore, secularism is considered healthy both for society and for religion itself.

The attitudes and experience in other parts of the world can be quite contrary. In some Islamic countries, for example, secularism is seen as a modern cancer cutting at the foundations of faith, destroying the cohesiveness of the Islamic Umma, community of believers, weakening public morality, and negating the very possibility of political Islam. Similar is the experience in some Buddhist

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**Can religion unite India now? Is Swami Vivekananda's dream of an India united by religion dead? It would be premature to declare any of the swami's ideas as dead.**

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countries, and in India there are those who believe that secularism has been bad for the country.

It is easy for Westerners to dismiss such concerns in other cultures, cultures with long and deep religious traditions. The typical Western response is, well, secularism was resisted by religious institutions in the West also for a long time, but they got over it, and so will these cultures—the implication being that these other cultures just haven't evolved enough to know what's good for them.

But most Westerners are blind to the other side of secularism, even as it is found in their own midst: the progressive removal of religion from public life, so that public life is religiously sterile, with the consequent dilution of religious values in public life and even in private life, and—one could argue—the ensuing dilution of moral values in public and private life.

In 2013 I went on invitation to Bhutan for a conference on preserving traditional values and culture and the environment in a developing world, sponsored in part by Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Centre. We spent six days travelling around the country, meeting people and seeing programs in place, and then four days in

the capital for the conference. As part of our tour of the capital, we were shown the Parliament Hall. What an extraordinary space!—filled with beautifully done religious symbolism, the working space organised symbolically, the protocol symbolic. One felt that one was in a temple, a beautiful and meaningful space charged with symbolic power.

A member of our party—a brilliant Indian spiritual and social thinker—expressed profound sadness on comparing this hall to the sterile Parliament building in New Delhi which reflects Western neo-classical sensitivities more than the native Indian. Yes, Bhutan has problems like other countries, including corrupt politicians who remain immune to the religious symbolism surrounding them. Still, the contrast was striking, and the inspiration one felt in the Bhutanese Parliament as opposed to the sense of secular authority imposed on one by the Parliament building in New Delhi were remarkably different. This is part of the cost of secularism: the loss of a meaningful symbolic world in the public sphere.

Thus, on the one hand we have the problem of increasingly diverse societies around the world, where the imposition of one state religion is oppressive to minorities; oppressive even to diverse beliefs within the majority religion,<sup>6</sup> and on the other we have religiously sterile societies where the sacred is increasingly squeezed out, to die from neglect. How to gain the liberalizing value of secularism without destroying the integrity of society through the neglect of the sacred?

***Beyond Secularism***

Here we don't pretend to have an answer, nor can an answer be dictated from on high, but we want to discuss some possibilities.

An answer can't be imposed from on high because, as Swami Vivekananda often said, society has a life of its own. It isn't a machine but an organism. As with an organism, we can support

its health by providing favourable circumstances, but we can't *make* it grow, or *do* the growing for it. That is why the swami was against revolutionary movements, where the attempt is to destroy the old and build something new and better: that always does more harm than good, he said, because of the organic nature of society where institutions are evolved over long periods in response to circumstances.



A machine can be broken down into its component parts, the parts can be retooled or replaced, and the machine can be reassembled in a new way, but again, a society is not a machine with mechanical parts. Therefore the swami's method of bringing about needed changes in society was not the reformist's method of destroying institutions and building something new in their place. His method was to feed society nourishing food in the form of life-giving ideas and ideals, and then society itself would in time internalise them and express them in its institutions.

Along with seeing society as a living organism, the swami also said that each society has a purpose, an ideal which is its very life and *raison d'être*. As long as that ideal is strong, the society remains strong, and if the ideal dies, the society dies. And, as is well known, he said that India's ideal is God, or more precisely, the realisation of God. All reform, he said, has always come to India through religion, and it will have to continue to do so. It is religion that unifies India, it is religion that has always inspired all of her traditional institutions, and it is religion that has kept Indian civilisation alive since the dawn of history.<sup>7</sup>

But how can religion unite India now? There is a very large Muslim population, a significant

Christian population, many Sikhs now define themselves as non-Hindu, and there is a very small but growing number of Buddhists. Many Jainas, though non-Vedic, consider themselves as practically Hindu, or Hindu-with-a-difference, but all the others have very distinct non-Hindu identities. Is the swami's dream of an India united by religion therefore dead?

It would be highly premature to declare any of the swami's ideas as dead. So let us try to get a glimpse at least of what he might have foreseen.

First, the swami certainly did not want Hinduism forced down the throats of anyone; and he also understood that other religious traditions are here in India to stay: they are not temporary visitors who would decide tomorrow to go elsewhere. They are Indian. The swami was the first great 'reformer'<sup>8</sup> to accept the whole of India's past, including its Muslim past. He foresaw a beneficial coming together of Hindu and Muslim influences in the future of India. And he expressed great admiration for the Sikh tradition, which in his time was still largely considered a member of the vast and diverse Hindu family. He was admittedly wary of Christianity in India because, at the time, it was part of the colonial project. But he spoke very highly of Christ and of the great mystics of Christianity, and of books like *The Imitation of Christ*.

The swami's vision was—as far as this author can see with his limited understanding—of an India united by a broad spirituality, where different traditions would all find their place, a spirituality where differences would be seen as different paths to climb the same mountain. And he saw this possibility as the great contribution of the Vedas, the

fountainhead of Indian civilisation ancient and, he foresaw, modern. It was a threefold contribution:

First, the idea famously expressed as '*Ekam sad, viprā babudhā vadanti*, truth is one, sages call it variously.'<sup>9</sup> There is one infinite, illimitable, unnameable Truth, which is described in various ways by different sages. In this vision, the different religious traditions are seen as naturally harmonious because they are all directed toward the same Reality.

Second was the associated Vedic idea that religion is one thing, but people 'do' it in a variety of ways. As the swami used to say, the idea of different religions arose in India with Buddhism, when the Buddhists said, 'We are not like you; we are different and don't accept your ideas and traditions.' It thus didn't come from the Hindu reaction to Buddhism, but from the Buddhist reaction and rejection of Hinduism: Hinduism could easily have found room for Buddhism, which was no more radical than the Sankhya or the Nyaya.

From these first two Vedic principles, we get a philosophy of religion that is ready not only to accept all, but to embrace all. It makes room for all as they are; it doesn't demand that they all first conform to a list of imposed rules before they can be accepted.

The third contribution of the Vedas was the contribution specifically of the Vedanta, the Upanishads, which presented a religion based on experiential principles. The Upanishads don't present a religion of mythology or ritual or creed or revelation or fiat. They present a religion of principles, discovered in direct experience, principles which can be rediscovered in

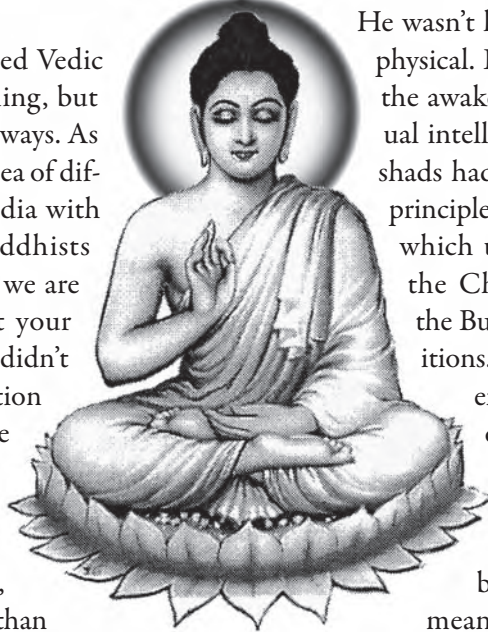
anyone's experience, independent of culture or race or country, and which the swami found to underlie religion itself, in all its forms. A mythology can never be universal, a ritual can never be universal, nor can a creed or culture or a particular people's history. Principles are by nature universal, like the law of gravity.

That's why the swami spoke of a 'Vedanta brain and Islam body' as the future of India.

He wasn't limiting Islam to something physical. By 'Vedanta brain' he meant the awakened Vedantic *dhi* or spiritual intelligence which in the Upanishads had discovered the underlying principles of religion itself, principles which underlie the Sufi tradition, the Christian mystical tradition, the Buddhist, Sikh, and other traditions. That could provide a broad enough foundation for an Indian civilisation where the different religions are partners rather than competitors at best. By 'Vedanta brain' and 'Islam body' he thus meant, not that 'the Hindus' of today would be the head and 'the Muslims'

would be the body, but that the Vedantic principles would form the background philosophy of Indian civilisation, and that the ideal of the Muslim community where all are equal would form the social body. That is, he saw the Islamic ideal of equality as a practical working out of the Vedantic view of the divinity of all souls.

Some Hindus may say, 'Well, other religious groups in India want to remain separate from us, and some want to be antagonistic. Why would they join with us?' We can infer that the swami's answer to that would be, if Hindus once again become spiritually vitalised, if they become fired with these principles, and if they sincerely embrace every



Indian as brother or sister, opening their arms and hearts to all, then others will want to join hands, not by conversion but by seeing a deeper unity where all are united. As the swami used to reiterate, the Vedantic method is to look to the subjective, to ask what my part is in the present divisions.

### ***The Individual Sadhaka in a Secular Context***

In the remaining space, let us turn from the social level to the individual sadhaka or spiritual aspirant who wishes to lead a spiritual life in a secular world.

At one time an aspirant of any tradition lived in a social context that was rich in religious symbolism and ritual. Belief in spiritual realities was common and normal. True, to follow a life of renunciation was often regarded even in religious societies as extreme, but it was the extreme end of a continuum, a continuum of religious belief on which almost everyone in society found themselves. This was true not just in India but in Western and other countries as well. It was normal for a Roman Catholic family, for instance, to consider it a duty to God and to the Church to give at least one son to the priesthood, and families felt blessed to have a son or daughter in a monastic community.

As secularism has spread, that has become increasingly rare: the social context has become increasingly sterile of religious influences. Now an aspirant must contend with a society that constantly gives contrary messages: consumption is bliss, enjoyment is the ultimate aim of life, money buys security and happiness, self-aggrandisement is good and necessary while self-sacrifice is for those who can't measure up, while renunciation is, well, renunciation is just crazy.

This means that today, more than ever before, the spiritual aspirant has to swim upstream against a strong contrary current. The good news is that an intense spiritual life is still possible;

more importantly, it is essential in order to turn the tide of worldliness that is sinking the whole world, India included. As Swami Vivekananda wrote to Margaret Noble, before she became Sister Nivedita: 'Who will give the world light? Sacrifice in the past has been the Law, it will be, alas, for ages to come. The earth's bravest and best will have to sacrifice themselves for the good of many, for the welfare of all. Buddhas by the hundred are necessary with eternal love and pity. ... I am sure, you have the making in you of a world-mover, and others will also come. Bold words and bolder deeds are what we want. Awake, awake, great ones! The world is burning with misery. Can you sleep? Let us call and call till the sleeping gods awake, till the god within answers to the call.'<sup>10</sup>

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**Secularism is not an end in itself. It may bring great good in the long run, freeing people from the tyranny of a stale piety, the tyranny of ideas that have outlived their usefulness.**

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On the other hand, there is an advantage today that has never existed before: because secularism has made religion more of a private affair, one has greater freedom of choice in religious matters than ever before, even in India which has always been religiously liberal. Of course, wherever there is freedom, there is greater responsibility as well, and so one must take responsibility for finding a path and seeing it through to the end.

Moreover, the Vedanta taught by Swami Vivekananda is especially suited to the modern secular world. Not that it depends on secularism, not at all. But a secular society is no obstacle to the life of a Vedantin.


Vedanta depends on no mythology, though one can have all the mythology one wants. Vedanta depends on no ritual, though one can be as ritualistic as one wants. Vedanta has no one teacher that all must bow before. Take inspiration



from the person or persons that naturally inspire you. Vedanta has no one scripture that all must exclusively worship. Yes, Vedanta means the Upanishads, but the Upanishads themselves say that it is not by the study of the scriptures that one attains to the highest. So, as Swami Vivekananda says, concentrate on the scripture that gives you the most light, that speaks your mental language, the language of your temperament. And this is why the swami saw Vedanta as having the potential to unite India.

Though India is still full of temples—at the foot of innumerable trees, on top of every hill, on practically every street corner—that’s not the case today in many secular societies. So what? Fall down in worship before every man, woman, and child. Worship the Virat. This universe, as the swami often said, is the visible God. It is he who is eating through all these mouths. It is he who needs clothing, he who needs shelter, he who pulls the rickshaw; it is even he who steals, he who sits in prison. He is the king and he the beggar, he the saint and he the sinner. What need of symbols and temples and images? What need of support from society?

When seen in this way, secularism, though a limitation that has some negative effects on society, is perhaps a phase that by God’s grace we are passing through, a phase that is cleaning out long ages of superstition, long ages of encrusted practices that no longer function, that no longer inspire, that no longer convey the meaning they once did. It is forcing people to take to spiritual life consciously. No, secularism is not an end in itself; it is only a phase through which society is passing, but it may turn out to bring great good in the long run, freeing people from the tyranny of a stale piety, the tyranny of a sclerotic interpretation, the tyranny of ideas that have outlived their usefulness. Truth is eternal, but social truths are temporary, for a time, for an age perhaps, but not eternal.

Swami Vivekananda—if he did anything, he clarified and held before us the eternal truth, freed from temporal superstitions, freed from time-limited observances, freed from all that is purely cultural, so that it could be re-adapted to the modern age, in all countries, in all cultures, by all people. Let us take advantage of this grand opportunity for ourselves as individuals, and let us help society where we can, not by ‘reforming’ through destruction, but through worshipping the living God within everyone and everything. 

### Notes and References

1. The concept of free thought on which secularism is based has been found since ancient times, East and West. The word ‘secularism’ itself, however, was coined by the British writer George Jacob Holyoake in 1851, well after the end of the European Enlightenment. In this article we are speaking of the modern *concept* which, again, began in the Enlightenment.
2. Actually, the state of Virginia put a robust freedom of religion clause in its constitution in 1786, five years before the first amendment to the US Constitution was adopted in 1791.
3. This is the beginning of the first amendment. Congress, under the US Constitution, is the legislative branch.
4. This doesn’t mean that there wasn’t religious freedom before modern secularism. For example, India had enjoyed religious freedom for millennia.
5. Earlier the French Revolution (1789–99) had also made an attempt to do the same.
6. As we see with the ongoing persecution of the Ahmadiya community in Pakistan.
7. China is the only other country with such a long and continuous history, though with China it is perhaps humanism as opposed to spirituality that is her ideal.
8. The swami would have vigorously objected to the term, for reasons already given.
9. Rig Veda, 1.164.46.
10. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 7501.



# ***Spirituality without Religiosity: The Urge in the Modern Mind***

**Swami Atmapriyananda**

**W**HAT IS THE INNERMOST URGE in the human mind that motivates a person to find meaning to life?

This question has been asked time and again since the dawn of civilisation and the range of answers is of course too vast, quite naturally so, given the variety and complexity of the human psyche. But the one predominant answer is the irresistible urge in the human mind to seek something that transcends the sense world of everyday reality. Why is it so? Because the human mind, irrespective of place or time or circumstances, has never felt satisfied with its present condition. This deep dissatisfaction propels it to try

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to move on to a different state of mind or new level of consciousness hoping to find satisfaction in the new state or the new level.

This search in the inner world of spirituality and mysticism, however fascinating, has come under fire from the so-called rational human mind that at its best feels uneasy and uncomfortable with such an undertaking and at its worst finds it downright abhorrent and bizarre. But then why is it that the rational human heart turns for a moment 'irrational' in feeling joyful at the sight of a rising morning sun on a winter morning on the shores of the river Ganga emerging from nowhere as a bright red disc of breathtaking beauty? Why does the rational Wordsworth feel so 'irrationally' that his heart 'leaps up in joy' when it 'beholds a rainbow in the sky'? Why does a mother's or father's emotion surge joyfully

when the baby in her or his arms opens its toothless mouth wide and laughs gleefully as a picture of matchless innocence and immaculate purity? What is the materialistic or 'rational' explanation? Is this all through neuron reactions? We are so far away, what with our boast of scientific advancement, song and dance about technology, from understanding even an infinitesimal part

**'The intuitive mind is man's greatest gift while the rational mind is his faithful servant. We have created a civilisation which honours the servant and ignores the gift!'**

of the human brain and its functions that the neuro-scientific explanations—admit the best of neuroscientists—appear so childish.

### ***Spirituality as the Search for the Source of Being, Awareness, and Joy***

There are situations, and millions of such situations arise every moment in our everyday life, in which the rational mind is exposed as a dull, dead killjoy, and the non-rational emerges as a victorious saviour of our sensitive soul. It is an oft-quoted saying: 'The intuitive mind is man's greatest gift while the rational mind is his faithful servant. Unfortunately, we have created a civilization which honours the servant and ignores the gift!' If materialistic calculations were alone to decide and dominate our daily life, every parent should be weeping and mourning when a cute, beautiful baby is born to her or him, for this child is going to be a liability for the next two decades or more, what a drain of material resources! But then it is a most common experience that every parent, even the most selfish or materialistic, rejoices at the sight of a newborn baby. Why? Because there is something within the human psyche that is a source of inexhaustible joy and wellness and this source transcends

and overpowers the selfishness and materialistic calculations of even the cruelest heart.

What is this inner source? Wherefrom does this 'irrational' joy at the sight of the morning sun or the rainbow in the sky arise? Is such a feeling—this 'irrational' sentiment that is nonetheless pure and elevating—extendable to a domain that transcends nature? Whence is this human urge to be noble, to be truthful, to be selfless, and to be pure and loving? Can these noble emotions of the human heart, without which humanism on this earth would be reduced to mere animalism, be simply wished away or brushed aside as meaningless and irrational?

These and countless similar questions crowd the human mind that is seriously and unbiasedly trained to ask fundamental questions about life and existence—questions like 'Why do we exist?' 'What are we?' It is in this context that the present trend, particularly among the youth, to crave for something higher and nobler without accepting the sanction of the so-called religion becomes relevant—what we have called in the very title of this paper as 'spirituality without religiosity'.

Nor is this trend of thought completely new. It is as old as Buddha who for the first time renounced all worldly pleasures and personal comforts not for the sake of religion or God, but for finding a lasting solution to the problem of misery plaguing the human heart and who taught that 'to be good and to do good' is the whole of religion. This trend of thought is as old as the last literature of the Upanishads which is a record of the rishis' bold attempt to seek, within and without, that divine source of infinite wisdom, infinite Consciousness, infinite bliss, by breaking down the fossilised structure of religious ritualism and religious barter masquerading as religion—'O God, I give you this, and You in turn give me this back a thousandfold'—what Swami Vivekananda in recent times called

‘sanctified shop-keeping’. In more recent times, religion per se has come to be understood and defined as the search for the ultimate Reality as contradistinguished from the religious dogmas and ritualistic exercises that constitute merely its periphery. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan’s powerful words may be recalled in this context: ‘Religion is not doctrinal conformity or ceremonial piety, but it is participation in the mystery of being. It is wisdom or insight into reality.’<sup>1</sup> Spirituality thus is the innermost urge in the human heart to search for the very source of Being. This Being, which is pure Existence, is at once the source of Consciousness or Awareness and Bliss or Joy.

### ***Spirituality in the Modern World— The Vedanta World View***

Vedanta asks us simply to analyse our daily experience to answer the fundamental question, which any sensible human being needs to ask some time or the other in one’s life: Why do we exist? What are we? Where do we come from? What is our final destiny? What is the meaning of our daily life and experience? Is this life of relative existence the be all and end all of human life? What indeed is life? What is death? We may close our eyes to these questions for some time. Perhaps in our youthfulness and infancy we may try to wish them away. But these questions will come back to us, again and again, as we grow older, as long as we remain as thinking, rational human beings, with the three existential problems of life and existence, namely, disease, old age, and death, staring at us squarely in the face. Let us now analyse our daily experiences. The following analysis, remarkable and rational as it is, is based on an analysis given by Swami Ramakrishnananda, who was a direct monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and a dear brother-disciple of Swami Vivekananda.

Our very *first experience* is our own existence.

From our experience in daily life, we see that nobody can imagine one’s own death, one’s own non-existence. Nobody wants to die. Nobody can imagine one’s own destruction. When we read the newspapers, watch the daily television news and see people dying, see deaths by the hundreds, by the thousands, terrible, gruesome deaths by accident, by suicide, by any other means, we often cry out in pain, ‘Ah, what a terrible thing!’ We feel so much agony, so much empathy. But the very next moment we are off, back to the common conversation: ‘Eh, where’s the tea? I need to leave quickly, get ready for the heavy day’s work ahead’. It doesn’t just strike us, even for a second, that we too could die this very moment! This shows that we just cannot imagine our own destruction, our own non-existence.

In the grand immortal epic Mahabharata, an interesting question has been raised: ‘What is the greatest wonder in life?’ The answer is equally interesting: ‘Day after day we find people dying by the hundreds, but we seek perpetuity, we feel that we are going to live for ever, what could be a greater wonder?’ Vedanta analyses this experience and says that at the very root of this feeling is the fact of our real nature being Existence Itself. It is not that we exist, our very nature is Existence. Since Existence can never become non-Existence, we always feel that we will live for ever, we seek permanence. The Vedantic term for this feeling is that we are *sat-svarupa*, Existence itself is our real nature. Interestingly, nobody can deny her or his own existence. Nobody can assert: ‘I do not exist’! Because, to say that ‘I do not exist’, the ‘I’ should be there!

Vedanta therefore says that this undeniable, incontrovertible, irreducible, constant, unchanging, eternal ‘I’, of the very nature of Existence, is the Self, the Atman, the ultimate Truth about oneself. This Self, the Atman, is the supreme Reality, Brahman. There is no other God apart

from this Self or Atman or Brahman that Vedanta posits, and it is interesting that this is deeply reflected in our daily experience. Vedanta makes no qualms about a person who does not believe in God, because one has to believe in oneself, in one's own higher Self or Atman which is an undeniable entity. Swami Vivekananda couched this fundamental Vedantic principle in the following startling statement: 'The old religions said that he was an atheist who did not believe in God. The new religion says that he is the atheist who does not believe in himself.'<sup>2</sup> Acharya Shankara, commenting on why one cannot deny the Atman, says beautifully: 'This Atman is the very Self of the person who is the denier!'<sup>3</sup> So, he says that everybody possesses self-knowledge. It is only that one does not know the real nature of this self as the immortal, undying, eternal Atman and hence, the urgent need for Self-enquiry.

Our *second experience* is that we always want to know more and more. Nobody wants to remain ignorant. There can be no satiation in knowledge. Man wants to continuously explore, to seek, to find, to learn, to search. As the great poet Tennyson said in his famous poem Ulysses: 'One equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will; to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.'<sup>4</sup> What is the urge which makes man explore the dense impenetrable regions of the Amazon forests, the depths of the Pacific Ocean, the peaks of the Mount Everest, probe the depths of space through moon missions and Mars missions, and so on, at so much risk? Is it for any personal gain? No. It is not even for the advancement of science. When you are launched into space, you are lost there as it were, the chances of your being back on earth is anybody's guess! When you are not even sure of your return, who cares if science advances or not?

So, what is the urge that makes the human mind explore the unknown? The urge is the

hunger for knowledge, to know more and more. This deep craving for knowledge arises, Vedanta says, from the fact that your real nature is knowledge itself. The Vedantic terminology is that the Self is *jnana-svarupa, chit-svarupa*—the very embodiment of Knowledge, Consciousness, and Awareness. *Chit* is a beautiful word in Vedanta which means expression, manifestation, showing up. How do you know that a table exists? Because you see it. How do you see it? Science will explain this phenomenon of seeing by saying that light falls on the table and the reflected light comes to my eyes and the brain interprets it as a table. So the table needs an external light to reveal it, to show it. Now, the table is matter, and therefore requires a conscious principle to certify its existence. This world does not come and tell me 'I exist', but I say this world exists.

Let me give you a simple example. Thousands of devotees throng the holy place of pilgrimage, Belur Math, where I live, on special days considered sacred by the Hindus. There is an enquiry booth from where continuous announcements are made to inform people of so many things, important among these being the whereabouts of people who have lost their companions, and friends, children who have lost contact with their parents and guardians, and so on. Suppose a mother has lost contact with her child. She runs about hither and thither calling out her child's name: 'Hey Ram, where are you?' The child, hearing the mother's voice calling him quickly responds: 'Mother, I'm here.' Now think of a similar situation. You are about to rush to the office, already it's late; you need to catch the train. At that time you find that you are unable to locate your pen, your watch, your diary. You cry out in anger and desperation: 'Where's my pen gone, where's my watch, where's my diary?' Does the pen or the watch or the diary come and say, 'Sir, I'm here'? No. Why? They are pieces of unconscious matter,

which cannot announce itself, cannot reveal itself, cannot self-manifest. They need a conscious entity to certify their existence!

What then is the difference? The difference is that Consciousness can announce itself, can reveal itself, can self-manifest, while unconscious matter cannot. Matter requires a conscious principle to reveal it, to certify its existence whereas consciousness does not require anything else apart from itself to certify its existence. This means that matter has dependent existence on consciousness whereas consciousness has independent existence and does not need anything else apart from itself to certify to its existence. Consciousness, therefore, is self-revealing, because it is Existence Absolute and Consciousness Absolute. Being Existence Absolute, it is also Consciousness Absolute. It is therefore called in Vedanta *svayam-prakasha-jyoti*, the self-revealing Light of Consciousness. The word 'light' is used because it is light that always reveals. But here it is not the light of the ordinary kind. It is the Light of lights, the Light of Consciousness, which is self-revealing, It reveals or manifests Itself on its own. It is therefore called *svayam-prakasha*, self-revealing light of Consciousness and this Light is the 'Light of lights'. It is this Light that lights, imparts light to, all the ordinary luminous objects, the lights in the world like the sun, the moon, the stars, the fire, and so on. The famous verse of the *Katha Upanishad* says: "There the sun shines not, nor the moon or the stars, nor the lightning, what to speak of this fire! It (the Atman or Brahman) shining all [the so-called luminous objects] shine after It, all these shine by the light of the Atman or Brahman."<sup>5</sup> This is the fundamental truth of Vedanta that Consciousness which is Existence Absolute is also Awareness or Knowledge Absolute and is self-manifest or self-revealing Light.

Our *third experience* is that we all want joy. Human beings relentlessly seek happiness. Only,

the direction from which one seeks happiness is external. Imagining happiness to be external, out there, human beings run about seeking sense-pleasures, only to end up in sorrow. But the fact remains that joy is the fundamental pursuit of human beings. This shows that joy is our real nature. We are of the very nature of joy and happiness, not the happiness that is derived *from* something outside, but the happiness that is our own inner Being, Bliss Absolute. We are thus Existence Absolute, Awareness Absolute, and Bliss Absolute. When you are just sitting quiet, not particularly thinking of anything, just enjoying your own existence, the joy you feel is the semblance of the bliss that is your real nature. Thus awareness of existence is joy, the awareness of 'I am'. In the intense state of that awareness,

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**Matter has dependent existence on consciousness whereas consciousness has independent existence and does not need anything else to certify to its existence.**

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the awareness of 'I am' springs up spontaneously within you like a fountain, a continuous spring of joy welling up from within like a fountain as 'I am', 'I am', 'I am'. That feeling wells up spontaneously and continuously as pure Awareness-Joy, *chid-ananda*, remaining as a pure Witness of all your activities and thoughts.

Putting together the *three* experiences described above, we come to the simple conclusion that we are of the nature of Existence-Awareness-Joy, *Sat-Chit-Ananda*. This is our true nature. Wellness is a term used these days to denote a state of well-being. This is our natural state. Any deviation from this state due to our own wrong thoughts and actions is called illness. Suppose your friend asks you: 'How are you?' and you reply: 'Oh, I am not well.' Your friend's spontaneous reaction will be: 'Why are you not

well? What happened to you?’ Suppose you answered in the first place: ‘I am well’ and he asks: ‘Why are you well?’ it would look ridiculous and laughable. Why? Because wellness is your natural state and not being well is an unnatural state. A natural state does not have a cause, but an unnatural state has. Nobody asks you: ‘Why are you healthy?’, because health is our natural state of existence. Swami Vivekananda beautifully derives the meaning of the Sanskrit word

**One gets a newer revelation about what this fundamental urge is: to stay connected, to feel united, to embrace and share. In one word, it is *interconnectedness*.**

for health, namely, *svasthya*, from ‘Svastha, the Sanskrit word for “standing on your own Self”’.<sup>6</sup>

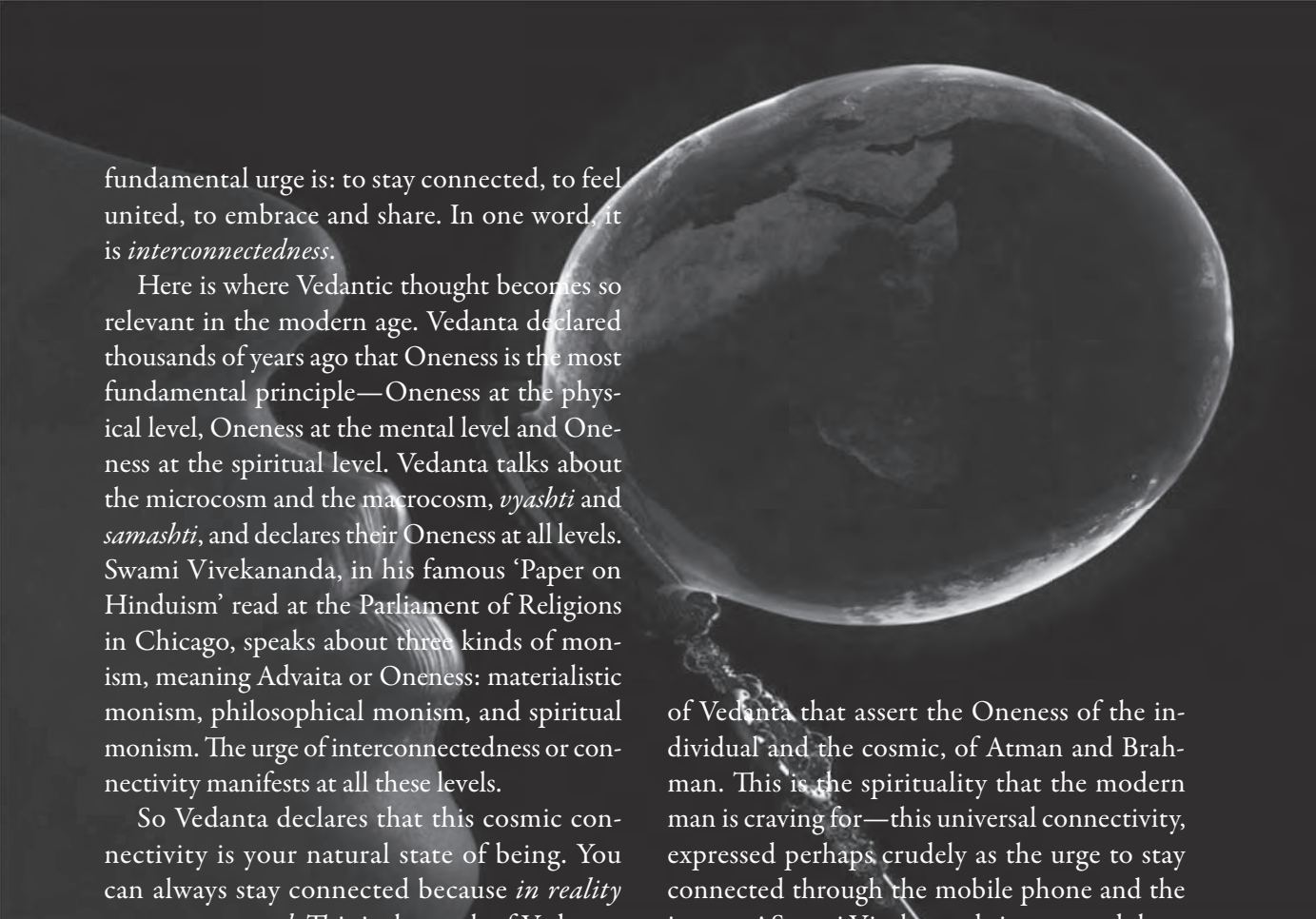
If you are just in your own Self, you are healthy. The moment you move away from your own Self, seeking something external to yourself, ignorantly and foolishly imagining that happiness is out there, you become *a-svastha*, that is, not well or ill. Thus, from our daily experience, including daily usage of language, we see that wellness or being in the Self is our natural state. All that the Upanishads, the Vedanta asks us to do is to deeply analyse our daily experiences and ask simple questions to understand the meaning of these experiences. The result would be profound answers that constitute the body of Vedanta. You are *sat-svarupa*, you are *chit-svarupa*, and you are *ananda-svarupa*: you are *sat-chit-ananda-svarupa*. This truth is derived from a deep analysis of our daily experience. This analysis is called *vichara*, reflection, contemplation. We imagine that we are unhappy, we are ignorant, and so on because we do not do relentless *atma-vichara*, Self-analysis. The practice of *atma-vichara* is a fundamental Vedantic practice.

When Swami Vivekananda expounded these truths of Vedanta in the West and

bombarded the Western audience with the idea that they were *sat-chit-ananda-svarupa*, Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute, he was challenged by a person in his audience who said that the swami was ‘hypnotising’ them, for did not our daily experience dictate that we are small, we are limited, we are joyless, we are ignorant? In that case, asserting that we are *sat-chit-ananda*, we are Infinite and Immortal spirits, and so on, is only hypnotising ourselves into believing what we actually are not. Swamiji instantly and spontaneously replied that he was not hypnotising, but de-hypnotising. We are already hypnotised into believing that we are limited, we are weak, and we are ignorant and so on. Swamiji was helping us to come out of this delusion, this spell of hypnosis, by teaching us our real nature as *sat-chit-ananda*, by de-hypnotising us.

### **Practical Application of the Vedanta World View—Unity leading to Harmony and Peace**


Man’s real nature as *sat-chit-ananda* is a universal principle that alone can unite mankind. It alone can bring about human unity, leading to harmony and peace. The human mind wants to universalise. The human mind always looks to unify. Nobody wants to be isolated. Somehow everyone wants to unify. Everyone wants to realise one’s connectedness with the universe. So the urge to get connected and stay connected so as to embrace everything and communicate at any time with anybody overwhelms even the other basic urges like hunger, thirst, sleep, and so on. In psychology, so many schools have emerged as an answer to this question: What is the most fundamental urge in the human heart? Looking at the modern world of the mobile phone and internet connectivity, one gets a newer revelation about what this



fundamental urge is: to stay connected, to feel united, to embrace and share. In one word, it is *interconnectedness*.

Here is where Vedantic thought becomes so relevant in the modern age. Vedanta declared thousands of years ago that Oneness is the most fundamental principle—Oneness at the physical level, Oneness at the mental level and Oneness at the spiritual level. Vedanta talks about the microcosm and the macrocosm, *vyashti* and *samashti*, and declares their Oneness at all levels. Swami Vivekananda, in his famous ‘Paper on Hinduism’ read at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, speaks about three kinds of monism, meaning Advaita or Oneness: materialistic monism, philosophical monism, and spiritual monism. The urge of interconnectedness or connectivity manifests at all these levels.

So Vedanta declares that this cosmic connectivity is your natural state of being. You can always stay connected because *in reality you are connected*. This is the truth of Vedanta: Oneness of the individual and the universal. We are individuals only when we are universal. The moment we ignorantly think or imagine that we are little beings, isolated, and disconnected, we cut ourselves away, as it were, from the cosmic Reality. The latest theories of the physical sciences, Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity for example based upon Mach’s principle, assert Oneness at the physical level. This Oneness is jocularly expressed by saying that if you lift your little finger, you disturb a star in the cosmos because it is all one ocean of matter of which your little finger and the star out there are like little whirlpools! My body is a part of the ocean of cosmic matter, my mind is a part of the cosmic mind and my spirit is part of the cosmic spirit. So I am one with the Infinite connected at all levels. This is the meaning of the famous *mahavakyas* or great sayings

of Vedanta that assert the Oneness of the individual and the cosmic, of Atman and Brahman. This is the spirituality that the modern man is craving for—this universal connectivity, expressed perhaps crudely as the urge to stay connected through the mobile phone and the internet! Swami Vivekananda interpreted these *mahavakyas*, great sayings, in the light of modern physical and mental sciences to mean Oneness at all levels of existence—physical, mental, intellectual, and spiritual. Spirituality in the modern times therefore is the Vedanta world view of Oneness and unity of all Existence—You are the Universe. And the Universe is you. *Tattvamasī*, You are It. 

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# Basic Human Needs and Spirituality

Swami Nityasthananda

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ASKED his disciple, Sharat Chandra Chakravarty, ‘Well, say then, what is the sign of consciousness? Disciple: Why, sir, that indeed is conscious which acts through intelligence. Swamiji: Everything is conscious which rebels against nature: there consciousness is manifested. Just try to kill a little ant, even it will once resist to save its life. Where there is struggle, where there is rebellion, there is the sign of life, there consciousness is manifested.’<sup>1</sup> This is the most significant, the most original observation, characteristic of Swamiji. Elsewhere, he defines life as ‘the unfoldment and development of a being under circumstances tending to press it down.’<sup>2</sup> Here two important ideas stand out in bold relief: one is the idea of freedom and the other the idea of manifestation of consciousness. All animals resist and try to retain their individuality against all odds of nature. This struggle against nature is the basis of evolution, and its culmination is found in a man of God who is free from nature both external and internal. The positive aspect of this struggle is ‘the manifestation of Divinity already in man’. This indicates that a human being is divine.

There are many definitions of a human being given by the great thinkers of the world depending on their outlook towards humans, ranging from the crude materialistic to the highest spiritual. In fact, these definitions are related to the

different dimensions of humans. Some of them are related to the purely physical nature of human beings, some are related to the psychological aspects, some refer to the social dimension, and some reflect the spiritual nature. There are reductionist psychologists who want to reduce the human being to a sexual animal. Some philosophers with a nobler concept of the human being think that the human being is a rational animal. Social scientists, pinning their attention on the gregarious tendency of the human being, consider it as a social animal. Some physical scientists would like to consider the human being as a tool-making animal. Thinkers of moral philosophy elevate the human being to the level of a moral being. Some theologians consider the human being as a born sinner. And the people of spirituality see the human being as a divine being. If we take all these concepts of a human being together, it gives a comprehensive picture of humans, for the human personality constitutes all these various dimensions dealt with by great thinkers in different fields.

Carl Jung gives a somewhat comprehensive picture of the human being while delineating the human personality structure. According to him, the total personality consists of a number of different but interacting systems—the most important of them are the ego, the personal unconscious, the collective unconscious, the persona, the anima and animus, shadow and the Self. The ego is the conscious mind comprising conscious perceptions, memories, thoughts, and feelings, and it gives one a personal identity. The persona

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IMAGE: [HTTP://WWW.BS757.COM/2011/12/TAKE-CHARGE-OF-YOUR-HEALTH-IN-2012/HOPE](http://www.bs757.com/2011/12/take-charge-of-your-health-in-2012/hope)

is the mask one wears as the social convention and tradition demand. The personal unconscious is composed of all the thoughts, feelings, desires, and so on, repressed by the individual. Things simply forgotten also form a part of its content. The collective unconscious lies deeper than the personal unconscious, and constitutes instincts and archetypes inherited racially from our primitive ancestors. A human being is considered to be bisexual, since both masculine and feminine characteristics are found, in greater or lesser degree, in all human beings. The femininity in man is called anima, and the masculinity in woman is called animus. The shadow is the animal aspect of man which is acquired from his animal ancestors. This gives rise to unpleasant and socially reprehensible thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

The most important component of the human personality is the self, the center of personality which holds other aspects of personality together and provides the personality with unity, equilibrium, and stability. According to Jung,

the self is 'a point midway between the conscious and unconscious. This would be the point of a new equilibrium, a new centering of the total personality, a virtual centre which, on account of its focal position between conscious and unconscious, ensures for the personality a new and more solid foundation.'<sup>3</sup> 'The Self is life's goal, a goal people constantly strive for but rarely reach. It motivates human behavior and causes one to search for wholeness, especially through the avenues provided by religion' (ibid). The wholeness exists in everyone in the form of Christ or Buddha, and we have to manifest it.

What Carl Jung discovered as self in his research as a psychologist, Swami Vivekananda experienced as the real essence of the human personality beyond the psycho-physical entity, not just the most important component of personality structure. Jung's concept of self looks like a center of a whirlpool around which the whole body of water whirls. When we conceptualise the human being as basically a divine being, as

Swamiji conceived, there will be a sea change in our outlook towards the basic needs of humans. The spiritual needs assume paramount importance, relegating psychological needs to a secondary position. We shall consider what constitutes the basic needs of humans from this higher concept of the human being.

### **Meaningful Life**

The human being seeks meaning. It is not like a machine that simply works or an instinct-driven animal that merely survives. It is the divinity in the human being, which is more manifest in it than in other beings, that urges it to seek meaning in life. Only it can ask questions like ‘what is the purpose of life?’ ‘What is the purpose of whole existence?’ Since time immemorial these questions have been asked. We find in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* such questions about the meaning of existence: ‘What is the nature of Brahman, the Source? From what have we been born? By what do we live? And where do we exist?’<sup>4</sup>

In Sankhya there is a great principle: ‘All combinations are meant for something or somebody else.’<sup>5</sup> For example, the house, which is a combination of materials does not exist for itself, but for somebody else to stay in. Since the body, senses, and the mind are all combinations, they must be meant for something other than them which Sankhyans call Purusha or Self which is simple and not a combination. We have to seek this center of personality, the Self, which gives meaning to the whole existence. When we know the meaning of our own existence, we can find our meaning in the total scheme of existence, then everything related to us assumes meaning. All experiences of happiness and suffering appear more meaningful to us. Carl Jung says: ‘A sense of wider meaning to one’s existence is what raises a man beyond mere getting and spending. If he lacks this sense, he is lost and miserable.’<sup>6</sup> Viktor E Frankl, the founder

of Logotherapy, the psychology of meaning, asserts: ‘The will to meaning is really a specific need not reducible to other needs, and is in greater or smaller degree present in all human beings.’<sup>7</sup> And he further states, ‘Actually, the will to power and what one might call a will to pleasure are substitutes for a frustrated will to meaning’ (85).

How to make one’s life meaningful? The seed is useful in many ways. It can either be used for decoration or for play, and it can also be used to satisfy our palate. However, the real purpose of its existence is fulfilled only when it is allowed to germinate and grow into a mighty tree, manifesting its inner potentiality. Similarly our life becomes meaningful and purposeful when we are able to bring out our potentialities, such as inner capacities and talents, love and charity, moral goodness, and finally the potential divinity which is the source of everything that is noble in man.

Sri Ramakrishna puts it in his own way: ‘First realize God, then think of the creation and other things. Valmiki was given the name of Rama to repeat as his mantra, but was told at first to repeat “mara”. “Ma” means God and “ra” the world. First God and then the world. If you know one you know all. If you put fifty zeros after a one, you have a large sum; but erase the one and nothing remains. It is the one that makes the many. First one, then many. First God, then His creatures and the world.’<sup>8</sup> Man derives his meaning by associating himself with the Divine, the Whole—the part becomes meaningful when it is associated with the whole, when it finds its place as a part of the whole.

The manifestation of inner potentialities will give one the sense of fulfilment. As human beings we are supposed to derive happiness from the sense of fulfilment rather than from sense-gratification. It is not an overstatement to say that one’s mental health also depends upon this inner manifestation. According to Western psychologists, some of the neuroses are caused by the conflict

between the inner capacities and the forces that block their expression. If one is able to express oneself in spite of inner blockades or outer discouragement, one would feel a sense of fulfilment, the lack of which will lead to inner emptiness, the existential vacuum as psychologists call it. Carl Jung says: 'About a third of my cases are suffering from no clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and emptiness of their lives.'<sup>9</sup>

Because of this inner emptiness, the human being feels an inordinate desire to possess things, and hankers for power, position, recognition, and so on. In spite of many possessions humans remain empty, for greed is like a 'bottomless pit'. A reservoir remains full if the springs below are open discharging water continuously. If the springs are blocked, it is difficult to keep the reservoir full supplying the water from outside. Similarly our inner emptiness cannot be filled by possessing external things, if the spiritual wellspring is blocked. That is why Jesus Christ says: 'For what shall a man be profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and forfeit his life? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his life?'<sup>10</sup> Life is more valuable than anything in this world, for everything derives its value through a human being. And this human life becomes valuable and meaningful only when it is associated with the Divine.

### **Work as a Means of Self-expression**

Normally work is considered as a means of getting or attaining something. It is true that the activities of animals are restricted mainly to getting something, especially food. Traditionally too, karma is considered to be the means of fulfilling desires. However, from the spiritual standpoint, we have to look upon work not as a means of getting something, but as a means of self-expression. Through activities one expresses one's capacities and talents, love, and charity in the form of service, and one's innate goodness, provided one

performs them with faith in one's potential divinity. Creativity can only be expressed through activities. One can be creative even in the most ordinary activity, and this creativity brings joy. Creativity need not be associated only with aesthetic expressions. One can express one's creativity in finding a novel ways of doing certain things, a novel way of teaching, novel approaches to certain life-situations, and developing a new attitude in improving one's relationship with others.

Abraham Maslow classifies three kinds of creativity: primary creativity, secondary creativity, and integrated creativity. The spontaneous paintings of children, being witty and cutting jokes, singing, tool-making, and so on, without any training can be classed as primary creativity, and it is there in the unconscious. When we

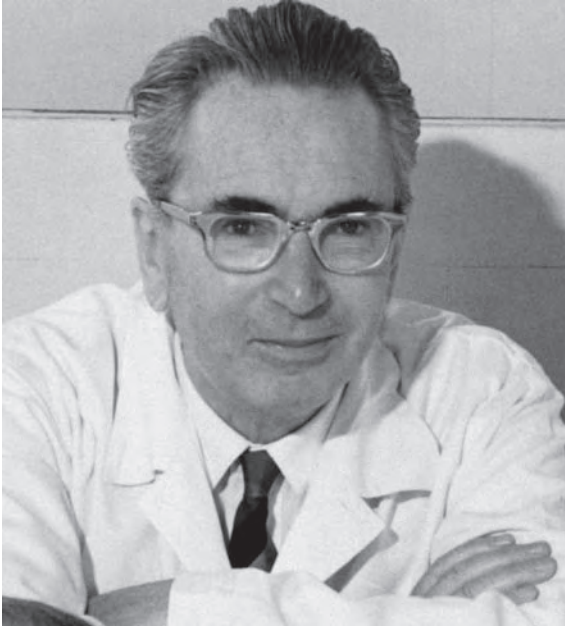
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**The manifestation of inner potentialities will give one the sense of fulfilment. It is not an overstatement to say that one's mental health also depends upon this inner manifestation.**

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repress lower impulses, primary creativity also gets repressed sometimes. Maslow characteristically says, 'By protecting himself against the hell within himself, he also cuts himself off from the heaven within.'<sup>11</sup> According to him, secondary creativity is based on secondary thought processes, that is, the consolidation and development of other people's ideas. This includes most of the productive activities such as building bridges and houses, designing new automobiles, making scientific discoveries, and creating literary works. 'The creativity which uses both types of processes easily and well, in good fusion or in good succession, I shall call "integrated creativity". It is from this kind that comes the great work of art, or philosophy or science' (144).

Work can be done with three main attitudes: as profession, as duty, and as service. While doing



Viktor E Frankl (1905–97)

work as a profession, gain is the motive. While working as service the motive is to give and while working as duty there is no gaining, no giving, but only working for work's sake. In fact, with the attitudinal change, every work can be converted into service to others, because no work is purely personal. Every work, including breathing and thinking, has its own social dimension and in some way affects others and society at large. This awareness will implant in us a greater sense of responsibility. Even a business person does business only for personal profit, rendering some service to society depending upon one's moral integrity. In the Bhagavadgita, Sri Krishna says: 'They indeed eat sin who cook only for themselves.'<sup>12</sup> Here Sri Krishna is referring to all the activities, not only cooking. The important significance of this statement is that no work is purely personal, without having any social implication.

Machines also work perhaps more wonderfully and expeditiously than a human being. But it cannot think 'I am working', it cannot find any fulfilment in work, it cannot judge the moral veracity

of the work, and it cannot feel the sense of freedom in work. All these characteristics are necessarily present in human activity, since the human being is endowed with spiritual consciousness. So it behoves a human being as a spiritual being, to work consciously, with a sense of fulfilment, with moral integrity and a service attitude, and without sacrificing the spirit of independence. Let us listen to Swami Vivekananda's invigorating words: 'We must work. Ordinary mankind, driven everywhere by false desire, what do they know of work? The man propelled by his own feelings and his own senses, what does he know about work? He works, who is not propelled by his own desires, by any selfishness whatsoever. He works, who has no ulterior motive in view. He works, who has nothing to gain from work.'<sup>13</sup>

### **Faith**

Jesus Christ says: 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.'<sup>14</sup> This statement obviously indicates that mere material development is not enough, but faith in God is also indispensable, for the human being is not merely a psycho-physical entity. Christ also emphatically speaks about the unfailing strength of faith: 'Verily I say unto you, if ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you' (17:20). He further says: 'We walk by faith, not by sight.'<sup>15</sup> One of the Vedic hymns, extolling the glory of faith, worshipfully offers the following prayer: 'We worship faith in the morning, at noon, and in the evening. O faith, please endow us with faith.'<sup>16</sup> While commenting on the *Yoga Sutra*, Vyasa makes a beautiful observation: 'Faith is the tranquillity of the mind, and this blessed faith will protect the yogi like a loving mother.'<sup>17</sup> Viktor E Frankl highlights the importance of developing strong

faith with an appropriate example: 'Just as the small fire is extinguished by the storm whereas a large fire is enhanced by it—likewise a weak faith is weakened by predicaments and catastrophes whereas a strong faith is strengthened by them.'<sup>18</sup>

It is instructive to know the positive effect of faith on neural functioning. Andrew Newberg says: 'If you strongly believe in something—in other words, if you have enough faith in yourself—you will stimulate both your immune system and your motivational system into action.'<sup>19</sup> It is authenticated by the research on neurology that 'having faith in the human spirit is what drives us to survive and transcend. It makes life worth living, and it gives meaning to our life' (20–1).

In keeping with Swamiji's ideas, we can speak of four kinds of faith: Faith in God, faith in oneself, faith in the power of goodness, and mutual faith. The faith in God is strengthened and fortified by faith in oneself, without which nothing great can be achieved in life. However, unless this faith is guided by the faith in the power of goodness, the power to achieve may take a squalid path that could affect society insidiously. When people in general lose faith in the power of goodness, the degeneration of that society is unavoidable. According to Swamiji, the greatest service that one can render to society is to restore faith in the power of goodness among the people. He says: 'We may convert every house in the country into a charity asylum, we may fill the land with hospitals, but the misery of man will still continue to exist until man's character changes.'<sup>20</sup> This faith must be the guiding force behind all our service activities without compromising with moral integrity. If we adopt unfair means to do good to society—convincing ourselves that 'the end justifies the

means'—it will lead to unsavoury conditions in the long run. If we honour corrupt personalities for their support of our service projects, people in general would lose moral faith. We have to look beyond the immediate purpose to be served.

The lack of moral faith will lead to the most tragic situation where 'no one is to be trusted'. Without mutual trust and faith humans cannot live happily in society. Let us recall Swamiji's exhortation: 'I have never failed in my faith in man in any case, even taking him at his worst. Wherever I had faith in man, though at first the prospect was not always bright, yet it triumphed in the long run. Have faith in man, whether he appears to you to be a very learned one or a most ignorant one. Have faith in man, whether he appears to be an angel or the very devil himself' (3,383–4).

### **Relatedness**

We live in a world of relationships. Everything here is related to everything else, and total isolation is an impossibility. We cannot even imagine a completely distinctive existence, for the very process of imagination itself involves getting related. The whole universe can be compared to a picture where every line and every colour is interrelated. Nothing in it can be separated

*Andrew Newberg (b.1966)*



without undermining, at least to some extent, the meaning of the whole picture.

We live in three kinds of environments: natural, social, and internal. As we all know, the natural environment comprises air, water, hills, flora and fauna, and so on. Its vital role in the survival of human beings on earth can never be overestimated. The human being's life on earth largely depends on keeping the natural environment clean and in abundance. It means, we have to live in harmony with nature and cooperate with its evolutionary process. Another environment in which we live is the social or human environment. Our physical and mental health and well-being largely depends on our capacity to relate to others and society at large. This human urge to relate to others, according to psychologists, is stronger than all other human urges. When one is unable to develop healthy relationships with others, one suffers from loneliness—though living amidst many people. It is a strange phenomenon that while some people rejoice being alone in a solitary place, many others feel forlorn even living amidst a crowd. Some blessed ones enjoy solitariness everywhere and some hapless people suffer from loneliness everywhere.

More important than the outer world is the inner world in which we live. This is the world of our thoughts, emotions, and feelings. When there is harmony among them, if the environment of the inner world remains free from the pollution of negative thoughts and feelings, then we can have better human relationships in the external world also. This inner harmony is fundamental to social harmony. This inner harmony can be attained by making different faculties of the mind function harmoniously with divinity as the centre. Swami Yatiswarananda says: 'With the help of prayer or hymns, by repeating mystic words and dwelling on their meaning, by meditating on the divine Reality, we can create such

a "music" in our soul, such a harmonious state within us, that we rise above our little personality, our little ego, our individual consciousness. ... Here the deepest integration takes place.'<sup>21</sup> Swami Vivekananda puts it succinctly: 'Manifest the divinity within you, and everything will be harmoniously arranged around it.'<sup>22</sup>

What is important is that there must be a fundamental change in our mindset, so that we can have access to the perennial source of joy and inspiration within, which will facilitate our developing a harmonious relationship with other fellow beings. This harmonious human relationship is and can be a great source of happiness, and the lack of this can produce intense agony leading to various physical and mental ailments. Broadly speaking, we can identify three kinds of relationships: material, human, and divine. The first one refers to our relationship with material objects and machines. Constantly engaging ourselves with matter and machine, we also become more materialistic and mechanical devoid of humanity. It is worth recounting the warning that Swamiji gave a hundred years ago, 'Machinery in a small proportion is good, but too much of it kills man's initiative and makes a lifeless machine of him. The men in factories are doing the same monotonous work, day after day, night after night, year after year, each batch of men doing one special bit of work—such as fashioning the heads of pins, or uniting the ends of threads, or moving backwards or forwards with the loom—for a whole life. And the result is that the loss of that special job means death to them—they find no other means of living and starve. Doing routine work like a machine, one becomes a lifeless machine' (7.317). It is a good loving human relationship that gives real happiness to human beings. However, the highest is the divine relationship, which gives eternal happiness and fortifies and ennobles human relationship. Here our basic need to be related reaches its highest fulfilment.

### **Love and Empathy**

It is said, 'Love is not a virtue. It is a necessity; more so than bread and water; more so than light and air.'<sup>23</sup> In this world everything deserves to be loved and respected, nothing is to be discarded as trivial and inconsequential. We take care of machines, cars, and other things that are useful to us. But we neglect living beings, especially human beings, even if they are useful to us in many ways, we follow the tendency to 'use and throw'.

Love is a reward by itself, and our capacity to love by itself should give us inner satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment. We must understand that to love others is a constitutional need; it is essential for our growth. As other's love is a necessity for one's well-being, so also is the expression of our love for others a necessity for one's own well-being. Once we understand this, it will enable us to remain undisturbed even when our love for others is not duly reciprocated; rather we would then regret their inability to reciprocate and thus would be sympathetic to them. Our expression of love need not be the same towards all. In some cases even indifference can be an expression of love. In the case of those who do not expect our love, it is better that we love them obliquely. Love is not a means of filling the inner emptiness, but an expression of inner abundance. It is an inner growth in which the consciousness, confined to the limits of human personality, progressively expands to encompass in its fold, family, society, humanity, and ultimately the entire universe.

Another noble quality related to love, which rather affirms love, is empathy—the capacity to place oneself in the position of others and share their happiness and misery. Everybody possesses this capacity to a greater or lesser degree. When we see others laughing happily, we also tend to share it. Misery also evokes a similar response in others. According to neuroscientists,

the human brain itself is endowed with this capacity. There are certain nerve cells called mirror neurons which are responsible for this empathetic response. For healthy human relationships to prevail in society, it is an absolute necessity to learn to participate in the happiness and misery of another's life, as we expect others to do so in ours. We must learn to share our happiness with others and partake in their misery.

Psychologists identify three kinds of empathy: cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and empathetic concern. 'While cognitive or emotional empathy means we recognize what another person thinks and resonate with their feelings, it does not necessarily lead to sympathy, or concern for another's welfare. The third variety, empathetic concern, goes further: leading us to care about them, mobi-

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**We take care of machines, cars, and other useful things, but we neglect human beings, even if they are useful to us in many ways, we follow the tendency to 'use and throw'.**

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lizing us to help if need be.'<sup>24</sup> Emotional empathy refers to 'do you feel for others?' Cognitive empathy refers to 'do you understand their condition and their actual need?' Empathetic concern is concerned with 'what you can do to help them to face all the challenges?' Swami Vivekananda's following statement epitomises all these ideas in beautiful words: 'What we want is to see the man who is harmoniously developed ... great in heart, great in mind, [great in deed] ... we want the man whose heart feels intensely the miseries and sorrows of the world. ... And [we want] the man who not only can feel but can find the meaning of things, who delves deeply into the heart of nature and understanding. [We want] the man who will not even stop there, [but] who wants to work out [the feeling and meaning by actual deeds]. Such a combination of head, heart, and hand is what we want.'<sup>25</sup>



### Freedom

Another important basic need of human beings is freedom. Every living being wants to be free. The human being is not so degraded as to be happy in a jail, even if living comfortably, and will avail of every opportunity to get free. The very basic human nature is to aspire for freedom as a spiritual being. This urge for freedom expresses itself through one's actions and behaviour. One rebels against authority, breaks laws, destroys, runs about, tells lies, steals, and indulges in all sorts of reprehensible deeds to express one's freedom. And at last finds, to one's utter dismay, that it is not possible to have freedom at the physical level. Then one looks within oneself to find that one is exasperatingly bound by innumerable fetters of desires, emotions, old impressions, and so on. This intense awareness of bondage and desire to be free is the sign of spirituality; this is the sign of manliness too.

However, on the psycho-physical level there is no freedom in a real sense. Let the body be dependent, let the senses be dependent, and let the mind also be dependent, but 'I' should not be dependent upon the body, mind, and senses, I should not dance according to their tunes. I must take care of them as my servants and try to do good to others through them. Let the chamber of our heart reverberate with the invigorating voice of freedom that issued forth from Swamiji's lips: 'Even hells stand out with this miraculous fact that we are born rebels; and the fact of life—the inrushing of life itself—against this we rebel and cry out, "No law for us." As long as we obey the laws we are like machines, and on goes the universe, and we cannot break it. Laws as laws become man's nature. The first inkling of life on its higher level is in seeing this struggle within us to break the bond of nature and to be free. "Freedom, O Freedom! Freedom, O Freedom!" is the song of the soul' (1.335).

One must aspire to live a meaningful life based on faith, expressing one's potential, having loving relationship with others, and enjoying inner freedom. 

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# Spirituality and Management

Swami Nikhileswarananda



**M**ANY PEOPLE FEEL THAT spirituality and management are poles apart like the North Pole and the South Pole because one is sacred and the other secular. This is due to our wrong understanding of these two words.

Popularly spirituality means meditating somewhere in the forests or caves, or performing worship—in short, taking part in some rituals. But spirituality is the development of our inner being for achieving happiness, peace, and fulfilment. This spirituality can be practised in everyday life. This is what Swami Vivekananda came to declare in this age. That is why Sister Nivedita in her introduction to *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* says:

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If the many and the One be indeed the same Reality, then it is not all modes of worship alone, but equally all modes of work, all modes of struggle, all modes of creation, which are paths of realization. No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. ... This is the realization which makes Vivekananda the great preacher of Karma, not as divorced from, but as expressing Jnana and Bhakti. To him, the workshop, the study, the farmyard, and the field are as true and fit scenes for the meeting of God with man as the cell of the monk or the door of the temple.<sup>1</sup>

By the same token, a factory or an industry is as much a fit place for the worship of God in man as a temple, a church, or a mosque.

Secondly, we also do not have a proper understanding of the word 'management'. Management is nothing but organised common sense and is not restricted to business management.

But as soon as we utter the word ‘management’, we equate it with business management.

Peter Drucker, who was one of the most acclaimed management experts of the US, says: ‘Before the 1930s the few writers and thinkers who concerned themselves with management—beginning with Frederick Winslow Taylor around the turn of the century and ending with Chester Barnard just before World War II—all assumed that business management is just a subspecies of

**Spiritual leaders are including cool management jargon in their discourses. A number of corporate executives are trying to adopt spirituality in their personal lives.**

general management.’<sup>2</sup> He further says: ‘But the assumption that Management is Business Management still persists. It is therefore important to assert—and to do so loudly—that Management is NOT Business Management—any more than, say, Medicine is Obstetrics’ (6). So there can be management of business enterprises, NGOs, hospitals, government agencies, banks, and various other organisations. Again, management is not restricted to these institutions only. It may be management of ourselves and our mind, of time, of everyday life

*A Manuscript Illustration of the Battle of Kurukshetra*



as well. It is after all an organised common sense. The science and art of performing a thing productively with maximum utilisation of resources is management. It has to be applied to every walk of life, just as Swami Vivekananda said that Vedanta has to be applied to all situations and fields of life. So if we understand the proper meaning of the two words—spirituality and management—together they would not sound like an oxymoron.

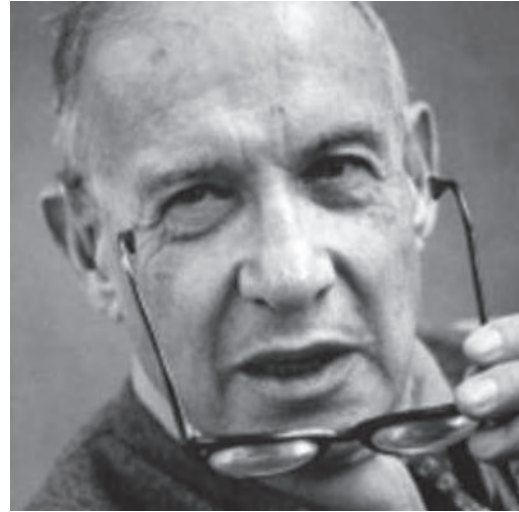
In management, the fourth wave is now coming slowly. The first wave was the British style of management when work-study, work-measurement, and method study were in vogue. The second wave was the American style of management when Peter Drucker became popular. The third wave was the Japanese style of management when Total Quality Management (TQM), Zero-Defect Management, and other such systems became popular. Now the fourth wave is coming, not only in India, but all over the world. And it is spirituality based management with a holistic approach to life. This kind of management is based on Indian ethos, based on spiritual culture. Spirituality is now in vogue in the field of management. Corporate America is embracing Indian philosophy in a big way, phrases from the ancient Hindu texts such as the Bhagavadgita keep on coming up in management circles, websites, and top business schools have introduced self-mastery classes that are using Indian methods to help managers boost their leadership skills and find inner peace amidst hectic life schedules. This has been termed ‘Karma Capitalism’—a gentler and more empathic ethos that surfaces in the post-tech bubble. The trendy Eastern text today is the more introspective Gita.

The Vedic style of management is the new age mantra for the CEOs of some leading companies. It is not a mass movement yet, but has shown improved results to those who have tried it.

From the other end, management is also getting into spirituality. Spiritual leaders are including cool management jargon in their discourses. A number of corporate executives are trying to adopt spirituality in their personal lives and also in their companies for improving the productivity as well as the quality of their own lives and the lives of their staff members. Also some companies are integrating prayer, meditation, and worship into their work routine. This leads to the employees having a peaceful mind and consequently increased productivity.

There are an increasing number of books on spirituality and management, which emphasise the need for ethics and holistic growth in any company. Many companies now train their executives by teaching them values as practised in the lives of great persons. As is evident, there are so many companies now adopting the concepts of spirituality in management and they are getting benefit out of it. But the question arises: Why this paradigm shift? There are obviously many reasons. One reason being globalisation. It has come, whether it is to our liking or not. At least on the economic front, globalisation has come and the globe has become a village now. Advancement in communication technology has annihilated the geographical distances among the nations. Hence, advancement of rapidly changing communication technology can be said to be the first reason for this paradigm shift.


The second reason is liberalization. This has changed the approach of nations towards the economy and other related factors. Consequently, the interdependence of one nation on another has increased. Competition has to give way to interdependence. Productivity is now a must while previously it was an option. Now if there is no productivity the company will be written off from the market. We can understand it from the meltdown that has come now. So the Gita says:



Peter Drucker (1909–2005)

‘Yoga is dexterity in action.’ That is an essential lesson taken up by most of the companies.

Another reason is ‘stress management’. Many companies conduct regular courses on stress management. The Western models of stress management are not working. Western psychologists say that unexpressed or suppressed feelings in the subconscious mind lead to stress problems. So they advise their clients to give vent to their feelings. But the problem is that venting will make one lose her or his job. That is why they are turning to spirituality and meditation. Countless institutions across the world conduct meditation sessions for coping with stress.

Thus we find that management and spirituality are not poles apart, but interdependent. In the field of management we need spirituality and meditation for obtaining concentration and overcoming stress, and for practical spirituality we need management techniques. 

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# Dialogues on Spirituality

Swami Kritarthananda

**T**HE TERM 'Interfaith religious dialogue' has become common among organised religions in recent times, especially in view of communal riots, racial intolerance, and frightening terrorism taking place across the world. All thoughtful people the world over are now looking for peaceful coexistence while maintaining their own identity, religious faith, and freedom of thought uninfluenced by other faiths. It is in fact an honest attempt for the followers of various faiths to seek a proper platform from which they may express the views of their own faith and to show how that faith contributes to the betterment of the world. Each religion or faith is unique in one way or the other.

But in doing so people end up in mere peaceful toleration of other faiths. It is in a way looking objectively at other people following their faiths and letting them do so in order that one's own way of living is not hampered. In other words, there is a tinge of selfishness hidden behind such an attitude. When Swami Vivekananda appeared in the arena of the world religions, he boldly proclaimed that the object of a truly religious

person is not mere peaceful tolerance of others. By tolerance he meant the attitude that other religions may have certain evils too, but I allow them to coexist out of mercy. Instead Swamiji used the word 'acceptance' of other faiths. Its meaning is much wider. Acceptance means I welcome wholeheartedly your religion with all its capacities and limitations. In spiritual life there comes a stage when the ardent devotee realises that the same deity whom he had been worshipping all along resides not only in temples but also in churches and mosques, and more so in the hearts of everyone. So he does not hesitate to genuflect before the holy Cross, nor to pray in congregation in a mosque. His devotion to his own faith does not diminish thereby.

Spirituality, however, cannot be kept bound within such interfaith dialogue. The end and aim of all religions is the attainment of spirituality. And in the long run this spiritual fervour has got to be translated into every walk of life, nay; it must spread into the warp and weft of society. Then only will you be considered successful in life when you can bring spirituality in all your bearings. At least in the Indian context, spirituality means this. We see that both in the East and the West, people afflicted with various problems

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in society are taking to spiritual counselling to find a lasting solution to their problems. Even in psychological fields, experts have started valuing the spiritual quotient (SQ) higher than the intelligence quotient (IQ) or even the emotional quotient (EQ). Research has revealed the fact that a person endowed with a high degree of intellectual achievement or even a good emotional understanding falls back from others in one's rank due to some unknown lacuna. Strange as it may seem, this lacuna has to be filled in by one's inherent spirituality. When someone quotes from the Upanishad saying that 'everything should be enveloped by God'<sup>1</sup>, the common person is taken aback. He feels that God is transcendent, that is, beyond all our earthly dealings, while the Upanishads state that God is both transcendent and immanent at once, and even beyond both. The term 'infinite' attributed to God points to all those countless aspects. Enveloping everything with God is not a superimposition of one thing over the other; rather it is a process of going back to the real nature of things.

Well, our purpose is not to bring in some intricate discourse on philosophy or metaphysics here. This, as we all know, will only be mere intellectualism. It may satisfy our intellects, but we have to find some solution to our day-to-day existential and coexistential problems through interpersonal understandings. Let us go to the root of the teachings of our scriptures which say unanimously that we are basically divine, and not 'fallen from divinity' or 'sinners.' How can this idea of natural divinity be brought to bear upon our life is the question that follows from this. Swami Vivekananda showed us that it is very simple. If God can be contacted in temples, churches, mosques, and so on, through various rituals, then—granted that he is immanent in all beings and everywhere—can he not be met with even through our works, interpersonal dealings, menial chores, and other

fields of work? When you seek him in the depths of meditation, it is a static way of communing with him. Likewise, when you are in movement, you can also commune with the same God who is present everywhere. The only thing you have to take care of is that the work you are engaged in should make you purer in heart and not selfish or eccentric. This can also be done without being too extroverted or work-addicted. Any external work, however absorbing, turns into a mechanical, repetitive process after a period of practice; then the work is carried out with only a very little part of the mind focused on it. This fact bears evidence in the case of an expert cyclist or a typist who can apply the rest of her or his mind to different engagements.

Swami Vivekananda as a schoolboy could simultaneously listen to the class teachings while telling stories to his friends in whispers. Sri Ramakrishna also explained this fact by an example taken from day-to-day life. It is often seen in a market that a woman vendor is at once making bargains with the customers, breastfeeding her child, removing the husked rice from the husking pit as well as pushing in the paddy for husking, all the while keeping a keen gaze on the pounding stone which falls continuously into the pit, so that her hand isn't smashed. So the powerful mind can be used for various engagements at the same time with a little awareness and practice. Now the question is how to gather up the dispersed mind and focus it on something higher and permanent through a strong and trained willpower. This 'higher goal' has to be decided by each individual in one's own way. Everyone has the freedom to choose one's goal by oneself.

Of course there is another approach. That is called spiritualising our everyday life. Any work we do, any work that falls to our lot can be spiritualised. For example, when I am cleaning my own room or toilet, I can look upon it either as a

bounden duty or an opportunity to please God. When you are preparing to welcome a most beloved guest in your home, you take all the necessary steps to put everything in good order so that your guest will feel welcomed. And you never feel tired of doing this. Can that attitude not be extended when cleaning our rooms or even toilets as parts of daily chores or even in our interpersonal dealings? That is exactly what Swamiji meant by saying that the ‘conceptions of the Ved-

**The dynamic power within, which brings about mindfulness, is the willpower; and this willpower has with it the inseparable companion, the vital force.**

anta must come out, must remain not only in the forest, not only in the cave, but they must come out to work at the bar and the bench, in the pulpit, and in the cottage of the poor man, with the fishermen that are catching fish, and with the students that are studying.<sup>2</sup> True, it is easier said than done. But by persistent practice and mindfulness this can also be made possible. And once this is accomplished, even the most menial of tasks will cease to be a source of drudgery. The unbroken flow of the thought of God during our work makes our life more practical and leaves in its trail the by-product of orderliness in all that we do. If you carry on with your work in a spirit of duty or drudgery, you will be in a hurry to finish it; and your way of working will be haphazard. Your vital force will be absent there.

Some religious preachers extol mindfulness under all circumstances for the successful accomplishment of work. But the dynamic power within, which brings about this mindfulness, is the willpower; and this willpower has with it the inseparable companion, the vital force. This vital force works like an obedient machine under the command of will and brings about miraculous,

incredible feats of human capability. So before launching into an undertaking, a person really determined to be successful should of necessity be aware of such valuable forces working in and through him. Without this awareness any endeavour will come to rack and ruin.

### **Dialogue 1**

To exemplify and accentuate the above points, a special type of dialogue is presented here. Concrete examples more often than not succeed in driving a point home. A promising young man aged around thirty-two and with colourful academic achievements once approached a swami for counselling. The following is the dialogue that took place between them:

Young man: Swami, by virtue of my talents I got a position in a multinational company which promised to pay me a high salary along with many other perks like residence, car, laptop, mobile phone, and so on. I was in the prime of youth and dived headlong into my assignment. Some vanity also perhaps peeped through my mind every now and then because I was one of the rare, fortunate chaps blessed with that type of job. Within a year I won the favour of my senior officials, and my parents also found this the right opportunity to arrange my marriage. The wedding went off well. Even our marriage turned out to be happy, and in the following few years we were blessed with two children. But slowly and imperceptibly my responsibilities increased in so many fields. I had to assume a number of roles in my everyday dealings—as a son to my parents, as a partner of my wife, as a father to my children, as a colleague in my working place, and even as a friend to many acquaintances. But so many duties bumping one upon the other has created havoc in my mind, and I am unable to coordinate all these forces in order to bring peace of mind. I feel mentally tired and want to resign from my

job, but the pressure from family keeps me from doing that. Besides, it will be foolish to step back from that lucrative post as the queue of eligible people in wait is quite long. Torn between these two alternatives I am at a loss. Please advise me.

Swami: You spoke of various duties. I very much appreciate that. Every man has to perform quite a number of duties. Our personality has been created in such a way as to meet all such duties. But very few of us are aware of the way to perform them. You rightly pointed out that your task is to *coordinate* all these duties. There is a higher being in you full of power and singular in every respect, which performs this task. But the root cause of all your troubles is that you are unaware of this core of your being, which is the most important part of you. According to our scriptures there are five types of duty enjoined for the householder. They are duty towards our ancestors, duty towards the gods, duty towards the wise men, duty towards our fellow beings, and duty towards other beings, like animals, birds, and so on. Of these, the first duty has to be performed by keeping the glory of the lineage aloft and by becoming a dignified human being in every sense of the term. The second type of duty is carried out through yajna, sacrifice, and worship.

Young man: But in this modern age performances such as sacrifices and worship have become almost outmoded except for a little waving of incense sticks or offering of flowers morning and evening; and those are supposed to be the duties of homemakers.

Swami: You need a wider perspective on the terms yajna and worship. These were not meant merely for the Vedic Age. Their significance breaks the bounds of age, caste, creed, or occupation. The important thing is to get the right interpretation of those terms suiting modern times. You were right to say that yajna with fire and wood is not practicable for modern times. But the

term means sacrifice. Every moment nature sacrifices for the welfare of her inhabitants, mothers sacrifice for their children and others, elders sacrifice a part of their enjoyments for the youngsters, and so on. Knowingly or unknowingly, every moment this process of sacrifice is going on. If you go to work without this sense of sacrifice, you are apt to be bound by whatever work you do. What we need to do is to knowingly practise sacrifice. An inferior thing is sacrificed for a superior thing. Can this not be applied in our day-to-day affairs? Suppose you are sitting in meditation in your closet and in the locality some revelry is going on with loud sounds of music which does not allow you to concentrate. You may feel disturbed at first. But don't give up, and try to think which is more powerful—the outside sound or your mind? In fact sound is only the object, but your mind is the subject. So why don't you merge that sound itself into the ocean of power that is the mind? That confidence is what you should develop. Apply it and you win the contest.

To continue with the types of duties, the third is accomplished through the development of knowledge, the deep study of scriptures as well as self-analysis, cultivation of higher knowledge through discussion, and so on. From the perspective of the modern age, it may also imply imparting knowledge freely to others. Knowledge is never reduced through distribution. This type of duty enriches one even spiritually, and hence it may also be taken as one's duty to oneself. Apart from the above five kinds of duty, the duty to one's own self is the greatest and most important. It keeps your fire of discrimination ablaze. The greatest mistake our modern youth commit is to neglect this duty to oneself after being deluded by the enticements of this colourful world.

Young man: So do you mean I should become selfish and egocentric?

Swami: Far from it. There is a natural urge



in everyone to express the inherent knowledge within and to feel joy at that. In Vedantic parlance this expression is the nature of *Sat*, the inherent knowledge is called *Chit*, and the feeling of joy is called *Ananda*. When the soul is allowed to express itself freely, it becomes satisfied. When this free expression is impeded due to fear of calumny and so on, it results in unsettlement. That is exactly what you failed to take care of amidst your preoccupations in the outer world. In the process of offering wholehearted service to various people you moved away from your own self. This is called self-alienation in psychology. Every now and then, amid your busy schedule, you must take a moment and ask yourself such questions as 'Who am I?', 'What is the purpose of my life?', 'Am I proceeding towards my goal or getting stuck somewhere?'

Young man: Your idea of self-alienation interests me. I never thought along this line. It seems to me a unique point.

Swami: By the statement 'duty to oneself' I meant going back to your real nature. One has to learn by training to stay close to one's being. Another way of spiritualising our lives is to perform every action, in a thoughtful, well-planned, consistent, and orderly way with a calm bearing. Even objectively speaking, no work is good or bad. It is our attitude that makes it so. The point is to pay full attention to the work without caring for success or failure, name or fame. Working in a hurry or in a haphazard way makes matters more complicated.

Young man: Why do I very often find myself in a confused state of mind under situations of exigency? Under the circumstances, taking the right decision becomes extremely difficult.

Swami: That is because your idea about yourself is hazy. Even your opinions and decisions depend helplessly on others' opinion about you. You have not developed a proper sense of the value of life. Everyone's life has a value;

unfortunately very few are aware of it. This sense of value is ingrained from our very childhood. The higher your sense of value, the more decisive you will be in your practical life. Even in an emergency your decision will remain firm. It is said in a Vedantic story that a very young boy went to meet the king of Death and asked him the question about the migration of the soul. The king tried to dissuade the boy in many ways by offering many worldly things such as long life, wealth, and entertainment but failed to impress the boy because the boy knew well what he wanted, and such a lofty thing as he was seeking can be had from the king of Death alone. That is why every individual should orient his life towards higher values from early childhood. Now tell me what your immediate goal of life is.

Young man: Well, I have no clear idea about it at this moment. When I came out of my academic life with bright colours I felt that my immediate goal was to get a coveted post in a company; but after spending several years in that state I now feel my goal was not properly selected.

Swami: Your answer betrays your lack of confidence. It is not enough just to fix a certain goal of life. Anybody can do that. A human being's idea of the goal or purpose in life shifts from one focus to another according to time, experience, and maturity. The human being has a hierarchy of needs. When one need is met, one seeks for something higher, and then higher. As one's real nature is infinite, so are one's wants. All wants will cease to exist only when one attains the highest. The main point is not merely to fix a goal, but to subordinate all other goals to that one goal. In other words, all your temporary or immediate goals should cater to that ultimate goal in every way. Generally that does not happen. Most of the people like to hop from one goal to the other. They like to nibble at one thing now and the next moment at another. This act drains

a lot of energy, leaving them back at square one without an inch of progress. Your success will be commensurate with your goal orientation.

As a matter of fact the only option left to you under such circumstances is to carry on in your present assignment with the proper understanding of yourself, of the world, and of your relation with it. This world is a changing phenomenon, and no one can even dream of developing a lasting relation with something that is transitory, fleeting. A permanent relationship can be established only with that which exists eternally. Think deeply of these instructions and go ahead boldly with your assignment. It is not that after getting this advice all the problems will cease to exist; they may even come up again with redoubled intensity. But your understanding and attitude to face them will no longer be buffeted. I can not help you in actually solving the problems. It is your own trained self that will make the impossible possible.

### **Dialogue 2**

Another day a young woman came to the swami's office, looking worn out and full of suspicion, her gait restless. She straightaway entered into the following conversation:

Young woman: Is there any provision for women to become nuns and stay in this monastery?

Swami: (Smilingly) No; but why do you want to become a nun? Besides, you look quite tired. First be seated a while to relax.

The young woman felt a bit relieved at this reply and sat in the chair. After her breathing became normal she said: I am fed up with this world, and so want to pursue spiritual life so as to lead an honest and peaceful life. This world is too much for me.

Swami: Well, how old are you, and what is your academic achievement?

Young woman: I am twenty-seven. After

graduation I completed an MBA course successfully. Then I got a good job in a company. I hail from a very conservative family. My pious parents brought me up with due care and enriched me from my childhood with so many qualities like honesty, simplicity, kindness, truthfulness, helping others whenever needed, and so on. In order that no evil influence from outside could have its sway on me, my parents always kept me under their close watch. Under their loving care I built up talents also, like music, and dance at home. I was never allowed to come in touch with the bad

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influences of the outside world. Those were my best days. Even when I was undergoing the MBA course I did not have friendship with others more than what little is unavoidable. My soul remained satisfied with my parents' love, and I never cared for any love from others. They even taught me to take the name of God in times of difficulty and to have full faith in him while praying.

But things around me took a sharp change from the moment I joined my assignment. I was suddenly thrown into a strange world full of jealousy, competition, the desperate bid to go ahead of others, a casual display of dishonesty, immoral and irresponsible practices, and so on. I gradually discovered that people are hell-bent on taking advantage of me because I am simple by nature. My boss extracts more work from me as I am unselfish. My colleagues try to unseat me from my office since I am honest. People do not like me when I call a spade a spade. Seeing my polite and humble nature, others try to boss over me. As I do not flatter others, so my promotion is held up unreasonably. Having received such unexpected

blows ceaselessly from the outside world, I have started to lose confidence in my good qualities. From my very childhood I have been hearing my parents quote from the Upanishad: "Truth alone triumphs, not untruth."<sup>3</sup> But after facing such rude behaviour and seeing the nature of worldly people, it seems I am losing faith in that great statement. I really feel suffocated in such circumstances. If even after taking God's name and praying to him I have to suffer so much, then what is the use of such piety? Please advise me how to get out of this mess.

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**The hearts of all the people in the world have not yet become rotten. There are souls who have still great feeling for others, who hold fast to high values of life.**

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Swami: Your parents taught you a great lesson: Truth alone triumphs, and not falsehood. But it has to stand the fiery test of time, place, and circumstance. When you find that in the world only falsehood triumphs, it is only a superficial appearance. By cheating others, leaving others behind by evil strategy, one may manage to get tinsel-like advantages for the time being, but truth will forge its way like a corrosive substance in the long run. You and I may not be there to witness it, but truth will express itself in and through all. It cannot be otherwise. If the truth you have learnt fails to stand before all ordeals, you should know that it is due to your wrong understanding of truth. Your parents taught you many truths, but they did not teach you the truth about this world. One truth is that this world is false! It is just like a fleeting view, a passing show. Hence all relationships in the world are short-lived. Only our relationship with God endures beyond death. Secondly, good and evil are just the obverse and reverse of the same coin; it is the same energy flowing in different directions, like the high and low tides of a river. Another great

mistake you are committing is by thinking that your workplace constitutes the whole world. But the hearts of all the people in the world have not yet become rotten. There are souls, however rare, who still have great feelings for others, who hold fast to the high values of life through thick and thin. To be blessed with the company of such people is a rare privilege of human life. It is with them that you should compare notes, share your good experiences, and feel elated. How can you expect high values from such persons who remain satisfied with the workaday world?

Another flaw in your character is that you never learnt at home to compare notes, to exchange dealings with others in the world. There is a greater family outside your own, which is called society, and of which you are a member too. You have been trained only to take everything from the society, and not to give your best in return. Thus you have built a cocoon of vanity around yourself. Now learn to break out of this cocoon. Don't recoil at the slightest sign of onslaughts. They are meant to make you strong. Swami Vivekananda called this world a gymnasium. We all come here to flex our muscles, and build up strength.

People in general understand piety to mean acts such as repetition of a holy name, leading an austere life, offering charity, putting sectarian marks on the forehead, going on pilgrimage, and other such acts. But true piety consists in your spiritual bearing in every phase of life. Religious practices should enable you to develop the feeling that not only are you intrinsically divine but so are all others. In most people, all spiritual attitudes disappear the moment their integrity is put to the test. You must know that for leading a spiritual life you must pay a high price. If you want to conduct a shop keeping business of give and take with God, all your imaginary edifices of life will crash down in moments of trial. All worldly undertakings are visited by good and bad times. You have

to be ready to take on all that. But always keep a vigil on your faith in goodness. Wasn't Christ crucified for being extraordinarily selfless? Did Buddha even hesitate to accept the invitation of a low caste person and welcome death as a consequence of eating forbidden food? Their lips never uttered any curse for wrongdoers. In fact, evildoers are always scared of holy men. So they spare no pains to

is built only on the results of your bad actions. Rather believe that you can change your fate by performing better acts. Go forward on your own path without being troubled by others. Give up the escapist's attitude towards the world. When faced with trying situations, stand firm with the weapon of your goodness. Remember that if you earnestly seek good company, you will certainly



get it. Instead, if you take to monastic life just to run away from evils, you will only pile up more trouble. Besides, since you work, try to learn the secret of work. Do you know what Swamiji has said in this context: 'Even the greatest fool can accomplish a task if it be after his heart. But the intelligent man is he who can convert every work into one that suits his taste. No

work is petty. Everything in this world is like a banyan-seed, which, though appearing tiny as a mustard-seed, has yet the gigantic banyan tree latent within it. He indeed is intelligent who notices this and succeeds in making all work truly great.'<sup>4</sup> All that I said to you in this context comprise a true spiritual life in the modern age. Just be good yourself, and do good to others. This is the gist of spiritual life. PB

You must develop three things consciously: 1) Faith that *goodness* will win in the long run, not *you* nor anyone else; 2) every creature, including you, has a place assigned in the great scheme of nature; each one should try to find out that right place for oneself; and 3) the whole of nature is bound by the law of karma, which decides the type of birth, longevity, and suffering of every soul. Never believe that your life

work is petty. Everything in this world is like a banyan-seed, which, though appearing tiny as a mustard-seed, has yet the gigantic banyan tree latent within it. He indeed is intelligent who notices this and succeeds in making all work truly great.'<sup>4</sup> All that I said to you in this context comprise a true spiritual life in the modern age. Just be good yourself, and do good to others. This is the gist of spiritual life. PB

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# *The Spiritual Awakening of Humankind*

**Swami Satyamayananda**



**I**N THEIR LONG HISTORY religions have helped civilise societies after humankind began settling down in communities. Religions built civilisation and cultures and have been a blessing to humankind during its many phases of struggle down through the centuries. On the other hand, religions have been and are even now the cause of many wars, battles, fights, violence, and aggression. Religions have been found guilty all over the world of suppressing dissent, sometimes violently, and imprisoning the human spirit. There seems to be this contradiction in religion which is puzzling to the modern mind.

The good side of religion was when it started organising itself and things were simple. But as

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societies and humankind became increasingly complex, religions could not cope with these challenges, and so met them with force and coercion. To an impartial student this demarcation and character of the history of religion is clear. But this is not clear to the religionists and their ideas of society. Thus religion, religionists, and their world view suffer terrible contradictions. Some religions insist on going back to the good old days, but going back is impossible as humankind moves towards the future and does not want to live in the past. There is something terribly wrong about those who want to do so. Human minds are designed to plan and prepare for the future not the past. These religions, societies, and individuals, suffering from contradictions, are facing a new form of threat: a new form of religion that is free and easy to pursue.

Such a culture is being formed on the basis of the nature of humankind, in which religion and its doctrines are found to be deficient. Religious persecution is on the wane and so is the suppression of knowledge. Centuries of social freedom enjoyed by many societies have done away with the religious power over their lives and so naturally societies are veering towards a new area of religious or spiritual experimentation.

### **Religion in Tatters**

Most of the major religions, which developed around books, prophets, churches, doctrines, or priests, are seen to be outdated and are being increasingly left behind by modern society. Those who still hold on to mediaeval theories and doctrines are either deeply dissatisfied or have become fanatical about those beliefs. Moreover, most of these organised religions, because of being organised, spread fast and over centuries have become a political force and a major player in power struggles. That is an additional reason why religions mixed with politics are seen as misfits to ensure the well-being of the spiritual side of the human mind.

Then there are the old religious theories that have been proved wrong by science. These religions see science as an enemy, which in turn has been detrimental for religion's survival. Above all, present day social life is far removed from its old religious settings and ambience. Social life developed because it came out of the clutches of religion, and human development has been so rapid in recent times that social life is totally divorced from religious life; and they are worlds apart. The human heart, with its tremendous increase of desires, finds no answers about present day morality. The morality preached in the old books has not taken into account the psychological profiles of modern humans, such as the issues of abortion, contraceptives, same-sex marriages, and so

on. In addition, religious institutions are becoming increasingly wealthy and drifting away from the spiritual needs of the masses. They are looking only at the temporal needs, now redundant, like building charitable institutions but with the purpose of converting people. The poor masses are there only to be exploited; institutions are becoming bankers and investing in dubious schemes besides laundering unaccounted money. Then there are the various scandals plaguing even the best religious institutions.

There are those who appear religious and pious but scratch them and the fanatic howls out loud. Strong religious faith combined with wrong understanding creates fanatics and fanatics in turn misrepresent their religion's principal teachings. Then there is the fact that people of all faiths cannot get together. Observers are aghast at supposedly learned and cultured people of faith, involved in puerile quarrels with each other, within their own faith, and also with people of other faiths. With the spread of knowledge and resources everywhere, people seeking genuine answers find that religions cannot supply authentic answers. Swami Vivekananda says: 'Religion has been reduced to a sort of national form. It is one of our very best social remnants; let it remain. But the real necessity which the grandfather of the modern man felt for it is gone; he no longer finds it satisfactory to his reason.'<sup>1</sup>

### **New Age Religions and Beyond**

That ancient urge for spirituality found in every human heart, which was smothered by religious practices, doctrines, dogmas, and rituals, is breaking free from its artificial trammels. For instance the belief in reincarnation and karma is strong in New Age beliefs. These doctrines are anathema to major monotheistic religions. For the last fifty years or more as the old doctrines could not satisfy the spiritual hunger of people,

many preachers of different shades and shapes preached a mixture of old doctrines mixed with modern theories. Such spirituality blossomed in many places around the world. New Age religions mixed Eastern and Western philosophical traditions with inspirational psychology and self-help techniques. The body, mind, spirit, or

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**Many gurus, god-men, and charismatic personalities are losing ground to a new perspective: discover your own brand of spirituality; discover your own unique path.**

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soul is an organic whole and science as well as pseudoscience was used liberally. These beliefs took the best from all the religions of the world as well as the various philosophies that made it attractive: spirituality without religion.

In recent times even New Age beliefs are being overshadowed by a new trend in the spiritual quest. The many gurus, god-men, and charismatic personalities are losing ground to a new perspective: discover your own brand of spirituality; discover your own unique path. The masses, however, with their life of intense struggles, still hold firmly to old beliefs, naturally. For these old religions give solace and comfort. Today's new trends in spirituality do not look for comfort or solace but look for truth.

Millions of these modern people searching for spirituality find that they are able to lead a good and happy life without the burden of doctrines and dogmas. Morality is and was not the sole preserve of religions; in fact one can live life on one's own moral terms. Over the years modern theories of secularism and humanism distanced people from religion. The vastness of the cosmos does not frighten educated people but they are finding their own place in the scheme of creation and are basking in it. In the old days religion told them some strange mythological stories and

insisted they were true. People find that they are made of the same stuff that makes all creation and everything in it, down to the humblest and tiniest living and non-living thing. This knowledge is inspiring and makes one an integral part of the cosmos. All genome studies point to a common human source and that human beings are really cousins. One does not need any more religion speaking of the brotherhood of humankind as a religious metaphor. People today are using all sorts of novel and creative methods to solve their problems, which religion taught them to accept as their destiny as well as to quietly suffer their miseries. These people are moulding their own destiny instead of listening to the priests and prophets telling them that their destiny is unalterable and written in stone. Death is no longer seen as frightening and bad but as a necessity in creation. This shift in perception is really grand and it is because of that people now see that life will continue in the cosmos and that the knowledge and skills one acquires in life is distributed to the future generations. Nothing is lost. Each one of us is a part of the unfolding of the grand story of cosmic life.

### ***Diverging Away***

These changes in perception have enabled people to embrace their own individuality and to have the courage to experiment with concepts and practices from different cultures and times. Another large section of individuals look at organised religions as humankind's experiments that got stuck far behind and never moved. These people are acutely aware that peace of mind is not spirituality per se. The newest gadgets to make one happy do not distract them in the least. People know that material wealth does not give lasting happiness. They are discovering that religion is in their souls and that also means the path one takes to express it is also religion. It is not atheism or agnosticism

but spirituality. In their minds spirituality stands divorced from religion, and is not the sole preserve of any institution. Each one finds her or his own religion. It is a personal brand of religion, or better still spirituality, that is sweeping some influential circles. Here there are no dogmas, popes, churches, and so on. According to Swamiji, religion 'is therefore the eternal relation between the eternal Soul, and the eternal God' (4.209).

The rise of studies in neurology, neurophysiology, cognitive psychology, and so on, along with scientific studies of consciousness have eradicated

the unshakeable domain of religion with its strange psychological doctrines. Moreover, the ritualistic side of religion has not attracted much attention nowadays as people are too busy the whole day to attend these rituals. Such studies on consciousness have eroded the doctrines and dogmas, the theology, and philosophy, and psychology.

The old religions had a world view that was and is static.

The concept of God was unchanging and so was the concept of humankind and the universe.

That





everything in the universe evolves was beyond their ken and even when these facts were presented they fought and are still fighting them as this world view does not gel with their archaic world view. Humankind evolves and so does the universe and so also do our concepts of God. We don't live in a static universe but a dynamic one. This problem of religion has made people drift away from it. Religions also should have been dynamic and change according to changing times.

**Humankind is moving toward its spiritual awakening. It is looking at the old religions as immature stages and moving to the goal of mature humankind.**

Humankind was imprisoned for so long and that energy that is pushing evolution broke the walls and made humankind free. It had to be so. Swamiji puts this in perfect perspective: 'Evolution is in nature, not in the soul—evolution of nature, manifestation of the soul' (6.92). The human spirit is not bound to anything material and as this spirit is manifesting, nature evolves.

**Future Spirituality**

Sincere people all over the world are internalising spiritual concepts. The old world religions projected things outside. The shift of internalising things is a great advance of the modern human mind. It may be so due to the evolution of nature or the expansion of consciousness but it is here to stay. This paradigm shift naturally leads one to practise meditation and absorption. People are discovering that truth lies within and that the old running about in search of a guru or teacher is futile. One must be able to experiment with one's mind, plunge inside, and discover truth. No method is standard and each one can tailor them according to their needs, time, and place.

The more the oneness of the universe is being discovered the more the mind or consciousness is manifesting or expanding. Thought or mind is dominant over matter in this age. We know we live more in the mind than the outside world. The percolation of Eastern philosophies and psychology everywhere has been imperceptible and this is due to the fact that the fast developing human mind itself was reaching out to these philosophies and metaphysics that gave them broad outlines and scope to experiment and tailor the teachings according to individual needs. Swamiji says about the difference in outlook: 'The Eastern is looking inward for all that is great and good. When we worship, we close our eyes and try to find God within. The Western is looking up outside for his God' (3.375). Spirituality is not anymore being confounded with materialism or organisation. It is a journey of tremendous hope and faith in oneself. Swamiji says: 'The hour comes when great men shall arise and cast off these kindergartens of religion and shall make vivid and powerful the true religion, the worship of the spirit by the spirit' (8.141). This is capturing the hearts and imagination of the people and will be the future of religion and spirituality. The sublime image of a meditating face, divested of all the baggage of human follies, is more meaningful today and is also the face of future humanity. Humankind is moving toward its spiritual awakening. It is looking at the old religions as immature stages and moving to the goal of mature humankind, to know that it is the Truth it has been seeking for—the Atman which is of the nature of Infinite Existence-Knowledge-Bliss. Somewhere, deep down in the human heart is heard Swamiji roaring out: 'Arise! Awake! And stop not until the goal is reached' (1.342).<sup>PB</sup>

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## ***The Vedic Rishi Ideal: Its Re-emergence in Contemporary Western Spirituality***

**Pravrajika Brahmaprana**

**T**ODAY IN AMERICA there is an emerging spiritual movement which is called, for lack of a better name, ‘Spiritual, but not Religious’ (SBNR). In a recent edition of *The Atlantic*, Steven Barrie-Anthony briefly attempts to present the societal context for this phenomenon:

A fifth of Americans check ‘none’ on surveys of religious preference. Among the young adults under 30 who helped propel [President] Obama into office, a full third check ‘none’. Atheist pundits are quick to claim these gains for their own, but that is not the case—nearly 70 percent of ‘nones’ report belief in God or a universal spirit, and 37 percent describe

themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’. This may or may not be the story of the decline of ‘religion’, but it is clearly also the story of the ascent of ‘spirituality’.<sup>1</sup>

Is, in fact, the SBNR movement an emerging spirituality in America? If so, what are the special characteristics or trends within this movement?

In the last decade ‘spiritual but not religious’ has evolved from an academic definition to a label preferred by those Americans who have abandoned organised religion for one reason or another. However, the SBNR movement means different things to different people. To some it seems shallow, to others profound; to some broad and universal, to others unfocused; to some it means unchurched, to others multi-faithed;

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to some it means a belief in a higher Power, to others a 'me' generation of self-obsessed, truth-is-whatever-you-feel-it-to-be thinking. Robert C Fuller, Professor of Religious Studies at Bradley University, is more generous in his appraisal, equating it with 'a desire to connect, or enter into a more intense relationship, with this Higher Power' along with an 'interest in rituals, practices, and daily moral behaviors that foster such a connection or relationship.'<sup>2</sup>

If, indeed, Fuller's appraisal is correct, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda would have endorsed the spirit of the SBNR movement. In fact, when we begin to probe beneath the surface of this movement, some of its trends are noticeably akin to the Vedic rishi ideal, reflected in the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, and could, perhaps, add a depth and focus to the pioneering course many of today's SBNR seekers have taken.

### ***A Non-dogmatic, Experimental, Experiential, and Engaged Spirituality***

One feature of the SBNR movement is that its adherents do not honour dogmas or creeds; theirs is a movement away from religions and their authoritarian and restrictive structures. For this reason the SBNR movement is a more individualistic rather than a *sangha*- or community-centered movement. Perhaps, Vivekananda would have also affirmed this trend. After all, it was he who threw one of his famous 'bombs' when he stated to a well-churching, turn-of-the-century West: 'It has been said, "It is good to be born in a church, but not to die in it." The tree receives support and shelter from the hedge that surrounds it when young; but unless the hedge is removed, the growth and strength of that tree will be hindered.'<sup>3</sup>

Another feature of the SBNR movement is that it is experimental and experiential; it involves exploration, innovation, and risk-taking.

Sometimes that means charting one's own spiritual course by combining practices from two or more faith traditions. Would Vivekananda have also endorsed such a SBNR approach when he declared: 'Religion is not in doctrines, in dogmas, nor in intellectual argumentation; it is being and becoming, it is realisation' (2.43).

Third, the SBNR movement is an engaged spirituality; it is not locked up in books but is instead service-minded. Once again, Vivekananda, who revolutionized the reclusive monasticism of the Order of Acharya Shankara by founding the Ramakrishna Mission, devoted solely to selfless service activities, would surely have championed those seekers who uphold engaged spirituality as their spiritual practice.

Fourth, the SBNR movement is anti-consumeristic—a conscious realignment to simple living. Herein we find a strong resemblance to the Vedic Rishi ideal. Sri Ramakrishna explained:

The rishis of old attained the Knowledge of Brahman. One cannot have this so long as there is the slightest trace of worldliness. How hard the rishis laboured! Early in the morning they would go away from the hermitage, and would spend the whole day in solitude, meditating on Brahman. At night they would return to the hermitage and eat a little fruit or roots. They kept their minds aloof from the objects of sight, hearing, touch, and other things of a worldly nature. Only thus did they realize Brahman as their own inner consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Interconnectedness with All Life***

The SBNR movement further demonstrates an ecological awareness of the interconnectedness of all life—a reawakening of a sense of wonder to the possibility of seeing the Divine everywhere. The movement is comprised of lovers of nature, hikers, bikers, river rafters, and environmental activists—from tree-huggers to 'Woofers', volunteers for 'Worldwide Opportunities for Organic

Farms, who sometimes settle on large spiritual retreat facilities to do organic farming and then engage in the spirituality of the religious community that fosters their earth-centered lifestyle. Like the Vedic rishi ideal the SBNR movement honours the natural rhythms of life and seeks wisdom from nature. The Vedic rishis handed down their nature-inspired revelations through such dictums as ‘*Sarvam khalvidam brahma; all this is verily Brahman*’<sup>5</sup> and invocations such as:

May the winds blow sweetly,  
 May the rivers flow sweetly,  
 May plants and herbs be sweet to us,  
 May night and morning be sweet to us,  
 May the dust of the earth be sweet to us,  
 May the heavens be sweet to us,  
 May the trees be sweet to us,  
 May the sun shine on us sweetly,  
 May the cows yield us sweet milk.<sup>6</sup>

Today’s SBNR seekers would certainly be in tune with Manu for having long ago declared trees and plants to be full of consciousness, endowed with pleasure and pain—and has prescribed punishment for hurting them<sup>7</sup>—a truth Sri Ramakrishna vividly experienced in various spiritual moods. During his practice of Tantra, Sri Ramakrishna came to understand bird calls and animal cries,<sup>8</sup> and when absorbed in *bhavamukha*, he was so completely identified with the consciousness in all that at one time he experienced severe pain when observing a man crossing a field of grass—as though the man were trampling on his own chest! (321). The SBNR adherents would surely marvel at such a spiritual endorsement of their cherished belief.

### **Holistic Approach to Spirituality**

The SBNR followers gravitate toward a holistic approach to the self by exploring, however credulously, the mind-body connection and Tantra’s energy-spirit paradigm of the body’s interior chakras as taught by hatha yoga instructors.

Today in American yoga studios we hear the ancient Gayatri mantra<sup>9</sup> chanted by Western students, a practice stemming from the Vedic *sandhya* ritual and still performed today by orthodox Hindus during the auspicious morning and evening hours. It is a systematic rite deeply connected to nature, beginning with self-purification with water and followed by an oblation to the sun as a symbol of Brahman, meditation on the Chosen Ideal within the sun mandala, and repetition of the Gayatri mantra. ‘The purpose of the sandhya is to purify body and mind’<sup>10</sup>, Sri Ramakrishna explained, endorsing the efficacy of this ancient ritual.

Along with the practice of hatha yoga, SBNR followers recognise the ancient wellness traditions of Ayurveda, homeopathy, and herbs as preferred over and above the allopath’s more intrusive and chemically-based medical treatments. Their reverence for nature also includes



honouring its cycles. The SBNR seekers would certainly be inspired by the early Vedic law of *ritam*, or sacrifice, still honoured by Hindus today. What an expansive holistic view to see the entire universe as sacrificial! As the non-dual Reality is sacrificed into the diversity of creation, night sacrifices itself into day; the future becomes sacrificed into the past; each season sacrifices itself into the one that follows; living creatures are sacrificed to those higher up on the food chain; food is sacrificed into energy; in-breath is sacrificed into out-breath; rain is sacrificed into rivers, which are, in turn, sacrificed into oceans and then into clouds and, once again, into rain; and life is sacrificed into death, which is then sacrificed into new life.

The Vedic rishi tradition is further nourished by expansive Upanishadic meditations based on the interconnectivity of nature. For example, the Madhu Vidya is a meditation on the universe as a creation of bliss begins thus: ‘This earth is honey for all beings, and all beings are honey for this earth. The intelligent immortal being, the soul of this universe, and the intelligent immortal being, the soul in the individual being—each is honey to the other. Brahman is the soul in each; he indeed is the Self in all. He is all.’<sup>11</sup>

From earth, the meditation advances to water, fire, and the more subtle elements—each verse, a meditation on the unity behind the manifold. Thus by the time aspirants finish with the concluding meditation on consciousness within both microcosm and macrocosm, they may reach a level of consciousness wherein they realise that when touching another being, they are also touching the sun.

Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda also drew from nature when they imparted meditation instructions. At one time Sri Ramakrishna instructed a devotee: ‘In the Sahasrara,

Siva manifests Himself in a special manner. The aspirant should meditate on Him. The body is like a tray; the mind and buddhi are like water. The Sun of Satchidananda is reflected in this water. Meditating on the reflected sun, one sees the Real Sun through the grace of God.’<sup>12</sup> At another time the Master took M., the recorder of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, to a reservoir and instructed him: ‘Look at the fish. Meditating on the formless God is like swimming joyfully like these fish, in the Ocean of Bliss and Consciousness’ (256). M. later divulged: ‘The river, the ocean, the vast fields—all these awaken God-consciousness. After I returned from Darjeeling, the Master asked me, “Did you experience the presence of God when you looked at the Himalayas?” He said nothing else.’<sup>13</sup>

In today’s Western society, where so many adults come from broken families and thus suffer a lack of self-esteem, there is a profound need and importance for Vivekananda’s meditation on strength. At Camp Taylor the swami recaptured the simple and direct approach of the Vedic rishi—to see the world as spiritually alive and strength-giving. One night under the redwoods, with a fire blazing on a spit of sand, he delivered his guided meditation to his band of Western students: ‘You may meditate on whatever you wish, but I shall meditate on the heart of a lion. That gives strength.’<sup>14</sup> What an organic remedy for sorrow and natural emblem of autonomy and freedom for pioneer-minded Americans today!

### ***Honouring the Divine Feminine***

In India the Vedic worship of nature was eventually replaced by Mother worship, another potential appeal for those seekers in the SBNR movement who left their family’s Judeo-Christian patriarchal, judging God for a more compassionate, all-forgiving Divine feminine. Sri

Ramakrishna embraced the Motherhood of God by choosing a woman as his guru, worshipping his divine consort, Sri Sarada Devi, as God the Mother, and exemplifying the Mother-child relationship with God as the closest and purest bond.

At Camp Taylor, Swami Vivekananda followed his Master's example and encouraged his Western students to see the Divine Mother in everything, including one's relations, regardless of gender. 'He insisted for one of his teachings that we look upon every relation, whether brother or husband, or father, or mother or sister, as Mother regardless of sex. We were to tell ourselves that everyone we saw was Mother' (155).

When Vivekananda's brother monk, Swami Turiyananda, followed Swamiji to America, he also introduced the Divine Mother to his Western students at Shanti Ashrama, in the San Antone Valley. One afternoon when the swami ascended a hill with his students and sat under the pine trees, he began:

'Mother is very proud and very pure. She wears a heavy veil that none may lift except her children. When they look behind the veil, she is happy and smiles.'

'What is Mother, and where is She?' a young student asked.

'She is everything and everywhere. She permeates nature. She is nature. But talk won't do. You must lift the veil.'

'How, Swami?'

'Through meditation', the Swami replied. Then with great emphasis he replied, 'Meditate, meditate, meditate! What are you doing? You are frittering away your life. Think deeply, pray to Mother, go beneath the semblance of things, see the One Reality in all.'<sup>15</sup>

### **Lay Devotee as Rishi**

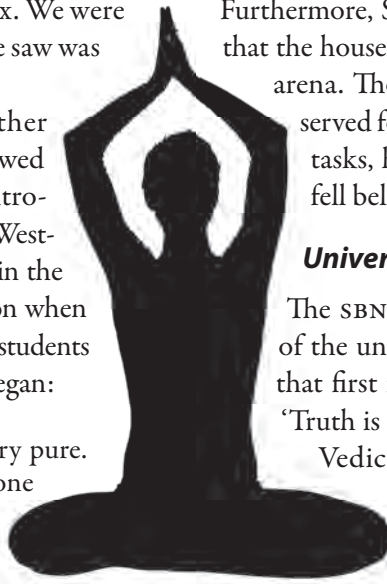
One of the strongest possible draws of the Vedic rishi ideal for SBNR aspirants may be its non-hierarchical approach to spirituality in affirming the lay devotee as the mystic, the rishi. The marriage of Sri Ramakrishna to Sarada Devi is a striking example of what this democratisation of spirituality can look like. Their marriage reawakens the Vedic rishi ideal in the contemporary age, as not all Vedic rishis were sannyasins. Though Ramakrishna received the vows of sannyasa, he also lived as a householder. Hence his teachings were moulded to sannyasins and householders alike. Furthermore, Sarada Devi shows women today that the household can be a rewarding spiritual arena. Though Holy Mother cooked and served food and performed simple menial tasks, her spiritual consciousness never fell below the throat center.<sup>16</sup>

### **Universality of all Religions**

The SBNR followers are strong advocates of the universality of all religions, a truth that first found its voice in the Rig Veda: 'Truth is one, sages call it variously.'<sup>17</sup> This

Vedic ideal of unity in diversity has never before been so exemplified in the life of a rishi as it was in the life of Sri Ramakrishna, who accepted the uniqueness and authenticity of each religion—not just on hearsay, but from his own experience after practising the various conflicting Hindu sects—dualistic, qualified non-dualistic, and non-dualistic—to their non-dual culmination. He went on to practise Islam, had the vision of Christ, understood the subtleties of Buddhism and honoured the Jain and Sikh founders and gurus. Thus he proclaimed: 'As many faiths, so many paths.'

How can this ancient Vedic ideal inform and nurture the contemporary SBNR movement?





Swami Vivekananda explained: ‘Unless there is unity at the universal heart, we cannot understand variety.’<sup>18</sup> We must strive to look past external forms in which truths are clad—scriptures, mythologies, philosophies, and rituals—to what Vivekananda called the ‘internal soul of every religion’ (2.365). There we find that what may appear contradictory is actually supplementary. Each religious tradition takes up one angle or aspect of the universal truth and devotes itself to embodying and typifying that part of great truth. Hence religions can only add to—never subtract from—universal truth, as adherents progress from truth to higher truth. In fact, Swami Vivekananda challenged: ‘Would to God there were twenty millions more [such faith traditions], for the more there are, there will be a greater field for selection’ (1.325). Vivekananda, following the universal teaching of his Master—‘As many faiths, so many paths’—stressed that we cannot fit every aspirant into one individual religion—individual so far as externals go. In this sense, Vivekananda would surely have commended the spirit behind the SBNR movement with its offshoots of hyphenated traditions: Jewish-Buddhist, Christian-Sufi, and, yes, even Christian-, Jewish-, or Muslim-Vedantins—but with a cautionary note. Let’s then take a closer look at the challenges of an uninformed universality.

### ***One-pointedness and Regularity in Spiritual Practice***

Spirituality is the core of universality, but what are the nuts and bolts of spirituality? It’s what we do *every* day. Therefore most teachers of all traditions stress two secrets of success in spiritual life: regularity and one-pointedness of practice. Patanjali states in the *Yoga Sutra*: ‘To counteract obstacles to yoga, (one should take up) the practice of one principle’, which is called *nishtha*.<sup>19</sup> When our day begins and ends with some practice—whether prayer, meditation, or worship—a spiritual current is set in motion and flows throughout the day, and we’re nourished by that. It informs the events of our day-to-day life and feeds into our next day’s meditations, and so on. But without regularity and one-pointedness, this perceptible spiritual current is dammed up, its momentum lost. And without a rhythmic momentum to our spiritual practices, union is not possible. *Nishtha* is what fuels our progress towards Self-realisation.

Some SBNR aspirants are inspired by Sri Ramakrishna’s example and attempt to follow all or several paths at once, thinking ‘I too want to be universal’. So they follow one of two

methodologies: 1) syncretism, which is taking certain practices from different traditions and trying to synthesize them with one's own path; or 2) performing a collection of practices—some Hindu, some Buddhist, and some Christian or Sufi. Most teachers of all traditions, including Sri Ramakrishna, would discourage this. Why? There are four main reasons.

### ***Sri Ramakrishna's Unique Example of Universality***

First, Ramakrishna had a unique capacity, unlike few luminaries in the history of the world's religions. He lived six months in *nirvikalpa samadhi*, an unheard of feat. Those rare individuals who not only attain, but are graced to dwell in, *nirvikalpa samadhi* usually die after twenty-one days because their bodies are unable to withstand such a high voltage of spiritual current.

Second, when Sri Ramakrishna took up any path, he put aside all other practices until he attained perfection in that particular discipline. When the Master took up Islam, he ceased to enter Hindu temples, suspended his Hindu meditation practices, ate only Muslim-style food, and dressed as a Muslim. For most aspirants it takes years of one-pointedness and regularity of practice to attain some realisation within a single tradition, so how can one possibly expect spiritual depth, as Sri Ramakrishna explained, by digging many wells in different places?

Third, there is a danger in undertaking practices from different faith traditions, when the spiritual practice itself may be rooted in a spiritual premise completely incompatible with one's own tradition. For example, the Theravada mindfulness practice is essentially watching the breath with the objective of seeing impermanence in everything, including consciousness itself and the experience of the self. Here it's important to

note that the Theravadin and the Vedantin have very different understandings of consciousness and the self. To the Theravadin consciousness is not the pure, all-pervading consciousness as in Vedanta; rather, it is a process—just moments of conscious activity. Furthermore, for the Theravadin the 'self' is not permanent as in Vedanta; it is only a false appearance of a permanent self, which in mindfulness practice, the Buddhist tries to overcome. This is in opposition to the Vedantin, who negates the false self, ego, for the higher Self, or Atman, which is all that *is* and one with Brahman, the underlying Reality that can never be denied in any state of consciousness.

However mindfulness *can* be practised by Vedantins, if they know what they are doing. Though the Theravadin practices mindfulness to see through the illusion of selfhood, including the idea of an abiding consciousness, the Vedantin can practise mindfulness in order to see that everything is momentary and impermanent, *except* the witnessing Self.

Furthermore, there is even a danger of injuring our spiritual life if we prematurely undertake practices from different paths that are within our own umbrella tradition. For example, within the Ramakrishna-Vedanta tradition, if we turn to a different spiritual path too abruptly or rapidly without proper preparation, understanding, or guidance, our spiritual life risks being aborted. Naren, the future Vivekananda learned this the hard way.

At one time while staying at Cossipore during Sri Ramakrishna's illness, Naren felt a growing spiritual power within himself, and decided to test it on his willing brother monk Kali, the future Swami Abhedananda. When they both sat together in meditation, Naren touched Kali and thereby transmitted a tangible electric current into Kali, who then entered deep meditation and lost outer consciousness. But when both young



monks returned to normal consciousness, Sri Ramakrishna quickly summoned Naren upstairs to his room where he lay ill: ‘Don’t you see what harm you have done to him by injecting your attitude of mind into him?’ the Master scolded. ‘He has been progressing till now with a particular mental attitude, the whole of which has now been destroyed, like a miscarriage during the sixth month of pregnancy.’<sup>20</sup> Sri Ramakrishna then worked carefully during the rest of his lifetime to correct Kali’s mistaken understanding of Advaita Vedanta.

Fourthly, the spiritual practice from any faith tradition comes from its mythic universe—the integrated context of that tradition. A faith tradition’s mythic universe is based on the revelations of its founders, prophets, and seers from which flow its foundational principles, values, practices, sacred imagery and symbols, and ways of understanding the mind, the self, the world, and the supreme Reality. In turn, this religious framework provides the aspirant with a mythic mind that over time becomes stabilized and well-assimilated within that tradition, because its perspective has been deeply contemplated and rigorously analyzed—not just donned for a brief time and then discarded or inherited through one’s family tradition and therefore blindly accepted.

From the spiritual integrity of one’s own mythic universe and the time-tested model of the Vedic Rishi Ideal, revitalised by Sri Ramakrishna, aspirants within the SBNR movement can successfully forge an authentic spiritual path that nourishes their soul and embraces the one universal truth with greater depth and breadth. As Swami Vivekananda stated, ‘This Rishi-state is not limited by time or place, by sex or race.’<sup>21</sup> Indeed, it was Vivekananda’s belief that the Vedic Rishi Ideal would be the future ideal for humankind.



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# 'If You're But Dust and Shadow'

Pravrajika Shuddhatmaprana

**M**AN, IF YOU'RE wholly frail / and vile,  
if you're but dust / and shadow, why  
do you feel so sublime?' wrote the  
nineteenth-century Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi, contemplating the death of an unknown young woman.<sup>1</sup> This question is one of the main themes that run throughout Leopardi's poems, and he doesn't just ask it—he agonises over it. In fact, for him, the question about feeling sublime is merely rhetorical. He doesn't actually mean it.

'If death truly is the end of everything, then what is the point of this life?'—who has not contemplated this question? Whose heart hasn't cried from the depths at the thought that our life might be for nothing—that we might be nothing more than glorified clods of dirt born of nature? Leopardi curses nature for a fate that demands we suffer not only from the apparent meaninglessness of life, but also from the torment of separation from our loved ones due to death, as in the poem 'On an Old Tombstone Bas-Relief':

Dreaded, lamented nature,  
Mother at the birth of every creature,  
Wonder unworthy of our praise  
Who spawn and nourish just to kill ... How can

You make such pain in us  
So needful that one man  
Loving another mortal may survive?  
But as for nature, whether man fares  
For better or worse is least among her cares  
(30–3).

Commenting on his own writings, a more modern poet, David Gascoyne, wrote: 'The underlying theme that has remained constant in almost everything I have written is the intolerable nature of human reality when devoid of all spiritual, metaphysical dimension.'<sup>2</sup>

Every day our body tells us that it is getting older and cannot function the way it used to. And we see in many elderly people how much of a burden the body can be in old age. For a moment we may reflect: 'What is the purpose of my life? Have I attained it? Will I attain it before I die? Have I gained *anything* in my life?' Then the next moment perhaps we turn on the television set, or watch a video on the computer. We forget it all. 'And this is Maya,'<sup>3</sup> as Swami Vivekananda says. This is precisely how we accept ourselves to be nothing more than dust and shadow—that is, by doing nothing, by lulling ourselves to sleep.

All around us the media tells us that life is meaningless. It constantly blares: 'Buy now!'

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‘Shop online!’ Is there anything sublime in this? The questions—Is this all to life? Is there *any* meaning at all to life?—are painful and are hard to face. But what is the alternative? If we don’t face these questions now, what answers will we have when death stares us in the face?

In his book *Why Religion Matters*, Huston Smith, the noted writer on comparative religions, looks at how the ‘traditional world view’, with its religious foundation, was the accepted view for thousands of years. For ages, most people all over the world accepted religion as part of their life, and they had faith in the teachings of whatever religion prevailed in their society. In fact, churches, temples, mosques, and synagogues were formerly the heart and soul of most communities, and we can still see this in a physical sense when we gaze on the landscape of an old European city or some of the older cities in India. Contrast this with today’s cities where the most prominent buildings are owned by banks and big businesses.

When the age of the ‘Enlightenment’ was ushered in, doubts were gradually cast on religion and religious beliefs. The poet Leopardi himself was a product of this culture. Some criticism was justified, but some was not. Soon, as science got bolder in its attack, nothing of religion was too sacred to dismiss. In the US, by the end of the twentieth century, the public voices of the country—that is, the educational system and the media—had all but put a muzzle on public recognition of religion.

There is one good side to this, however, and that is: it is now more difficult for societies in which only one religion prevailed for many centuries to run roughshod over people who belong to a minority religion. But once people get used

to the changing world with multiple cultures and religions living side-by-side—as is slowly happening in today’s global society—then this problem should eventually die off naturally.

On the other hand, a society loses a major part of its culture when religious festivals and celebrations must be relegated to private spaces so as not to offend the sensibilities of people who do not share those beliefs—or even worse, when holy celebrations are more about making money than about religion.

What is happening in most societies now—especially those in the West—is that there is almost no public recognition given to the fact that there are fundamental questions of human existence that need to be addressed. Parents have been partly to blame for this neglect. Since the 1970s, many parents in the US have ignored religious and spiritual education for their children altogether, thinking that their children would, as they grew up, find what they need on their own. Meanwhile, the educational system and the media have taken things further by presenting a totally materialistic view of life.

Even those parents who believe in being ‘spiritual but not religious’—that is, who reject the doctrines and dogmas of established religions, but accept a spiritual basis for life—must take as the basis of their belief the same fundamental principles that most religions hold. So religions cannot be totally dismissed.

Without some religious or spiritual guidance by parents and elders, where will children get answers? Certainly not in today’s public schools and science classes. How is it, Huston Smith asks, that some of the most illogical answers of science—that is, answers regarding where we



Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837)

come from and who we are—are taken as absolute truths? As he says:

Can something derive from nothing? Can a stream rise higher than its source? Intuitively, neither seems likely, but the scientific view requires affirmative answers to the questions whereas the traditional [religious] worldview does not. Life from non-life, sentience from insentience, intelligence from what lacks it—for science it is more-deriving-from-less at every step. ... the moral is this: true or not, the traditional worldview is transparently intelligible. The scientific worldview is not. Final causes being categorically excluded from it [the scientific worldview], it necessarily deadends in questions that have no answer (232–3).

Huston Smith's conclusion is 'that science has discovered nothing in the way of objective facts that counts against traditional metaphysics' (231). This is not to say that science does not have some legitimate answers. They do have answers on many things. They just don't have *all* the answers—and especially not for the questions that matter most to

human beings. Regarding the ultimate destiny of human beings, who are we to believe in this debate? Darwin, Freud, and Karl Marx? Or Buddha, Christ, and Sri Ramakrishna? Whose words are worth more?

Near the end of his life, the well-known psychiatrist Carl Jung said: 'Among all my patients in the second half of life ... every one of them fell ill because he had lost what the living religions of every age have given their followers, and none of them has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook.'<sup>4</sup> Clarifying this further in a letter, 'Jung explained that the source of our current cultural and collective malaise was

the collapse of a spiritual underpinning that has traditionally provided direction and purpose to people's lives. That is why we live in what Jung referred to as "crazy times."<sup>5</sup>

Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here?—these are all questions that hit at the very root of our existence, and of our whole idea of what it means to be human. We see again and again that those people who cannot find answers to these questions suffer greatly from a sense of anxiety and alienation. But those who accept the words of people like Buddha, Christ, and other saints and sages, get some peace. And those who strive to emulate those great souls get the highest peace.

Scientists and other critics of religion have all based their judgments and criticisms of religion on principles that they hold for science. That is to say, they judge something through the worth of its perception in a material sense. If our ordinary sense perception is not good enough to perceive what scientists want to perceive, then they build better and better equipment

to perceive what they are studying. Yet recent developments in science give us cause for hope. To take just one example: scientists are now beginning to understand that the mind itself plays a part in the perception of objects.

Meanwhile mystics of all religions have understood this for thousands of years. And they have also understood that the mind has a power to turn within and to perceive more and more subtle layers of existence—layers that science has not even considered. The only equipment that the mystics and yogis need is a mind that has been purified through regular training and discipline.

We find in any field of life that those people



Carl Jung (1875–1961)

who can concentrate their minds can work wonders. We marvel at the skill of great musicians and artists and wonder how they can do what they do. We little realise how much power there is in the mind. But these powers are manifest only through intense training with discipline and great concentration. People understand this when it comes to ordinary vocations in this world. But somehow, when it comes to religion, many people think that God does not exist because they don't see Him. 'Where is the proof?' they say. 'We can see this world, but we don't see God.'

Ramakrishna once scoffed at this attitude, saying: 'Even if a great soul affirms that he has seen God, still the average person will not accept his words. He says to himself, "If this man has really seen God, then let him show Him to me." But can a man learn to feel a person's pulse in one day? He must go about with a physician for many days; only then can he distinguish the different pulses. He must be in the company of those with whom the examination of the pulse has become a regular profession. Can anyone and everyone pick out a yarn of a particular count? If you are in that trade, you can distinguish in a moment a forty-count thread from a forty-one.'<sup>6</sup>

So training is necessary—training and mental purification—so that the mind will cease to identify with the outer physical world and

*St John of the Cross (1542–91)*



learn to identify instead with the Spirit within. Speaking to a young disciple, Swami Brahmananda once said:

By a very long habit of many lives, your mind has become so attached to the body, to the objective world and to alien opinions,

that it has forgotten that it can remain aloof, free from the gross body and that it may reason independently, without the necessity or pressure of the opinion of others. Commonly the mind behaves through the impulse of the desires, and the majority of them are on sensual pleasures, limited by time and space. The common mind cannot think of something outside the kingdom of 'name and form', it cannot conceive of something eternal. It wakes up in the body and remains attached to the body throughout the day. ... Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that you change your mentality, submitting it to a severe daily discipline at the same time. ... Now it sees and believes that outside the transitory world of the senses, nothing else exists, but through the force of constant practice it will feel that its only duty is to direct itself towards God. Practise something, practise with determination ... practise with the spirit of the true researcher, and you will see that everything that I have said is true.<sup>7</sup>

Swami Vivekananda urged us again and again to take up the challenge given to us by the sages of old—that is, to put into practice the disciplines they prescribed in order to see God for ourselves. We must have the experience ourselves; otherwise doubts will always remain. As Swamiji said:

Each science must have its own methods. I could preach to you thousands of sermons, but they would not make you religious until you practised the method. These are the truths of the sages of all countries, of all ages, of men pure and unselfish, who had no motive but to do good to the world. They all declare that they have found some truth higher than what the senses can bring to us, and they invite verification. They ask us to take up the method and practise honestly, and then, if we do not find this higher truth, we will have the right to say there is no truth in the claim, but before we have done that, we are not rational in denying the truth of their assertions. So we must work faithfully, using the prescribed methods, and light will come.<sup>8</sup>

So whose words shall we listen to? Swamiji himself assures us that we will get the result. We will then discover why, as Leopardi says, we 'feel so sublime', and we will have no doubt about it. The *Mundaka Upanishad* also assures us that when we reach that supreme state, 'All the knots of the heart are cut asunder and all doubts are dissolved.'<sup>9</sup>

According to Swamiji, obstacles to our spiritual growth are sometimes good for the soul, as they make the soul stronger. In spite of everything, the Self within will definitely find its way to manifest itself. This is its very nature. Societies also have a way of adjusting themselves, and this is what we are seeing in regard to religion. As public recognition of religion gets less, more and more people are becoming interested in private spiritual disciplines and meditation—in going within, finding the Self within.

But will we actually get all our questions answered then? In a literal sense, perhaps no. It's more likely, however, that we will get to the state where there no longer are any questions. This is how St John of the Cross described that state:

I entered into unknowing,  
and there I remained unknowing  
transcending all knowledge.

1. I entered into unknowing,  
yet when I saw myself there,  
without knowing where I was,  
I understood great things;  
I will not say what I felt  
for I remained in unknowing  
transcending all knowledge.

2. That perfect knowledge  
was of peace and holiness  
held at no remove  
in profound solitude;  
it was something so secret  
that I was left stammering,  
transcending all knowledge.

3. I was so 'whelmed,  
so absorbed and withdrawn,  
that my senses were left  
deprived of all their sensing,

and my spirit was given  
an understanding while not  
understanding,  
transcending all knowledge. ...  
7. And this supreme knowledge is  
so exalted  
that no power of man or learning  
can grasp it;  
he who masters himself  
will, with knowledge in unknowing,  
always be transcending.  
8. And if you should want to hear:  
this highest knowledge lies  
in the loftiest sense  
of the essence of God;  
this is a work of his mercy,  
to leave one without understanding,  
transcending all knowledge.<sup>10</sup>



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# Religion: A Deeper Mystery in a Utilitarian Society

Bishop Paul Dupuis

**I**F I'VE HEARD IT ONCE, I've heard it a hundred times: 'I believe in God, but I do *not* believe in priests, I do *not* believe in religion, I do *not* believe in church.' Often they add, 'But I do believe in spirituality.' Statements like this stem partly from what is perceived to be the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of organised religion, but also partly from the prevailing ideas of progress. Just as people see computers as an improvement over manual typewriters, they tend to see what they call 'spirituality' to be an advance over what they think of as 'religion'. Modern men or women generally look unfavourably upon past things as antiquated and meaningless, or quaint at best.

## ***The Modern Mind***

The modern mind fervently believes in progress. One of its major axioms states that we are evolving into a better and more advanced, freer and more civilised society. We understand more than people did in the past, and few think that a better world is a false idea. From a Christian point

of view, however, as for all societies prior to the sixteenth century, this dictum is rooted in fallacy. The Christian does *not* think that men can improve society—a view bitterly borne out by history, especially modern history—but that the Heavenly Jerusalem of the New Testament is God's gift and is measured by Christ: His crucifixion, the present state of humanity, and His Resurrection, the heavenly city to come.

Usually, when Christians imagined that they could better society they decided to do it by violence. This led theologian Stanley Hauerwas to conclude that violence is 'idolatry', an attempt not to obey God, but to assume the place of God. What is called progress today is the secularisation of the Kingdom of God. Men cannot add to it or subtract from it; it is the work of God and it is already complete. This mystical reality is already beginning to manifest itself in our world, and where it is manifest it is truly present.

Politicians and bankers speak glowingly of the 'New World Order', but history will prove to them that the present world order, too, will cease to exist. It will collapse just as all other societies before us have collapsed, and what we do in our lifetime will crumble also.

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Probably most Christians would object to what has been written above, finding it a very negative appraisal of society, but St Paul would be in full accord with this appraisal. In his letter to the Romans he says: ‘Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.’<sup>1</sup>

The popular writer J R R Tolkien considered history to be a ‘long defeat’, even though it may contain ‘some samples or glimpses of final victory.’<sup>2</sup> The anti-modernism of his thought agrees perfectly with the Fathers and the whole of classical Christian teaching. St Paul sums it up severely when he writes to his disciple Timothy: ‘In the last days perilous times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid them!’<sup>3</sup> So much for progress and modernism!

Modern capitalism is a case in point. Capitalism feeds off selfish impulses that Christian moral teaching condemns. Pope Leo XIII argued that both capitalism and communism were flawed, and that unfettered capitalism is defined by the callousness of employers and the greed of unrestrained competition, including its drive to leave workers isolated and defenceless. The predatory logic of capitalism corrupts everything that it touches by turning labour, nature, and everything else into a commodity.

This materialist approach assumes that there is no God. Christians, of course, do not deny the existence of God, but for many of them—let’s call them ‘Christian materialists’—God exists

outside of and removed from the material order. Water, wine, and bread are only water, wine, and bread, not sacramental, not an upsetting ‘real presence’, or some psychological extra-material reality. These Christian materialists restrict religion to the walls of the church and do not feel it has anything to say about the nature of things.

In this materialistic Christian scheme of viewing sacred things, God is greatly concerned with behaviour, right and wrong; he is an enforcer of morality, rewarding good behaviour and punishing bad. They rarely want God, but they want the rewards of God. In Meister Eckhart’s colourful language: ‘Some people want to see God with

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**Capitalism feeds off selfish impulses that Christian moral teaching condemns. The predatory logic of capitalism corrupts everything that it touches by turning labour, nature, and everything else into a commodity.**

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their eyes as they see a cow, and to love Him as they love their cow. They love their cow for the milk and cheese and profit it makes them. This is how it is with people who love God for the sake of outward wealth or inward comfort.’<sup>4</sup>

But even certain ‘realists’, people like Tolkien and C S Lewis, understood that the material world is more than material, that symbols, meanings, and values are real too. They saw in myth a primal story that is profoundly true, far truer than what one reads in the daily newspaper, Internet, or hears on television. The mythic nature of the world, however, is only revealed to people who possess the child-like innocence that Christ says is necessary if one is to enter the Kingdom of God.<sup>5</sup> The ‘wise’ according to the material world are foolish when it comes to spiritual things. There is something of the ‘mythic’ in Liturgy, in the sacramental and symbolic enactment of a Reality that might otherwise *not* be



seen, understood, or experienced. The world that is reduced to a narrow materialistic fact is unable to communicate with God. And that is why people come together to worship in a church.

### **Secular View of Religion**

Secularists believe that religion is never anything but a private affair. They will probably not quarrel with religion as such, but they do believe that secular knowledge is founded in this life, is related to the conduct of this life, and is conducive to the welfare of this life. While it may protect the rights of other religions—because secularism has become a religion, too—it aims at taking over the state with its own truths, demands, conditions, and sanctions which function to replace the eternal truth of religion with its own so-called eternal truth. It is not a neutral ideology. It advertises itself as a substitute for religion, as a political and social application of religious atheism. And now we begin to reach the nub of the discussion, because secularism, which goes hand-in-hand with atheism, sets up the utilitarian scheme as a protest against God and his divine Providence.

If we wish to determine whether organised religion can still be useful in a utilitarian society, we must first examine what is meant by Utilitarianism. As a theory, Utilitarianism holds that the correct course of action is to maximise utility—that is, to maximise total benefit and to reduce suffering. According to both Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, the fathers of Utilitarianism, the moral worth of an action is determined only by its resulting consequences. For Bentham, the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the measure of right and wrong. This naturalism believes that what determines the moral worth of an act are its consequences, and this results in a kind of ethical egoism.

Because of this, Utilitarianism is influential in

political philosophy. We see this in the case of a Niccolò Machiavelli, for instance, for whom the actions of a state, however cruel or ruthless, must contribute towards the common good of society. Utilitarians believe that they can accommodate the perimeters of moral good and evil according to the common happiness they hope to attain. Moral good or evil, virtue or vice, have no objective, and certainly no divine base in their view, only what they contend obtains the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Even if they believe in God, utilitarians like John Gay will say ‘that the will of God is the immediate criterion of Virtue, and the happiness of mankind the criterion of the will of God; and therefore the happiness of mankind may be said to be the criterion of virtue, but once removed.’<sup>6</sup>

In *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx critiques Bentham, who holds that the Christian religion can be ‘useful’, ‘because it forbids in the name of religion the same faults that the penal code condemns in the name of the law.’<sup>7</sup> Despite occasional positive consequences, he still thinks that, viewed historically, religion is a repressive institution and should be abolished.

Now we come to the heart of Christian teaching. What for Bentham is the only saving point of the Christian religion—its parallel to the penal code of the law—is precisely one of the major points why our society finds organised religion useless or even harmful. Portraying God or the human condition in legal terms falsifies the law of God, which is not an arbitrary set of rules, created in a way similar to any earthly legislature. No sane person desires anarchy in a society, yet the modern concept of law is entirely external.

When one looks at American prisons, which house the largest prison population in the entire world, one understands that to compare this kind of ‘legalism’ gone mad to God and

religion does nothing to help us understand the beauty and the joy of God's law, expressed so well in the Psalm:

The law of the Lord is perfect,  
 converting the soul;  
 The testimony of the Lord is sure,  
 making wise the simple;  
 The statutes of the Lord are right,  
 rejoicing the heart;  
 The commandment of the Lord is pure,  
 enlightening the eyes;  
 The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;  
 The judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.  
 More to be desired are they than gold and a very precious stone;  
 Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.<sup>8</sup>

We all live in solidarity with the rest of humankind. Our lives and existence are woven in with those of all beings. Sometimes this relationship is marred and deeply offended, even if no legal damage has been suffered. The law of Christ makes us into a 'new creation', and Christ takes on our trespasses and leads us to 'reconciliation' so 'that we might become the righteousness of God in Him'.<sup>9</sup> Legality metes out punishment; Christianity seeks reconciliation and love.

Christianity has absolutely nothing to do with making us law-abiding citizens or even good people. The purpose of the church is to bring about a personal relation between man and Christ, not Christ's *teachings*, not the *Gospel*. Religion teaches us to accomplish our duties, but even ethical non-religious people perform their duties. Once one enters into a relationship of love with God, teachings

and Gospels are no longer necessary. Nor will they exist in eternity. This is the difference between religion, duty and the church, love. People are more comfortable with the simple truths of the Gospel rather than with its deeper mysteries. They prefer milk to solid food.<sup>10</sup> Even when they pray or attend sacred Liturgies, they may follow complicated rituals and formulas, but in their routine they do not experience a living encounter with the Holy Spirit.

### Nature of Faith

Faith is not a doctrinal system but a restoration of man to his true relationship with God. Christianity is not about religion but about the transformation of the heart, about community. The fierce individualism found in much of what falsely claims to be Christianity is in opposition to the age-old understanding of the faith. This faith cannot be lived in a vacuum. Our personal transformation requires working it out with a community of faith, which is why the church is still necessary today.

Because of the spirit of community, we are



IMAGE: WWW.ETSY.COM

not afraid to open our arms to our brothers and sisters, to all those who come to us, as Christ did. We need not strive to convert people to a doctrine, but to reveal the Christ who is in the heart of every man and woman. The only testimony we must give is a 'holy life full of divine charity towards all', as Bishop Mael de Brescia said. And he goes on: 'The weakening of faith comes from a worldly interpretation of the Gospel. The worries of the world stifle the voice of the Holy Spirit.' People sometimes confuse religious feeling with a profound spiritual life. But, as St Nikolai Velimirovich said: 'Our religion is founded on spiritual experience, seen and heard as sure as any physical fact in this world. Not theory, not philosophy, not human emotions, but experience.' If our life is corrupt, says St John Chrysostom, our 'correct faith does not benefit us in anything'. We should never sacrifice love for the sake of dogmatic differences.

Christians view suffering very differently from the way Utilitarians do. According to Christian Personalism, suffering can help to engender and release love. Instead of closing people off to others, it helps to develop an interior sensitivity of the heart. It works outwardly also by bringing one to produce works of love towards others, and in the long run can transform human civilisation into a civilisation of love. Persons come to be appreciated for their own sake, because of the divine presence within them, their inner work and preciousness. John Paul II goes so far as to say that 'man owes to suffering that

unselfish love which stirs in his heart and actions'.<sup>11</sup> In the Christian view, suffering is always understood as individual suffering, while in Utilitarianism suffering is mostly thought to be something measurable detached from the person who experiences it. This view has led utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer to criticise Mother Teresa of Calcutta for wasting her time and energy on individuals, instead of working to reduce the quantity of general suffering. Singer is even open to putting people to death if that will reduce overall suffering; he focuses his extermination attentions mostly on foetuses, newborn babies, and elderly people suffering from dementia. Some may think it merciful to kill someone who is in pain; that, however, is not love, but abandonment. From legalised euthanasia it logically follows that afterwards will come large-scale killing.

'God loves us more than a father, mother, friend, or anyone else could love', says St John Chrysostom, 'and even more than we are able to love ourselves'. Unless organised religion teaches us to try to love others as God loves them, it serves little purpose in a utilitarian society such as ours. And unless this love extends even to our enemies, then we can be sure we have not known the Holy Spirit and learned from him how to love God. The Holy Spirit patiently, progressively teaches us humbly to love all men, despite their weaknesses and difficulties. St Silouan of Mount Athos says, 'If we love our enemies, pride will have no place in our soul'. We love, forgive, and pray for our enemy. 'Therefore



*Nikolai Velimirovich (1880–1956)*


if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink.’<sup>12</sup> Behind the man who seeks our charity is the very Lord himself.

In living the fullest dimensions of our life, we breathe the light and spirit of God. We breathe in peaceful energy and harmony. Matter and spirit come into communion. Far from God, the soul of man is like a dark room. But the nearer one draws to God, the more light flows into one’s soul. ‘Do not say that it is impossible to receive the Spirit of God,’ says St Symeon the New Theologian. Once received, we must keep it by guarding the heart. The spirit of God does not come to those who indulge in endless speculation and clever arguments, to those who read many books. It comes to those who are humble of heart and lead a self-effacing life—such persons are taught by the Holy Spirit himself. Jesus said that we would ‘see’ him, and in seeing him we see the Father. He came ‘to set the earth on fire.’<sup>13</sup>

‘God is light’,<sup>14</sup> not an external visible light, but a light that illumines the mind. According to Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, ‘The whole creation is a sacrament’. That bread and wine become the Body of Christ does not violate the nature and character of bread and wine. They were created for this purpose.

Returning to the question whether organised religion is still of any use in a utilitarian society, the answer is clearly yes, unless people are content with leading a mono-dimensional life. Matter and spirit are inseparable, individuals and community are inseparable, and so are continuity and church inseparable. Utilitarianism seeks the happiness of the greater number, but how can people whose spirit does not know the light and the love of God be happy? Persons who have suffered a stroke can only use part of their body; the other half remains paralyzed. Unless our spirit also breathes in its divine ‘oxygen’, an

entire part of our being becomes deadened. Half a life does not bring happiness either to the individual or to the collective.

These words of St Gregory Nazianzus have engraved themselves into my heart: ‘It is more important to remember God than it is to remember to breathe’. It is through organised religion that we have learned to ‘breathe’, but once we have learned, we must acquire the spirit of Peace so that a thousand souls around us will be saved as told by St Seraphim of Sarov. That is why organised religion will always be necessary in any society, but that is also why we must move beyond the words of the Gospel, beyond the rituals of the Liturgy in order to taste the Lord and see how sweet he is. 

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# The Real Challenge: Both Religious and Spiritual

Francis X Clooney SJ

WE ARE ALL FAMILIAR WITH the phenomenon, lamented by some, ideal to others, of 'spiritual but not religious', SBNR: finding one's own way spiritually, experimenting, drawing on multiple traditions, adding and subtracting practices and ideas insofar as they work, for as long as they work, at some more or less stark distance from religious institutions, their creeds and commitments. Certainly in the West, but globally as well, this is an increasingly common characteristic of how we think and act, particularly among young people; many are comfortable in finding their own way and reluctant to join or stay in a religion. Though individuals make their own choices in this regard, 'spiritual but not religious' is also a wider cultural phenomenon; the cultural flow as it were carries individuals with it. The number of political independents has grown phenomenally and in the US, where I write this, the Democratic and Republican parties decline and all kinds of social groupings have fragmented and grown smaller.

## Denying Religion

As Robert Putnam's well-known 2001 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* suggests, today we pursue all kinds of satisfying activities, but doing so

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in stable social groups is much less frequent than in the past. We still bowl or play other sports, or do spiritual practices but we do not join old-fashioned bowling leagues; more than ever, *we bowl alone*. The 'Nones', 'none of the above' are forming quickly growing communities. In a way, we can hardly be surprised if Americans step back from, walk away from, institutionalised churches, temples, mosques, and other structures of religion, and prefer to find their own way spiritually. Institutions become stagnant, fail to change with the times, preferring playing it safe over honouring individuals in their times of need. As the news daily testifies, religions really do sometimes seem to do more harm than good. Abuse of power is sometimes evident in the top ranks of religious organisations, which are isolated from their own communities; and members at all levels may bring shame up on the religions to which they say they belong, and thus on other participants. So people walk away. Is not 'former Catholic' one of the largest denominations in America today? SBNR and Nones exemplify in part the resistance of individuals to their institutions, because they are still horrified by the violence perpetrated in the names of the old, ossified religions, and still put off by sanctimonious leaders clueless to people's real spiritual needs.

But we need not see this trend as solely in one direction, away from religions and their institutional forms. SBNR and Nones may also soon be giving witness to the rise of new and restored

communities of faith. The journey from one's original faith to another religion will perhaps only rarely be the end of the story: *religious-to-spiritual* leads to a further renewal of religion, while *from-my-religion-to-another* may actually turn out to be, in the long run, a step in the larger process, *from-my-religion-to-another-and-back-all-the-more-deeply-to-where-I-started*.

To understand how it is that religion and spirituality are interdependent, neither by itself the end of the story, let us look at it from another angle: I suggest that we often see things in terms that are too stark. We are disposed toward a 'spirituality versus religion' dichotomy: if you opt for one, you must abandon the other. Certainly, there is much talk today about the split between spirituality and religion usually—on the part of those who make the dichotomy—in favour of spirituality. We work with a series of standards, even expected pairings that are often seen as standing in an adversarial relationship: Spirituality versus religion; experience versus thinking; intuition versus logic; faith versus reason; soul versus body; oral versus written; spirit versus letter; charismatic leader versus institutional head; the internal versus the external; and esoteric versus exoteric.

Now each of these distinctions has a point, and we can learn from all of them. They also have moral force, since religion—often identified with the right side of each pair—can become merely external, while the spiritual—often identified with the left side of these pairs—appeals to serious people, seekers after meaning and experience: who would not want to be spiritual, guided by intuition, trusting in personal experience, finding one's own way, uncompromised by the sins of institutions? If posed as either/or dichotomies—including spiritual but not religious—the pairings do not do justice to either of the poles, for we get the impression that we

can be spiritual entirely apart from being religious or religiously connected. I doubt that we can. Even if religion without spirituality is not healthy, spirituality is not a sufficient remedy to the problems that ail religion or ourselves, for that matter. The truth is that spirituality and religion need one another. The pairing is not like soul and body, but like flesh and bones; no one can be satisfied merely with bones, the skeleton stripped of all life and beauty. But who would dare charge that since bones are rigid and unbending, breakable and hardly adaptable, our

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**Spirituality and religion need one another. The pairing is not like soul and body, but like flesh and bones; no one can be satisfied merely with bones.**

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bodies would be better if we had no bones?

It is wiser to think that the spiritual and the religious always, over time, belong together. The spiritual leads to the formation of community, and that formation leads to religion; when religion atrophies, spirituality breaks away; but spirituality on its own, 3ed, lacks in discipline, focus, ability to transmit itself over time; so religion is once more needed. Being spiritual is a short-term remedy for the abuses and decay of religion, but on its own, does not suffice in the long run.

### **Old and New Religions**

We know all this when we seek to describe the old and large traditions, which are, at their best, both religious and spiritual. Christianity has an inner life and an external life, and while it is appealing to look to the example of Jesus as justifying a purely spiritual path, free from the taints of the world, we need to be cautious in this regard. Certainly, Jesus certainly did speak harshly of those who cling to externals, and distanced himself from religion as a set of rules:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practised without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like white-washed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.<sup>1</sup>

Harsh words indeed; but it would be to misunderstand Jesus and the message of early Christianity to think that Jesus, or the prophets before him, were entirely against religion. After all, in Matthew, we also hear: ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished’ (5:17–8).

Jesus was spiritual *and* religious.

This is, I suggest, the dynamic, corrective balance that characterises religions and spiritualities at their best. Let me illustrate all of this positively with a beautiful story from the Gospel according to Luke. After the death of Jesus his disciples are naturally disillusioned, since their leader, guide, the one they hoped would change the world, has died an ignominious death:

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself

came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’ He asked them, ‘What things?’ They replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.’<sup>2</sup>

Not only was Jesus killed, but he was killed, the Gospels say, particularly due to the determination of *religious* leaders to crush all opposition. If so, then this was certainly a case wherein religion destroyed the spiritual. Yet there is more, and the story is not over with: ‘Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him’ (24:21–4).

Signs of life are in evidence, right at the site of the great failure, the tomb. Yet Cleopas and companion are still walking in the wrong direction, away from Jerusalem where these new things are taking place. They cannot imagine, it seems, that spiritual happenings could connect them back to Jerusalem and all it stands for.

In this situation, Jesus could of course have simply identified himself to them, but he does not; rather, he interprets the very scriptures at the basis of the Jewish religion: ‘Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how

slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory? Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures' (24:25-7).

He leads them back into the law and the prophets, and thus to the very religion that they had lost hope in. Were they simply to walk away and leave behind the scriptures too, what would they have left?

The final part of the story depends on the initiatives taken by Cleopas and his companion. First, they invite the stranger to stay: 'As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over". So he went in to stay with them' (24:28-9).

Had they not, he would have simply left them. Even then, at table, Jesus enlightens them not by direct words, but by turning to a simple human and yet very traditional act, as recent as the Passover meal and his last supper, and as old as Israel: he broke bread with them: 'When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"' (24:30-2).

Such is the old and the new religion, the invitation to recognise God in an action both ordinary and revered, the breaking of the bread.



Robert D Putnam (b. 1941)

And so they did. Their spirits enlivened, now they reverse course, and return in haste to the place where their hopes had been dashed, right to where their leaders had killed their Jesus. They go to the women and men of the earliest Christian community already forming a community and, we presume, become members of that community: "That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread' (24:33-5).

In a small way, the Christian religion began in the spiritual experience and insights of that very evening. Cleopas and companion—spiritual and no longer religious—met Jesus on the road and through scripture and the meal—human and religious realities—rediscovered an identity that was spiritual and *therefore* more deeply religious.

### **Hinduism and Other Traditions**

Now the very same points can be made with respect to Hinduism, which has many faces. At times, it can be seen as a very large mass of





religious practices and traditions, often ill-understood by their practitioners, customs fossilised and out of touch, even superstitious. But Hinduism in its many forms is of course also a great haven for the spiritual, its many traditions of interiority sought after by Hindus and non-Hindus alike, for the sake of spiritual awakening. Hinduism is both a religion, religions, and a spiritual way of life at its best, and like Christianity, it becomes more deeply religious insofar as it is more deeply spiritual. Here I could retell another also very famous story in which disillusionment has a remedy that is neither only religious nor only spiritual: that of Arjuna. Is not the Bhagavad Gita in part about a person, in a time of crisis, whose good impulse is to cast aside social and religious expectations, to fight no longer, but rather simply to be spiritual? The tension in the Gita between experience and social order resolved not by mere social order or

by mere experience, but by a return to the social order—even in its darker aspects—but with a renewed spirit. I simply ask the readers to meditate on the framing story of the Gita, Arjuna's journey from religion to spirituality to spiritual religion. This too is a sacred story in which religion fails and spirit arises, and that renewal of spirit takes form finally and only in the renewal of religion as well.


At this point, I can generalise. Religious traditions have always been, and are still, engaged in the dynamic of the spiritual becoming institutionalised as the religious, the religious over time becoming stale and diminished, and then, in times of crisis, renewals by which the spiritual breathes new life into existing, modified religious structures. It may well be that for cultural and social reasons we are in an era when there is more extreme mobility and thus more opportunities for SBNR and Nones. As mentioned

above, institutions of all kinds, not just religious ones, are looked on with skepticism today, and independence and personal choice have become premier values. People are freer than ever before to move away from and out of religious institutional commitments, linking up in fluid, ever-shifting arrangements with others seeking spiritual alternatives. But this dynamic, I insist, is not new and does not indicate any irreversible turn away from religion to the age of the spiritual experience.

All that I have just said notwithstanding, we would be greatly mistaken merely to promote loudly the values of institutional religion, casting aside the aspirations and insights of those who have turned away in search of the spiritual. As always, we need to take people where they are, as they come. If some people are very attached to the formalities of religion but fearful of where spiritual experience might lead, we need to respect their commitments, and find ways, using religious language, to nudge them beyond formalities into real spiritual journeys. If some, particularly younger people, are alienated from religion and on the quest for a purely spiritual way of authenticity, those of us with institutional religious commitments need to respect that quest too. We need also to move from spectators to participants. We ourselves need to venture onto spiritual paths, including some paths that the Church has neglected or tried to suppress; we dare not play it so safe as to become models for 'religious but not spiritual' (RBNS). If we are religious and deeply engaged in the practice of religion, we too will need to go deeper into the spiritual roots of our own traditions, in order to share spiritually. Conversely, if we are spiritual and not religious, we need to think about the communal bonds, duties, and obligations, which hold society together as more than a conglomerate of individuals.

We need to learn from those who have set out on their own spiritual paths, rather than just writing them off as naive or selfish. The Nones and SBNR can teach us how to be better Jews, Catholics, and Hindus. If we listen to them with a certain openness—that the SBNR and the Nones would do well to reciprocate—their insights can filter back into our lives too, reviving us and helping us to be better, religiously. Even those who convert away from one's religion to another may be doing us a favour, if we listen to them and see how mixing 'ours' with 'theirs,' is to the improvement of 'ours' yet again.

In all of this, we need also to nurture a critical attitude toward the religious institutions to which we belong. We must see for what it is the appalling behaviour of some people who call themselves religious, vicious in their refusal to think with open minds and in their fear of what is alive, spiritual, and unpredictable. We need to keep reminding ourselves that people who leave behind organised religion are not always missing the mark.

But again, those of us with religious commitments ought not give the impression that we think being spiritual is enough. The spiritual, the Spirit, leads back to community, and community cannot exist on a purely spiritual level. So a return to religious language and practice is inevitable. Holding out to people the hope—I would say, vain hope—of a spiritual path free of any externals, structures, or habits of practice, does not really help; the resources of religions are exceedingly helpful on the path, and if they are missing, they will be poorly or aptly reinvented. In all such matters, intelligent balance is the more religious and more spiritual option. 

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1. Matthew 23:23–5.
2. Luke 24:13–21.

# Three Candles to Light the Darkness

William Page



FOR A LONG TIME, I had a bias against the word *spiritual*. I thought it was a smarmy, vague, nebulous term whose meaning was never clear and whose sole purpose was to puff up every sentence it appeared in. Pretentious New Age types babbled about ‘my spiritual life’, ‘my spiritual quest’, ‘my spiritual journey’. The word was so overused that I winced every time I heard it.

My antipathy led me to look for an alternative synonym. How about *religious*? Alas, I found that, for many people, *religious* has negative connotations. They associate it with organisations, dogmas, and sectarianism. It didn’t have those meanings for me—but if it did for others, *religious* wasn’t the right word.

Well, how about *inner*? My inner life, my inner quest, my inner journey. I imagined myself as a little homunculus wandering around inside my body among my internal organs, picking my way past my pancreas, my gall bladder, my

spleen, my intestines, pushing aside every organ and dodging blood vessels all the while. Nope, *inner* wouldn’t do.

How about *devotional*, then? My devotional life, and so on. *Devotional* would be fine for bhaktas, but what about jnanis? For sure jnanis have a spiritual life, but *devotional* isn’t the word for it. As a bhakta myself, I was fond of *devotional*; but I needed a word that was more inclusive.

Like *immaterial*. Now, that was a neutral word that could apply anywhere. But what did it mean? My immaterial life? My immaterial quest? It didn’t mean anything. Into the trash can with *immaterial*.

In the end, I had to give up. There were contexts in which some of these words might work, but none of them worked in every case. I gave up and came to terms with the necessity of using *spiritual*.

## Defining Spirituality

How to define spirituality? Dictionaries and thesauruses are helpful, but there’s no perfect one-word synonym. If you go to the Internet,

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that magnificent and indispensable first-stop resource for researchers, you'll find there a definition that goes on for thirteen pages.

Using all of these sources, I finally cobbled together an extended definition that satisfied me, although it was much too wordy for my liking. Spirituality is a refined and purified state of mind in which unwholesome emotions like greed, lust, anger, cruelty, jealousy, fear, and hatred have been eliminated or reduced to a minimum, and in which wholesome emotions like compassion, sensitivity, selflessness, detachment, calmness, and altruistic love predominate.

But there's more to it than that. Such a state of mind is merely virtuous. To be spiritual, the mind has to be directed to, focused on, and preoccupied with an ideal. It might be a personal god like Ishvara, or an impersonal reality like Brahman. It might be a human embodiment of divine qualities like Krishna, the Buddha, or Jesus.

### **Spirituality without Religion**

But it wouldn't have to be a religious ideal. Some people are dedicated to art or music, to theatre, or to dance. Many people nowadays consider themselves 'spiritual but not religious'. They may be looking for a system of metaphysics they can commit to, or they may be content to remain without any metaphysical viewpoint at all. They may just have a vague longing for something transcendent.

In fact, a seeking, reverent, open mind may be better than a mind that has already decided on what it believes and clings to fixed concepts. 'The perfect way knows no difficulties, Except that it refuses to make preferences'<sup>1</sup> sings Seng Tsan, the third patriarch of Chan Buddhism, in his poem *On Trust in the Heart*, 'To set up what you like against what you dislike—That is the disease of the mind' (ibid.).

Reality is fluid. We distort it if we try to ossify it. I can imagine God saying, 'How can I fill you with new knowledge when you're already full of old ideas?' Perhaps the wisest thing that the Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran ever wrote in his book *The Prophet* was: 'Life, and all that lives, is conceived in the mist and not in the crystal. And who knows but a crystal is mist in decay?'<sup>2</sup>

Some people may be indifferent to metaphysics, but they may regard the vastness, beauty, and complexity of the universe with such awe that it borders on worship. Others may have a deep and abiding love for nature; or they may cherish, to use Albert Schweitzer's famous phrase, a 'reverence for life'.<sup>3</sup>

All of these attitudes can be considered 'spiritual', although there is always a question of degree. I know of atheists and agnostics who are humanists. They value our common humanity, and believe in behaving decently toward our fellow human beings. Some people are dedicated to ideals like truth, freedom, altruistic love, and service, and work towards their actualization in the world. Can we call such people spiritual? Certainly. We are all sailors on uncertain seas, the boats we sail in are similar, and no sailor is to be scorned.

### **Jihad vs McWorld**

There are two major threats to spirituality in our interesting and ever-changing world. In 1996, the political theorist Benjamin Barber published a book titled *Jihad vs McWorld*.<sup>4</sup> In Barber's thinking, *jihad* stood for tribalism—specifically, religious fundamentalist tribalism—and *McWorld*—derived from McDonald's, the famous international fast-food chain—stood for globalism—specifically, worldwide corporation-sponsored materialistic consumerism. These two handy catchwords



*Benjamin Barber (b. 1939)*

can be adapted to denote the two great threats to spirituality in our time.

Jihad—as wrongly understood by some terrorist groups—represents extreme religious fundamentalism: militant, aggressive dogmatism run amok—fanatical, intolerant, vicious campaign bent on converting the entire world to a narrow and savage ideology, determined to crush anything and anybody that stands in its way. The US got a taste of its destructive power in the atrocities of 9/11; India got a taste of it in the more recent Mumbai catastrophe. It is active in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is currently chewing up Iraq, and further horrors are bound to come.

McWorld, on the other hand, represents rampant materialistic consumerism. It originated in the West, but has since infected most of the planet. Its engineers are big corporations, and their goal is to lure us into a web of constant self-indulgence. Its god is ‘getting’, its chief priest is the credit card, and its temple is the shopping mall. In Thailand, where I live, we have multi-storeyed shopping malls the size of international airports. Minibuses speed customers from one enormous concourse to another and security guards cruise around on Segways, two-wheeled, self-balancing, battery-powered vehicles.

If the motto of Jihad is ‘Kill! Kill! Kill!’; the motto of McWorld is ‘Buy! Buy! Buy!’ Jihad

aims to annihilate; McWorld aims to seduce. Jihad beheads spirituality with the sword; McWorld smothers it in self-indulgence and sense-gratification. Trapped in a world dominated by these two despots, spirituality is caught between Scylla and Charybdis.

### **The Wickedness and the Wonders of McWorld**


A major temptation of McWorld is communication technology. If you don't have the latest smartphone, if you don't have the latest apps, you don't belong in McWorld. If you don't take hundreds of self-photographs with your smartphone camera every day, McWorld disdains you as a dinosaur. If you don't use software for posting online these photographs, if you don't update your status on social networking websites, McWorld doesn't even want to look at you. And if you don't update your profile-page on such websites every day, McWorld doesn't consider you human. Social networking websites, in fact, are the greatest purveyors of narcissism, solipsism, and self-absorption since the invention of the mirror. Together with self-photographs, it is Mahamaya's trump card in distracting us from our religious practices and drowning us in egoism.

You might escape Jihad, but you can't escape McWorld. Its tentacles reach everywhere. We are all its slaves. Even though I inveigh against its excesses, I would never have been able to research this article without the Internet. This is an entirely beneficent aspect of McWorld to which I am obliged to offer a sincere salutation. I wouldn't be able to write anything at all without my faithful laptop, to which I offer a heartfelt full-body prostration for its many years of loyal service. Despite its evils, McWorld does have its good side, and without it we are all cripples. The best we can do is try to minimise our dependence on it.

### **Two Promises**

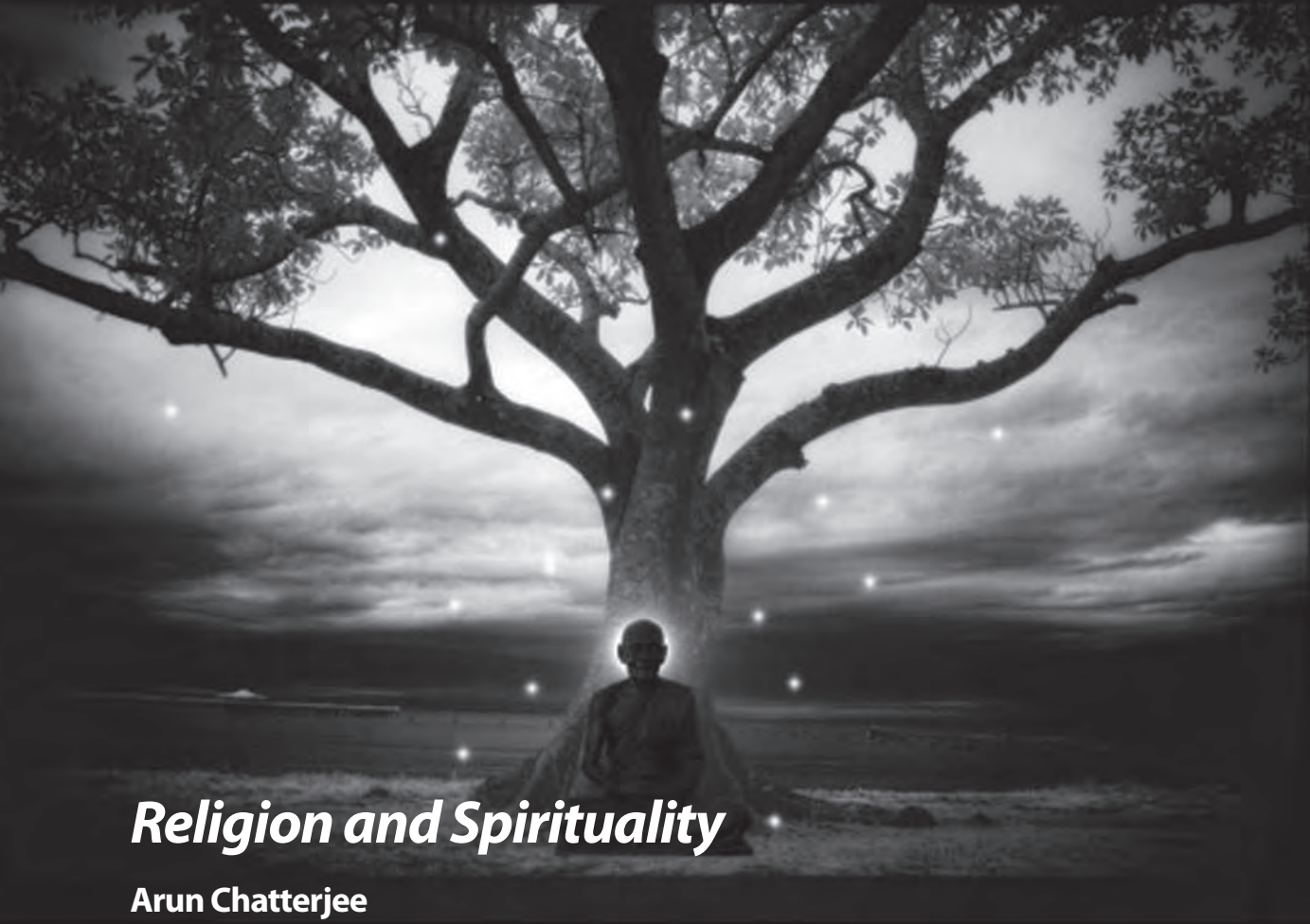
What chance does spirituality have of surviving in such a world? There are three considerations that inspire hope. One is the fact that a hunger for spirituality seems to be hard-wired in many of us. Some people can't live without a transcendent ideal. Maybe not all of us, but enough. So long as that condition persists, there is hope for spirituality. It may not sweep the world, and it will certainly assume different forms; but it will endure.

There are also two great promises—one from the distant past, one more recent. In the Bhagavadgita, Sri Krishna famously declares that he would be around when irreligion raises its head: 'Whenever there is a decline of religion and a rise of irreligion, I manifest myself. For the protection of the righteous, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of religion, I come into being from age to age.'<sup>5</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna, too, promised: 'Two hundred years later I shall have to go there [indicating somewhere to the northwest of Kolkata].'<sup>6</sup> Since Sri Ramakrishna passed away in 1886, that would bring him back to us some time before 2086. With promises like this to inspire us, spiritual aspirants can take hope. 

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# *Religion and Spirituality*

**Arun Chatterjee**

**I**N THE BEGINNING OF THIS ARTICLE I will discuss some general concepts and issues related to religion and spirituality. Next I will examine the place of religion and spirituality in Hinduism. In the third section I will present my personal approach to leading a spiritual life.

## ***Religion and Spirituality: General Concepts***

A religion usually is defined as a collection of beliefs about God and his relation with the universe and individual persons. There are many religions

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in the world, but I will deal only with the major world religions, which include Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The beliefs of these religions are documented in certain books, which are considered to be sacred and used for guidance as to how a man is supposed to act in the world. Many religions also have a hierarchy of organisations and clergy, and they have considerable influence on their followers and dictate how the respective religions are practised.

The religions of today are preceded by many different types of belief systems and there has been a gradual evolution of religious views. The origin of religions can be traced to animism, fetishism, and the worship of nature gods. These approaches now are considered to be crude, but they reveal

man's quest for something beyond the phenomenal world. Gradually more refined concepts of God emerged some of which are polytheistic and some monotheistic. One important aspect of most of these theistic views is that they consider God and gods to be essentially different and separate from man and believe that man can approach God for help and salvation but can never unify with him. Hinduism, which we will discuss later, is an exception due to its monistic metaphysical view.

As the evolution of thoughts and views continued, religious beliefs were challenged by scientists and intellectuals of the modern era, and gradually materialistic philosophies emerged. These philosophies, which can be found in both the West and the East, do not believe in anything that cannot be verified by the senses and scientific instruments. In this article I will not examine materialistic philosophies. However, I will examine approaches that do not follow traditional religious practices, and spirituality falls in this category. It should be noted that all the major religions of the world—Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have variations of belief and practice within them, and they have both religious and spiritual components. The spiritual component usually is mystical in nature.

The term spiritual is used in several different senses. For example, some persons think that the term spiritual is related to spirits that are forces of nature, or souls of dead persons; this is a narrow meaning of the term spirit. Some consider certain practices such as meditation as spiritual no matter whether the person meditating believes in having a spiritual self or not. I will use the term spiritual in the sense that is compatible with Hindu philosophy, which believes that Spirit is the ultimate Reality and that it is the essence or Self of everything. Spirit is self-existent consciousness, which is eternal and the inner reality of existence. A spiritual person believes

that he is not just a mental being and that his outer personality, which is driven by 'ego', is the construction of his nature. He believes that he has spiritual consciousness and a spiritual self or soul, which is higher or greater than his mental consciousness, and that it is hidden deep within him. Spirituality involves self-finding or self-realisation. A spiritual person also believes that God dwells within his consciousness and that he can reach him through his inner self or soul.

Spiritual or mystic personalities can be found in all religions. In Judaism, Kabbalah represents a spiritual approach, and there are many teachers of Kabbalah who are highly spiritual persons. Within Christianity, St Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) are examples of highly spiritual persons. Within Islam, Sufis are considered as mystics or spiritual persons. One well known Persian poet who was a Sufi mystic is Rumi (1207–1273). Religious and spiritual approaches are not necessarily opposed to each other. Many saintly persons combined religious and spiritual life; their religious life was motivated by a sincere yearning for contact and union with God.

### ***Place of Religion and Spirituality in Hinduism***

Hinduism accommodates both religious and spiritual approaches. The original sourcebooks of Hinduism are the Vedas. Yajur Veda, one of the four Vedas, has been most influential in Hindu religious practice, and it serves as a guidebook for priests for performing ceremonial rituals. The fundamental concept that underlies these rituals is that of sacrifice. External sacrifice involves offerings to the gods in different forms. The offerings are of food, flowers, and in rare cases, animals. It is important to note that these sacrifices are performed for gaining the favour of the gods. Getting rewards such as wealth, fame,



children, and protection from danger is the primary motive of these offerings. However, rituals in many cases are symbolic in nature and offerings can be interpreted as expressions of devotion and adoration for God. Rituals can be performed with correct knowledge and interpretation of the symbols with no expectation for rewards, and in that case they assume a spiritual nature.

The foundation of the spiritual approach of Hinduism is the Upanishads, which is referred to as Vedanta. The Bhagavadgita is also considered to be Vedantic literature. The Upanishads' spirituality involves the experience of the Atman, which is Spirit and represents consciousness at the highest level. For Hinduism spiritual practices lead to self-realisation or finding one's true nature, which is Brahman. Self-realisation is a difficult task and it requires a change or transformation of consciousness. One has to shift one's focus from the external ego to the inner self within. According to the *Katha Upanishad*: 'The self-existent Lord destroyed the outgoing senses. Therefore, one sees the outer things and not the inner Self. A rare discriminating man, desiring immortality, turns his eyes away and then sees the indwelling Self.'<sup>1</sup>

The Upanishads generally accept the validity and efficacy of Vedic rituals. However, they also point out that ceremonial sacrifices and ritualistic worship lead to gains that are materialistic and of limited value. The Upanishads recommend a spiritual approach for

gaining higher knowledge, finding the Self and uniting with Brahman, the ultimate Reality. Among all of the Upanishads it is the *Mundaka Upanishad* that addresses most clearly and directly the difference between the ritualistic religious approach and the spiritual approach towards God. Although the *Mundaka Upanishad* does not denigrate Vedic rituals, it clearly presents spirituality as being superior to the ritualistic approach. I quote here a few verses that present the view of the *Mundaka Upanishad* on the ritualistic approach: 'Since these eighteen constituents of a sacrifice, on whom the inferior karma has been said to rest, are perishable because of their fragility, therefore those ignorant people who get elated with the idea "This is (the cause of) bliss", undergo old age and death over and again.'<sup>2</sup> 'The deluded fools, believing the rites inculcated by the Vedas and the Smritis to be the highest, do not understand the other thing (that leads to) liberation. They, having enjoyed (the fruits of actions) in the abode of pleasure on the heights of heaven, enter this world or an inferior one' (1.2.10).

The following verses present the recommendations of the *Mundaka* and *Katha* Upanishads for spiritual practice leading to self-realisation, and this practice includes the study of the Upanishads, gaining higher knowledge and equanimity, casting away of desires, and meditation on Brahman: 'Taking hold of the bow, the great weapon familiar in the Upanishads, one should fix on it an arrow sharpened with meditation. Drawing the string, O good-looking one, hit that very target that is the Imperishable, with the mind absorbed in Its thought' (2.2.3). 'The intelligent man gives up happiness and sorrow by developing concentration of mind on the Self and thereby meditating on the old Deity who is inscrutable, lodged inaccessibly, located in the intellect, and seated in the midst of misery.'<sup>3</sup> 'When all desires clinging to one's heart fall

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955)



off, then a mortal becomes immortal (and one) attains Brahman here' (2.3.14).

The Gita's views on the ceremonial and ritualistic approach are similar to those of the Upanishads. The Gita recognises that the ritualistic approach can yield desired enjoyments and rewards, but these gains are of limited value. The Gita prefers a psychological or spiritual approach. I present here a few verses that would reveal the Gita's views on ceremonial sacrifices:

In the days of yore, having created the beings together with the sacrifices, Prajapati said: "By this you multiply. Let this be your yielder of coveted objects of desire. You nourish the gods with this. Let those gods nourish you. Nourishing one another, you shall attain the supreme God. Being nourished by sacrifices, the gods will indeed give you the coveted enjoyments. He is certainly a thief who enjoys what have been given by them without offering (these) to them."<sup>4</sup>

Those who are versed in the Vedas, who are drinkers of Soma and are purified of sin, pray for the heavenly goal by worshipping Me through sacrifices. Having reached the place (world) of the king of gods, which is the result of righteousness, they enjoy in heaven the divine pleasures of gods. After having enjoyed that vast heavenly world, they enter into the human world on the exhaustion of their merit. Thus, those who follow the rites and duties prescribed in the three Vedas, and are desirous of pleasures, attain the state of going and returning (9.20-1).

The Gita recognises a variety of sacrifices, which can be performed and these sacrifices range from the offerings of food and flowers, ascetic practices of self-control, doing selfless work, and gaining knowledge of Brahman. After recognising the validity of these sacrifices the Gita reveals its preference for doing works as a sacrifice and also gaining knowledge as a sacrifice: 'O destroyer of enemies, Knowledge considered as a sacrifice is greater than sacrifices requiring materials.

O son of Pritha, all actions in their totality culminate in Knowledge' (4.33). The Gita presents its profound concept of sacrifice: 'The ladle is Brahman, the oblation is Brahman, the offering is poured by Brahman in the fire of Brahman. Brahman alone is to be reached by him who has concentration on Brahman as the objective' (4.24).

Sri Aurobindo explained the above verse:

This then is the knowledge in which the liberated man has to do works of sacrifice. It is the knowledge declared of old in the great Vedantic utterances, 'I am He', 'All this verily is the Brahman, Brahman is this Self'. It is the knowledge of the entire unity; it is the One manifest as the doer and the deed and the object of works, knower and knowledge and the object of knowledge. The universal energy into which the action is poured is the Divine; the consecrated energy of the giving is the Divine; whatever is offered is only some form of the Divine; the giver of the offering is the Divine himself in man; the action, the work, the sacrifice is itself the Divine in movement, in activity; the goal to be reached by sacrifice is the Divine.<sup>5</sup>

The Gita wants us not only to understand the meaning of this verse, but also to act accordingly; and that requires us to be desireless and egoless. Every action, however small it may be, should be done for God as an offering, and this approach is expressed clearly in the following verse of the Gita: 'O son of Kunti, whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer as a sacrifice, whatever you give and whatever austerities you undertake, (all) that you offer to Me.'<sup>6</sup>

### ***Personal Perspective on Religion and Spirituality***

This section is meant for sharing with the readers how spirituality finds a place in my life. I must acknowledge that my perspective has been moulded by the views of several philosophers whose views match Vedantic views on spirituality. Prominent

among these philosophers are Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda. The books and articles that have had significant influence on me include lectures of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita* and *The Life Divine*. I am concerned that when I present my views I may come across as a wise person who is trying to teach others how to lead a spiritual life. So I want to seek the understanding of the readers of this article that I am in no position to give advice to others. My goal is to share with the readers my understanding of how I *should* act spiritually although I do not always succeed in acting according to these ideas and ideals.

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**I believed in God since my childhood. I sincerely believe that learning about other religions and Western philosophy enhanced my understanding of Hinduism significantly.**

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I have believed in God since my childhood. I believe in the power of God, which I worship as the Mother. I was highly influenced by my visits with my parents to Dakshineswar, where Sri Ramakrishna lived, and Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. I am fortunate to have seen Sri Aurobindo and the Mother when I was ten years old. My father was a disciple of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. He was a brilliant student of philosophy and a scholar of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and yoga. However, he never told his children what to do spiritually, but his life's example has been very influential. After he passed away, I had a sincere call to follow his path. I started taking courses on religion and philosophy at the university where I taught, and I was exposed to various religions and also Western philosophy. Some of the professors of the departments of religious studies and philosophy became good friends and their guidance has been extremely helpful. I sincerely believe that learning about other religions

and Western philosophy enhanced my understanding of Hinduism significantly.

When I was growing up some of the incidents of Swami Vivekananda's life made an indelible impression on my mind and psyche. One such incident had to do with his going to the Kali temple of Dakshineswar at the behest of Sri Ramakrishna to ask Mother Kali for financial help because his family was going through hardships after his father passed away. He could not ask for money but only for knowledge and peace. He was sent back by Sri Ramakrishna to pray again for financial help, but again he could not ask for anything but knowledge and peace. Since my childhood when I pray I do not pray for any specific reward or success for myself. I can only pray for guidance for doing the right thing. Another thing that impressed me is Swami Vivekananda's pronouncement: 'We want to worship a living God. I have seen nothing but God all my life, nor have you. ... The living God is within you, and yet you are building churches and temples and believing all sorts of imaginary nonsense. ... The moment I have realized God sitting in the temple of every human body, the moment I stand in reverence before every human being and see God in him—that moment I am free from bondage, everything that binds vanishes, and I am free.'<sup>7</sup> In my personal life I try to treat everyone—poor and rich—with respect. I do come across persons who are malicious, and instead of fighting or arguing with them I try to stay away from them as much as possible.

Swami Vivekananda's life is a testimony for work. I try to follow the Gita's approach to work, which is to work without any attachment to the results and offering all works to God. It is very important for my spiritual development to control my emotions such as anger and jealousy and that work without attachment is a means for diminishing my ego and attaining equanimity. The approach of the Gita can be followed by the

continuous remembrance of God and the offering of all works to him. The Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram had a simple message, 'remember and offer', which I try to follow sincerely. The same message is found in several verses of the Gita such as these: 'Therefore, think of Me at all times and fight. There is no doubt that by dedicating your mind and intellect to Me, you will attain Me alone.'<sup>8</sup> 'Mentally surrendering all actions to Me and accepting Me as the supreme, have your mind ever fixed on Me by resorting to the concentration of your intellect' (18.57).

Doing external rituals just to gain the favours of gods does not lead to spiritual growth, and it does not help one come closer to God. However, one can perform rituals with sincere devotion and yearning to reach God, and such practices can prepare one for spiritual life. For me, the most important task is to be vigilant about my emotions and control them, and also to work without attachment remembering God continuously. It is not easy to 'remember and offer' all the time, but I try to do that despite many failures. <sup>PB</sup>

### References

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3. *Katha Upanishad*, 1.2.12.
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# Reflections on Spirituality in Changing Times

M Sivaramkrishna

## A Brief Scenario

**I**N OUR RADICALLY CHANGING TIMES, spirituality exists in matrices of varied hues with their own texts, rituals, and institutions. On one side, organised religions continue to hold considerable sway; on the other, many faith seekers, free from this sway, find their own frames. Strangely, atheism and agnosticism assume the dimensions of dogmatic religious faiths! The outcome is evident, also, in the study of Western philosophers without deities. The God that failed in the wake of Marxism has his history chronicled by scholars now. Above all, Religious Studies departments churn out tomes ranging from theology through sexuality to feminist bias or anything else which helps the researchers' tenure.

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## Spirituality: The Centre Stage

Though it is naïve—indeed risky—to generalise, the dialectic of spirituality and religion as integral is gaining ground. Perhaps, religion is diluted spirituality and spirituality is distilled religion. Thus, religion and spirituality cannot be divorced. Appropriating elements from faiths other than one's own is evident in a significant way. The idiolects of gurus, yoga, and tantra proliferate. Therefore, as Ken Wilber suggests, rigid bifurcations tend to be 'obscure':

It is common to distinguish between 'religion' (authoritarian and institutional forms) and 'spirituality' (personal beliefs and experiences). In some ways that is a useful distinction, but in many ways it obscures. There are very profound personal/mystical branches of most forms of institutional religions; in fact, in many ways religion is just institutionalised spirituality (e.g. if New-Age spirituality became influential and established, it could eventually be a religion).<sup>1</sup>

### **Spiritual 'Growth' from One's Faith Itself**

Swami Vivekananda affirmed that each faith must grow according to its own laws of growth. And without destabilising it, enrich it with what it is in tune with. Therefore, from within one's religious grounds grow the roots of integral spirituality. The editor of *American Vedantist*, Beatrice Bruteau affirms that Vivekananda brought Vedanta to America 'not as a religion, but as spirituality ... to which we can all rise, in and from the context of whatever religion we had inherited or adopted.'<sup>2</sup>

If we glance at the journals which by and large represented Vedanta vis-à-vis other religions, their very titles are revelatory. There was a journal *Message from the East* founded by Swami Paramananda, who was himself a prolific writer. Then there was *Vedanta and the West* from the Vedanta Center of Southern California, Hollywood's Swami Prabhavananda, and *Vedanta for East and West* edited by Swami Ghanananda of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, London. All these journals had contributors from diverse religious backgrounds. Now there is a quantum leap: from the Vedanta Society of Western Washington we get *Global Vedanta*, and *Jyoti* from The Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa. Religion has transcended its specific, innate hallmarks from which has emerged the availability of spiritual perspectives spatially beyond one's borders and spiritually 'universal'. We now have the culmination of the 'Veda' itself assuming the avatar of *American Veda* by Philip Goldberg.<sup>3</sup>

### **Blind Spots**

But then, there are predictable aberrations. Tantra, the dialectic of desire, is built on the neutralising of desire's undesirable consequences. This gets ignored and tantric studies make themselves vulnerable to the erotic at best and to raw sexuality at worst—in most cases. The clarity and

sensitivity—above all, the authenticity of an explorer like Sir John Woodroffe—which ought to be the values, are undermined. The apparently sophisticated academic studies reduce their hermeneutics—for want of another word—to the predictable or pernicious infantile insecurity and the guilt of adult sexuality. Perhaps, it is insensitive to invoke Sri Ramakrishna's characterisation of pundits which applies to most tantric studies rolling out mostly from American universities. The irony is that from the University of Chicago

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**Religion is diluted spirituality and spirituality is distilled religion. Appropriating elements from faiths other than one's own is evident in a significant way.**

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come such studies: Chicago, from where Vivekananda pleaded for interfaith harmony. But then a Vivekananda Chair was instituted in the same University of Chicago! I can only invoke Shakespeare's words: 'How far that little candle throws his beams! So shines a good deed in a naughty world.'<sup>4</sup> Can we say the 'naughty' world of so-called Tantric scholars, by and large? The irony of academic honours for writers or academics is: the most offensive, insensitive books—for instance, on Hinduism and its sages—are awarded prizes!

### **Are there Incomparable Texts and Faiths?**

This question was asked by Francis X Clooney SJ in his study of theology after Vedanta. Texts of spiritual truths and their realisation in one's consciousness are very tricky and tantalising areas. Clooney raises the question of reading a text: 'No part of a Text, however central, can be appealed to as an excuse for not reading other parts of it; and no part can be ignored merely on the grounds that it is inconsistent with the general trajectory of the reading that is undertaken. We must therefore take into account the possibility

that there are at least some parts of texts which resist comparison, which are so significantly unlike what is found in other texts that any possible comparison is likely to be unwarranted.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Desire and the Undesirable***

This is quite interesting an analysis of comparison where needed and where it is unwarranted. Aren't the tantric texts so 'unlike' other texts that any comparison with other religious traditions which have no such sophisticated but natural systems recycling 'desire' is not only unwarranted but is in incredibly bad taste? Tantra is a spiritual

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**Tantra, the dialectic of desire, is built on the neutralising of desire's undesirable consequences. This gets ignored and tantric studies make themselves vulnerable to the erotic at best and to raw sexuality at worst.**

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tradition of transcendence which tames but does not terminate the desire to be happy. If this is ignored, even serious studies adorned with erotic drawings and photographs draw attention only to enjoyment but not to enlightenment. The profuse stream of tantric texts emerging from the West is scholarly yet smacks of the underlying but perceptible sexual aberrations.

### ***Margins as Centres: Master 'M' and the Maid***

'God grant the philosopher insight into what lies in front of everyone's eyes,' says Wittgenstein.<sup>6</sup> This is, in his own imagery, an indictment of the fly getting caught in the fly bottle. The obvious, they say, is often overlooked. The 'margins' and 'centres' are functional but not fundamental. A mosquito can inject malaria! Without the invaluable services of those who pick up the 'trash,' whole cities will stink. The marginalised are not devoid of the dignity an egalitarian society confers.

The Master here is M., the future chronicler of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. The maid is Brinde who generally sits guarding Sri Ramakrishna's room, obviously helping his visitors. M. already impressed, indeed enchanted by the Great Master's scintillating discourse, asks Brinde, 'Does he read many books?' With transparent surprise, Brinde replies: 'Books? Oh, dear no! They're all on his tongue.' M., who had 'just finished his studies in college,' was 'amazed ... to hear that Sri Ramakrishna read no books.'<sup>7</sup>

### ***Short Refresher Course***

Seemingly a simple incident this unlocks the abyss between the academic background of M., on matters spiritual and the inwardness with those matters evident in the unlettered maid. That real spiritual matters go beyond books, debates, and disputations, perhaps, does not seem to have struck M. Brinde does not veto books: 'They're all on his tongue,' she says. The Great Master was infinitely knowledgeable in the sense with which he saw them. It was one of applying the wisdom of books for experimenting the eternal spiritual truths passed on by the ancient sages. If logical disputation, intellectual debate are the only orientations of learning, 'books are knots,' *granthas* and *granthis*. Brinde, in her own way, gave a short, quick preliminary refresher course on who Ramakrishna was and what he embodied!

### ***Advent of Sensate Culture***

That was in 1882. Sri Ramakrishna was well-known as a unique spiritual figure in Calcutta. One who embodied the essence of various spiritual traditions—thus demonstrating the various facets of spirituality. For our context, one would like to think that he restored the ancient tradition of a real *purohit*: a well-wisher of the place, the *sthala*. Not one of those 'rice-and-plantain bundling' priests, in his own words.

We have a glimpse of such priests in *The Gospel*: the Great Master went to worship his beloved Divine Mother in another temple and he saw the priests gambling, forgetting everything. Did the rot begin?

An odour of sensate culture began invading the nostrils of the elite, the Bengali *bhadralok*. They were highly educated, sensitive persons but helpless to resist the destabilising trends of the day. For our context, a characteristic example is seen in the meeting between Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Sri Ramakrishna. In the course of the conversation, the Great Master asks him: ‘Well, what do you say about man’s duties?’ With evident nonchalance, if not irreverence, he replies: ‘If you ask me about them, I should say they are eating, sleeping, and sex-life.’ The Great Master reacts sharply: ‘Eh! You are very saucy.’ However, he continues his sage ‘counseling’: ‘Of what use is erudition if the mind dwells on “woman and gold”? ... The pundit has no doubt studied many books ... But if he is attached to women, if he thinks of money and honour as the essential things, will you call him a pundit? How can a man be a pundit if his mind does not dwell on God?’ (669).

**The Continuity of Craving in a Consumer Economy**

One may feel that the Great Master was critical of affluent society and its bases: sensex and sex. Is he a puritan who is averse to enjoyment as one of the basic goals of humans? Certainly not. He was cautioning spiritual aspirants to be wary about the

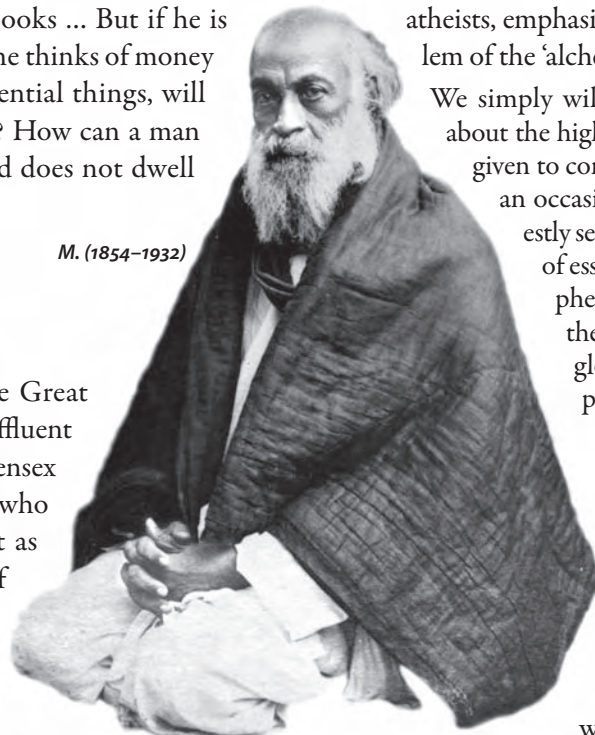
risks involved in a hedonistic style of living. As Gerald Heard, one of the pioneers of the Vedanta movement in the West and a brilliant thinker, puts it tersely: ‘Our whole society is increasingly organized to keep its economy going by creating craving and inflaming it. Our economies are based on increasing consumption, and when those who can pay for it can consume no more necessities, we must make them buy more luxuries, we must make them continually be more luxurious, otherwise our very machine “stalls” “slump and crash” ... plenty is at last within our grasp?’<sup>8</sup> Heard asks this question but the paradox is that the major portion of world’s resources are enjoyed by a minority in the Western societies.

**The Phantoms of the Global Alchemy**

The picture today is much more inimical to values, let alone spiritual matters. Value is mirrored in the yardstick of price and the art of selling a product. Alain de Botton, while outlining God for atheists, emphasises the formidable problem of the ‘alchemy’ of advertising:

We simply will not care for very long about the higher values when all we are given to convince us of their worth is an occasional reminder in a modestly selling, largely ignored book of essays by a so-called philosopher, while in the city beyond, the superlative talents of the globe’s advertising agencies perform their *phantasmagorical* alchemy and set our every sensory fibre alight in the name of a new kind of cleaning product or savoury snack.<sup>9</sup>

But he says in another context that: ‘For better and for worse, consumerism is



M. (1854–1932)



condemned *not* to be a total waste of money' provided the 'material objects' lovingly bought are reminders of the essence of religious or spiritual way of living. This awareness may not come easily simply by purchasing those items but by perceiving their 'essence'. The purchased items can 'provide us with an inspiring picture of a

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**The Great Master was critical of affluent society and its bases: sensex and sex. Is he a puritan who is averse to enjoyment as one of the basic goals of humans?**

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destination and thereby bolster our efforts to get there'. Similarly, a 'titanium desk lamp hints at a busy life reduced to its meaningful essence, the mountain hiking holiday promises an end to hesitancy and fragility and the birth of a new and a more resilient self'. And, he adds, 'religions have always understood this dualism.'<sup>10</sup>

***Dualism, the Basic Brick of Creation***

Though religions understood dualism, they seem today, incapable of accepting it as an inalienable dimension of human consciousness which pervades entire Nature. And if God disappears, and everything that exists is merely an evolution based on survival of the fittest, then the Hobbesian dictum 'nasty, brutish, and short'<sup>11</sup> swings into action. This is evident in the escalation of violence for various purposes, including the religious. It does not require books or visuals in news channels to sense this.

Elizabeth Anderson raises a startling query: 'If God is Dead, is Everything Permitted?' She takes the context of evolution and says:

The 'evil tree of evolution' is a stock metaphor among proponents of the literal truth of the biblical story of creation. In different versions, it represents evolutionary theory as leading to abortion, suicide, homosexuality, the drug

culture, hard rock, alcohol, 'dirty books', sex education, alcoholism, crime, governmental regulation, inflation, racism, Nazism, communism, terrorism, socialism, moral relativism, secularism, feminism and humanism, among other phenomena regarded as evil.<sup>12</sup>

This is a stunning catalogue of, by and large, phenomena which, perhaps, we see globally. But then, was the past an unsullied virtuous entity? Wars, exploitation, slavery, colonisation in one form or the other was evident—we now watch stories about them in movies. Therefore, religion has to account for its contribution. It is this paradox that spirituality, not religion, resolves. For, if we take Ken Wilbur's suggestion, spirituality is a personal matter. It takes elements of religion and works out an attitude of acceptance of these negatives as natural, as our perennial effort to tame them.

***Evil is Misunderstood Wisdom of God***

Says a contemporary sage Sri Ram. For God he prefers Nature. Any number of instances can be found. Isn't it the evil of racist bias that made Mohandas Gandhi get thrown on to the platform even when he had every right to travel in the class he chose? Is it a wise act on the part of the person who did this? In retrospect, that was the beginning of the long struggle for non-violence which got subverted. He died from a violent act and remained in the global consciousness as a figure of practical spirituality. This is not legendary: it is history. So is that of Nelson Mandela.

To further confirm this naturalness of evil as apparent ignorance, there are studies about the relation between Christ and Judas.

***Judas as a Catalyst for Christ's Emergence as Saviour***

Hindu mythology is noted for its juxtaposing of good and evil as fluid manifestations of the same

energy. Whether one calls it God or Shakti is immaterial. According to traditional faith, it is the acceleration of 'evil' that demands the descent of a god-man or goddess. The Bhagavadgita was taught in the background of a fierce war and the praises of Vishnu in a thousand forms came from the wounded Bhishma lying on a bed of arrows. And it is the decline of dharma and its restoration that unfolds the devastating Kurukshetra war. Of course, there is nothing strange if Robert Oppenheimer recites a verse from this text when the atomic explosion erupted during its first testing.

Keeping this in the background, can we perceive spirituality as an inclusive consciousness without any bifurcations? Therefore, it is natural to accept Judas as an indispensable catalyst in the story of Christ. Bart D Ehrman observes that Judas's betrayal is not 'a very evil deed'. 'Without the betrayal there would be no arrest, without the arrest there would be no trial, without the trial there would be no crucifixion, without the crucifixion there would be no resurrection—and in short, we *still* wouldn't be saved from our sins. So why were Judas's actions such a bad thing?'<sup>13</sup>

Apparent evil gets transformed into a profound act of revelation. Does this destabilise our immense reverence for Jesus? In the life of prophets, paradoxes are common and corresponding questions predictable. For instance, cancer, 'the Emperor of Maladies', as it is termed now, 'visited' Sri Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharishi from whose lips not even a fib in fun escaped. The natural fact is articulated by Shakespeare: 'The web of our life is of mingled yarn, good and ill together.'<sup>14</sup> The hero and the betrayer are more interlinked than our interfaith dialectics are! Spirituality never bifurcates but balances.

### **The Question of the Ethics of Divinity**

Jonathan Haidt, to cite another example, explores the 'dark side' of 'the ethic of divinity',

though he understood it only intellectually, on his visit to India he could 'see' it. He says, 'in India, and in the years after I returned, I felt it. I could see beauty in a moral code that emphasized self-control, resistance to temptation, cultivation of one's higher, nobler self, and negation of the self's desires.'<sup>15</sup> Yet, the plight of the minorities is 'sometimes incompatible with compassion, egalitarianism, and basic human rights' (ibid.). But the picture in the West raises other issues: 'Why are many of us bothered by rampant materialism? If some people want to work hard in order to earn money to buy luxury goods in order to impress others, how can we criticize them using the ethic of autonomy?' (ibid.). In short, the ethic of divinity is sometimes incompatible with compassion, egalitarianism and basic human rights.

But there are also theories based on stories of TV series which are 'offering a hymn to a just inequality, based on merit, education, and the social utility of elites'. They also show 'unfeeling big businessmen who have stolen hundreds of millions of dollars from their workers'<sup>16</sup> and wives who divorce but retain cash and swimming pools. These may be creative but show the fragile nature of spirituality in an affluent world. But there could be an answer or an alternative 'version to harmonisation'.

### **Harmonisation: The Spiritual Key to the Divine Feminine**

Francis X Clooney SJ calls for a hermeneutical harmonisation, *samarasya*, as the culmination of 'connection (saṅgati), textured reasoning (nyāya) and coordination (upasaṁhāra)<sup>17</sup> in understanding Vedanta. This strategy is handy in understanding spirituality as a harmonisation of apparent polarities. This is most important especially in the feminist field. Issues of gender need this *samarasya*. Radical feminism seems now to be a bit subdued, though in our country

it seems to be widely adopted with enthusiasm while it seems to be questioned in the West.

There are extremely convincing studies of the primacy of woman as the divine feminine. Luce Irigaray's *In the Beginning She Was*, for instance, says: 'The logic of Western culture ends in a substitution of representation for perception.'<sup>18</sup> This explains the inability to 'raise' 'the negative' of a man and woman 'itself to a transcendental level, without making it correspond to any being whatsoever. The negative then becomes the absolutely irreducible which lies between the other and him—and first, between woman and man' (101).

A more assertive attitude is found in Jane Hope's lively, fascinating study of the 'secret language of the soul'. She calls it 'a visual key to enlightenment and destiny'. We need 'a re-visioning of the "Great [Earth] Mother"'.<sup>19</sup> The faith thereof is still alive in a Native American's relationship with the Earth, the document of which is 'less than a hundred years' (ibid.). When asked to dig the ground, a native exclaims: 'You ask me to plough the ground? Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest' (ibid.). Jane refers to the 'survival of the Hindu pantheon of Hindu goddesses' specially 'Kali and Durga' alongside Parvati's nurturing qualities. In short, these are 'environmental concerns' which show 'a re-emerging awareness of our profound connection with the Earth and of the importance of responsible guardianship of our spiritual well-being' (17).

The Great Master revolutionized and re-defined the supremacy of the divine Mother over Shiva! And, as the distinguished Art critic Harsha V Dehejia, in his magnificent study of the journey of the Indian forms, has noted that Kali was 'traditionally ... the deity of thugs and

robbers and of anti-social elements ... yet, the same horrific Kali venerated in Bengal through the moving songs of Ramananda and Ramakrishna the two Bengali mystics who were able to turn the image of the bloodthirsty Kali into a living mother who listens to the supplications of her devotees.'<sup>20</sup>

### **Spirituality: Its Therapeutic Dimensions vis-à-vis Consciousness**

This is one of the most fascinating areas, which shows how the philosophers without religion are subjected to convulsions of consciousness. For instance, Nietzsche speaks of

'the soul in quest of freedom' convulsed, torn loose, torn away—it itself does not know what is happening, a drive and impulse rail like a command, provoking a lightning bolt of contempt for what is called 'duty'; a rebellious arbitrary, volcanically erupting desire for travel, strange places, entanglement, coldness. Soberness, frost, a hatred of love, perhaps a desecrating blow and a glance backwards where it formerly loved and worshipped.

And yet, 'a drunken, inwardly exultant shudder which betrays victory has been won—a victory? Over what, over whom?' The realisation comes that 'such bad and painful things are a part of the history of the *great liberation*'.<sup>21</sup>

The 'great liberation' is what philosophers seek but by and large smother it, by the overwhelming sway of intellect. It engulfs even the stirrings early in life. Nietzsche himself wrote a poem which expresses adolescent yearning:

I want to know Thee, O unknown power,  
That thrusts its head into my soul,  
Raging through my life like a storm,  
O unfathomable One, my kinsmen!  
I want to know Thee and Serve Thee (313).

'Great liberation'? Nietzsche didn't know the *Mahanirvana Tantra*! Indeed, the coincidence

is striking—Nietzsche was a contemporary of Sri Ramakrishna; born in 1844, Nietzsche passed away in 1900.

One feels that a comparative study of Sri Ramakrishna and the philosophers and scientists contemporary to him should be undertaken to find the alpha and omega of spirituality as a universal phenomenon. For instance, we have Emerson who ‘in private ... recorded more than one wave of exultation’ that he would ‘rout skepticism through sheer self-expression.’ Interestingly, he asserted: ‘I say to the Universe, Mighty one! Thou are not my mother ... star by star, world by world, system by system shall be crushed—but I shall live’ (287).

### **Meditation and Consciousness**

Before we look at the psychological facets of spirituality it is interesting to look at one very important aspect of spiritual life: meditation. The empirical consciousness studies are enthusiastic about this area. But the ‘hard core’ academic consciousness does not seem to cognise it, let alone re-cognise. For instance, *The Oxford Companion to Consciousness* has an entry on ‘meditation’ and its neurocognitive aspects. ‘The term “meditation” encompasses many activities.’ And ‘because of the paucity of empirical data currently available in this field,’ ‘this entry remains largely programmatic’<sup>22</sup>, says the entry writer Antoine Lutz. And the religion selected for detailed analysis is Buddhism. Of course the bibliography does not cite James H Austin’s *Zen and the Brain*, a comprehensive study of meditation and consciousness by a neurosurgeon practising Zen Buddhism.<sup>23</sup> Naïvely, I looked for an entry on Yoga but there are no entries under Y let alone Yoga! It is unfortunate, particularly when Yoga is so much in vogue now. But we can examine related areas. How do we then alert academics to be open about such matters?

### **The Psychological Facets of Spirituality**

We do not always live in the ‘high’ ambience of spiritual consciousness. We have setbacks, our crosses, our frustrations. Then high spiritual axioms may appear abstract and fill us with despair. A sage counsellor Dr Kenneth Ulmer, drawing from his vast experience of counselling says that: ‘Life can break you ... Sometimes you go to God even in your brokenness. Sometimes you have to go to Him with your wounds. Sometimes when you place yourself in His hand, you think that you are putting nothing in His hand because you feel like nothing. You look in the mirror and see nothing looking back at you. David said, “I feel like a broken pot.” But even with his brokenness David said, “I am in God’s hand”’<sup>24</sup>

It is in such contexts that we require not the

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**Quite often we are engulfed by sorrows of a persistent nature. What we expect escapes us, what we don’t desire engulfs us. Even small differences of views lead to fierce conflict.**

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debate about the compassion of God but effective measures of changing the ‘mood’. Simple steps go a long way in a short time. When asked, a contemporary sage Sri Ram said: ‘Spirituality is a constant *psychic readiness* to believe in the fact that all that happens is *always for our good*, either understandably or ununderstandably.’<sup>25</sup> This is a disarming, transparent answer. For, if we face a problem, we should realise that spirituality does not mean a state which is not ‘being problem-free but problem-resistant’ (14). Giving an analogy he adds, ‘If you find melodies in maladies and meanings in miseries’ (12), you can surely claim you are spiritual. In other words, ‘the turbulent paradoxes of life,’ ‘the ironic reversals in life’ are challenges to our ability to remain unperturbed. ‘Remain unshaken even when your heart is broken’ (11).

Quite often we are engulfed by sorrows of a persistent nature. What we expect escapes us, what we don't desire engulfs us. Even small differences of views lead to fierce conflict with even the potential of tear-shedding. Can we then think of it as negative? The argument can be met, says Sri Ram, by reasoning that 'a wise man *happily* extends, welcome to tears when they knock at the door of his life. Since he knows that the same father who blessed him with smiles is now sending tears. For him teardrops are diamonds in disguise' (13).

We constantly wonder about the affirmation of illusion or Maya. And it is, along with mind, 'the two perennial perplexities endlessly baffling the best brains of humanity. Is it some kind of deception? Is there a Reality which dispels that illusion?' (ibid.). Maya may be defined as 'the dramatically necessitated and dualistically induced apparent absence of God' (ibid.) says Sri Ram. It is the drama of dualistic characters, if we prefer to characterise it. With the advent of technology we are enjoying 'virtual realities' as if they are real. We not only suspend belief willingly, but we also allow dents to our wallet. And in philosophy, the discussion goes on and on about appearance and reality. We enjoy it only if we assume its reality. With impeccable logic, according to Sri Ram if spirituality or religion is ultimately the quest for God, 'we have to dismantle Maya. The search for God is not possible. But Maya can be dismantled only with the help of God's grace. This is an eternal spiritual riddle' (ibid.).

Out of illusion comes illumination. And 'the ultimate fact of life is that life is a fiction and the ultimate fact of fiction is that fiction is a (psychic) fact; so let us, in order to be really happy, enjoy fact as fiction and fiction as fact. Spirituality is nothing but the ability to do so' (ibid.).

All aspects of spirituality are condensed into that ability—I assume.



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## *My Religion: A Scaffolding for My Temple*

Prema Nandakumar

**P**ERHAPS I HAVE BEEN LUCKY. It was not my choice to be born in a Shrivaiishnava family. While Vaishnavism refers to all the creeds that consider Vishnu or one of his incarnations as the Supreme, Shrivaiishnavism sees the Supreme as a two-as-one, Shri, Lakshmi and Vishnu. My natal home has always given importance to

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certain external ways of behaviour and action associated with the practice of the religion. Being brought up in the tiny village of Kodakanallur on the banks of the Tambraparni river for the first few years of my life, I imbibed certain elements of body language from my grandmother. Whenever she took me to the temple I had to prostrate and offer salutations at the entrance, at the flag-staff, and the image of Garuda before entering the *mukha-mandapa*, the front hall.

### Growing Up with Rituals

While going round the *parikrama*, circumambulation, I had to stop in my tracks at a particular place, look up at the *vimana*, the structure covering the sanctum, keep my palms together to show humility and recite: '*vimanam, pranavakaram, sarva papa vinashanam*; the covering of the sanctum, of the form of Pranava, and the destroyer of all evils.' When the priest kept the Shri-Satari on my head, I had to say, '*dhanyosmi, dasosmi, anugrahitosmi*; I have been blessed, I am your servitor, I have been given your guardianship.' Such external markings and recitations were part of all the branches of day-to-day living. Even when I had to gulp down some medicine, I had to close my eyes before taking it and utter a prayer: '*Sharire jarjare-bhute vyadhi-graste kalevare, aushadham jahnavi toyam vaidyo narayano hari*; for an ill body become infirm, Narayana Hari is the doctor and the medicine is Ganga water.' Each time my grandmother would explain that this is a prayer to Narayana who is the doctor who will cure the suffering in my body through this medicine which is actually a representative of Ganga water.

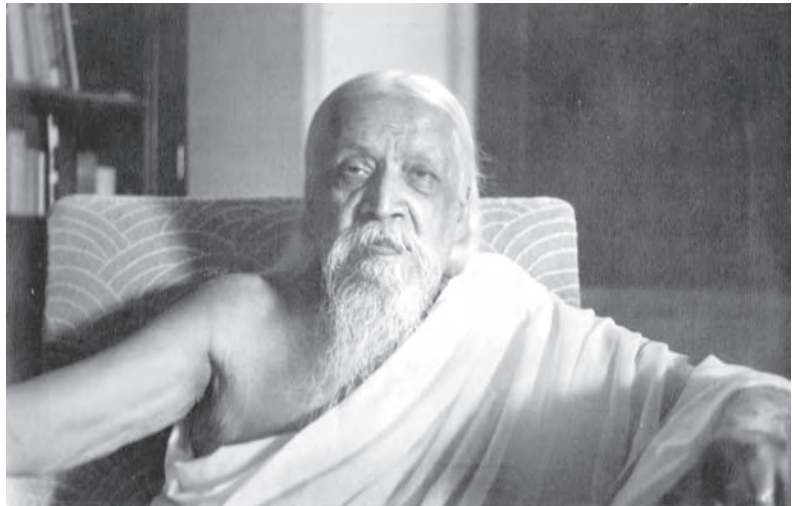
What seemed mechanical in those distant days appears now as the life-springs of spiritual living linked to a positive outlook in my advanced age. This lambent faith in customs that had an immediate significance and no doubt, a long-term humanising touch, were most welcome. I know now that this was the creative discipline inculcated in me which helps me regulate my life in a way that I feel free to breathe comfortably in any atmosphere, the

surrendered being within unaffected by the complications of external living. Shrivaisnavism has taught me by its *acharya-parampara*, the unbroken tradition of teachers, that one should surrender to the Divine and one should have humility. I am glad I was brought up this way; today I may or may not need any of the external disciplines but I continue to follow them, as that gives me a sense of safety. And, perhaps, to a very small extent, it gives the younger generations something to hold on to in the home atmosphere. As when my granddaughter, little Mythili shows me how she has learnt a new *kolam* for Friday, and the very young grandsons receive holy water and flowers in the temple from the priest, looking at me through the corner of their eyes seeking an approving smile. I am sure when they grow up, even if they are driving a spaceship, these little touches of religious discipline will give that calm to go ahead with the work at hand.

### Religion and Spirituality

At the same time, I know that religious discipline is not all. It is but a help to attain the wider spaces of spirituality. I had not understood this

*Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950)*





clearly till Sri Aurobindo placed before me a wonderful simile:

The highest spirituality indeed moves in a free and wide air far above that lower stage of seeking which is governed by religious form and dogma; it does not easily bear their limitations and, even when it admits, it transcends them; it lives in an experience which to the formal religious mind is unintelligible. But man does not arrive immediately at that highest inner elevation and, if it were demanded from him at once, he would never arrive there. At first he needs lower supports and stages of ascent; he asks for some scaffolding of dogma, worship, image, sign, form, symbol, some indulgence and permission of mixed half-natural motive on which he can stand while he builds up in him the temple of the spirit. Only when the temple is completed, can the supports be removed, the scaffolding disappear. The religious culture which now goes by the name of Hinduism not only fulfilled this purpose, but, unlike certain other credal religions, it knew its purpose. It gave itself no name, because it set itself no sectarian limits; it claimed no universal adhesion, asserted no sole infallible dogma, set up no single narrow path or gate of salvation; it was less a creed or cult than a continuously enlarging tradition of the Godward endeavour of the human spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Such is India's ancient religion, the Sanatana Dharma. Sri Aurobindo has caught the vital need of the human psyche to hold on to something even to understand materialistic philosophies like rationalism and atheism. At the

same time, I learnt that my religion which gives me 'something to hold on to' is not a confining space but a liberating force. Again and again the chants I heard took me to the world beyond the area of a small Indian village. When the elders were engaged in ritual worship, they never failed to conclude their rituals with prayers for the entire humanity: '*Sarve janah sukhinah bhavantu; let all people become happy.*' Such inclusiveness!

I grew older; I moved into cities, I was exposed to our scriptures. Not in any formal way for there are no such initiations for the girls in our families. But it was a scholar's home and studying books on Indian culture and listening to scripture-recitations was a way of life. This was when I was exposed to the great *shanti* mantras and was astonished to find the ancient seers take the entire humanity in one sweep to give their blessings: '*Om sarvesham svastir bhavatu, sarvesham shantir bhavatu, sarvesham purnam bhavatu, sarvesham mangalam bhavatu, Om Shanti Shanti Shanti; Om, let there be the well-being of all, let there be peace for all, let there be fulfilment for all, and let there be welfare of all. Om, peace, peace, peace.*'

This prayer is for the well-being, peace, prosperity, and auspiciousness for all. Such was the global, inclusive outlook of our forefathers. In my journey to gain self-knowledge I read scriptures of other religions. None of them went beyond 'my' and the immediate present. I saw no global outlook. Of course, this may have been due to the translations on which I had



Thiruppan Alvar (c. 2760 BCE)

to depend. So I have remained firmly rooted to the Sanatana Dharma which has happily given me enormous elbow room to study other pathways to God as well, never shutting me up in 'my religion'.

### **The Inclusive Psyche**

Prayers calling for '*sarve janah sukhinah bhavantu*' were made to percolate into the Shrivaisnava psyche. At the same time, the enquiring mind was never shut off. Till one could be sure of oneself and would not need any support system, the householder went on with his ritual-ridden life. Between rituals and the questing mind one lived, till one could become part of the universal psyche of '*sarve janah*' instead of just thinking about them. That was when one became spiritual and ready for sannyasa. As far as Hinduism is concerned, rituals do not come in the way of your enquiry or reaching out to spiritual oneness with other pathways. This has been demonstrated in the lives of many great people. Nearer home, I found my mother-in-law, the famous Tamil writer Kumudini, to be very particular about ritual worship of the household deity and the attendant 'achara' in vessels used for cooking and one's garments. At the same time, it was no contradiction for her when she went and served in the Sevagram, corresponded with Gandhiji and found a home for destitute women and children in Tiruchi, the Tiruchi Seva Sangam, which has been doing exemplary service to the marginalised and the poor irrespective of caste and creed. I guess this was because Kumudini was a Shrivaisnava and Tirupan Alvar, a Dalit saint of the Shri Vaishnava canon was revered at



Renganayaki Thatham aka Kumudini (1905–86)

home. Indeed, her translation of J C Kumarappa's *Precepts of Jesus* as *Yesunadhar Bodhanai* is a classic.

I go to an earlier generation and contemplate upon the life of my maternal grandfather. My earliest memory is when I was five years old. He had passed away by the time I was fourteen years old. He was a widower and my mother was his only child. He was so orthodox that he would not eat food cooked by my mother as she had not

undergone the initiation ceremony of *Panchasamskara*. As a Superintendent of Post Offices, he had to travel a good deal but he never ate in a stranger's house. He would carry a neatly-packed, self-sufficient set of utensils and would cook his food. If this was not possible, he was content with a couple of plantains and water offered to his personal deity, the Salagrama.

But he never imposed this rigidity in his personal life on the younger generation. He realised that new times demanded new kinds of search and new disciplines. This is how he bought the two-volume edition of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and gave it a place among his scriptures. He must have been drawn to it deeply for it was preserved carefully and given to my mother and has the pride of place as the first of the literature on the 'new' religion—spirituality of our times in our family. For my grandfather it was obvious that his religious discipline in the Vedic stream kept the windows open for a new breeze. Surely a moment comes for such questing persons when they recognise the soul-oneness in all, and then the religious discipline takes a back seat. But it is not given up altogether. This is to

help the younger generations imbibe the spirit of the religion of their forefathers. It chimes in with Krishna's telling Arjuna in the Bhagavad-gita that though he is beyond action, he continues with it like King Janaka, lest men give up action altogether: 'Whatsoever the superior person does, that is followed by others. What he demonstrates by action, that, people follow. I have, O son of Pritha, no duty, nothing that I have not gained, and nothing that I have to gain, in the three worlds; yet, I continue in action. If ever, I did not continue to work, without relaxation, men, O son of Pritha, would in every way, follow in My wake.'<sup>2</sup>

This is why great acharyas never gave up the discipline of religion. Adi Shankara, Sri Ramanuja, Sri Madhvacharya have all followed the religious commands, while they were also fully emancipated from the feeling of 'I-ness'. Swami Vivekananda was much drawn to Sri Ramanuja in this regard, though he knew how much importance he gave to religion. Swamiji's own disciple, Alasinga Perumal was such a strict follower of Shrivaisnava rules which included the drawing of a conspicuous *namam*, mark on his forehead. Religion and spirituality are not incompatible companions as revealed in the following incident in Sri Ramanuja's life. When a Shrivaisnava brahmin, Periya Nambi carried food to the house of the Dalit devotee Maraner Nambi, Ramanuja raised no objection. The Dalit, Maraner Nambi was sick and needed help.

### **No Strangers**

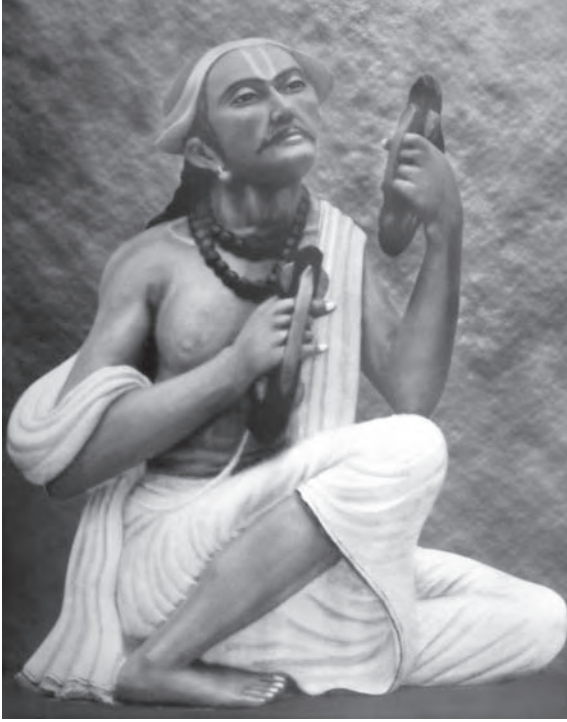
When Maraner Nambi died, Periya Nambi performed the last rites for his close friend. At this there was a lot of criticism from the orthodox public, but Ramanuja quelled it all by standing firmly behind Periya Nambi. He also named the Dalit community 'Tirukulatthar' or people

belonging to Lakshmi's fold. Swami Vivekananda says:

Then came the brilliant Ramanuja. Shankara, with his great intellect, I am afraid, had not as great a heart. Ramanuja's heart was greater. He felt for the downtrodden, he sympathised with them. He took up the ceremonies, the accretions that had gathered, made them pure so far as they could be, and instituted new ceremonies, new methods of worship, for the people who absolutely required them. At the same time he opened the door to the highest spiritual worship from the Brahmin to the Pariah. That was Ramanuja's work. That work rolled on, invaded the North, was taken up by some great leaders there; but that was much later, during the Mohammedan rule; and the brightest of these prophets of comparatively modern times in the North was Chaitanya.<sup>3</sup>

Adi Shankara's Advaita spoke of Brahman as the only Truth and added in the same breath that the world is an illusion, *mithya*. However, he knew the value of religion and that is why despite his own views, he went around India restoring temples to their original glory, removed encrustations like the Kapalika sect and built new temples. He also organised the wandering renunciates into ten denominations and established monasteries with elaborate rituals. His Sanskrit hymns, in particular, balance religion and spirituality in a perfect manner. The *Annapurna Ashtakam* speaks of Goddess Vishalakshi to give alms to the suppliant. The immediate meaning is clear: the prayer of every hungry person for food to sustain the body.

At a somewhat deeper level, the suppliant is asking for the alms of knowledge, *jnana-bhiksha*. Religion and spirituality hold hands together when we move steadily and reach the concluding verse: '*Mata cha parvati devi, pita devo maheshvarah, bandhavah shiva-bhaktashcha, svadesho bhuvana trayam*'; Goddess Parvati is my mother. God



Narsinh Mehta (c. 1409–88)

Maheshvara is my father. All devotees of Shiva are my family. All three worlds are my home.’

This is the very essence of spirituality. There are no strangers in this world since all of us are children of the Divine. Call the Divine by any name to pander to local mythos, he still remains the Divine, god-like as its Latin root suggests, ‘divinus’ as also *deva* in Sanskrit and Zeus in Greek. If Shankara juxtaposes religion and spirituality in one verse, Sri Aurobindo gives a long passage on the nature of spirituality in his poem, *Savitri*. The canto is ‘The House of the Spirit and the New Creation’:

Attuning to one Truth their own right rule  
Each housed the gladness of a bright degree,  
Alone in beauty, perfect in self-kind,  
An image cast by one deep truth’s absolute,  
Married to all in happy difference.  
Each gave its powers to help its neighbours’  
parts,  
But suffered no diminution by the gift;  
Profiteers of a mystic interchange,

They grew by what they took and what they gave,  
All others they felt as their own complements,  
One in the might and joy of multitude.<sup>4</sup>

But this future of the entire humanity thinking and becoming one is still far away. Meanwhile one has to inculcate this spiritual oneness slowly and surely. Can it be done?

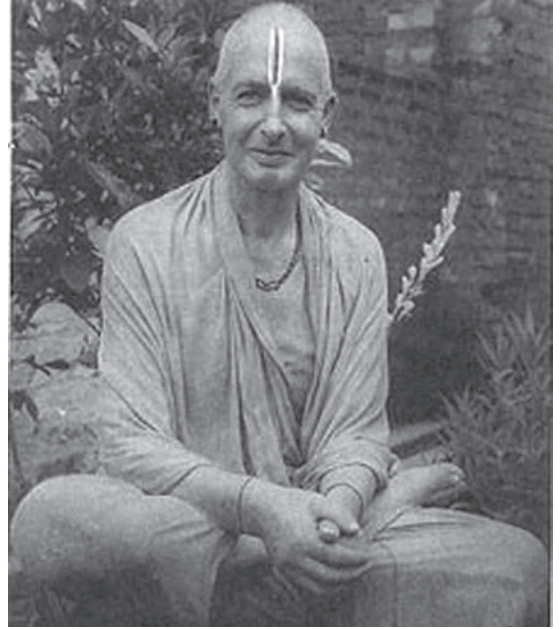
Spiritually advanced people have never lost hope in this matter. It can be done, is their message. One way of doing it is placing constantly a positive picture before mankind. This has been taken up to a great extent by the concept of dharma in India. If a person follows dharma in dealing with one’s fellow human beings, then one is moving towards the spiritual oneness of man. The Mahabharata, for instance constantly harps upon dharma, as when it repeats ‘*ahimsa paramo dharmah*; non-violence is the greatest virtue.’<sup>5</sup> The ‘Bharata Savitri’, an annexure to the epic proclaims: ‘*Urdhva bahur viraumyasha na cha kashchid shrunoti may, dharmad arthashcha kamashca sa dharmam kim na sevayate*; with uplifted arms I am crying aloud but nobody hears me. From righteousness is wealth as also pleasure. Why should not righteousness, therefore, be courted?’ (18.5.49).

The sage says that although no one is listening to him, he will go on speaking about how dharma brings eternal happiness to a body that is by its very nature impermanent. This is why our elders have never felt that the retelling of our moral codes in various garbs is redundant. Bhartrihari’s Sanskrit aphorisms, Tiruvalluvar’s Tamil Kural, Vemana’s Telugu Shatakam, and so on. Our culture has a Himalayan amount of literature in this respect and can never be brushed aside as ‘mere religion’.

Again, the karma theory has been a deterrent too. Except for hardened criminals, the commoner believes that if we do an evil act, we may escape the consequences in this birth but it is sure to catch us in our next birth. This theory is common to all religions born in India, including


Buddhism and Jainism. The most beautiful statement of this culture comes from Narsinh Mehta, a Vaishnava saint from Gujarat in his song, '*Vaishnava jana to tene kahiye jo peed parayi jane re*', a favourite of Mahatma Gandhi. The opening verse sets the tone of spirituality that is linked to religion and yet goes beyond it: 'They who experience the pain afflicting others, they who proffer help to persons who are in sorrow, they who are not egoistic and keep away from pride—they are the ones called as true devotees of Lord Vishnu.'

Finally, both the concepts of dharma and karma get their active image in one's personal life which is largely dictated by the discipline of the religion to which one belongs or the discipline imposed by a spiritual quest that leads one to a guru. It was when I was reading the life of Sri Krishnaprem that I understood not only the value of religious discipline but also the need to follow it to help those who are with us and those who may come after. An Englishman who was working as a professor in Lucknow, Ronald Nixon became the disciple of Yashoda Ma, a realised soul of the Gaudiya Vaishnavite tradition. He built an ashrama at Mirtola in the Himalayas where he set up an image of Krishna. After Yashoda Ma's passing, he continued with his orthodox life. He was also a brilliant writer and mystic. Once Dr Basishwar Sen, the beloved student of Dr Jagdish Chandra Bose asked his friend Sri Krishnaprem: 'If my widowed grandmother followed all this ritualistic procedure, I could understand. But you have had such a different background. Back in your Cambridge days you must even have eaten plenty of beef. How is that you can observe such orthodox restrictions?' Pat came the reply from the great yogi who had achieved the highest spiritual plane of *samatva*, equanimity: 'I believe that any self-imposed discipline, external or internal, is rather a good thing in this present age, when every kind of social and individual restraint



Sri Krishnaprem (1898–1965)

is being discarded. Besides this is the path laid down by those, who have gone before me and reached the goal. Who am I, just entering the path, to say, "I will do this and not that, accept this discipline, but not that?" I accept the whole.<sup>16</sup>

Salutations to such flaming pioneers of the Omnipotent who have shown us the way to reach our goal: 'The labourers in the quarries of the gods, the messengers of the Incommunicable, the architects of immortality.'<sup>17</sup> 

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# Spirituality Today

Christopher Key Chapple

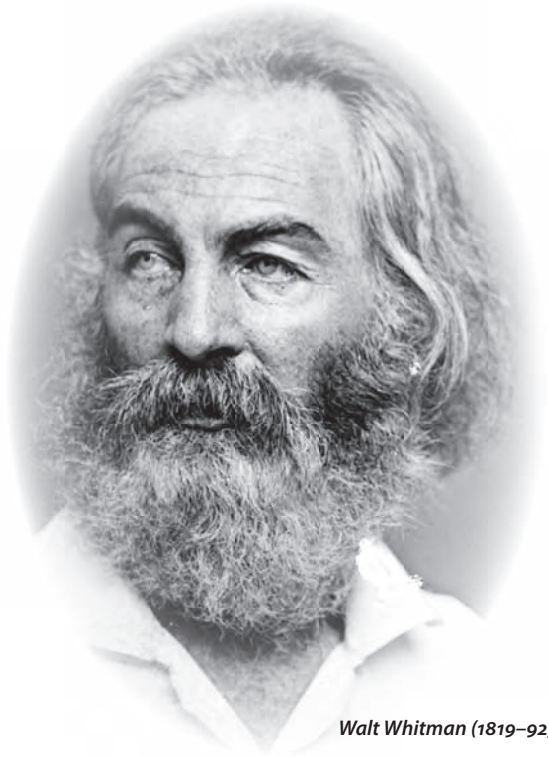
WILLIAM JAMES, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, provided a road map for understanding the relationship between psychological states and the human connection with the sacred. He profiled the lives of many individuals who suffered through darkness to find peace and a place of health and wholeness. His pioneering research inspired generations of readers to consider their own investment and participation in spiritual life. His affirmation of Walt Whitman and George Fox, founder of the Religious Society of Friends, and Swami Vivekananda acknowledged the American yearning for religious experience, and a willingness to see the sacred in poetry and in meditation and Yoga. More than a century later, people worldwide seek and find meaning in poetry, in moments of quiet reflection, and increasingly through activities that entail the coordination of body and breath. This essay will provide a sketch of how spiritual values are being reinvented through study, practice of spiritual disciplines, and activities of social engagement.

## ***Moving Towards the Spiritual***

Psychotherapy has gained wide popularity in the US not purely in the Freudian sense but in a broader movement known as the human potential movement. Inspired by the seminal works not only of William James but of mid-century

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Walt Whitman (1819–92)

writings by Paramahansa Yogananda, Sri Aurobindo, Carl Jung, Thomas Merton, Huston Smith, and Joseph Campbell, psychologists and psychotherapists gave way to a new phenomenon: spiritual direction, inspired in part by the guru-traditions of India, but adapted to a modern age. In the essay that follows, highlights will be given from each of the persons and movements mentioned above, with some reflections on what the future might hold.

Some years ago, the Christian theologian Karl Rahner stated that in order for religions to survive, they must turn to mysticism. He wrote: 'In the days ahead, you will either be a mystic (one who has experienced God for real) or nothing at all.'<sup>1</sup> Each of the world's faiths holds two faces: an outward institutional crust, and an inner source of inspiration. The outer aspects of religion are well known, involving a genesis story, a founding narrative, hierarchies, and core



*The Anti-Slavery Society Convention by the Quakers in 1840*

teachings. For the monotheistic faiths, human life begins with the Garden of Eden. The Jewish narrative, related by Moses, becomes encoded in the Torah, resulting in rabbinical authorities who continue to disseminate instructions on how best to live. The Christian narrative begins with Jesus of Nazareth and through Paul becomes united with Hellenistic culture, expressed through biblical and patristic literature. Islam, building on these early faiths, traces its origins to the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the emergence of the Quran, providing guidelines for a faith-filled life. Sources for the religions of India include the Vedas, as well as the teachings

of the Buddha, Mahavira, and Guru Nanak, from which developed systematic ontologies and correlative ethics. In China, writings attributed to Confucius and Lao Tzu laid the foundation for proper human behaviour. Each of these faiths developed lifestyles requiring that the human person live responsibly, in order to uphold the personal, familial, and social order.

The inner aspects of religion deal not with the domain of conformity, but with the difficult realities of human suffering. Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Vedic seers, Buddha, Mahavira, Confucius, Lao Tzu and other founding figures each dealt with adversity and provided, new,

creative world-altering religious responses. With the advent of the European Enlightenment arose the emergence of the concept of the autonomous individual. Beginning with political upheaval in the Americas, France, and the emergence first of the nation state in Europe, and later with the overthrow of colonialism in Asia and Africa, a new imperative was born. Not only must the individual take control of her or his own political destiny, one must look inward when dealing with matters of spirit. William James recognised this shift, profiling great figures whose anguish served first to inspire self-change, and then a turning outward to help change others. George, a progenitor of the Radical Reformation, found himself reviled and imprisoned for his views and his disruptive behaviour. He publicly proclaimed that no divinity could be found in the steeple houses of organised religion. He found solace only in the inner light, the place of consolation found in collective silent meditation. The shared ministry of his Religious Society of Friends, established in collaboration with his wife Margaret Fell, included men and women from all strata of society. With its levelling of all hierarchies and its emphasis on a well-formed conscience, the Quaker movement in England and America successfully campaigned for the abolition of slavery and for the rights of women, for ever changing the social landscape of England and the US. Most importantly, this movement arose from the conviction of each member, not from obedience to authority.

### **The Mystical**

Walt Whitman, a nineteenth century wandering printer, school teacher, editor, government worker, and writer born of a Quaker mother, charted a path of non-conformity across the American continent. He travelled from his native Long Island, New York, to New Orleans

and California and to the battle fields of the American Civil War. He documented with exuberance all aspects of human life. In the multi-stanza poem 'The Sleepers', he writes: 'The



*Henry David Thoreau (1817–62)*

soul is always beautiful, The universe is duly in order, every thing is in its place, What has arrived is in its place and what waits shall be in its place.'<sup>2</sup> With the alacrity of a Zen master, Whitman invited his reader to a place of open awareness, an acceptance of the presence of the spirit in fair and foul, high and low. The Canadian R M Bucke, quoted by William James, hailed Whitman as the paragon of Cosmic Consciousness.

Though Whitman, as well as Emerson and Thoreau before him, celebrated and invoked 'Sanskrit and the Vedas' (436) in their writings, it was not until the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago that Indian teachers found a wide platform for their teachings. Whereas the European Enlightenment had emphasised the dignity of the human person in the economic and political spheres, the wisdom of India taught about a deeper Self, prior to ego identity and possessions. This idea of Self, held forth by Swami Vivekananda as equal within all men and women, captured the imagination of America and Europe and inspired William James to explore the analysis of mind in Indian thought. He extolled the experience of samadhi, and proclaimed that the experience of connection with something far greater than





Thomas Merton (1915–68)

oneself transforms one's ethical sensibilities, empowering one to overcome past weakness.

Psychologists in Europe were similarly exploring the human psyche, most notably Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Jung developed the notion of the collective unconscious, positing that the human psyche at its root connects to larger archetypes and ultimately, deeply, connects through Self to the Divine. He used analysis of dreams and extensive journaling to encourage his patients to explore dig beneath surface realities to the point of connection with what he referred to as the *imago dei*, the Image of God. In his own personal exploration, recently published in *The Red Book*, he drew Mandalas and wrote about the womb of consciousness, *hiranyagarbha* as found in Buddhist and Hindu texts. Much of the imagery of this phase of Jung's journey communicates grappling with darkness, attempting to bring subconscious difficulties into a place of light and understanding. Bill Wilson and Dr Bob Smith, who founded Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935, incorporated various aspects of both William James and Carl Jung into their work, including their emphasis on 'bottoming out' as a precursor to seeking relief. Alcoholics Anonymous in many ways fulfils what Rahner had predicted: only through the experience of entering the darkness mapped by William James in his psychology of religious experience, can one enter the light of healing and wholeness.

### **New Methods of Spiritual Practice**

Swami Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952) charted a new on-the-ground interpretation of yoga sadhana, spiritual practice, for the American public. By living in the US for more than three decades, and utilising such innovations as mail-order communication with students worldwide, Yogananda paved the way for an applied spirituality consonant with the home faiths of the Americas, but emphasising the experience of spirit or Atman or Self as central to the process. As documented in the recent documentary 'Awake!' his innovations drew the attention and devotion of both celebrities and everyday people, as well as inventors such as George Eastman and politicians who supported his work. The Beatle George Harrison was so enraptured by the best-selling book *Autobiography of a Yogi* that he kept stacks of it on hand and gave it to all his visitors.

Whereas Yogananda lived and wrote in the US, his contemporary Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), after being educated in England, was at first incarcerated by the British in India for his anti-colonial activism, and then continued his work within the safe haven of Pondicherry, the French colony in South India that gained independence in 1954. Sri Aurobindo, in the Bengali intellectual tradition of Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore, having studied and taught the philosophy of the European Enlightenment, engaged in depth studies of the Vedas and Upanishads while in prison. He created a system of Integral Yoga that does not advocate the path of escape from worldly life in favour of an abstract transcendence but claims that true evolution requires involvement through the senses with every day concerns. Not unlike Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), who also grappled with how to come to terms with the emerging and irrefutable scientific narrative, Sri Aurobindo

used the language of science to explain the capability of the human being to ascend. Eschewing reliance on his earlier education in Western thought, he wrote: "The method of India, is on the contrary, to discover the spirit within and the higher hidden intensities of the superior powers and to dominate life in one way or another so as to make it responsive to and expressive of the spirit and in that way increase the power of life. Its tendency with the intellect, will, ethical, aesthetic, and emotional being is to sound indeed their normal mental possibilities, but also to upraise them towards the greater light and power of their own highest intuitions."<sup>3</sup> Aurobindo's study center, managed by his close associate Mira Richards until her passing in 1975, attracted international scholars and seekers from around the world. Auroville continues experiment with various aspects of applied spirituality, including innovations in architecture, healing modalities, and sustainable agriculture.

Thomas Merton (1915–1968), followed the well-trod path of the mystic described by William James. Merton suffered from the death of his American Quaker mother when he was six years old, and the passing of his New Zealand artist father when he was fifteen. Having been educated largely at boarding schools in England, he entered Columbia University in 1935 and converted to Catholicism in 1938. His 1948 book *The Seven Storey Mountain* became a best-seller. It narrates his search for meaning in a chaotic world, a journey that brought him to the Trappist monastery in Gethsemane. While in Kentucky he experienced a transformation of

consciousness not unlike samadhi as described by Swami Vivekananda, and in the 1950s began serious study of the world's faiths, particularly Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sufism. He was a pioneer in the field of inter-religious dialogue, and by 1968, the year of his death, had been in conversation with D T Suzuki, the Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hanh. His writings, from the 1948 autobiography through *New Seeds of Contemplation* and other essays emphasise the cultivation of authentic human experience in the cultivation of spiritual life.



Swami Satprakashananda (1888–1979)

Huston Smith (b.1919) and Joseph Campbell (1904–1987) helped popularise world spiritual traditions through their best-selling books and television programs. In the 1950s, Smith, then a professor at Washington University in St Louis, gave television lectures on the world's great religions. Born of missionary parents, he grew up in China, moving to America during his college years, during which he came under the tutelage of Swami Satprakashananda at the advice of Gerald Heard and Aldous Huxley, whom he visited in Southern California. Smith was perhaps the first true 'hybrid', avowing enthusiasm for any and all religious truths. Joseph Campbell's television series and book *The Power of Myth* visually communicated the insights of the world's symbolic systems, preferring language of psychological transformation to that of religious faith.

In the 1990s, various movements coalesced to transform the landscape of spiritual practice. The conveyance of core ideas of Vedanta had permeated throughout American discourse, as

documented in Philip Goldberg's book *American Veda*. Both Zen and Transcendental Meditation had become household words in the 1960s, and an entire generation came of age knowledgeable of and comfortable with Asian thought. Yoga became popular as a form of exercise with the acknowledged benefit of spiritual upliftment. Scientific research affirmed the physical and mental benefits of meditation practice, and, in addition to the proliferation of self-help books, a number of materials became available by such authors as Sharon Salzberg and Jack Kornfield who had trained in meditation techniques in Asia and communicated their experiences in a widely accessible language. Building on the work of Thomas Merton, various Christian meditation communities arose both within and without monastic orders. One of Merton's former protégés, James Finley, originated a form of Christian contemplation that combines contemporary psychological research and knowledge with biblical reflection.

*BKS Iyengar (1918–2014)*



Today the spiritual landscape of any community worldwide, but particularly in the Americas, might include a mix of traditions and practices. The popularity of yoga as a form of spiritual practice has grown to include more than fifteen million practitioners in the US alone. Though Swami Yogananda had included yoga-asana and breath control, pranayama, as part of his Kriya purification system, his Self Realization Fellowship took on a decidedly church-like appearance, with pew-like seating, hymnals, and images of Yogananda, his guru, Sri Yuktishwar and his gurus, along with Krishna and Christ. For forty-five years, the Yogananda organisation, along with the various Vedanta Centers established by Swami Vivekananda in the 1890s and early 1900s dominated the non-Christian religious landscape. In 1924, the US government passed the Asian Exclusion Act, making it impossible for religious leaders to immigrate. With the Civil Rights Movement, this discriminatory practice was struck down with the liberalization of immigration laws in 1965, making it possible once more for new teachers to arrive. In the midst of the counter-cultural revolution of the 1960s, many new teachers arrived, including Sasaki Roshi, founder of the Zen Center of Los Angeles, Swami Rama of the Himalayas, A C Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Swami Vishnudevananda, Yogi Bhanjan, and many others. Not all settled permanently in the US, but built organisations that continue to thrive throughout the country. Additionally, with the change in law enacted in 1965, students were allowed to take up residence and gain citizenship from other countries, as well as enter American universities in great numbers. Hence, a new phenomenon was born: the ethnic temple, whose members were almost entirely Asian-born. These organisations, which now number in the hundreds or thousands in the US, joined inter-faith in cities


and towns, and through inter-marriage, it is not uncommon for young people to claim multiple faith identities.

Many of the male spiritual teachers became mired in scandals of various sorts in the 1970s and 1980s. The Jonestown tragedy of 1978 created a backlash against all alternative forms of religious practice, though Jim Jones, ironically, had mixed Marxism with Christianity to formulate his own peculiar form of religious practice. Throughout the 1980s, all religions were held under a cloud of suspicion, and the exuberance for yoga and meditation that had started in the 1960s entered a quiet phase. However, in the 1990s, the physical aspects of yoga practice entered a period of exponential growth, with students of B K S Iyengar (1918–2014) and Patahji Jois (1915–2009) opening centers throughout the country. Meanwhile, Bikram Choudhury (b. 1946) started teaching yoga in California in the 1970s and began to offer nine-week teacher certification courses in the 1990s.

On the spiritual side of yoga, women gained ascendancy with the revitalisation of yoga. Of the first wave of 1960s yoga teachers, Gurani Anjali (1935–2001), founder of Yoga Anand Ashram, was the only woman. This began to change in the 1980s when Gurumayi Chidvilasananda (b. 1954) succeeded Swami Muktananda as head of Siddha Yoga in 1985, expanding meditation instruction at a collection of converted hotels in South Fallsburg, New York in the 1990s. Amritanandamayi (b. 1953), also known as Amma, first came to the US in 1987, and has since blessed millions of persons worldwide through a process of whispering a mantra and giving a hug. Amma's organisation operates a hospital and medical school in India and engages in many charitable activities.


Health and wholeness have long fallen into the provenance of religion and spirituality.

Shamans, the world's first religious experts, provided healing through their own experience of recovering from a broken state. Taoists long concocted life extending potions, and Brahmin priests incorporated medicine into their toolbox along with Vedic ritual. Contemporary scientific studies have affirmed the health benefits of meditation as documented by Dean Ornish and John Kabat-Zinn. Knowledge of the body-mind-heart connection has entered the mainstream, with complementary and alternative medicine recognised by the US National Institute and medical schools nationwide.

The contemporary world changes constantly, with new technologies, social upheavals, pollution, climate change, and a sense of unrest perennially challenging one's peace of mind. In a certain sense, spirituality offers a wisdom that such has always been the case. Driven by desire, greed, and hatred, the human person throughout history invented devices to enhance comfort, has cultivated new and tastier foods, and has plotted the design of better weapons with which to ensure victory and protection. Spirituality invites a reconsideration of values, a discernment that can reveal the sources of suffering and offer remedy rather than stoking the fires of conflict, inner and outer. By facing the difficult truths of human darkness, by a willingness to change, and by cultivating the humility to learn from others, treading the spiritual path can lead from understanding to acceptance, from acceptance to peace, and from peace to freedom. 

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# The Need for a Meaningful Narrative

Jeffery D Long

## **Religion and Spirituality in a Skeptical, Pluralistic World**

**I**S IT POSSIBLE, OR DESIRABLE, to be spiritual but not religious? How does one justify having a religious belief or affiliation in a world in which religion is implicated in such a wide range of violent, fanatical behaviours: from genocidal warfare to the denial of many basic, scientifically established truths about the universe we inhabit? Is it not better to be spiritual, but free from the dogmatism and fanaticism that often accompany religion? Or, despite its numerous pitfalls, is there something in religion that is necessary to sustain a serious spiritual path and practice?

The relationship between religion and spirituality is extremely complex. The two cannot be extricated from one another as easily as a theoretical distinction between them might seem

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to suggest. This essay will argue that religion can sustain a spiritual life that is of benefit both to the individual and to humanity as a whole, but that this requires a major rethinking of religion as it is generally understood. It will present a three-tiered developmental model of the spiritual life, based on the teachings of Swami Vivekananda and the work of philosopher Paul Ricœur, in which one moves from blind faith, the first stage, to skepticism or atheism, the second stage, and finally, spirituality. It will then briefly explore the role of religion in this third stage of development.

In so doing, this essay will draw upon both logical argumentation and the personal experiences and perspective of the author. Born and raised in America, and in a Catholic family, the author was drawn to the practice of Vedanta in the conviction that the dharma traditions offer a rational approach to spirituality that is capable of integrating

insights of both religion and science into a fulfilling, holistic approach to life. It is this approach that will be presented here, based on the author's own limited experience and understanding.

### ***Our Current Situation: A Grim Scenario***

In his opening address to the first Parliament of the World's Religions, given on 11 September 1893, Swami Vivekananda says, 'Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilisation, and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now.'<sup>1</sup>

These words, tragically, are as true today—perhaps even more so—as when Swamiji spoke them over one hundred and twenty years ago. In the same address, Swamiji talks of these terrible tendencies that, 'their time is come', and expresses the fervent hope that 'the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal' (*ibid.*).

We can share Swamiji's fervent hope that, at least on a broad, cosmic timescale, the reign of sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism will soon come to an end. From our present-day perspective, though, it is very easy to despair of the future of humanity. We continue to clash violently in the name of differences of religion, culture, ethnicity, and national affiliation. And while we waste our time and countless precious human lives in these conflicts, the temperature of our planet's atmosphere continues to rise with each passing year, with runaway climate change threatening the fate not only of humanity, but of all species.

Never has the need been more urgent for the

followers of all religions to find a way to resolve or simply learn to live with our various differences, and come together to solve our shared problems. If we do not, sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism certainly will come to an end, not because we will have learned to put them behind us, but because humanity itself will no longer exist.

At the same time, a solution that does not include or in some way respect the core insights to which the followers of various religions adhere will not be sustainable, and the reign of violence will return. This is arguably what has happened in recent decades, with the rise of religiously-

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motivated terrorism, after a period in which secularism seemed to have replaced religion as the dominant ideology of global civilisation. As scholar Mark Jürgensmeyer points out,

[I]n the wake of secularism, and after years of waiting in history's wings, religion has made its reappearance as an ideology of social order in a dramatic fashion: violently ... Religion gives spirit to public life and provides a beacon for moral order. At the same time it needs the temper of rationality and fair play that [secular] Enlightenment values give to civil society. Thus religious violence cannot end until some accommodation can be forged between the two—some assertion of moderation in religion's passion, and some acknowledgment of religion in elevating the spiritual and moral values of public life.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Spiritual but Not Religious***

Due to the alarming frequency with which religion is bound up with sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism, and the violence that arises from all three of these, a small but increasing number of

thoughtful persons, especially from the younger generation, are choosing to reject traditional religious affiliation. This trend has been observed in many countries, particularly in the US and in India. It is a global phenomenon.

This does not mean that these persons are all embracing atheism, though many of them are. Concluding that religion causes more problems than it solves, that it is possible to have a good

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**Atheism is an improvement over superstition. It is a sign of an active mind that takes truth seriously, rather than passively accepting what has been taught, without question.**

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moral life without religion, and that science provides the surest foundation for knowledge, they reject any belief that is not based in empirical observation. A larger number, though, continue to hold some kind of belief in realities that are not available to scientific analysis, such as a divine being or beings, a soul that survives the death of the physical body, and a cosmic moral order. They refer to themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’.

These spiritual but not religious persons do not restrict themselves to a particular religious tradition, but draw from various systems of belief and practice, embracing what they find to be consistent with their reason and experience and helps to sustain a peaceful and healthy life, whatever its source, and rejecting the rest.

### ***The Pros and Cons of Atheism and Its Role in Spiritual Development***

At first glance, the option of defining oneself as spiritual but not religious may be quite appealing. It seems to be a reasonable middle path between the extremes of, on the one hand, blind adherence to a religious belief which may fly in the face of reason or of established scientific

knowledge, what we might call ‘superstition’, and on the other, of atheism.

The problems with blind faith are clear. While unquestioning adherence to a set of beliefs and moral rules may enable a measure of order and stability in the life of the individual person and of society, it is ultimately unsustainable. It leads to sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism, and the violence that continues to plague humanity. If we follow a religion blindly, we fail to see the good in other religions, thinking ours alone is true.

But what is wrong with atheism? Why should one not simply reject religion root and branch, if it causes so many problems, in favour of a world view that is based solely upon rational observation of the universe?

It is not that such a choice is absolutely wrong, or that atheism is to be wholly and utterly condemned. Swami Vivekananda says, ‘I would rather see every one of you rank atheists than superstitious fools, for the atheist is alive and you can make something out of him. But if superstition enters, the brain is gone, the brain is softening, degradation has siezed upon the life. *Avoid these two.*’<sup>3</sup> Of course, Swamiji’s use of the term ‘rank atheists’ strongly suggests that he does not hold atheism in a very high regard; but it is also possible that he was using rhetoric strategically here, seeming to disparage atheism—as most in his audience might have expected him to do—but making the deeper point that atheism is preferable to blind faith: to superstition.

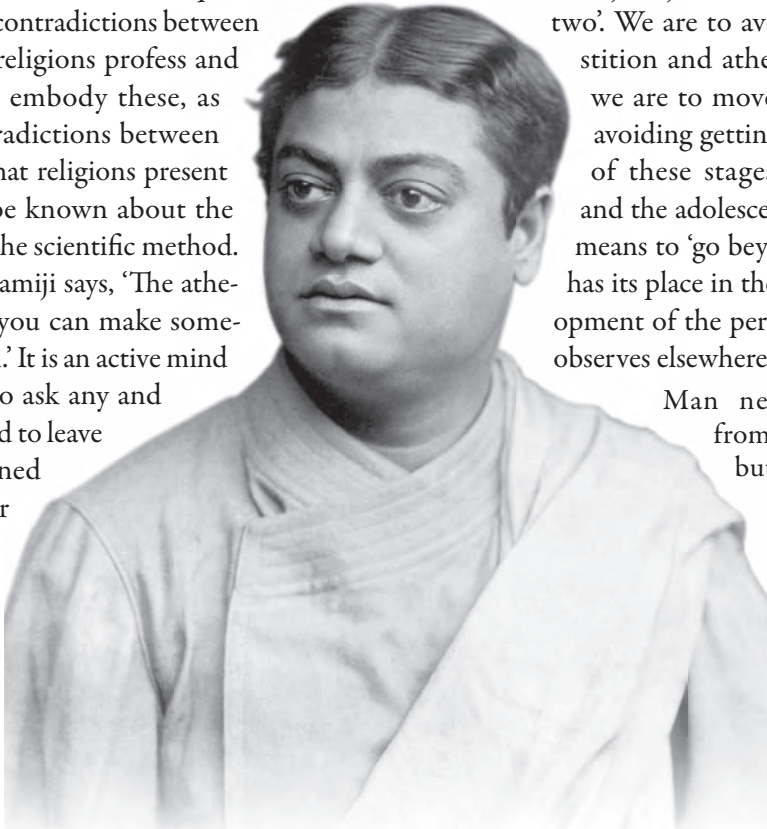
So if we rank the ways of approaching reality according to Swami Vivekananda’s estimation, superstition—blind faith—and not atheism, clearly stands at the bottom of the hierarchy, as an infantile level in the spiritual development of a human being.

Atheism is an improvement over superstition because it is a sign of an active mind that takes truth seriously, rather than passively accepting

what has been taught, without question. One is reminded of a recent test of basic religious literacy in America that was circulated on the internet. It was the atheists who scored highest, knowing more about the teachings and practices of various religions than the adherents of those religions.<sup>4</sup> An atheist is typically a thoughtful person who asks uncomfortable questions, pointing to the contradictions between the ideals that religions profess and their failure to embody these, as well as to contradictions between the narratives that religions present and what can be known about the world through the scientific method.

Again, as Swamiji says, ‘The atheist is alive and you can make something out of him.’ It is an active mind that is willing to ask any and all questions, and to leave no stone unturned in the search for truth, that is an essential prerequisite for achieving the highest realisation. Swamiji himself had such a mind, and

went through a phase in which he seriously entertained the possibility that atheism might be true, and religion a delusion. And if religion remains at the level of a mere repetition of what others have taught—at the level of superstition—it *is* a delusion, to which atheism is preferable. Realisation requires direct experience, not a mere parroting of what one has heard one’s teachers say or what one has read in a book, however ancient, revered, and sacred that book may be.



One may correlate these phases of the spiritual life to the stages of realisation in Vedanta—*shravana*, *manana*, and *nididhyasana*—hearing and repeating the teachings of a religion, reflecting on them—critically, in the case of atheism—and then finally moving beyond both of these stages to attain a direct spiritual realisation.

Swamiji enjoins us to ‘avoid these two’. We are to avoid both superstition and atheism. Or rather, we are to move beyond them, avoiding getting stuck at either of these stages: the infantile and the adolescent. ‘Avoid them’ means to ‘go beyond them’. Each has its place in the spiritual development of the person. As Swamiji observes elsewhere,

Man never progresses from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lesser truth to higher truth—but it is never from error to truth. The child may develop more than the father, but was the father inane? The

child is the father plus something else. If your present state of knowledge is much greater than it was when you were a child, would you look down upon that stage now? Will you look back and call it inanity? Why, your present stage is the knowledge of the child plus something more.<sup>5</sup>

Again, it is not that atheism is wholly wrong or to be condemned. It is a clear improvement over blind, irrational faith. It is the experience of many of us, though, that an absence of some



higher narrative—more than what science alone can provide—can make it very difficult to navigate the storms of life. I have had atheist friends ask, ‘Why do you need to believe in an imaginary being or an afterlife to be a good person with a meaningful life? Why aren’t this world and this life enough for you? Aren’t there plenty of struggles and important causes to make life worth living?’ These are all fair questions, and in the abstract, they point to an important truth. If religion is simply about getting a reward for being a good person, it is bound to make us spiritually immature. If I do good only because I hope for good karma or for a heavenly reward, am I truly a good person? Have I broken the bonds of self-

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**There is no shame in needing to situate one’s life within a narrative that goes beyond what science can provide—a narrative that can provide meaning to one’s suffering when life’s tragedies are otherwise too great to bear.**

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ishness and egotism? Or does my religious belief, in fact, serve to trap me further in these bonds?

At the same time, though, the problems of the world are so great, the tragedies of life so devastating, that even a morally heroic person who is happy to live for others, even sacrificing life and limb for the good of all, may feel crushed by the sufferings life can bring without some idea that this is all leading to some greater end beyond this life. This is why philosopher John Hick sees atheism as ‘bad news for the many.’<sup>6</sup>

My atheist friends may congratulate themselves on their tough-mindedness—for the fact that they do not need the ‘crutch’ of religion in order to get by from day to day. But if their world view is true, then there is no shame in holding a religious belief so long as this helps one to cultivate the same values of unselfishness, compassion, and care for the world that the atheist

values. I may appear weaker if I ‘need’ a narrative to give me hope: that all of this suffering is but a stage on the path to a state in which all beings will be liberated from limitation, to know infinite freedom and bliss. But if the atheist is right, then the atheist and I will both be just as dead as the other someday. What does it matter if I used the help of a myth to get through life? They were right and I was wrong, but the universe is not going to give them a medal for being right, or for their tough-mindedness. What matters, from the atheist perspective, is what is empirically knowable: the way we have lived our lives, whether or not it was sustained by a religious narrative.

The point here is not that we need any reward for virtue other than virtue itself—again, that is the path of a self-centered spiritual immaturity. The point is that there is no shame in needing to situate one’s life within a narrative that goes beyond what science can provide—a narrative that can provide meaning to one’s suffering when life’s tragedies are otherwise too great to bear—especially if this empowers one to rise to the challenges the world faces today. It is this meaningful narrative that religion provides.

This clearly cannot mean a return to the infantile stage of blindly believing all that we are told by a particular authority: a book, a church, or a charismatic leader. That is the way back to sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism. It cannot mean surrendering one’s rational mind or passion for truth. It means moving beyond the stages of both blind faith and skepticism, toward what scholar Paul Ricœur calls the ‘Second Naïveté.’<sup>7</sup> It is a recovery of the essence of religion, but with all of one’s critical, rational faculties intact.

At this stage, one does not believe blindly; but one also understands that there are deep mysteries beyond what science has explored and to which the teachings of religion point. Ricœur, coming from a Christian cultural background, distinguishes this

stage from the first by calling it not religion, but ‘faith.’ I am referring to it here as spirituality.

This means taking a second look at religion, beneath its surface, for an essence that can give meaning to life when all else seems lost: a meaning that does contradict, but supplements, what science tells us about ourselves and the universe that we inhabit. This essence of religion, distinct from its varied particulars, is what is commonly meant by the term ‘spirituality.’ In the words of Swami Vivekananda, ‘I do not mean the external forms in which great thoughts are clad. I do not mean the different buildings, languages, rituals, books, etc. employed in various religions, but I mean the internal soul of every religion.’<sup>8</sup>

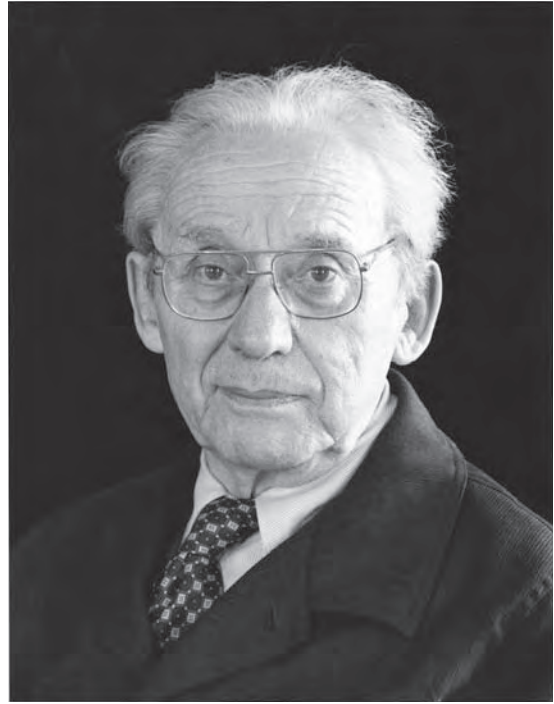
The question, of course, is whether this internal soul of religion can be sustained without religion itself. Can religion be discarded in the pursuit of its inner essence?

### **Spirituality Without Religion? Not So Simple**

If religion is the same thing as superstition—blind faith in realities that cannot be proven by, and may even contradict, science—and atheism is adherence only to what science can demonstrate, and nothing more, then spirituality might be seen as the third stage just described—Paul Ricœur’s ‘Second Naïveté,’ to which Swami Vivekananda points when he says, ‘Avoid these two [both superstition and atheism]’. It is with this understanding of the term ‘religion’ that many now embrace the idea of being spiritual but not religious.

But is it really possible, or desirable, to be spiritual but not religious? Or, despite its numerous pitfalls, is there something in religion that is necessary to sustain a serious spiritual path and practice?

I would submit that the answers to these questions hinge upon the definition of the term



Paul Ricœur (1913–2005)

‘religion.’ Depending on how we use this word, religion is either essential to spiritual life, optional for spiritual life, or a positive hindrance to spiritual life.

If *religion* simply means *blind faith* or *superstition*, then it is not only possible, but *necessary*, to rid oneself of religion in order for one to be truly spiritual. This is the perspective expressed by Ricœur when he writes, ‘I take religion (of the Faithful) [the first stage] to be this archaic system which faith (as in the faith of the Mystic) [the third stage] *must always overcome*.’<sup>9</sup>

This does not, however, seem to be an adequate definition of the term *religion* as it is commonly used. First, there is the fact that we can point to many persons who are, without question, deeply spiritual, but who are also deeply religious. Participation in the rituals of a specific community of belief and practice is intrinsic to their spiritual life, and they express and understand their path in the terms

provided by the terminology and the sacred texts of that community.

Secondly, even those who do not identify with a particular religion nevertheless inevitably draw upon existing religious narratives and systems in developing their world views and practices. Those who call themselves spiritual but not religious are—and I do not intend this in any pejorative or negative sense—parasitic upon religion. Religions are sources of meaningful narratives that enable spiritual practitioners to understand life and its varied experiences in a way that cultivates a sense of direction and purpose.

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**That in religion which leads to narrowness of vision and exclusion, which inhibits the spiritual life, must be cast aside.**

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A person may therefore be spiritual and religious in the conventional sense—that is, an adherent of a specific system of belief and practice and a member of a community identified by such adherence—or a person may be spiritual but not religious in this sense—not identifying exclusively with any particular community or system of practice, instead drawing upon many such systems creatively to develop their own world view and way of being spiritual. Both are possible. But both are dependent, in some sense, upon religion.

Religious affiliation or adherence, in the conventional sense, would appear to be optional for the spiritual life, from this point of view. But some element of the religious is always present. It is never wholly discarded, just as language is not wholly discarded even as we have experiences that defy the ability of language to express.

But if one simply defines religion as any combination of world view and practice that provides the kind of meaningful life narrative we have been discussing, then even the beliefs and way of life of a solitary, spiritual but not religious—in

the conventional sense—individual may be called a religion. In this case, it is *not* possible to be spiritual but not religious; for one is religious simply by virtue of having a world view and a practice. This seems to be what Mahatma Gandhi had in mind when he said, ‘In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals.’<sup>10</sup>

### **Rethinking Religion: The Vedantic Option**

Our spiritual path begins at the first stage of *shravanam*: hearing and learning by heart the teachings of a religious tradition. We adhere to what we have learned without question, as it bears the authority of our elders and our community, upon whom we are completely dependent for all of our knowledge—even the very words that we use in our thought processes. This is the infantile stage of blind belief.

This stage has its place—a very important one—in our spiritual life, for it is where our basic foundation is built. But if we do not eventually move beyond this stage, we become a danger to ourselves and to the rest of the world, becoming bigoted and fanatical in adhering only to that which is familiar and rejecting all that is different.

The next stage is *mananam*: thoughtful reflection upon what we have learned. At a certain point in our lives, we are faced with contradictions and questions that cannot be resolved by mere rote recitation of what we have been taught. We may, at this point, find ourselves disillusioned, wondering why our society has been lying to us all of this time, and why people are willing to believe such silly things. This is the adolescent stage of the spiritual life.

We may find, however, that our confident skepticism is also inadequate to all of the hard challenges that life brings: tragedies both large and deeply personal, devastating losses, and many other seemingly insurmountable obstacles. It is then that we remember what we learned in

our spiritual infancy, and begin to see the truth embedded in the myth.

This is the beginning of true spirituality—the contemplative or mystic stage called in Vedanta, *nididhyasana*. This is where we re-integrate the essential spiritual teachings, using *viveka*, or discernment, to distinguish the inner truth from its external trappings.

Are we religious at this ideal stage? Is religion to be dispensed with at this point? Is it optional? Or is it so intrinsically bound up with our spiritual process that we can never be said to be wholly without it?

It seems that we impoverish and inhibit ourselves unnecessarily if we choose to cut ourselves off completely from the many spiritual resources that religion brings with it. At the same time, though, we need to divest ourselves of the narrowness of religion in the traditional sense: of sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism, and the violence to which they give rise.

The path of Vedanta, as taught and embodied by Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda, and many other great sages from many traditions and cultures, would seem to point us toward a path of religious practice, but one that has been radically rethought, and that is being perpetually rethought as our spirituality moves to ever greater depths of realisation. That in religion which leads to narrowness of vision and exclusion, which inhibits the spiritual life, must be cast aside. That which flatly goes against what can be observed and experienced through science must belong to an earlier stage of human knowledge, and must be reinterpreted in order to remain meaningful. At the same time, that in religion which nurtures and gives meaning, which is not only compatible with science, but which also sustains lives of compassion, creativity, richness, and depth, must be preserved, and not thrown out with

the bathwater of superstition. In a world that is skeptical of religion and all the suffering it has brought, a pluralistic world of multiple traditions that can either be seen as competing or as providing complementary visions of reality, it is a path that can provide hope: a beacon in the darkness. It is not that everyone must follow the Vedantic path: a most un-Vedantic conclusion! But such an ongoing, critical yet appreciative approach to religion is the need of the hour. ☞

### Note and References

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 1.4.
2. Mark Jürgensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2000), 243.
3. *Complete Works*, 3.278. Emphasis added.
4. See 'Atheists Rank #1 in Religious Literacy in America', <<http://www.care2.com/causes/an-almighty-quip-atheists-rank-1-in-religious-literacy-in-america.html>> accessed 14 November 2014.
5. *Complete Works*, 2.365–6.
6. John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004), 19–24.
7. Ricœur calls the first stage the 'First Naïveté' and the 'Faithful Stage'. He calls the second stage 'Critical Distance' and the 'Rational Stage', identifying it with atheism. He calls the third stage the 'Second Naïveté' and the 'Mystic Stage'. See Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 349–50 and Margaret Placentra Johnston, 'Paul Ricœur's Work as It Relates to Spiritual Development Theory', <<http://www.exploring-spiritual-development.com/Paul-Ricœur.html>> accessed 14 November 2014.
8. *Complete Works*, 2.365.
9. Alasdair Macintyre and Paul Ricœur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University, 1969), 60. Emphasis added.
10. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2009), 49.



## ***Cultivating Spirituality***

**Subhasis Chattopadhyay**

**S**PIRITUALITY DENOTES the spirit-embodied.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is impossible to be spiritual without being physical. This is akin to the essence and existence problem which has plagued philosophers for ages. So, when the issue is whether spirituality is declining; one should first turn to the question: is the body declining? If the body is in trouble, then the spirit too will be in trouble. The importance of the *sarx* is evident if we turn to the Hindu scriptures: there

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is hatha yoga to discipline the body and then, through the discipline of the body, is possible the discipline of the mind. Swami Vivekananda stressed on first having a strong body and enough physical vigour before beginning on inward journeys of transcendence. Jesus tells us that this body is the temple of God.<sup>2</sup> The *sarx* is not fallen;<sup>3</sup> what we do to the *sarx*, or enact through it, may be death to the soul within. Spirituality concerns itself with keeping the soul within alive. It takes time and conscious choices to be spiritual for instance, in love. Thus, the first prerequisite for becoming spiritual is good health. It is only

a reasonably healthy person who can sustain the spiritual journey. And within the scope of this essay, we will map the trajectory that the spiritual quest can take through the use of the World Wide Web. The embodied being can undertake spiritual practices only if she or he is firmly or healthily embodied. This is why good health is a prerequisite for being spiritual and even when the stated purpose of this essay is to seek self-knowledge through the use of the Internet.

The last century was the goriest century yet;<sup>4</sup> and therefore the need for spirituality was the greatest. After all, our conceptions of spirituality are results of our seeing of the state of the being searching for fulfilment. To become spiritual, an absurdity in itself,<sup>5</sup> women and men tried psychedelic drugs and transcendental-meditation techniques. These were poor substitutes for solid spirituality. Then, there were some who experimented with sex as a form of revolt. Many foreigners came to India to find spiritual fulfilment. Most returned disillusioned and went back to their lives to be spent in 'little boxes made of ticky tacky' and they went:

to the university,  
Where they were put in boxes  
And they came out all the same,  
And there's doctors and lawyers,  
And business executives,  
And they're all made out of ticky tacky  
And they all look just the same.<sup>6</sup>

This song is from the period when Americans began their dabbling in Hinduism and transcendental meditation. The job of spirituality is to usurp practitioners from their comfort zones made of 'ticky tacky' and 'put in boxes' where 'they came out all the same' (ibid.). Drugs and sex are not recommended; the sexual experiments have failed; the side effects include addictions, various venereal diseases, and AIDS. In fact, the dazzling splendour of being in touch with the

godhead lies in ascesis and not in hedonism. This essay will concern itself with means to becoming spiritual in a world seeking transcendence.

It is one thing that it is quite difficult for most of us to be self-controlled and quite another matter that we must be self-controlled if we are to experience first-hand beatific bliss in *the here and the now*.<sup>7</sup> This essay will now focus on the use of the Internet to underscore the positive effects it can have on spiritual journeys. The issue of the use or the abuse of the Internet crops up since it is both integral to our lives and at the same time, it is the most vilified amongst contemporary media. There is a need to see the Internet as an aid to spiritual practice, rather than a hindrance. Like everything else given at our disposal, it can boomerang on the seeker who cannot use it temperately. Before seeing how the internet can help us, let us quickly pass over the definite negative effects of the unchecked use of the Internet. This list is needed once for all, for the purpose of this essay, to clarify that the Internet can abuse a person and be itself abused. A detailed study of the scope and the nature of the abuses would be beyond the scope of this essay. The most evident abuses are: Endless and meaningless net-surfing; fleeting from one topic to another. This erodes the *jouissance* of deep-reading and contemplative study or *lectio divina*. Long hours spent on social media; seeking solace online for both one's real and imagined sorrows. Playing unending, interactive, and often multiple-player online games; bullying, trolling, and stalking online; addiction to the use of Internet and email; addictive downloading behaviour patterns through illegal means; and online window and real shopping leading to massive outflow of cash.

The point of listing these online ills is to precisely list how real-life evils have reincarnated in virtual avatars. For example, the supreme Godhead says of people who are distracted by their

addiction to sense-objects: the Internet can be potentially harmful if one engages in one or more of the above listed activities.<sup>8</sup> And yet we should not forget that all these ills were there before the Internet became ubiquitous. It is wrong to think that with the coming of the Internet, human life has suddenly degenerated. On the contrary, it will be now shown how the Internet can help a person seeking the Divine in one's own surroundings.

The scriptures exhort holy company. There cannot be had from dead texts the joy of being in the company of realised souls. Further, each person has her own inclination and method of devotion. Some are naturally inclined to Advaita Vedanta; some to dualism and some to a particular deity. Before the advent of the Internet, such company was often not possible to seekers of wisdom. The Internet now has dedicated pages for groups of devotees to come together. Moreover, *lectio divina* continues to be integral for spiritual growth. The Internet provides ample readings free of cost to the devotees of all faiths. Through the use of web-based communication tools, there is now possible a greater range of such holy company. The need for a guru in the spiritual quest is well articulated in Hinduism; but now we can have spiritual directors,<sup>9</sup> without infringing on the functions of the guru. While the guru can destroy ignorance through her or his mere willing; it is the spiritual director who through her or his daily communion with the spiritual aspirant can guide the former to the knowledge of liberation. The aspirant and the spiritual director can carry out their dialogue through the Internet. The Internet allows us to respond more effectively with our own inner urges. Depending on one's orientations, one can progress spiritually in ways impossible without the Internet.

The Bhagavadgita unfolded in a war zone. Earlier, the Ramayana was enacted through wars.

To be spiritual is to be engaged in war—wars against poverty, inequalities, and social injustices. One cannot be spiritual if one escapes from the overwhelming nature of life, being spiritual means to eschew solipsism and to engage with life in all its hideousness. Generally one cannot be spiritual if one is doing nothing in *the here and the now*. Religion and spirituality can have meanings only if they are foregrounded in actions leading to the alleviation of sufferings of our fellow human beings. Spirituality's doctrine of love should be propagated through social-networking websites to prevent young people from turning into fundamentalists. Spirituality is rooted in individual and social activism. The Internet has brought social activism to the room of the recluse. There is no place for becoming spiritual without being an activist. Spirituality is a function of our abilities to embrace the inhospitable Other. Only when there is renunciation, will it be possible for the spiritual person to empathise. Sri Ramakrishna felt the pain of creatures around him; and he was an epochal avatar. Thus spirituality is the ability to feel the pain of others and yet have the courage and intellect to respond to that pain, always trying to annihilate the cause of that pain. Hopelessness is not the way out; inaction against evil is not the way out; the only way to be spiritual is to act in *good faith*<sup>10</sup> and in *the here and the now*. The emphasis should be to work out one's liberation in this present life. What avails one if one saves the whole world and loses one's own soul? But once a person has become relatively detached from sense objects, it is one's duty to help others concretely within temporality and not wait for some imagined better time in the future. As one becomes more adept online; one can not only get aids to become spiritual, but help others in meaningful ways to find their own truths through the Internet.

It is not the Internet which has made people lonely; on the contrary the Internet has facilitated human interaction; it is not that social-networking websites have dulled the intellect or the need for human company; but they have brought people together and will go a long way in bringing people together. The power of the Internet remains largely untapped throughout the globe. Internet penetration is low in India and most of the African nations. This is the century when Internet will usurp the television and all other forms of passive communication. This will help those who are perfected in the Sanatana Dharma to reach out to the millions who want spiritual help. Hindu spirituality can reach uncounted peoples throughout the world. Will the twenty-first century be a Hindu century? Young people throughout the world are tired of dogma; of categorical imperatives and religious extremism. Further; religious pundits within the Semitic traditions do not allow for the justified expressions of the desires of the young. Hinduism with its long history of tolerance; anti-dogmatism, and non-centralised traditions supports the fulfilment of the major objectives of life, dharma; artha, prosperity; kama, desires; and moksha, liberation.

Hinduism does not demand that its practitioners be either vegetarians; ascetic, or monastic. A person need not be baptised to be a Hindu. It suffices that one accepts the truths of the Hindu canon which would broadly constitute the Upanishads and the Gita. They are available free of cost online and thus accessible to anyone who wants to find liberation in *the here and the now*. Hinduism is the only religion which does not ask the practitioners of other religions to formally become Hindus. One can be a practising Hindu without ever leaving one's country and religion of birth. This is where the Internet becomes the connecting medium between the neophyte and the teacher. As

Buddhism has travelled the world over through the efforts of the Tibetan spiritual masters in the last century; Hinduism too can touch and transform the hearts of millions of seekers tired of religious high-handedness and existing top-down approaches. The Internet instead of being constricting, opens up new doors to the lonely soul in search of meaning.<sup>11</sup> The medium is no longer the message.<sup>12</sup> Hindu spirituality can be transmitted through the virtual world.

Now arises the question regarding how to go about the business of changing the world through disseminating Hindu spiritual wisdom?

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The need of the hour is translation. Hinduism is articulated in three types of languages: Sanskrit—and even Pali and Prakrit—the regional vernaculars, and existing English texts. Most people who access the Internet now and will access the Internet in the future will do so through English, with the notable exceptions of the Chinese. Therefore three types of translations should be done immediately: from Sanskrit, *et al*, into English; from Indian vernaculars to English, and there is a great need to update older translations into contemporary English. It is a shame that the Tantra texts for instance, have not been translated into lucid English. These new translations should be available to the world free of cost; much the same way that the main scriptures of some other major world religions are given out freely. The electronic documents should be available through open access portals on the Internet.

The translations project should not be confined to a select number of experts; rather crowd-sourcing is the way forward. Otherwise



the process of getting ready the Hindu scriptures will be too long and by the time they are made available online; young people would have become hardened older people who are already swallowed up by the lures of sense objects. The need of the hour is to act fast on a war footing.

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**There is hidden in many, a little ascetic, who seeks silence and rest in the one's true personality, while the world turns.**

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St Ignatius of Loyola raised up the Society of Jesus to respond to the Reformation in Europe; like Roman Catholicism then, Hinduism today needs people who can similarly respond to life-negating forces in all their manifestations in a systematic manner. And all these responses should be fast and easily accessible to those who may not be even seeking them. Hindu spirituality will have to seek those who are cut off from society. The Internet can allow Hindu rapid response teams to help both psychologically and spiritually those who are so incapacitated within that they are unable to find solace through the Internet. The Internet can take Sanatana Dharma to a wider audience. Hinduism having no churches, is not bothered with numbers of converts; rather the Hindus find satisfaction that others are allowed the freedom to work out their liberation *in the here and the now*.

Hindus established firmly in their Sanatana Dharma should be available round-the-clock to spiritual seekers online, just like experts of other religions, to help neophytes or the casual enquirer. Similarly, there should be portals operative round-the-clock, which will guide the neophyte to learn of Hinduism not through mere reading but through the mediation of humane guides.

Hindu chants and mantras for various worship, need to be translated into both English and


the various Indian vernaculars. These translations should be available as audio files online for free. Very few understand these Sanskrit chants and thus, they are wasted upon the listeners. Rituals are meaningless unless they are decoded. How many can understand the meaning of ancient rituals performed through the medium of Sanskrit? The Roman Catholics have done away with Latin in their liturgies so that the ordinary person can understand and fully participate in the Roman Catholic Mass. Latin scholars are there to interpret the Church Fathers; but the Roman Catholic missionary in remote India or Africa, uses both English and the local vernacular to transmit the Gospel message. Hinduism just cannot wait for the world to become Sanskrit specialists for the Hindu message to go across the Internet. This line of reasoning is not so absurd since this is an extrapolation of Swami Vivekananda's own desires: he began this journal to dialogue to the West. Had he waited for the West to learn Sanskrit, then he would not have begun this journal. Language, used properly, is not enslaving, but liberating. Without English, we would not have understood or known the Holy Bible. This author in the past issues of this journal has advocated a preferring of English over Sanskrit for the lay person; and in vernaculars for those who do not understand English. Hinduism can become web-friendly only when Hindu texts are available in contemporary English online and free of cost.

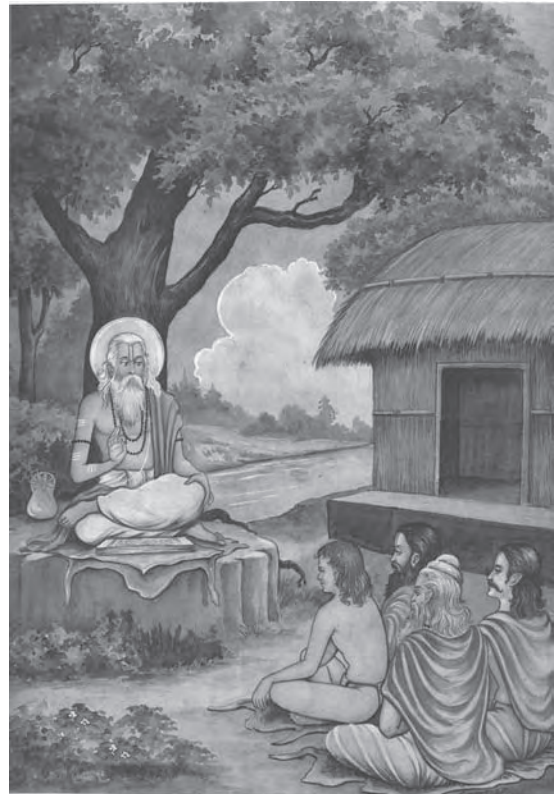
Indologists are insistent on their emphasis on Sanskrit. While this is good and necessary to keep up the tradition and the message in its original undistorted form, too much Sanskrit-fixation can be an obstacle to Hinduism reaching out to the masses. The result is that when a so-called 'scholar' attacks the Sanatana Dharma; the Hindus can only ban such books. It would be more proper to respond, in true academic or scholarly fashion, such vindictive 'scholarship'

sentence by sentence. Yet this task is onerous since the Hindu canon has not been translated as say, the Greek tragedies have been translated into English. Further, big publishing houses are not interested in publishing Hindu scriptures without cluttering the page with the original Sanskrit sources. Thus smooth reading is disturbed and the scholarly tomes have little circulation beyond elite and close-knit groups of Indologists. This needs to be corrected. Very few scholarly Bibles continuously refer to either Aramaic, Hebrew, or Old and New Greek. The *Jerusalem Bible*, for instance, provides a seamless reading experience in English. Moreover, excellently edited low-volume electronic documents of most Bibles are available on the Internet. Except the Gita with glosses by some particular traditions, serious commentaries on the Gita are not easily available online. Online bookstores have now through avenues for self-publishing, opened up the space for doing good Indological work entirely in English, as one pleases by bypassing publishers and their whims. To ready material for Hindu *lectio divina* is itself a work of prayer. And the world awaits these texts.

Hindu spiritual services should be freed of simony. There should be no mediation of money in this work. The work should be *opus Dei*. Born Hindus should be able to find both continued spiritual direction and Hindu-counselling whenever they need them. These services should be provided only by trained Hindu personnel. Cults which rob a person of autonomy have no place in Hinduism. They are akin to Western concepts of religions; they propagate a personality cult, whereas Hinduism has no known founder or even founders. It is an evolving religion and its spirituality is in adapting to the signs of the times. No event or literature can shake the Sanatana Dharma since Hinduism is not based on the character of particular historical people.

Spirituality is in no crisis. There is a crying need for spiritual solace and those who can adapt their own selves to the times will cater to the need of these seekers of wisdom who are tired of internet chat-rooms, endless simulations of the body and meaningless updates about current affairs. There is hidden in many, a little ascetic, who seeks silence and rest in the one's true personality, while the world turns.<sup>13</sup>

The world is more spiritual than ever. The human heart longs for the unction of peace and the Hindus have to take cognisance of this and reform their religion from within. This century is the century when books will die out; newspapers will be solely available online, and e-book devices with higher capabilities will overtake the printed word. Hinduism is the most adaptable religion in the world, and thus, it will adapt itself to the needs of the hour. There might be a Hindu century. 



## Notes and References

1. See Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), quoted in Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (New York: Oxford University, 2009), 61. Creamer says of McFague that 'she argues that we must recognize that it is embodied creatures, not disembodied ones, who do theology'. Even within Hindu theology and philosophy it is us humans who can do Hindu theology. Dis-embodiedness is conjectured by theologians. Experiential evidence points to essentialism over existentialism.
2. See 1 Corinthians 6:19. 'Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?'
3. See F Leron Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids: W B Eerdmans, 2003), 178, 'Overall, then, [the Biblical] Scripture depicts the human person as a dynamic unity, which it considers from various perspectives using terms such as "soul", "body", "flesh", and "mind"'
4. See E J Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph), 1994. Hobsbawm repeatedly stresses on the violence that characterised the last century. He terms it 'the most murderous century of which we have record' (13).
5. We are already pneumatic beings. In a different context the Jesuit Anthony De' Mello equated our search for spirituality as the search for our own noses, not knowing that the nose is part of us. Similarly, through ignorance, our own superimposition and de-superimposition creates the illusion that we are not spiritual beings.
6. *The Suburb Reader*, eds Becky Nicolaidis and Andrew Wiese (London: Routledge, 2013), 294.
7. Often Semitic commentators point out through a careful reading of the Bible, how only Judaism and later, Christianity definitively prove the working of God within humanly comprehensible time. The stress on the here and the now throughout this essay corrects that Judaeo-Christian position of being chosen by God. For instance, the advent of the epochal avatar, Sri Ramakrishna is nothing less than the advent of the Jesus or the Buddha. When Sri Ramakrishna was born; infinity intersected with temporality. Unlike the Semitic religions, the Hindus hold that eternity traverses temporality whenever the need so arises. See Gita, 4.7–8.
8. See Gita, 16.16: 'Bewildered by numerous thoughts, caught in the net of delusion, (and) engrossed in the enjoyment of desirable objects, they fall into a foul hell.'
9. Spiritual direction is more of a Christian concept integral to 'formative spirituality'. Christianity stresses regulated and disciplined formation before a person can become a missionary. Formation within the Roman Catholic traditions uses psychoanalytic techniques to help a person remain/become chaste, egoless, and faithful to the Church's magisterium. Spiritual directors have the role of being day-to-day sojourners of the neophyte Catholic on one's way to Christ. Hinduism is in need of spiritual directors, over and above gurus, since often the practicality of being one amongst thousands of disciples makes tense the guru-*shishya* dyad for the *shishya*. A spiritual director guides a few disciples over long periods of time. The guru's teachings are passed on and maintained in the heart of the seeker by the spiritual director. Hinduism needs to form individuals to become spiritual directors. These latter should be trained in both psychology, psychoanalysis, and in the Hindu scriptures. They must be individuals of deep inner convictions regarding the truths of Hinduism. Spiritual direction is not akin to mentoring and is a slow process and often, a lifelong process.
10. The term 'good faith' is used here existentially. To act in good faith invests existential validity to our otherwise existentially meaningless lives. Religious masters keep telling us to unite our actions to our thoughts. To be in good faith means to act out truthfully what we think.
11. The obvious reference here is to the book by the Nazi survivor Victor E Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon, 2000).
12. This is a rewording of Marshall McLuhan's idea that the medium is the message. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 2001).
13. The Carthusian motto is: '*Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*, the Cross is steady while the world is turning.'

# Women and Spirituality in the Hindu Tradition

T S Rukmani

WHEN WE LOOK AT the contemporary Hindu spiritual scenario in India we notice that there are a number of spiritual women with large followers both in India and abroad dedicated to awakening the hidden spiritual essence within oneself.<sup>1</sup> Names such as Nirmaladevi, Amritanandamayi Ma, Anandamayi Ma, Brahmakumaris, and numerous others crowd the landscape. While the message of each of them is to realise the real 'self' in oneself, the means each one adopts is slightly different. As these saintly women work selflessly for the upliftment of society at large we could classify their activities under the rubric of '*lokasaṅgraha*, welfare of the world' which gained prominence during Swami Vivekananda's time. The coining of the motto '*ātmanah mokṣārtham jagaddhitāya ca*' by Swami Vivekananda for the Ramakrishna Mission meant working for the welfare of the people at large—*lokasya saṅgrahaḥ* or *jagaddhitāya*—by the *sannyāsins* whereas earlier the emphasis for the *sannyāsins* was solely on the attainment of individual moksha for oneself. Thus we find spiritual organisations today running universities, hospitals, and other charity activities all under the banner of *lokasaṅgraha*. Modern women spiritual leaders have also factored in *lokasaṅgraha* in their own different ways as one of their main activities.

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In the first part of this paper, as an introduction, I would like to look at the history of spiritual women from the times of the Rig Veda down through the centuries to understand how this phenomenon has been a constant presence in the spiritual landscape of India over time. I will not be just listing names of the spiritual leaders but am more interested in trying to understand the underlying broad socio-cultural dimensions of the different manifestations of spirituality in the Vedic, medieval, and modern periods in the course of the history of Hinduism.

## The Vedic Period

The Vedic period is uniformly considered to be more kind to women and affording equal opportunities for their creative expressions. Thus it is natural to find the mention of at least twenty-seven Vedic *ṛṣikās* in the Rig Veda and the hymns of some of them like Ghoṣā have come

Sage Agastya Drinking the Ocean



down to us. One of them called Lopāmudrā, the wife of Agastya, is also hailed as an erudite scholar. She is reputed to have preached many *sūktas*, hymns, of the first book of the Rig Veda along with Agastya.

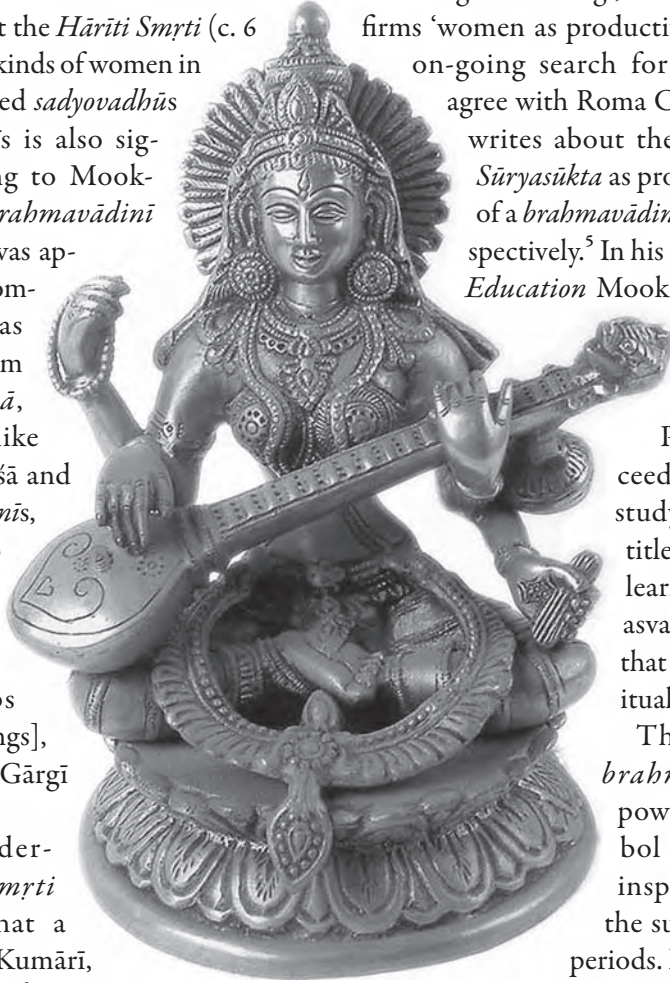
We also have the famous Maitreyī and Gārgī who have been immortalised in the Indian psyche. The fact that the *Hārīti Smṛti* (c. 6 BCE) mentions two kinds of women in the Vedic times called *sadyovadhūs* and *brahmavādinīs* is also significant. According to Mookerjee, 'The term *brahmavādinī* looks as though it was applied to both the composer of hymns, as one can surmise from the *Brhad-devatā*, classifying *ṛṣikās* like Lopāmudrā, Romaśā and so on as *brahmavādinīs*, as also to those who chose to remain unmarried, pursuing a life of learning [and perhaps their spiritual leanings], to which category Gārgī would belong.'<sup>2</sup>

Mookerji understands *Hārīti Smṛti* 21.23 to imply that a *brahmavādinī* is a Kumārī, 'who does not marry.'<sup>3</sup> But even if the Vedic *brahmavādinī* was married, and yet chose to continue a lifelong devotion to study and also spiritual pursuit, that would again indicate her own spiritual choice voluntarily. Similarly, when Maitreyī opts for being educated in the Upanishadic lore, she is exercising her choice, as there is no indication whatsoever

that Yājñavalkya tried to dissuade her from her decision. This also indicates a modicum of independence for women to pursue their chosen path through lifelong learning combined with spiritual inclinations as in the case of Gārgī for instance. According to Ellison Banks Findly, in the figure of Gārgī, the Indian tradition affirms 'women as productive colleagues in the on-going search for truth.'<sup>4</sup> We could agree with Roma Chaudhury when she writes about the *Vāksūkta* and the *Sūryasūkta* as proclaiming the virtues of a *brahmavādinī* and *sadyovadhū* respectively.<sup>5</sup> In his book *Ancient Indian Education* Mookerji also calls attention to *Kauśītakī Brāhmaṇa* 7.6,

where a lady called Pathyāsvastī proceeded to the north for study and obtained the title of Sarasvatī for her learning.<sup>6</sup> The title Sarasvatī could also suggest that Pathyāvastī had spiritual leanings.

The image of the *brahmavādinī* was a powerful cultural symbol and continued to inspire women during the subsequent historical periods. I would like to argue and agree with both Findly and Mookerji that a *brahmavādinī* is one who has devoted herself to a quest of the highest truth taking Gārgī as the model. I cannot agree more with Flood when he says, 'Although in one sense tradition is constructed in a shared imagination, this is not to say that tradition is made up and unreal, but is in a constant process of (re)



construction in the flow of temporal continuity from the past.<sup>7</sup> Thus the *brahmavādinī* image is part of the tradition and lives in the imagination and continues to reconstruct itself in different periods of history. Thus even when a male offspring is generally wished for in Vedic society it is significant that the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* has a *mantra* for the birth of a *paṇḍitā*.<sup>8</sup> If we look at the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranas, and *kāvya* literature we again find examples of the *brahmavādinī* model even though they may be few and far between. Sulabhā is a *brahmavādinī* who has found mention in the *Aśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra* and Acharya Shankara makes reference to her in connection with her yogic *siddhis* in his commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*, 3.3.32. She was a *yogī* or *yoginī* who, on a visit to Janaka's court, was able to surpass him in yogic feats and outclass him in spiritual discussions and who also defeated him in his own court.<sup>9</sup> Chuḍālā in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* is again a *brahmavādinī* and was responsible for leading her husband Śikhidhvaja in the path of wisdom.

### The Classical Period

The Vedic period is generally considered an age when women had a lot more independence to pursue their preferred choices. As time went by and we come to the classical period (500 BCE–500 CE) the picture is bleak. This phase ushered in the composition of sutras for the six schools of Vedic thought and the compilation of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and the early *Dharmasūtras* like that of Āpastamba, Gautama, and Baudhāyana as well as *smṛtis* like that of Manu, Yājñavalkya, and so on.<sup>10</sup> These texts make it plain that by this time the position of women had fallen, her education was affected, child marriages became the norm and all in all women were inferior members of a patriarchal society. On the religious front

during this medieval period (c. 300 CE–1000 CE) we find a number of Puranas being composed and their ideology of bhakti was replacing rituals and knowledge as the spiritual means for attaining moksha.

One positive aspect of bhakti was that it was open to all without discrimination and there was thus a spiritual place for women and lower castes within the ideology of bhakti. In South India meanwhile at about the same time a new genre of literature in the form of devotional songs in Tamil were popularised by Vaishnava and Shaiva bhaktas or devotees called the Ālvārs and Nāyanārs respectively which soon gained popularity amongst many followers. Since the bhakti ideology opened the doors to all people as a path for moksha we find women and lower caste members represented both amongst the Ālvārs and Nāyanārs and some of these Tamil women spiritual leaders have also found a permanent place in temples by being cast as bronze icons and placed in centres of worship in Tamil Nadu. This was the time that Sri Rama and Sri Krishna were raised to the status of avatars, God descended on earth, and worship centered on them was gaining importance and popularity. The building of temples dedicated to these deities as well as to other *devatās* also picked up momentum at this time. Vedic deities like Indra had also lost their importance in the social sphere by now and bhakti had overtaken the Vedic sacrifices as a path to the divine.

At this time we find a proliferation of spiritual women throughout the country though we do not have full biographical sketches of such women from all parts of the country. But we do find such powerful women devotees in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kashmir, and Maharashtra and their works have come down to us as well. It was in the Puranas, those manuals of



Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982)

popular Hinduism, that the doctrine of bhakti was vociferously advocated and the local bards who carried the message of bhakti to the masses must have played a great part in disseminating the glories of Sri Rama and Sri Krishna and thus attracted people, especially the women who had been deprived of all means of expression of spirituality in this medieval age.

Thus though the women spiritual practitioners of this bhakti age were different from the Vedic *brahmavādinī*, I would argue that the *brahmavādinī* model was a perpetual memory of that Vedic period and never faded from the cultural scene and it is reasonable to assume that the women bhaktas of this period also drew inspiration from the earlier Vedic examples to come out of the shackles of social oppression. Women such as Meera Bai, Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded, and others gave up their families and adopted the

lifestyle of a *sannyāsini* or *parivrājikā* wanderers in search of the divine. They were spiritual women who were dedicated to a theistic personal God and sought union with their chosen deity. Thus we have Meera Bai devoted to Sri Krishna, Akka Mahadevi devoted to Shiva, Mukta Bai, Bahina Bai belonging to the Varkari *sant* lineage following a *bhakti* modelled on Advaita lines, Lalla Devi or Lalla Ded devoted to Shiva, and may be many more whose lives have not been recorded in the history of the times.

One however needs to also note that the socio-religious atmosphere also determines the kind of spirituality that these women in the medieval period were engaged in, especially in South India, though the Varkari model was more in the Advaita paradigm. By this time the position of women being degraded, her only dharma was considered as following what is known as *pativrata* dharma wherein the husband is considered a god and complete devotion to him was the one that ensured her moksha. So when women like Meera Bai, Andal, and Akka Mahadevi abandoned their homes and family life they only substituted their chosen deity, be it Sri Krishna, Shiva, or the like, to take the place of their worldly counterpart and continuously served that deity as one would serve the worldly husband. It is a strange internalisation of one's own social status that even intrudes in the religious and spiritual spheres. One needs to also look at the paucity of bhaktas devoted to the worship of Shakti in this period to be able to assess the impact of the ideology of the *pativrata* syndrome at the time.

### **The Modern Period**

Let us now come to the modern period. I would consider the modern period in general as starting with the opening of the doors to the Western world. We could reckon the start of women's

emancipation in a broad sense in India during these times even though feminist ideas took some more time to make their presence felt in India. We can even concede that India's colonial period which though exploitative in many ways also enabled reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others gain some benefits like English education that opened up their mental horizon. Exposure to ideas of social equality and political freedom practised at least in theory in countries like the United Kingdom also helped the efforts of reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy at attempting some of those social reforms to the Indian context as well. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, thus, besides founding the Brahmo Samaj, also worked tirelessly against polygamy, child marriage, the caste system, and so on.

There came many reformers in this phase, especially in the nineteenth century, such as Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Keshav Karve, and many more who dedicated their lives towards improving the lot of women. Each of them addressed issues such as women education, widow remarriage, and abolition of child marriage. The Arya Samaj in particular aimed at the abolition of caste and opened up Vedic education for women as well. Swami Vivekananda also did a lot to improve the lot of women. His great achievement was sowing the seeds of the future establishment of a separate monastic order called the Sarada Math for women *sannyāsinīs*, which is managed and controlled only by women monastics. Thus there was a flurry of activities to ameliorate the social inequities from which women suffered in Indian society. It was with Mahatma Gandhi, however, that women really attained dignity and recognition as equals. He made it possible for women to participate in both social reforms as well as in political activities and women have not looked back after

that. Even though the progress of women has not been equal in all classes and strata of the society the movement was begun in earnest during his time and continues to the present.

The question we have to ask ourselves in this context is how have these reforms and progress affected the spiritual world of women. It is here that one also notices that the medieval bhakti model has yielded some space to the *sannyāsinī* paradigm in the modern age and the goal was increasingly being transformed into that of seeking to realise the truth and thus going back to the *brahmavādinī* ideal that was the earlier Vedic model exemplified by Gārgī and Maitreyī. Today *sannyāsinīs* like Amritanandamayi Ma and others stress on the seeking of mental peace and realising the truth. According to Anandamayi Ma, 'The supreme calling of every human being is to aspire to Self realization. All other obligations are secondary.'<sup>11</sup> She says: 'Only actions that kindle man's Divine Nature are worthy of the name of action' (ibid.).


A senior disciple of Amritanandamayi Ma, also known as the hugging saint, writes about her: 'The path inculcated by her is the same as the one presented in the Vedas and recapitulated in subsequent traditional scriptures such as the Bhagavad-Gita. ... *Karma* [action], *jñāna* [knowledge] and *bhakti* [devotion] are all essential. If the two wings of a bird are devotion and action, knowledge is its tail. Only with the help of all three can the bird soar into the heights.'<sup>12</sup> She stresses the importance of meditation and selfless service. There are 'some of the virtues to which Amma gives special prominence—namely, the cultivation of patience, innocence, humility, awareness and compassion' (112). 'Amma's only identification is with the True Self—the blissful consciousness that serves as the substratum to the thoughts and physical universe' (37). She also



accepts the Upanishadic concept of *jīvanmukti*, liberation while alive, and says: 'Jīvanmukti is not something to be attained after death, nor is it to be experienced or bestowed upon you in another world. It is a state of perfect awareness and equanimity, which can be experienced here and now in this world, while living in the body. Having come to experience the highest truth of oneness with the Self, such blessed souls do not have to be born again. They merge with the infinite consciousness' (185).

These statements echo the Upanishadic concept of moksha and its inquiry into the ultimate truth and thus one can see how the trend has changed from emphasis on bhakti in the medieval age to the modern emphasis on the quest for the ultimate truth. It is not as if the *brahmavādinī* image ever faded out from the Hindu cultural scene and memory throughout its chequered history. There are references to women *bhikṣuṇīs* or *sannyāsinīs* in the epic literature, in literary works of Kālidāsa, Bhavabhūti, and texts like the Arthaśāstra. Even though there are presumed to be some exclusive women *sannyāsinī* organisations from the time of Shankara, the general non-acceptance of *sannyāsinīs* in the tradition especially by the traditional Shankara *mathas* was not conducive to women adopting *sannyāsa* and it was therefore muted. It needed an impetus to come to the fore again and it came in the form of Swami Vivekananda who inspired the setting up of an independent women monastic order, the Sarada Math. Other factors like the emancipation of women in the post-independence period, the influence of social reformers, and Gandhiji's personal involvement in bringing women into the political struggle—all combined to enable women to choose their spiritual destiny as well. The figure of a renouncer—whether man or woman—has always gained

respect in Hindu circles and in her image of a *sannyāsinī* a woman has been able to regain the dignity and agency she is supposed to have enjoyed during Vedic times.

Thus Hinduism has had its share of women spiritual leaders, preachers, and exemplars of spiritual life from the earliest Vedic times to the present. It is only bound to increase as the thirst for inner peace and tranquillity is a constant spiritual need. 

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# Contemporary Spirituality

Suruchi Pande

## Two Zen Stories

THESE ARE TWO INSIGHTFUL Zen stories which explain the concept of spirituality and its applicability not only in changing times but they also focus the eternal

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importance of the principles in spirituality. *Dao* or *Tao* is a Chinese word meaning a way, a path, a doctrine, or a principle. It is not a name for a thing but it suggests the underlying natural order of the universe. The Dao can be known or experienced. The first story is titled 'The Ordinary Mind':

The disciple: Master, how should I practice the Dao?

Master: Eat when you're hungry and sleep when you're tired.

The disciple: Isn't that what most people do anyway?

Master: No, no, no. That's not what most people do. ... Most people entertain a thousand desires while they eat and untie a thousand knots while they sleep. ... How many people wake up in the morning still figuring out problems from the day before? We should take everything that threatens our peace of mind and throw it out. We should live according to our original nature because the ordinary mind is the Dao.<sup>1</sup>

The other story titled 'What is self-cultivation?' goes like this:

The disciple: What kinds of people need to engage in self-cultivation?

Master: People like me.

The disciple: Even a great master like yourself needs to practice self-cultivation?

Master: Self-cultivation goes no further than dressing and eating!

Disciple: But these are things we do every day. What is self-cultivation?

Master: What do you think I do every day? Self-cultivation refers to idle conversation, washing your face, eating—all the details of everyday life that should be done with care and sincerity. If performed in this way, every little task will resonate with the truth' (80).

When we read the moral of these Zen stories

we are reminded of Swami Vivekananda's words: 'Only that kind of work which develops our spirituality is work. Whatever fosters materiality is no work.'<sup>2</sup> He also clarifies the benefit of cultivating spirituality when he says, 'The more advanced a society or a nation is in spirituality, the more is that society or nation civilised' (6.462).

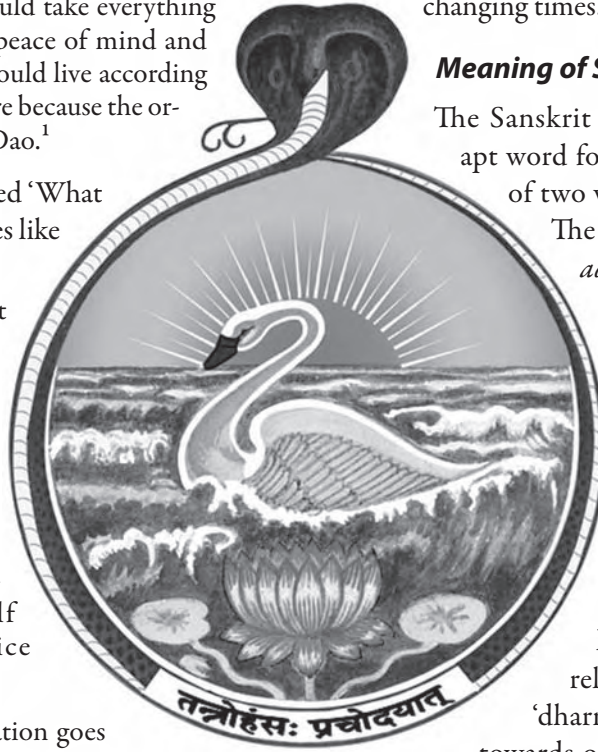
Here is a humble attempt to search for the reasons behind the need for spirituality in changing times.

### Meaning of Spirituality

The Sanskrit word '*adhyatma*' is an apt word for spirituality. It consists of two words, '*adhi*' and '*atma*'. The prefix '*adhi*' means '*tam adhitrutya*; about it'. *Adhyatma* aims to explore truth through one's own experiences. Each individual is engaged in this quest in one way or the other. It does not make any difference whether one believes in a particular religion or not because the 'dharma' speaks of our duties towards oneself, family, and society. One is expected to develop as a responsible citizen.

The *Yogavasishtha* asserts that every human being is capable of '*adhyatma*': 'One who resolves that "I am bound, and will become free", and one who is not much ignorant and yet is not a knower, that person is qualified for undergoing this discipline [of spirituality].'<sup>3</sup>

Thus we get two aspects of spirituality, one is personal enrichment and the other is development of a sense of social responsibility. When



we speak of spirituality in changing times, it is necessary to be aware of social and national well-being. We cannot afford to be only aware of one's own enlightenment. Swami Vivekananda gave importance to this aspect which is reflected through the motto of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission: 'For one's own salvation and for the good of the world.' The readers of Swami Vivekananda know that Swamiji was inspired by the life of Buddha, his compassion, and his concept of the monastic organisation or *sangha*.

### **A Need for Ideals and Altruism**

To cultivate spirituality in our life, we need some ideals. By contemplating on the lives of great people we can plan a mode of our life. If we have motivation and truly try to fol-

low, it becomes possible to cultivate a life of non-attachment even while remaining with family.

Today in the fields of economics, ecology, and environment, there is certainly interdependence among various countries. After a certain level, it becomes meaningless to use the words 'we' and 'they'. Taking care of others is not only required in a spiritual context but it is a necessary condition for the survival of nations.

There is difference between 'being religious' and 'being spiritual'. Swami Vivekananda's

words give us direction: '[Religion] is only between you and your God, and no third person must come between you.'<sup>4</sup> 'Every religion, is true, as each is but a different stage in the journey' (1.331). 'Religion cannot be swallowed in the form of a pill. It requires hard and constant practice' (1.407).

We all know that fanaticism grows because of considering the outer ritualistic covering of religions and it is one of the greatest dangers in changing times. Reworking and reinterpreting the concept of true spirituality is a need of changing times. Being spiritualistic is being altruistic because altruism is a high state of mind.

Struggling to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all is the greatest inspiration in life. Compassion is the

most visible form of this inspiration. A wish to see the well-being of all and a feeling to contribute actively towards it are further steps in the welfare of all. When there is a feeling of connectedness with others, it leads to the highest spiritual realisation.

While following all the duties of our station in life, we can cultivate the thoughts of universality. When we attempt it, the whole exercise becomes a journey of joy, alertness, and a critical and logical attitude.





### **Refining Our Life**

If we wish to refine our personal life, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's life is the ideal for us because it is close to our heart. A thought of helping all creatures to become free from bondage and afflictions is called '*bodhichitta*' in Buddhism. There is a Buddhist text titled *Bodhicharyavatara*, which discusses this concept. The author of this text was Shantideva of the seventh century. When I read this text, I was reminded of some incidents from Holy Mother's life. I quote some verses from *Bodhicharyavatara* and we will be able to easily correlate

these teachings with the message of Holy Mother's life: 'There is no guilt equal to hatred, no mortification equal to long-suffering; and therefore one should diligently practise patience in diverse ways. While the arrow of hate is in the heart, none can have a peaceful mind in equipoise, or feel the joy of kindness, none can win sleep or calm.'<sup>5</sup>

For changing times, the Holy Mother gave a similar message in extremely simple words: 'I tell you one thing—if you want peace, do not find fault with others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger. The whole world is your own.'<sup>6</sup> 'My son, forbearance is a great virtue; there's no other like it.'<sup>7</sup> 'You should work, no doubt. Work saves the mind from going astray. But prayer and meditation also are necessary. You

must sit for meditation at least once in the morning and once in the evening. That will be like the helm of a boat. When one sits in meditation in the evening, there is self-examination in respect of the work done in the course of the day.'<sup>8</sup> 'One must be patient like the earth. What iniquities are being perpetuated on her! Yet she quietly endures them all.'<sup>9</sup>

### **Spirituality and the Environment**

I have been working in the field of environmental education for the last fifteen years and find a growing need for developing a spiritual attitude.

Trees, birds, and animals were used as motifs, symbols to preach the Sanatana Dharma. We find them personified in mythological stories. We find the roots of particular belief-systems in myths. Usually mythological stories are a medium to convey the methods of spiritual life and a means to educate common masses where the essence of the Sanatana Dharma, importance of morality is made simple, unsophisticated, and direct. It is now, more than ever, that it has become very important for us to think about the environment and the restoration of the imbalance caused by our interference and negligence.

Spirituality and culture play an important role in this mission. We need to preserve our culture through various methods of presentation to attract people to nature conservation. All over the world we find philosophical stories related to birds.

One such beautiful example can be found in the preaching of St Francis of Assisi. He was born in Assisi, Italy in 1182. He was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant in Assisi. In 1206 he renounced all his wealth, left home. He devoted himself to the care of lepers and rebuilding the neglected churches. He lived in poverty. He preached the necessity of simple life. He founded the Franciscan Order in 1210 and he also founded an order for women in 1211.

His preaching to the sparrows is a popular legend. He firmly believed that Nature is the mirror of God. He called all creatures as brothers and sisters and had tremendous fondness for birds and used to feed them with great love. He said:

My little sisters, the birds, much bounden are ye unto God, your creator ... he hath given you liberty to fly about everywhere ... ye sow not, neither do you reap; and God feedeth you, and giveth you the streams and fountains for your drink; the mountains and valleys for your

refuge and the high trees whereon to make your nests; and because ye know not how to spin or sow, God clotheth you; ... therefore, my little sisters beware of the sin of ingratitude, and study always to give praises unto God.<sup>10</sup>

There is no doubt that through the preaching to the birds St Francis has taught us the importance of the value of gratefulness and humility towards Nature. When we consider the Vedic period, we observe that people did not think only of their prosperity. They were sensitive to Nature who provides us a firm foundation for our lives. In the Rig Veda there is a beautiful description of a goddess named Aranyani: 'Now have I praised the forest queen, sweet-scented, redolent of balm, The Mother of all sylvan things, who tills not but hath stores of food.'<sup>11</sup>

We find the spiritual attitude in the prescription of Nature worship in the Indian context. Trees, birds, animals, and many other elements in Nature were worshipped out of respect and there was a thought of conservation behind those rituals. The Puranic literature tried to reach the message of Sanatana Dharma to the masses.

For example, we find a great importance attached to the banyan tree. This tree is a great ecosystem in itself. Sri Krishna talks of it in the Bhagavadgita: 'I am the banyan among all trees.'<sup>12</sup> In Hindu iconography, the Dakshinamurti Shiva is shown engrossed in meditation beneath this tree. The banyan tree has a unique place in the story of Satyavan-Savitri. The tree is the silent observer of the intellectual struggle of Savitri. If we symbolically try to analyse this metaphor, we come to know that the names of Satyavan and Savitri represent eternal values. Satya means truth, and is as eternal and illuminating as the Savitur, the Sun. Both are inseparable. And the background is provided by the hugely spread banyan tree. As long as this story is valued and revered, people will tend to



St Francis of Assisi

protect and conserve banyan trees. Thus culture and an aspect of spirituality help in the drive of Nature conservation in a constructive and innovative manner.

Let us see another example from the Puranas. Often the Purana literature is thought of as a collection of mythological stories. But we have to go deep and search for true spirituality hidden in the Sanskrit verses and then we find a treasure that is really amazing. In ancient times it was expected that everyone should do plantation and take care of those saplings. It is said that God Vishnu is fond of eight types of flowers. From the outward meaning, one is expected first to grow and then collect eight types of flowers. When we read further, we note that there is a reference to eight kinds of virtues that are expected from the true devotee: 'Non-violence is the first flower, control of the sense organs is the second flower, compassion to all living beings is the third flower, forgiveness is the fourth special flower, restraint, austerity, and meditation are

the fifth, sixth, and seventh flowers. Truth is the eighth flower. Worshipped with these flowers Lord Keshava is pleased.'<sup>13</sup>

Even in changing times this is how spirituality plays an important role in our environment and ecology. Inculcating spirituality means cherishing morality and ethical values and it is an elevated state of mind which goes beyond the barriers of any label of the so-called ritualistic religion.

Destruction of natural resources is due to ignorance, greed, and lack of respect towards Nature. We all need to seriously think whether we are going to leave a degraded and disgraced planet for our future generations. Advances in technology and science do not provide solutions for mental degradation of human beings and that is where spiritual values are needed, to deal with new problems of our times. PB

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# Spirituality in Old Age

Kaila Meyer

AS A FLEDGLING MEMBER of the ‘young old,’ meaning in my early seventies, I can tell you that wisdom is not bestowed simply due to age! Somehow that thought might be embedded in the culture, leading us to believe that spirituality will just naturally develop. Not true!

No, the truth is that age and experience in the world will drag down an individual due to remorse, regret, and the sad fact that time makes everything disappear—loved ones, happy times, power, wealth, and beauty, if there has not been enough effort in the direction of spiritual growth. Spiritual wealth compounds if left to raise itself by ‘Itself’. For we all know that the sooner we start investing, and the longer that commitment builds, the larger the return will be.

Not many of us have had the good karma to work intensely at saving ourselves from worldliness through spiritual practices at an early age. But at whatever age we had that great awakening, we hoped that through patient and persevering practice we would succeed, surely by old age.

It is easy to tire of the effort. It is harder still to overcome spiritual obstacles with the erosion of energy, optimism, and the vibrancy we once had. This seems to be the real challenge in old age. We can’t quit and we can’t pretend that part-way is good enough. We must take heart, take the help of our guru and do our very best.

Our guru repeatedly said, very forcefully: ‘*Ihaiva*, here and now!’ In this very life, we must

bend all our efforts to achieve the goal. However, habit being what we live by, it is really tough to maintain the level of intensity we had in our youth.

What to do? Practise the good habits we were taught. We are in the home stretch, as in a horse race. The good jockey will beat the poor animal mercilessly to reach the winning position, and all for money and glory! Yet we have the greatest goal of all—can’t we beat ourselves a bit to get there? We really should.

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**It is hard to overcome spiritual obstacles with the erosion of energy, optimism, and the vibrancy we once had. This seems to be the real challenge in old age.**

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Making excuses: ‘Too tired, did that long enough, Mother loves us anyway’, saps what strength we have left, the strength we need for our spiritual practice and mindfulness. Our old nerves need quiet, not TV; our old brains need to focus on the goal. Yes, ‘old age is not for sissies’. Don’t be a sissy, survive the challenge because the winners get free.

The obstacles prevalent in old age seem to be different from earlier years, although trends form from a character fashioned over a lifetime.

Have you heard the saying, ‘We just become more like ourselves as we age’? A grouch was probably like that beneath a friendly facade in the formative years. Then add all the stresses of pain and loss. Well now that person is an old grouch: a complainer, a wimp, a dropout from society, a person who rests on one’s laurels, real

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or imagined, and don't forget the lecturer to one's children: 'In my day ...'. Memories could also turn the 'good old days' into 'the bad old days', producing a person filled with gloom, depression, or even thoughts of revenge! What a fruitless pastime this is, and very harmful to a spiritual aspirant. Dwelling on past mistakes, deriving pleasure from seeing the downfall of others who had hurt us, and finding happiness from other's misfortunes in general, can really kill an old person's hope for a good outcome.

Apparently the old days were better because that is how one remembers them. The truth hurts. Gone are the friends, the hope, the worldly love based on what can be gained with wealth. Few still have some earning power or plenty of money to last well into very old age—the nineties and the hundreds—without the fear of dependency. So often, there is no one left to depend on. Fear takes over and negativity reigns.

Here is where a lifetime of frugality pays off. Getting and spending constitute an admired lifestyle to worldly folks. The spiritually developed devotee is steered away from this path through the example of the guru. 'A monk's pack is light.' And why should we fear when we have been assured by Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi that our basic needs will always be met? Staying cheerful is essential. What our swamis teach is designed to lead us into the light and keep us there. There should also be a balance between feeling joy and admitting to the seriousness of the struggle. We need to maintain sensitivity towards the pain and struggles of our brothers and sisters who might not be experiencing joy today.

We had a marvellous member of the Vedanta Society of Portland who was very old, dying of cancer, who never complained. He worked hard to the very end. He would come down from his second-storey room in the temple to worship in the shrine despite extreme pain. What a hero! My

last conversation with him consisted of me quoting Buddha's words, 'Old age, disease, and death are the inevitable end of life in the body.' The dear elder brother passed away a few months later. We were called in to the temple for a last viewing, so I ascended the stairs in trepidation. Alone, at the foot of his bed, which by now was covered with flower offerings, I saw an emaciated corpse. Suddenly out of the air came his booming voice, 'Old age, disease, and death can touch me no more!' This is a great example of victory which can inspire us all. We can find these blessed oldsters in their quiet way continuing their practice.

I think these successful people achieved some spiritual understanding in their youth and never stopped their practice. There is no such thing as success starting in old age, since by then the mind has naturally deteriorated. I believe only continuance is possible. Of course with God all things are possible, but I am talking about probabilities.

What was done? What was that early success based on? It is discernment. The world is unreal since it truly has no perpetuity. Only God is real. We are taught then that we must realise God. Successful old spiritual seekers are really early spiritual 'finders' not 'seekers', who just keep going. That is my observation.

My doctor pointed out that my brain has shrunk like all old brains do. I should be so careful to not to fall and strike my head because that smaller brain could knock itself against the inside of my skull and cause serious injury or even death. Children have brains protected by natural size and juiciness. And here I thought I could do anything I wanted if I had the courage to try! We need to be realistic to survive. Old folks have lost so much of their juice. Everything shrinks, hardens to creaky stiffness and great care must be taken to avoid disaster—all this when we are closing in on the finish line. So, courageously,

boldly, we must persist. We must control that mind, stopping not until the goal is reached.

The external sense organs are losing power. That means the internal abilities must have been well developed in youth and be continually used well to persist unto old age. The internal abilities which must connect to external stimuli are also deteriorating. Where does this situation leave us? Only the strongest memory patterns and higher knowledge can survive. Repetition is the key to knowledge. My friend who has survived strokes

we have received over the years can now pay off. We will have success if we just don't quit.

Old age cures are so popular today. 'Never say die' is the rallying cry, and it is pushed by huge commercial forces. There is plenty of money to be made by authors, doctors, and purveyors of herbs, exercise machines, and systems of youth retention, like the latest drugs. Of course they are aiming at physical immortality. 'Live long and prosper.' Since we have been focusing on immortality of the spirit, we should be careful of our health, but not



tells me we should also be very patient and forgiving of our own deficiencies when they happen. Love is the answer; gentle self-love is necessary.

Survival of the strongest, deepest, and the most frequently used neural pathways is the key. This is the truth in old age. We can't cover up the truth of death lurking in our near future with lovely flowers and platitudes. We must be truthful, not deny our inevitable fleshly mortality, in order to affirm the immortality of the spirit, divine mind. All the help

overemphasise the striving to survive at all costs. Really though, who needs a pretty exterior if the spirit is strong? Real beauty always was, and always will be, the inner glow coming from the Lord.

There is no escaping these facts. Let us all realise God early and soon and persist until the end. If all our efforts are reduced to naught, we know another chance will come! The West needs to accept reincarnation. That surely would change everything.



## No 'Space' for God

Shruba Mukherjee

IT WAS SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S 150th birth anniversary and the New Delhi Ramakrishna Mission had planned a series of programmes to mark that occasion. Due to my journalistic background, I was given the responsibility to invite the media to one such event. The occasion and also the impressive guest list made me quite upbeat about the coverage. When I approached my editor with the press invitation, he blurted out a list: assembly elections were round the corner, a political leader was scheduled to address a rally, a couple of accidents had taken place, at least four to five crime stories were to

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be carried, and so on. 'Sorry, we do not have any space,' he said.

When prodded further, he shouted out at me and said, 'How can you make such a request? Aren't you a journalist? You should know what makes news.'

What makes news? Good journalism should be concerned with all aspects of our life: our country, society, economy, culture, professions, interests—everything. Then why is spirituality not a part of the mainstream media? Why is it restricted to just one column in a thirty-page newspaper? Why religion makes it to the front page only when the news is negative: a god-man commits a crime, a treasure trove is discovered in a temple, a religious leader issues fatwas or

special orders, or when a fight breaks out between two communities?

According to a study undertaken by Washington-based think tank named Pew Research Center, 'Worldwide, more than eight-in-ten people identify with a religious group. A comprehensive demographic study of more than 230 countries and territories conducted by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life estimates that there are 5.8 billion religiously affiliated adults and children around the globe, representing 84% of the 2010 world population of 6.9 billion.'<sup>1</sup>

Highlighting the resurgence of religion in the public sphere Monica Duffy Toft, Professor of Government and Public Policy at Oxford University, says that forces of modernisation, democratisation, and globalisation have made religion a stronger force than before.

This has happened because modernisation has failed to fulfil the aspirations of people. While secular ideologies such as communism and Baathism have crumbled, others have become associated with failed economic policies and corruption. 'Democracy is giving the world's peoples their voice, and they want to talk about God', she says.<sup>2</sup> If this is the trend the world over, then how can religion and spirituality be banished from the newsroom in India, where it is the lifeblood for the nation.

As a senior editor of a spiritual column in a leading English daily says, 'The editors do not take spirituality very seriously as a subject matter for readers. In fact, some of them have confessed that they don't understand anything about it.' Terry Mattingly, director of the Washington Journalism Center at the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, elaborates it further when he says that most of the senior editors reach their posts by covering politics, and that is why they always turn everything into a political story. He terms it as a worldwide phenomenon

and quotes Steven Waldman, former national editor of US News and World Report, to prove his point that it is difficult for the editors to grasp religion: 'They see church disputes and try to turn them into political stories. They see stories about the growth of new congregations and movements and turn them into stories about polls, statistics, and trends.'<sup>3</sup>

John J DiJulio Jr, who teaches Political Science in the University of Pennsylvania, feels that journalists have always 'castigated' religion rather than understanding it: 'This may have happened because many journalists have been led by political ideology or pseudoscientific pretense to castigate religion rather than understand it; or because they have innocently but foolishly imbibed the ahistorical, unempirical, anti-anthropological, and outdated sociology predicting that "modernity" would render religion irrelevant in the near future; or because, even as leading secular and nonsectarian scholars in just about every field, including the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, have begun to take religion seriously, they have lacked the intellectual self-confidence to do the same' (174).

Senior journalist Ravi Kant Singh gives two reasons for ignoring religion and spirituality by the mainstream media. Traditionally spirituality in India has been considered a matter of personal choice rather than a matter of public discourse. Hence, it has never been considered prudent to invade into the personal space of readers or viewers.

He also blames it on a 'hangover from the left leanings of media', when spirituality was considered a taboo and talking about God or god-men termed regressive. He says: 'Of course, anything negative is considered newsworthy and hence the type of stories that get highlighted by the mainstream media, are a direct reflection of this. Pseudo-secularism has its roots deep set in the Indian media as anything with the religion

of the masses [read Hinduism] is considered to be not progressive or even modern.’

Echoing Ravi’s view Delhi-based journalist Alokparna Das says that negative news sells, and gets the Television Rating Points, TRPs, and that is why media is ‘obsessed’ with ‘sensational news and sensationalising news’.

We know that the crime pages are the most-read pages of a newspaper. And if that crime is committed by someone associated with religion, it makes for a bigger story.

Explaining the

reason for this phenomenon, Satya Prakash, Legal Editor at *Hindustan Times*, says that if any leader, not necessarily a spiritual one, is found involved in a crime, people would like to know about it and, therefore, media would naturally cover it. Also, simply because the person allegedly involved in a crime is a so-called spiritual person, media can’t be expected not to highlight it. On the contrary, media is duty-bound to inform people about such incidents.

He also points out that so far as religion and spirituality are concerned, a section of media is often guided by so-called ‘secular and progressive’ ideas. ‘They have a tendency to ridicule everything spiritual. This is because they view spirituality from the narrow prism of ideology. Spirituality is above any ideology—left, right, or centre’, he adds.

Narayani Ganesh, the Editor of *Speaking*

*Tree*, the spiritual newspaper published by the Times of India group, feels the same way. ‘Bad news always makes it to the front pages, as it is sensational, it pumps up the adrenaline and there is shock and awe and so on. A pacific, philosophical story would not make for breaking news, would it?’ she asks.

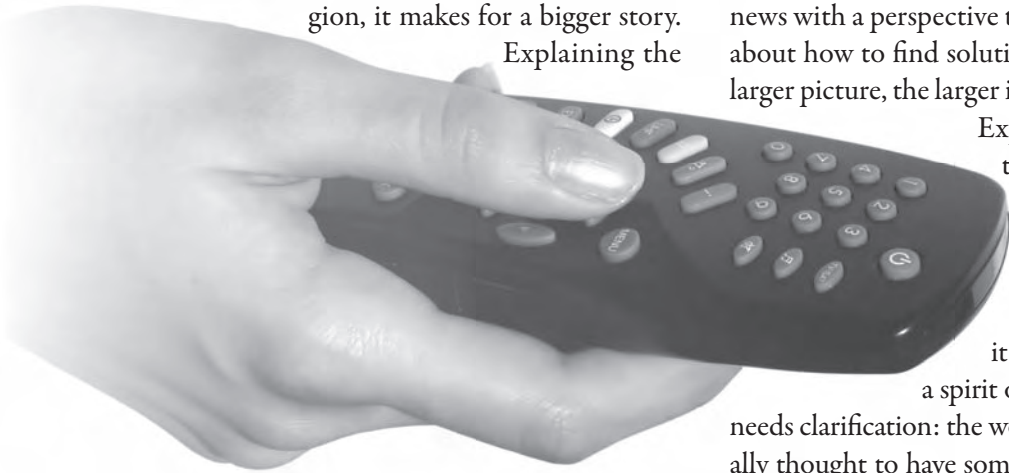
However, she thinks that the Times of India has been trying to highlight positive news—inspirational stories for example—or balance bad news with a perspective that can include talking about how to find solutions—or looking at the larger picture, the larger implications of an issue.

Explaining what exactly the term ‘spirituality’, means Swami Satyamayananda, a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order, says that it is thinking of oneself as

a spirit or the Atman. Here one needs clarification: the word spirituality is generally thought to have some kind of a subtle body, which is beyond the gross body. According to Indian religion and philosophy such a subtle body is still made of matter. The Atman is beyond such bodies and is pure infinite Consciousness.

‘The concept and word “spirituality” has—due to the media and other factors such as New Age religious trends—been distorted. So different people have different conceptions of what is spirituality and this is transmitted by the media, resulting in a great deal of divergence and confusion from the original Hindu idea of spirituality’, says Swami Satyamayananda.

Though media can provide an important channel of information, it has largely failed in its role. It is not only seen as mostly a negative factor, but partial, or having agendas. ‘People who read such stuff rarely want to see some original spirituality as it has no glamour. The media is



saturated with the ideas of politics so much that it wants to politicise even religion and its allied branches. Modern-day media is also deeply conservative at times', the swami adds.

An industry expert with more than twenty years of experience with the television, refers to the mushrooming of channels showing exclusively spiritual programmes. He shows how over the last seven years, news television has embraced religion as a cornerstone of its content paradigm. However, the coverage has centered around events where there is a guarantee of large footfall.

While arguing that religious channels have contributed to revisiting the spirituality plank he admits that they follow a stereotype identified closely with festivals and religious events. Many channels just give live coverage to different religious ceremonies and rituals at places of worship. 'I guess it is bound to change if these channels invest in content beyond events. Imagine the cost factor's role because live events' coverage is cheaper. Television has a great role to play in educating viewers but I must say that news channels would essentially be driven by news value and not educational value', he says.

The growth story of various Indian religious television channels is a proof that there is no dearth of audience for spiritual programmes. They have not only survived economic slow-down, but also showed steady growth in advertisement revenue.

But are the programmes really spiritual or do they just focus on the ritualistic aspect of religion and talk about shortcuts to fame and prosperity? As Alokparna points out, that is precisely the problem. She feels that in the name of spirituality, majority of the channels only talk about materialism; for instance, the late night advertorials on TV sell *kavach* and *yantras*, and such other wearables or products that will bring in wealth for those who buy these.

Acting on complaints against such programmes, the Information and Broadcasting Ministry issued an advisory on 7 June 2013 asking the television channels not to telecast anything promoting superstition and blind belief:

It has come to the notice of this Ministry that a number of TV channels are telecasting programmes which appear to encourage superstition and blind belief. Miraculous solutions of all problems are offered by the self-proclaimed Babas and Gurus in these programmes. ... It has also been noticed by this Ministry that most advertorials relating to Astrology, Vastu, so-called discourses by Gurus and self-proclaimed healers are being shown for hours together in such a way that might lead viewers to believe they are watching programme [sic] even though they are actually watching advertisements. This is a complete violation of the Advertising Code, particularly rule 7(5), contained in the Cable Television Networks Rules, 1994.<sup>4</sup>

Section 5 of The Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995 of India provides that 'No person shall transmit or re-transmit through a cable service any programme unless such programme is in conformity with the prescribed programme code.'<sup>5</sup> The programme code is laid down by The Cable Television Networks Rules, 1994 of India. Rule 6(j) of these rules prohibits carrying out of any programme in any cable service which 'encourages superstition or blind belief'.<sup>6</sup>

As Singh points out, though some contents on these TV channels are very enlightening in their spirituality, most of them are purely banal. Hence it is a tough balance between truly spiritual content and the purely pedestrian ones—easy ways of making easy money for the proponents.

Being extremely young, the electronic medium tends to churn out stuff in the name of spiritual discourse that is catching popular imagination rather than provoking deep introspection. Here is where the role of media can be faulted—lacking

in maturity of judgement. And as experts say, this happens because the contents are decided by the profit motive. It may sound ironical but the fact is that spirituality has been commoditised and the channels are monetising it.

‘There are three parties to this commoditisation—a spiritual guru or personality, her or his followers, that is consumers of spirituality, and the TV channels. While the first may or may not be a genuine player, those in the second category are mostly honest seekers of spiritual peace and elevation. The third, that is, the media is purely guided by market forces’, explains Satya Prakash.

Certainly it is not a spiritual relationship, but a purely professional relationship. A rela-

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**Media is big business but something which is merely run due to profit motive and does not contribute to the common good, cannot survive for long.**

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tionship of give and take where media virtually takes a ‘*baba*’ to his followers and in the process makes money. Both need each other for their own benefits. Media has commoditised spirituality to sell it in the market like any other product.

Narayani Ganesh feels that media presents an array of stories, and as far as spiritual masters go, it would be subjective to decide who is authentic and who is not. ‘The followers obviously find something in a master that soothes them or inspires them, so you have all kinds of stories for all kinds of audiences. A spiritual supermarket, where the customer is the queen or king, if you will. Of course there are fly-by-night operators here as well. But I think that risk is there in any field. So one has to take an informed decision and do one’s homework before reposing faith in some person or a belief system’, she says.

Even *Speaking Tree*, which is one of the few examples in India where just a column in a

newspaper was ‘reborn’ as a separate newspaper, what is published is not hard-core spirituality. The articles published in this paper vary from food for fighting obesity to positive thinking to two young girls scaling high peaks. Has the weekly paper, which has around three lakh circulation, ‘packaged’ spirituality in the garb of ‘wellness’?

The editor thinks that there is no ‘garb’ here. The paper seeks to present a variety of options ranging from abstract philosophy and scriptural wisdom to wellness, holistic living, celebration, contemplation, practice of various healing options, discussions in the form of interactions with masters and experts. It also focuses on the creative aspects of spirituality as reflected in the arts, classical and modern literature on the subject and more—humour, learning stories, physics, and metaphysics. The paper, which has readers right from school children to executives and senior citizens, also tries to feature progressive, inspirational stories that make for greater understanding and dialogue between diverse groups.

The first step towards setting things right is to recognise the fact that the horizons of news and religion have touched and ignoring the latter will make the former incomplete. Media should acknowledge that religion is a reality and they will have to engage with it, as human motives are shaped not only by forces of politics, economics, race and class, but also by that of faith.

Given the fact that the resurgence of religion is a dominant factor in national as well as international scenario, there is hardly any room for cynicism when it comes to faith. Before dismissing such issues as ‘irrational’ or ‘insignificant’, the journalists should first do their homework and learn from those who are competent enough to comment on the subject.

Since issues relating to religion or spirituality are considered to be of ‘less importance’, often cub reporters or inexperienced reporters are

sent out on such assignments. But covering such issues require as much dedication and understanding as writing stories on complex political and economic issues. The facts in such stories are, in fact, more sacrosanct than other subjects and the interpretation requires maturity and sensitivity. A particular reporter may not practise religion in one's personal life, but should not believe that one's views are the best description of the reality. As Roberta Green Ahmanson, an US-based award-winning journalist puts it, 'Religion can at times be irrational. But before judging it so, it is important to know that different religions may have their own sophisticated understanding of what rationality really is.'<sup>7</sup>

Christian Smith, Professor of Sociology and Associate Chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of North Carolina, has a suggestion. Stories relating to religion or spirituality should be assigned only to reporters who know religion just as well as their publication's political reporters know politics and their sports reporters know sports. It is high time that the publications recognise religion and spirituality as a serious subject and invest in hiring competent reporters for covering it. He says: 'I further propose that all news reporters and editors go on a retreat to search their hearts in order to discover why when it comes to religion they are simply obsessed with sex abuse and violence, and what the answer might mean for more balanced, representative coverage of religion in the future.'<sup>8</sup>

Media is big business no doubt and they need money to run it. But something which is merely run due to profit motive and does not contribute to the common good, cannot survive for long. Even the big corporate houses have recognised their social responsibility and have started working on projects, which can lead to social and economic empowerment of the people. As a powerful channel of information, media needs

to be more responsible, mature, and sensitive.

Roberta Green Ahmanson puts it rightly: 'We may argue for a God or gods or no god, but we ourselves are not God. In religious terms this realization is often called humility, and it is a virtue of particular value to journalists. In our work we should take a large view, strive to understand what religion is, and try to take seriously an individual's faith or lack of it.'<sup>9</sup>



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# *A Path for All Seasons*

**Carol Lee Flinders**

**I**N THE WINTER OF 1968, the University of California at Berkeley offered a ten-week course on ‘The Theory and Practice of Meditation’, the first accredited course on meditation offered at a major Western University. A Religious Studies course was taught by Sri Eknath Easwaran, former chairman of the Department of English at the University of Nagpur in central India and founder of the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation in Berkeley. Sri Easwaran had first come to America as a Fulbright scholar in 1959, and during his years there had developed an eight-point program that translated classical Indian spiritual disciplines from the Bhagavad-gita into a modern vernacular that spoke directly to the needs of the hundreds of Berkeley students who had enrolled in his meditation class.<sup>1</sup>

As graduate students at the university at the time, we had the great privilege of taking Sri Easwaran’s class, and the experience changed our lives forever. What especially appealed to us about the Eight Point Program was that it offered a universal, non-sectarian spiritual path to Self-Realisation that could be practised by aspiring young professionals who wished to follow a contemplative spiritual path, but were also planning to have careers and families. He assured us from the beginning that we did not need to renounce our careers or families in order to lead a deeply committed spiritual life—a

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popular misconception at the time. He himself had learned to meditate in the midst of an active career as an academic, writer, and speaker. ‘The old dispute about the relative virtues of the active way and contemplative way is a spurious one’, he would write later. ‘We require both. They are phases of a single rhythm like the pulsing of the heart, the indrawing and letting go of breath, the ebb and flow of the tides.’<sup>2</sup> The eight steps of his spiritual path were designed especially to facilitate both dimensions of the spiritual life, fusing a daily, concentrated practice of meditation with selfless, active roles within our home, workplaces, and communities. We could learn not just to survive in the midst of the stresses and time-pressures of modern life, but to thrive. Today, in an increasingly secular world saturated with media, technology, and consumerism, Sri Easwaran’s program of meditation, one-pointed attention, slowing down, discriminating restraint, and selfless service seems even more relevant—and welcome—than it appeared to us during those luminous Berkeley classes of almost half a century ago.<sup>3</sup>

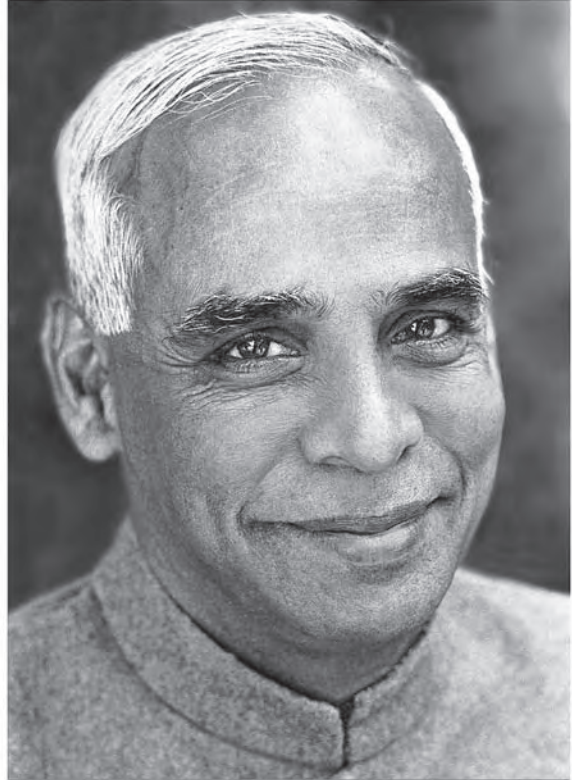
Sri Eknath Easwaran was raised in an ancient matrilineal family in Kerala under the guidance of his grandmother, Eknath Chippu Kunchi Ammal, whom he honoured throughout his life as his spiritual teacher. An unlettered village woman with a continuous awareness of God, she taught him through her example that spiritual practice is something to be lived out each day in the midst of family and community. Adept in both English and Sanskrit literature,

Sri Easwaran became chairman of the Department of English at the University of Nagpur, and by his late thirties, had achieved success as an academic and writer. When his grandmother died in the same year Gandhi was assassinated, he experienced a profound spiritual crisis, turned inward, and began meditating on the words of the Gita, much of which he had committed to memory. As his meditation deepened, he turned to the Indian scriptures for guidance and to the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. 'About this time,' he wrote later, 'I was handed a copy of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. I saw for the first time that it had something to say to me directly. I read the book from cover to cover, and then I read it again, and then again.'<sup>4</sup>

Although his grandmother had shed her body, Sri Easwaran nonetheless felt guided by her in his meditation: 'One night I found myself in deep waters in meditation and felt as though I were sinking fast. For some reason, I began to sense my grandmother seated by my side. She comforted me, protected me. Once a person becomes aware of God, she or he is no longer just a person, but a living force. My grandmother did not die, she merely shed her body. She was—she is—very much alive in me.'<sup>5</sup>

After years of intense sadhana, while maintaining his career as an academic and writer, Sri Easwaran discovered for himself, through the grace of his grandmother, the divine ground of existence that is described in the Gita. 'At that time,' he explained, 'You discover the deepest sources of your life, the deepest sources of your being. And you enter into an eternal relationship with the Self, the Lord of Love in the depths of consciousness, call it Sri Krishna, the Christ, the Compassionate Buddha, or the Divine Mother' (165).

It was about this time that Sri Easwaran arrived at the University of California as a Fulbright scholar and began giving talks on meditation



Ekknath Easwaran (1910–99)

throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. At one of these talks he met his future wife Christine, with whom he established the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation in 1960. After some years in India, he returned to California where he dedicated himself to the responsive young Americans who found their way to the Center during the spiritual upheaval of the late sixties. In 1970 he moved with forty-five of his closest students to his ashrama in Northern California, where he lived, taught, and published more than two dozen books on meditation and spiritual life, until his passing in 1999. The Center, under the leadership of Christine Easwaran, continues to make the Eight Point Program available throughout the world to spiritual seekers who find its practicality and depth uniquely suited to helping them lead spiritual lives within the context of their families, careers, and communities.<sup>6</sup> The program, briefly, is as follows.

### Passage Meditation

Sri Easwaran drew inspiration for his method of Passage Meditation from the sixth chapter of the Gita, ‘The Yoga of Meditation’, where Sri Krishna instructs the warrior-disciple Arjuna to sit in meditation and, once seated, ‘strive to still your thoughts. Make your mind one-pointed in meditation, and your heart will be purified.’<sup>7</sup>

In Passage Meditation, we learn to focus our attention on inspirational passages drawn from the scriptures and mystical writings of the world’s sacred traditions. We can choose to meditate only on passages from our particular religious tradition or range widely over the entire landscape of sacred literature, East and West. Meditators might select passages from the ancient scriptures of the Indian tradition, like this verse from the Katha Upanishad:

When the five senses are stilled, when the mind  
Is stilled, when the intellect is stilled,  
That is called the highest state by the wise.  
They say yoga is this complete stillness  
In which one enters the unitive state,  
Never to become separate again.<sup>8</sup>

Or they might prefer more devotional passages like the twelfth chapter of the Gita, the songs of Meera, the poems of Kabir, or the devotional songs sung by Sri Ramakrishna in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*:

Dive deep, O mind, dive deep in the Ocean of  
God’s Beauty;  
If you descend to the uttermost depths,  
There you will find the gem of love.  
Go seek, O mind, go seek Vrindavan in your  
heart,  
Where with His loving devotees  
Sri Krishna sports eternally.<sup>9</sup>

They might also choose passages from the western mystical tradition, such as this popular prayer from the sixteenth century Spanish mystic, St Teresa of Avila:

Let nothing disturb you;  
Let nothing upset you.  
Everything changes.  
God alone is unchanging.  
With patience all things are possible.  
Whoever has God lacks nothing.  
God alone is enough.<sup>10</sup>

When he introduced meditation to his Berkeley classes, Sri Easwaran recommended that we begin with the prayer of St Francis of Assisi, because of its universality:

Lord make me an instrument of thy peace,  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
Where there is sadness, joy.<sup>11</sup>

Free to choose passages exclusively from a single sacred tradition, or borrow widely from a variety of traditions, passage meditators today represent all the major religions, finding it seamlessly compatible with their faith traditions and practices. Perhaps more significant in an increasingly irreligious age, many passage meditators are seekers with no religious affiliations at all—a quarter of adult Americans identify themselves as ‘spiritual, but not religious’. Many such seekers have embraced Passage Meditation, choosing inspirational passages that celebrate the sacred without drawing upon religious iconography, as can be found in the Upanishads, in the Buddhist and Taoist canons, and in Sufi poetry, such as ‘A Garden beyond Paradise’ by the thirteenth century mystic poet, Jalaluddin Rumi:

Everything you see has its roots  
in the Unseen world.  
The forms may change,  
yet the essence remains the same.  
Every wonderful sight will vanish,  
Every sweet word will fade.

But do not be disheartened,  
The source they come from is eternal—  
Growing, branching out,  
giving new life and new joy.<sup>12</sup>

Having memorised the selected passage, we sit on the floor or in a straight-backed chair with our back, head, and neck in a straight line, close our eyes, and silently repeat the words of the passage for thirty minutes, as slowly as possible and with as much attention as we can give: ‘Lord ... make ... me ... an instrument ... of thy ...peace.’ When the mind wanders, we return it to the words of the passage. ‘Concentrate on one word at a time,’ Sri Easwaran writes in his book, *Passage Meditation*, ‘and let the words slip one after another into your consciousness like pearls falling into a clear pond.’<sup>13</sup> Gradually, the words begin to slow down, and in time—‘many, many years,’ he insists—the thinking process itself may come to a stop for just a moment. ‘Then you will find yourself on the very seabed of consciousness, where everything is still,’ he writes. ‘This stillness is the greatest source of joy. ... So there can be no anger, no greed, and no fear.’<sup>14</sup>

But what about the rest of the day? Once we have finished our morning meditation, how can we maintain our spiritual equilibrium living and working in the midst of the media-saturated, time pressured, emotionally alienating world that we all inhabit? Fortunately, there are seven allied disciplines in the Eight Point Program that support our meditation practice, helping us maintain our calm and focus as we encounter the challenges of family life and workplace stress.

### **Repetition of the Mantra**

Second only to the practice of meditation in its importance, the regular repetition of the mantra offers a powerful spiritual tool for keeping our minds equable and focused even during times of stress and anxiety. Sri Easwaran recommended

that we choose a mantra and stay with it—one that comes from a traditional source and has ‘withstood the test of time’. In *The Mantram Handbook*, he suggests such traditional mantras as *Rama, Rama* from the Indian tradition, or the mantra he himself repeated for more than half a century: *Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare; Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare*. From the Western Christian tradition, he recommended the name of Jesus, or *Ave Maria* or *My God and My All*, the holy phrase repeated by St Francis of Assisi. From the Eastern Orthodox tradition he recommended the Jesus prayer, *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me*, and *Allah* from Islam.<sup>15</sup>

We try to repeat the mantra whenever we have a free moment or two, while standing in line, for instance, or while exercising, or riding a bus, or while walking briskly. If we learn to repeat the mantra when we do not need to, it will be available to us when we become anxious or irritable, angry or afraid, at work or at home, helping us keep our minds calm and lucid. Sri Easwaran especially recommends repeating the mantra while falling asleep at night.

### **Slowing Down**

When he arrived in New York City in 1959, Sri Easwaran thought for a moment that he had arrived on the day of an auto race, since the speed and congestion of the traffic was far beyond what he was used to in his sleepy college town in central India. When he realised that this was the standard pace of life in the US, he understood that Americans would have to learn to slow down if they were going to be able to concentrate their minds in meditation. Now, fifty years later, the lifestyles of the global professional class mirror, or even surpass, the frantic, time-pressured pace of life he first experienced in New York. As an antidote, he encouraged us to

consciously slow down, moving through our day with greater care and deliberation to minimise the stress caused by hurry and time pressure. This does not necessarily mean that we go slower, but rather, we try to set clear priorities and are careful not to over-schedule our time.

### **One-Pointed Attention**

In the practice of one-pointed attention we try to do one thing at a time and give it our full attention. This may appear counterintuitive in our multi-tasking, media-saturated, device-driven world, but being fully present, regardless of circumstances, is an essential component of the spiritual life. As much as possible, we try to stay single-pointed, not texting while driving, for instance, nor checking our phones or tablets during a meal, nor mentally constructing a ‘to-do’ list while our nine-year-old tells us about her school day. Easwaran explains: ‘These are not little things. Taken together they help to unify consciousness and deepen concentration.’<sup>16</sup>

### **Training the Senses**

The goal of training the senses is to free ourselves from compulsive behaviour so that we can harness our vital energies for meditation and selfless service. It means making discriminating choices in the food we eat, keeping our bodies fit with appropriate exercise, and avoiding unhealthy habits like smoking, drinking, or overeating. Training the senses also includes being discriminating in our entertainment choices, avoiding movies, television, or websites that celebrate violence, sensuality, or excessive consumerism. This does not mean that we deprive ourselves of nourishing food or healthy entertainment; rather we learn to make wise choices and avoid the compulsive addictions that characterise so much of modern life. Easwaran says: ‘Training the senses does not mean denying them. It means educating

them not to demand things that will cost us in health, security, or freedom’ (ibid.).

### **Putting Others First**

All the world’s sacred traditions recognise that reducing our self-will is an essential requirement for spiritual progress. In the Eight Point Program, we learn gradually to reduce our pre-occupation with ourselves, putting others first whenever we have the opportunity. We begin within the family, where putting our partners or our children first comes more naturally, then extend the practice to our colleagues at work, the members of our community and, to the larger world, helping for instance, to create a healthy, sustainable environment. Putting others first does not mean making ourselves a doormat, or saying yes to whatever others want. According to Easwaran, ‘It means putting the other person’s welfare before your own personal desires. ... And love often requires you to say no’ (ibid.).


### **Spiritual Fellowship**

It is essential on the spiritual path to come together with like-minded seekers for support and encouragement. Finding our way in a world that is often uncongenial, if not antithetical, to spiritual life, we require as much support as we can find to keep our enthusiasm high and our priorities clear. Passage meditators come together regularly in fellowship groups to share spiritual inspiration and to meditate together. We often arrange recreational activities together and join in entertainment that is wholesome, or even uplifting. When just a few of us come together for retreat, we often find that we are ennobled by the experience.

### **Spiritual Reading**

The final step of the Eight Point Program encourages us to draw inspiration and support from the writings of the great mystics. Sri Easwaran

recommends that we read widely, drawing upon the sacred traditions of both East and West, from the writings of European mystics like St Teresa of Avila or St Francis of Assisi, to the sages of the Upanishads and the Gita, or closer to our own times, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* which proved so instrumental in his own spiritual development. He writes: ‘Whenever our confidence ebbs—for most of us as frequently as the ebbing of the sea—we can turn to the words of these men and women of God and renew our hearts, draw fresh breath, and bring back into sight our supreme goal.’<sup>17</sup>

Today, thousands of spiritual seekers of every religious denomination, and many with none at all, practise Passage Meditation and the allied disciplines, finding them powerful spiritual tools for deepening their spirituality, while they help them navigate the challenges of the modern world with greater serenity, focus, and compassion. ‘When we take to meditation and persevere, no matter what the obstacles,’ Sri Easwaran concludes the first volume of his commentary on the Gita, ‘we will find the Lord’s grace coming to us in many ways; we will be blessed with vibrant health, with increasing security, and with the ability to harness our creative resources to solve even the most difficult problems. By seeking the Self through meditation, we will come to live in awareness of the unity of life expressed in everyone, everywhere, every minute.’<sup>18</sup> 

## Notes and References

1. Required texts included Swami Prabhavananda’s translations of the Bhagavadgita, Upanishads, and the *Yoga Sutra*.
2. Eknath Easwaran, *God Makes the Rivers to Flow: An Anthology of the World’s Sacred Poetry and Prose*, (Tomales: Nilgiri, 2009), 20. All citations from Nilgiri Press have been cited with the permission of Nilgiri Press, PO Box 256, Tomales, CA 94971, USA.
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16. Eknath Easwaran, ‘The Eight Point Program’ <<http://www.easwaran.org/the-eight-point-program.html>> accessed 18 November 2014.
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# Organised Religion and Postmodern Spirituality

Niraj Kumar

WE ARE INTO THE ADVANCED stage of the Anthropocene period.<sup>1</sup> Mankind has transformed from the stage of hunter-gatherer to agriculturalist and thereafter to industrial civilisation. The information technology revolution of 1980s and the ongoing revolution in material technology like nanotechnology, optics, and superconductivity have induced an acceleration of higher magnitude. There has been a concomitant shift in religiosity even. While at the stage of hunter-gatherer, mankind did not have great organised religions and the transaction of material and non-material things with the Unknown was mediated through belief in magic, totem, and taboo. Agricultural societies are the bedrock of traditional great religions. Sedentary population preserves and carries the complex system of organised religion much easily than migrant population.

Along with the industrial revolution, religiosity funnelled into another stream—nationalism. But, with the advent of post-industrial societies in the advanced West, a post-material culture has dawned. There is fragmentation of belief system and a pastiche religiosity is growing fast. Upwardly mobile people no longer want to be under constraints of a single organised religion. Religiosity itself is like a grand shopping mall in which elements from distant sects and mutually

incompatible belief systems are adopted and amalgamated to cater to the existential needs of seeking a way to connect with the *permanence* in a fast changing world. This group claims to be spiritual but not religious (SBNR). A survey by the research firm LifeWay Christian Resources in 2009 found that seventy-two per cent of millennials, 18–29 year olds, said they are ‘more spiritual than religious.’<sup>2</sup> Thom Rainer, the President of the LifeWay Christian Resources quipped at the trend: ‘The Millennial generation will see churches closing as quickly as GM dealerships’ (ibid.).

But, in contrast to the growing adherents to pastiche spirituality, there is another trend of radicalisation of great religions like Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism. Christian evangelisation in hitherto inaccessible terrains of Asian highlands is growing fast. Radicalisation of Buddhism is causing disruptions in countries as far as Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Islam is growing into the south of the Sahara deserts in Africa and carving out new frontiers each day. We have therefore two contrasting trends—SBNR in prosperous societies and the deepening sway of organised religions in less prosperous and less mobile societies.

But is one better than the other? What is the fine distinction between religion and spirituality? Neuroscientists place religion as a set of ‘shared beliefs, practices and experiences regarding supernatural agents’<sup>3</sup> while a pioneer medical professional, who integrates spirituality and health care, designates spirituality as ‘the aspect of humanity

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that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose, and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred.<sup>4</sup> While religion is associated with ritualistic behaviour, spirituality is the autonomous quest to establish 'connectedness'. Both are quite rich in complex symbolic language. Often, religions are based upon books containing parables and similes. But spiritual experience is generally communicated through hymns, song, and poetry. Great religions derive sanctity from spiritual experience of their founders. Buddhism could not have thrived without the base of Buddha's spiritual experience. Neither can Christianity be imagined without the spiritual force of Jesus.

Religion arose from the need to survive the vagaries of life. Uncertainty makes the invention of 'God' indispensable. Religion is based upon two pillars—fear and love of God. Fear is the dominant facet of adhering to the religious beliefs. There is fear of hell, fear of death, fear of loss of wealth and cattle, and fear of failure of produce in fields and the markets. The believer indulges in rituals to propitiate the almighty God. But, with time, love towards god became as important to worship God as the factor of dread. This was the metamorphosis of major religions. The devotional attitude grew by leaps and bounds. Mysticism that allows freedom from rituals crept into organised religion. This also caused emergence of various esoteric sects. Spirituality emerged at a later stage of evolution of religiosity. Spirituality is based upon love and not fear of God.

While in religion, priestcraft mediates between believer and the transcendental being, spirituality is characterised by the immediacy of experience. Religion is an integrated system of belief and a liturgy of ritual and can be characterised as either orthodoxy or orthopraxis based upon the dominance of belief and

ritual, respectively. *Doxa* is the Greek term for what a person believes, but *praxis* is what a person does. Hinduism is less about orthodoxy and more about orthopraxy. A Hindu is not someone who believes in a particular God, book, or place of pilgrimage. A Hindu is what a Hindu does minimally. On the other hand, the Semitic religions are the religions of the book and prophets and clearly instil orthodoxy. But, spirituality is neither a set of beliefs nor a fixed

**Religion arose from the need to survive the vagaries of life. Uncertainty makes the invention of 'God' indispensable. Religion is based upon two pillars—fear and love of God.**

system of rituals. The Greek term for love in a 'spiritual' sense is *agápē*. This is the unconditional love unlike the attraction incited by operation of 'eros'. A spiritual seeker, can be characterised by the term *ortha-agápē*. The spiritual seeker revels in the connectedness and feeling of immediacy with the wider cosmos or the sublime presence of inter-relationality. Spirituality promotes the dissolution of boundary between self and the non-self, microcosm and macrocosm, inner and external realm. It is like converting oneself into a transparent prism through which the gossamer thread of connections becomes visible. Spirituality seeks to open up the self unlike organised religion which tends to erect boundaries of in-group and out-group.

Psychologist Daniel A Helminiak has provided a sharp distinction between different levels of spirituality. He adds following four categories of spiritualities reflecting the postmodern influences in the advanced West: 'Spirituality as *the human spiritual nature* as such: the spiritual component in the human being; that which makes humans spiritual. ... Spirituality as *concern for transcendence*: the sense that something in life



goes beyond the here and now ... spirituality as *parapsychology* ... spirituality as *spiritualism*.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, nowadays the SBNR loyalists can claim to be spiritual even by rejecting any transcendental presence and only by pursuing meaning in the human existence. Sandra M Schneider argues that such postmodern forms of spiritualities are often rival.<sup>6</sup> This group inversely correlates their commitment towards spiritual quest vis-à-vis their belief in organised religion. They find religion to be dogmatic and violent and point out to the ongoing battle lines drawn over the ground of religion. The followers are ridiculed by the leaders of traditional religions as 'out of sync' renegade alternative spiritualists. Schneider argues that religion and spirituality does exist as stranger or partners, but the rivalry between postmodern spirituality and organised religion has created a major chasm.

Since postmodern spirituality offers freedom from the restrictions of the organised religion,

total de-centring, transparency, diffusion, and cocktail of beliefs and rituals, the adherents are pushing the frontiers by claiming the same to be the future of mankind. In a way, postmodern spirituality is akin to a system in chaos. If that be so, can one anticipate emergence of religion as a self-organisation pattern in a dynamic system? Can the chaotic postmodern pastiche spirituality be compared with the Greek world of city-states with freedom as the supreme goal? Can the trend be compared with the conditions existing during Buddha's time when dozens of autonomous religious communities coexisted undermining the dominant Vedic religion? Both periods were subsequently succeeded by the period of major organised religions—Christianity in the case of the former and Buddhism in the case of the latter. Is this period of chaotic belief system the progenitor of the emergence of similar major organised religions, which cater to contemporary needs?



IMAGE: [HTTP://THOUGHTSUNRESTRICTED.WORDPRESS.COM](http://thoughtsunrestricted.wordpress.com)

We all know that the universe is dominated by synchronisation. The material world is not continuous but spread into discrete microsystems. From light to matter, quantisation is the ubiquitous nature of the universe. This synchronicity has entered the biological system exemplified by the cellular automata. We are governed by circadian rhythms, our heartbeats and brain functions are governed by such synchronisation. Tallon-Baudry and Bertrand describe how synchrony at the more regional or local level has been demonstrated repeatedly in humans, in relation to integrative mechanisms in language, memory, attention, and motor tasks, in virtually all the sensory modalities and the perception of coherent objects in humans is specifically associated with synchronous oscillations in the gamma range, the so-called 'induced gamma response'.<sup>7</sup>

Scientists are exploring the neurodynamics of consciousness and are startled with new findings. Recent research reveals manifold ways in which the brain effectively coordinates specialised activities to meet the immediate needs. Nervous system is seen as a complex dynamic structure, in which individual neurons have intrinsic activity patterns and these cooperate to produce coherent collective behaviour.<sup>8</sup>


Le Van Quyen has proposed a grand paradigm to mathematically explain how the brain self-organises distributed neuronal activities. The spatio-temporal large-scale phenomenon is coordinated through synchronisation, higher order spectra, and similar methods.<sup>9</sup> Oscillatory cell assemblies are widespread in the brain cortex and are the bases of our short-term memory.

The dynamic property which is ubiquitous in the realm of biology also characterises emergent consciousness among human beings. Synchronicity which is described as the simultaneity of experience in the social sciences is at the root of religious rituals. A Hindu takes bath in the

Ganga or sacred water sources on the day of Makara Sankranti. Christians celebrate Jesus's birthday on the eve of Christmas. Muslims engage in collective Iftar during the month of Ramzan. Participants may not be physically present together, but it is not just the sharing of place but also time that makes organised groups stable. But there are also shared places like places of pilgrim. The rise of nationalism is attributed to the simultaneity of experience during reading morning newspapers.<sup>10</sup> In culture, we find the manifestation of same power during strikes, bandhs, chorus, revolution, parades, crowd behaviour, riots, dance, exercise, political rallies, and so on. When protestors chant together, they unleash an altogether higher order of transformative power. Thus, synchronicity also generates higher power which is experienced by individuals as 'shared manifold of intersubjectivity'.<sup>11</sup> Such group dynamics multiplies the delight as seen in group singing, chanting, bhajans, kirtans.

It can be seen that any dynamic behaviour of a system leads to self-organisation with spatio-temporal structures emerging as the discreteness of the system. Synchronicity brings in higher transformative power in physical, biological, and cultural systems. While the group participation multiplies delight, it also restricts the individual's autonomy. There is a perpetual conflict between freedom and joy. Man wants to be free and yet longs for savouring the power of manifold. Postmodern spirituality and organised religion can be seen as two manifestations of this perpetual quest. While the former flows from the sense of breaking free from religious dogma and priestcraft, the latter experiments with novel ways to maximise delight among the believers. But, postmodern spiritualities do not neglect altogether the simultaneity of experience. They do celebrate solstices and eclipses, full moon and new moon, blue moon and red moon. They are

hyperactive in the social media which itself is a kind of synchronous interaction space. Their path is not as divergent from the organised religion as it is made out to be. They are trans-modernists who revel in transience, while religion tends to bring in a sense of stability in the face of uncertain events.

Though organised religion is blamed for the ongoing violence in many parts of the world, a closer examination will reveal that in fact post-modern spiritualists and violent religionists share a common dystopic vision. Violence in the name of organised religion itself is a by-product of alternative spiritualities. While bands of such spiritual people promote belief in apocalypse, it is the influence of such millenarianism over many radical religionists who claim to be at the edge of the moment and hence get inspired to create a new world order through violence. Mere experiential encounter bereft of moral and social values leads individuals astray towards millenarianism, and in a different cultural milieu, towards violence-based activism. What is required is to bring in sanity to both streams of postmodern spiritualities and organised religion. One way of achieving sanitisation of organised religion can be by allowing greater women participation in priesthood and other authoritative positions. Religion is necessary for our everyday life. It is the great religions which carry the load of civilisation. No religion will lead to barrier-free minds of schizoid, atomised individuals. That will be the end of human quest for maximising joy! 

### Notes and References

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# ***Psychological Problems of Indian Youth***

**Shyamolima Datta**

**T**HE 'YOUTH' PHASE OF LIFE is when one faces a lot of psychological problems which may hamper everyday living and make life a living hell. It is important to discuss the problems and its root cause. India is a cohesive society. However with the onset of globalisation, it is moving towards individualisation aping the West. More and more middle-class youths are struggling to achieve their expectations and new technologies like cell phones and social networking sites are helping break down traditional family units once relied on for support. There are few facilities in India for mental health problems and social stigma prevents many people from seeking support. Telephone helplines are often not adequately staffed and many schools do not have counsellors.

Youth is the time when an individual is growing emotionally and any kind of negligence on the part of the society and parents can lead to psychological disorders. In India, mental health is a highly neglected issue. Youth has long been recognised as a period of heightened risk-taking and accordingly a stage that requires special oversight from adults. Nevertheless, expectations regarding this period—and views of how youths should be treated—have varied.

The following are the findings of a workshop on adolescent behaviour:

Most adolescents progress to adulthood with relatively little difficulty, experiencing excellent

physical health and strength and not engaging in behaviors that put themselves or others at risk. Others, however, take many sorts of unhealthy risks—in their sexual behavior, in driving, in substance use, in criminal activity—or experience emotional distress or mental health disorders. For a substantial number of adolescents, the consequences are severe: they may limit a young person's opportunities to grow into a productive adult, they are the source of lifelong health problems, and they result in a significant risk of injury and death for adolescents. Many adolescent risk behaviors—particularly poor driving, either with or without concomitant use of alcohol or illicit substances, and crime—also put others at risk, and all of these factors together make the prevention of risk behaviors in adolescence an important public health issue. Risky adolescent driving illustrates well the seriousness of the public health concern.<sup>1</sup>

## ***Common Psychological Problems of Indian Youth***

A guidebook for handling the problems of school children describes the common psychological problems of youth:

Young people with an anxiety disorder typically are so afraid, worried, or uneasy that they cannot function normally. Anxiety disorders can be long-lasting and interfere greatly with a child's life. If not treated early, anxiety disorders can lead to missed school days or an inability to finish school; impaired relations with peers; low self-esteem; alcohol or other drug use; problems adjusting to work situations; and anxiety disorder in adulthood. ... There are a

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number of different anxiety disorders that affect children and adolescents. Several are described below.

*Generalized Anxiety Disorder.* Children and adolescents with this disorder experience extreme, unrealistic worry that does not seem to be related to any recent event. Typically, these young people are very self-conscious, feel tense, have a strong need for reassurance, and complain about stomachaches or other discomforts that don't appear to have any physical basis.

*Phobias.* A phobia is an unrealistic and excessive fear of some situation or object. Some phobias, called specific phobias, center on animals, storms, water, heights, or situations, such as being in an enclosed space. Children and adolescents with social phobias are terrified of being criticized or judged harshly by others. Because young people with phobias will try to avoid the objects and situations that they fear, the disorder can greatly restrict their lives.

*Panic Disorder.* Panic disorder is marked by repeated panic attacks without apparent cause. Panic attacks are periods of intense fear accompanied by pounding heartbeat, sweating, dizziness, nausea, or a feeling of imminent death. The experience is so scary that the young person lives in dread of another attack. He or she may go to great lengths to avoid any situation that seems likely to bring on a panic attack. A child with panic disorder may not want to go to school or be separated from his or her parents.

*Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.* A child with obsessive-compulsive disorder becomes trapped in a pattern of repetitive thoughts and behaviors. Even though the child may agree that the thoughts or behaviors appear senseless and distressing, the repetitions are very hard to stop. The compulsive behaviors may include repeated hand washing, counting, or arranging and rearranging objects.

*Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.* Post-traumatic stress disorder can develop in children or adolescents after they experience a very stressful

event. Such events may include physical or sexual abuse; being a victim of or witnessing violence; or being caught in a disaster, such as a bombing or hurricane. Young people with post-traumatic stress disorder experience the event again and again in strong memories, flashbacks, or troublesome thoughts. As a result, the young person may try to avoid anything associated with the trauma. They may also overreact when startled or have difficulty sleeping.<sup>2</sup>

The guidebook further states:

Researchers have found that a person's basic temperament may play a role in some childhood and adolescent anxiety disorders. For example, some young people tend to be very shy and restrained in unfamiliar situations. This may be a sign that the child or adolescent is at risk for developing an anxiety disorder. ...

Children and adolescents with anxiety disorders can benefit from a variety of treatments and services. After an accurate diagnosis, possible treatments include cognitive-behavioral treatment (where young people learn to deal with fears by modifying the way they think and behave); other individual therapy; family therapy; parent training; and medication.

While cognitive-behavioral approaches are effective in treating some anxiety disorders, medications work well with others. Some anxiety disorders benefit from a combination of these treatments (92).

## **Depression**

A introductory volume on the mood disorders of school children gives the following description of depression:

Disruptive behavior, possible academic difficulties, and peer problems. Increased irritability and aggression, suicidal threats, and worsening school performance. Parents often say that nothing pleases the children, that they hate themselves and everything around them.<sup>3</sup>



The study further says:

Significant distress or impairment is manifested by five of the nine criteria listed below, occurring nearly every day for 2 weeks.

These symptoms must represent a change from previous functioning and that either depressed or irritable mood or diminished interest or pleasure must be present to make the diagnosis: depressed/irritable; diminished interest or pleasure; weight loss/gain; insomnia/hypersomnia; psychomotor agitation/retardation; fatigue or energy loss; feelings of worthlessness; diminished ability to think/concentrate; and recurrent thoughts of death and suicidal ideation (7).

### **Treatment of Depression**

Treatment for depression could be done from the parents' side:

—Self-esteem and self-critical tendencies: give frequent and genuine praise; accentuate the positive; supportively challenge self-criticism; point out negative thinking.

—Family stability: maintain routine and

minimize changes in family matters; discuss changes beforehand and reduce worry.

—Helplessness and hopelessness: have the child write or tell immediate feelings and any pleasant aspects 3 or 4 times a day to increase pleasant thoughts over 4-6 weeks.

—Mood elevation: arrange one interesting activity a day; plan for special events to come; discuss enjoyable topics.

—Appetite and weight problems: don't force eating; prepare favorite foods; make mealtime a pleasant occasion.

—Sleep difficulties: keep regular bed-time hours; do relaxing and calming activities one hour before bedtime such as reading or listening to soft music; end the day on a 'positive note'.

—Agitation and restlessness: change activities causing agitation; teach the child to relax; massage may help; encourage physical exercise and recreation activities.

—Excessive fears: minimize anxiety-causing situations and uncertainty; be supportive and reassuring; planning may reduce uncertainty; relaxation exercises might help.

—Aggression and anger: convey a kind but firm unacceptance of destructive behavior; encourage the child to his angry feelings; do not react with anger.

—Concentration and thinking difficulties: encourage increased participation in games, activities, discussions; work with the teachers and school psychologist to promote learning (47).

### **Social and Emotional Issues**

Youth who have difficulty establishing, maintaining, or ending interpersonal relationships are of major concern to teachers and parents. Problems in this area are associated with poor performance at school—including a range of behavioural, learning, and emotional problems. There are ways to resolve such issues such as:

*Emotional:* identifying and labeling feelings; expressing feelings; assessing the intensity of feelings; managing feelings; delaying gratification.

*Cognitive:* self-talk—conducting an ‘inner dialogue’ as a way to cope with a topic or challenge or reinforce one’s own behavior; reading and interpreting social cues—for example, recognizing social influences on behavior and seeing oneself in the perspective of the larger community; using steps for problem-solving and decision-making—for instance, controlling impulses, setting goals, identifying alternative actions, anticipating consequences; understanding the perspectives of others; understanding behavioral norms (what is and is not acceptable behavior); a positive attitude toward life; self-awareness—for example, developing realistic expectations about oneself.

*Behavioral:* nonverbal—communicating through eye contact, facial expressiveness, tone of voice, gestures, etc; verbal—making clear requests, responding effectively to criticism, resisting negative influences, listening to others, helping others, participating in positive peer groups.<sup>4</sup>

### **Substance Abuse in Youth**

While describing the role of a counsellor in helping students with substance abuse, a psychologist says:

Adolescent substance misusers experience numerous social, economic, physical, and legal consequences. As a result they often have poor health outcomes and poor quality of life. Schools have consistently had the most substance prevention programs for children aged 6-14 in urban environments. ...

Children and adolescents living in low social economic status (SES), urban environments have a higher preponderance of substance use and are at a higher risk for substance abuse. These adolescents may be subject to psychopathology. As a result, these students may use substances to relieve the stress caused by their environment and the consequential psychopathology.

Having low SES is associated with greater alcohol use and with greater cigarette and cocaine use among teenagers. Lower household income and parental education are associated with increased substance use in school age children, and students whose parents had not received a high school diploma are at a greater risk for substance abuse. Low parental education and moderate household income has also been associated with greater rates of smoking in adolescents. Low family SES and larger family size are also associated with increased probability of substance abuse disorders in early adulthood.

Peer pressure in the form of peer substance use and solicitations causes children and adolescents to use substances at a greater rate than school age children who are not exposed to these types of social stressors. In addition, the presence of drug distribution sites and neighborhood atmosphere serve as risk factors to school age children for increased substance abuse. Children of disorganized families whose parental subsystem use or abuse substances has also been linked to higher school age children consumption rates.

Furthermore, a family history of mental health concerns and diagnosis have also been linked to increased substance abuse in school age children. Children that are exposed to conflict and violence are also at higher risk for substance use and substance abuse. Children and adolescents that have been diagnosed with disorders in regards to impulsivity, sensation seeking, anxiety, and aggression have higher substance use and abuse rates.

Adolescents who are seeking a means to rebel or show independence may be at a higher risk for substance abuse. Cultural factors also play a role in substance use and misuse; school age children that are raised in a culture where the use of substances is accepted and celebrated have higher rates of substance use and abuse. ...

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While risk factors may abound, protective factors can serve to combat the risk factors that exist in a youth's lives. Protective factors include environmental stability, where the home and community encourage high achievement for current aspirations and future goals. In addition, positive self-image, self-esteem, academic success, and good health aid in combating the risk factors that may exist. A healthy parent-child relationship, where there is positive communication patterns and developmentally appropriate supervision and regulations, as well as anti-drug and alcohol dialogues, serves to combat risk factors and decrease substance abuse. Finally, interactions with peers who exhibit positive attitudes may also act as protective factors and aid in reducing substance use behaviour.<sup>5</sup>

### **Suicide**

A document circulated by the School Mental Health Project, University of California analyses suicide in this manner:

Sadness is experienced by some children beyond the level of a normal developmental variation when the emotional or physiological symptoms begin to interfere with effective social interactions, family functioning, or school performance. These periods of sadness may be brief or prolonged depending on the precipitating event and temperament of the child. Reassurance and monitoring is often needed at this level. If the sad behaviors are more severe, consider major depressive disorders.

The potential for suicide in grieving children is higher. Evaluation of suicidal risk should be part of a grief workup for all patients expressing profound sadness or confusion or demonstrating destructive behaviors toward themselves or others.

Depressed parents or a strong family history of depression or alcoholism puts youth at very high risk for depressive disorder. Risk is



increased by family and marital discord, substance abuse by the patient, and a history of depressive episodes. Suicidal ideation should be routinely assessed.<sup>6</sup>

Suicide has been defined thus:

Suicide (*felo de se*) means deliberate termination of one's own physical existence or self-murder, where a man of age of discretion and *compos mentis* voluntarily kills himself. It is an act of voluntarily or intentionally taking one's own life. Suicide needs to be distinguished from euthanasia or mercy-killing.<sup>7</sup>

And what does a suicidal person want? An online helpline says:

A suicidal person may not ask for help, but that doesn't mean that help isn't wanted. Most people who commit suicide don't want to die—they just want to stop hurting. Suicide prevention starts with recognizing the warning signs and taking them seriously.<sup>8</sup>

### **Myths and Facts about Suicide**

The counselling centre of the University of Notre Dame clarifies some doubts about suicide:

1. People who talk about suicide don't do it—suicide happens without warning.

Myth or Fact?

Myth: Although suicide can be an impulsive act, it is often thought out and communicated to others, but people ignore the clues.

2. Talking about suicide may give someone the idea.

Myth or Fact?

Myth: Raising the question of suicide without shock or disapproval shows that you are taking the person seriously and responding to their pain.

3. There are more suicides than homicides.

Myth or Fact?

Fact: Suicide is the 8th leading cause of

death among all adults in the United States. There are twice as many suicides as homicides.

4. Suicide rates are higher for people of low income.

Myth or Fact?

Myth: Suicide shows little prejudice to economic status. It is representative proportionally among all levels of society.

5. More men commit suicide than women.

Myth or Fact?

Fact: Although women attempt suicide twice as often as men, men commit suicide twice as often as women.

6. Most suicidal people are undecided about living or dying, and they gamble with death, leaving it to others to save them.

Myth or Fact?

Fact: Suicidal people are often undecided about living or dying right up to the last minute; many gamble that others will save them.

7. Once a person is suicidal, he/she is suicidal forever.

Myth or Fact?

Myth: People who want to kill themselves will not always feel suicidal or constantly be at a high risk for suicide. They feel that way until the crisis period passes.

8. If a person really wants to kill him/herself, no one has the right to stop him/her.

Myth or Fact?

Myth: No suicide has only one victim; family members, friends, etc. all suffer from the loss of a life. You would try to save someone if you saw them drowning, why is suicide any different?

9. Most suicides are caused by a single dramatic and traumatic event.

Myth or Fact?

Myth: Precipitating factors may trigger a suicidal decision; but more typically the deeply

troubled person has suffered long periods of unhappiness, depression, lack of self respect, has lost the ability to cope with their life and has no hope for the future.

10. There is no genetic predisposition to suicide.

Myth or Fact?

Fact: There is no genetic predisposition to suicide—it does not ‘run in the family’.

11. Improvement following a serious personal crisis or serious depression means that the risk of suicide is over.

Myth or Fact?

Myth: The risk of suicide may be the greatest as the depression lifts. The suicidal person may have new energy to carry out their suicide plan.

12. It’s unhelpful to talk about suicide to a person who is depressed.

Myth or Fact?

Myth: Suicidal individuals often exhibit physical symptoms as part of their depression and might seek medical treatment for their physical ailments. Often times suicidal individuals seek counseling but are frustrated when they do not see immediate results.

13. People who commit suicide have not sought medical help prior to their attempt.

Myth or Fact?

Myth: Depressed persons need emotional support and empathy; encouraging them to talk about their suicidal feelings can be therapeutic as a first step.<sup>9</sup>

### **Body Image Issues**

The body appearance affecting self-esteem and confidence has become more prevalent in recent years as the influence of media has become very crucial in an adolescent’s life. The importance of how one looks has taken precedence over personality. The perfect images of models given by media create a sort of dissonance in the minds

of the youth as they feel dissatisfied with their bodies. The constant comparison leads to depression among youths and even suicide. The dynamics of counselling are discussed by a family psychologist:

Counseling and therapy is a mixed bag as far as solutions go. There are more than 200 types of counsellors and therapists. Trying to find the right one can be overwhelming or end up a waste of time. There is also a great deal of similarity between some counselors and some therapists. Counseling is not therapy. Counseling usually results in a realization, a plan or a decision. A therapist provides an environment of activities that bring about change—almost like exercise. ... Trial and error may be required. But there are four guidelines that have been shown to increase the likelihood of success.

—Become invested. Educate yourself, gather information and become actively invested in understanding the problem and selecting a counselor or therapist.

—Learn how it works. Don’t select a particular counselor or therapist unless you believe they can clearly describe the problem, how their approach to therapy or counseling works, and how that approach will resolve the problem.

—The relationship heals. The relationship you and your child have with a counselor or therapist as well as their approach are equally important. Work with people you and your child trust, like and believe is competent.

—Get references. Ask for the names of other parents or professionals who can recommend a potential counselor or therapist. There is no better reference than a credible recommendation and past success with similar problems.

*Medications.* The use of medication can present a real solution and a real problem for most parents. Medications can have a powerful effect on the mood and behavior of children. For parents who have tried ‘everything else’, medications can make the difference between a life



lost and a chance to become a reasonably successful adult.

There are certain realities when one decides to use medication. For one thing, psychiatric medications for behavioral and mental health problems will treat the symptoms and not the cause. Medications do not cure psychological, emotional and behavioral problems. Psychiatric medications that are used to treat depression, anxiety, mood swings, attention deficits, hyperactivity and disorganized thinking always affect another part of a child's body and brain. These 'side-effects' are not clearly understood and the long term impact on growing children is still uncertain. Lawsuits are surfacing and legislators are proposing legislation to address recognized dangers in the wrongful medication on children.

While one should be cautious about the use of medications to treat behavioral problems, there is certainly a place for these drugs. In severe cases, and cases where parents cannot afford therapy and special schools, medications can bring hope to an otherwise hopeless situation.

In some cases, children may require medication to simply participate in school, family activities and counseling or therapy. More importantly, a child's personality and attitude in life will be damaged if that child is left in a depressed, anxious or otherwise dysfunctional state for an extended period of time. Medication can be a 'life boat' and deterrent against psychological and social trauma that come from serious but temporary problems that would otherwise destroy a child's attitude toward life. But before you start any medication, ask your pharmacist for information on the side effects.

*The Power of Parenting and Family.* Parents and family members can have the most powerful impact of a child's behavior, attitude and approach to life. Put simply, children are persuaded and impressed by the people they spend the most time with and the people who matter most. That should be the child's parents and family. Why? Because a therapist can only provide an exceptional environment, relationship and activities for an hour or so a week.

Individual counseling and therapy may not be enough for most children—especially if that child is facing social pressure, temptations, painful experiences and inappropriate role models during the remainder of the week. In most cases, individual therapy or counseling without parental or family involvement is not enough.

In some cases, therapy and counseling can result in a child developing unrealistic expectation of their parents and family. It is easier to be a therapist than it is to be a parent. This is why family education and involvement in counseling and therapy may be essential. Therapy and counseling should never replace the essential role of parents or a family. It should support those roles. But if parents are unwilling or unable to become involved with their child or in therapy, then therapy can provide the support that some children desperately need.

*Peers and Social Pressure.* At a very early age, many children are profoundly influenced by their peers. It has been repeatedly observed in social science that children learn behaviors and will adopt the attitude of children they are emotionally bonded with. As children begin to bond with other children, they seek approval, advice and even direction for their life. The struggle for independence and separation from parents is a natural process. However, problems will invariably surface, attitudes may become hostile, and values can become lost when parents become less involved with their children. Social pressure is a powerful tendency for children to imitate and adopt the behavior and emotional sensitivity of others. Children begin to think the way they talk with their friends. Children tend to become what they think about.<sup>10</sup>

Adolescents and children need a strong emotional and psychological support to cope with various challenges they face at a vulnerable stage in their lives.



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# The Journey of Fulfilment

Shubhadip Mitra

HAPPINESS, PEACE, AND SECURITY are indispensable necessities in our lives. Hence the desire to be happy, peaceful, and secure is also inherent in each one of us. One may or may not have realised this fact vividly but all our thoughts, words, and actions are directly, or indirectly, aimed to fulfil this desire. Since happiness, peace, and security complement each other, and one cannot exist without the other, let us refer to this trio as fulfilment. The aspiration to be fulfilled is found universally. Be it a child, an adult, or an old person; be it a man, or woman; be it a poor, or a rich—all aspire to be fulfilled. Whatever society or nation, one may live in, to whatever religion, caste, and community one may belong to, to whatever profession one may be associated with, the desire to be fulfilled is common to all. Irrespective of the conditions, place and time, each one of us wants to be fulfilled. Further, we observe that fulfilment is not one of the many goals of life, but rather, the only goal of life.

## In Search of Fulfilment

The commonly presumed goals such as education, employment, marriage, wealth, possession, comfortable life, recognition, and the like, which we refer to as *incidental* goals, may be seen as means of realising this fulfilment, because none of them are sought for their sake alone. For example, none wants wealth for the sake of wealth. Wealth may only serve as means of security and

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comfortable living, which apparently makes one more complete, more fulfilled. But no matter how many incidental goals we accomplish, we find that our sense of fulfilment eludes us. We may have a sense of satisfaction, a sense of fulfilment for a short while; but sooner or later, we again find ourselves short of fulfilment and thus, aspire to be fulfilled once again. Since each one of us is relentlessly striving to be fulfilled, we consider fulfilment as the *ultimate* goal of life. Whether accomplishing the above incidental goals are *necessary* and *sufficient* means of fulfilment? If realising the above goals are indeed *necessary* to be fulfilled, then how is it that there are so many sages who claim to be happy, in spite of not fulfilling any or some of the above goals? And if they are *sufficient* means to realise fulfilment, then how come so many people are unhappy, those who have already traversed this path, and have accomplished all these incidental goals? Despite the fact that ever since the beginning of human civilisation, human being have been seeking to realise this ultimate goal of fulfilment, we have not well understood as to what the means of fulfilment are and how to acquire them. Since all of us are travellers in this journey to reach the ultimate destination of fulfilment, let us make an attempt to understand the important milestones that we shall encounter on this journey, as revealed by the Upanishads.

Each one of us wants to be fulfilled *unconditionally*. If one asks when one wants to be fulfilled, the answer is obvious: 'Always'. If one asks where one wants to be fulfilled, the answer is

again obvious: 'Everywhere'. Thus we note that the fulfilment that one seeks is independent of space and time. Irrespective of changing circumstances, one wants to be fulfilled. Further, since any entity that is unbounded by space and time is considered to be infinite, hence, the fulfilment sought, which is unbounded by space and time, is *infinite*. So what we are seeking is *infinite*. This also makes sense logically because no blessed entity in this creation with finite existence—finite in terms of space and time—can keep us fulfilled forever. We want to be infinitely happy, infinitely peaceful, and infinitely secure. Thus we want infinite fulfilment.

Another important aspect to note is that since the fulfilment sought is unchanging with time, it should be *permanent*. Anything that is permanent is defined as *real*. The fulfilment sought must be real. We have innumerable experiences of unreal fulfilment in our dreams. As soon as we wake up, we realise that it was just another dream. Since dream is unreal, so is any fulfilment experienced in dream. Next, we observe that anything that is real must be *true*. Hence the ultimate goal of fulfilment can be redefined as either infinitude or truth. How can one attain this infinitude or truth?

To attain the goal of infinitude, what should be the means? If one analyses carefully, one finds that any accomplishment in the world, falls under the realm of *finitude*. Any accomplishment, gross or subtle, is bounded by space and time. Any amount of power, wealth, property, scholarship that one may acquire, will cease to exist one day. One may have performed most noble actions in one's life to qualify for a place in heaven. But once one's account of merits fall short, one has to once again return to the world. Mathematically, we know that a finite sum of finite quantities leads to a finite quantity. Extending the same principle to our lives, any number

of finite accomplishments can lead only to a finite result. In other words, any number of finite accomplishments can never lead to the ultimate goal of infinitude.

### **The Ultimate Goal**

If we consider the ultimate goal as realising the truth, again we find that all worldly accomplishments are subject to space and time. Great emperors have come and gone. Once upon a time, they had acquired so much power and property, but today, we do not find any trace of them. If we analyse our own lives, we observe that nothing stays with us forever. Family and friends, scholarship, employment, health, wealth, gross, or subtle powers—none of them stays with us eternally. In fact, every day when we sleep, none of them accompany us. Hence none of them are real. Further they cannot lead one to the ultimate truth, either. This realisation is a significant step in the journey of fulfilment. Because this is when one shifts one's focus from worldly pursuits, and strives to know the secret of accomplishing the infinitude. One may still participate in worldly pursuits, but with the knowledge that they cannot give fulfilment, as they have limited existence. On a lighter note, consider a friend of ours, seeking to buy jewellery but does not know where to avail it from. Hence he was searching for jewellery in every shop that he encountered. He entered a huge shoe store, and visited each counter, but only to his disappointment. After failing miserably on several attempts, he understood that what he was seeking was never going to be available in a shoe store. He still has no clue of where to get his jewellery, but at least knows where it will never be available.

If none of the worldly pursuits can lead us to the ultimate goal of life, which is unconditional happiness, infinitude, or truth, then how does one realise it? It is here that the Upanishads

come to our rescue. They declare loud and clear that what one has been seeking is one's own self. They proclaim that our real nature is that of unconditional happiness, infinitude, and truth. Understanding this Upanishadic revelation can potentially lead us to the ultimate goal of life. Let us make an attempt to understand this assertion.

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**To address the ignorance of any subject, the solution is knowledge of that subject. If the ignorance is regarding the self, the solution has to be knowledge of the self.**

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First let us check the validity of the statement that I am infinite. This assertion is a bombshell to smash our understanding of oneself. Let us see how it works. Suppose the assertion is false, that is, I am *not* infinite, or in other words, I am finite. If one's real nature is not that of infinitude, one can never become infinite, by any number of worldly pursuits, because each of them would lead to finite results. Further, infinitude can never be accomplished, but can only be recognised. From the definition of infinitude, it cannot stand away from us in terms of space or time. Thus, *I am infinite here and now. I was always infinite, and will remain infinite*, as it is my real nature. If I am unable to recognise this fact, the problem is self-ignorance. To address the ignorance of any subject, the solution is knowledge of that subject. If the ignorance is regarding the self, the solution has to be knowledge of the self. This is a remarkable step in the journey of fulfilment. One finds that one's understanding of oneself is rather incomplete and unverified. One understands that self-ignorance is the barrier to realise the ultimate goal of life, and the only solution is self-knowledge. Since the goal sought lies within oneself, one shifts one's focus from the objective world to the subjective world. Thus, our friend searching for jewellery, now finds the address of the jewellery shop.

To distinguish our individual egoistic nature from our real nature, as a convention, we use 'self' for the former and 'Self' for the latter. While the self has a finite existence, the Self has infinite existence. Since the Self is infinite, it is only one. In other words, although there are millions of individual selves from the perspective of the physical world experienced by the senses, but in reality, we are all one and the same Self. In fact, the Upanishads proclaim that there is no world different from the Self. What we regard as the world is simply a manifestation of the Self. This is rather a difficult pill to swallow right away, especially, because right from our birth, we are trained to treat the world as different from ourselves. Nevertheless, the Truth stands as it is, irrespective of our acceptance of the same. The sooner we realise this fact, we will be closer to our ultimate destination of fulfilment. If we understand the above fact, the world will no longer bother us. It will cease to cause both joy and sorrow. One can stay in peace with the world. How to reach such a state of understanding? What should be done to dispel the ageless ignorance? The answer is Self-knowledge.

### **Means of Self-knowledge**

How to get the Self-knowledge that will reveal our true nature? Upanishads once again come to our rescue. They claim that a qualified student can receive the self-knowledge from a competent guru. Who is a qualified student, and where can we find a competent guru? The masters of spirituality advise us not to worry about the guru, but rather work on acquiring the qualifications. When the disciple is ready, the guru would necessarily come. Upanishads list the qualifications as discernment of the real and the unreal, dispassion, restraint of the internal and external senses and organs, cessation of running after objects, forbearance, faith in the teachings of the guru

and the scriptures, constant concentration, and the intense desire for liberation. To acquire these qualifications, the scriptures suggest us to lead a healthy moral life, practising certain values.

Depending on the mental state of the spiritual aspirant, the scriptures advise us to take up an appropriate spiritual discipline. Although there are innumerable spiritual disciplines prescribed in the scriptures, they can be broadly categorised into three classes: Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Jnana Yoga. These three classes of spiritual disciplines are however not mutually exclusive. All of them are meant to discipline the mind, purify it, and lead it to the ultimate goal of attaining the infinitude. In general, the prescribed order is Karma Yoga, followed by Bhakti Yoga, and finally Jnana Yoga. Initially, when the mind of the aspirant is predominantly engaged in actions, the scriptures recommend Karma Yoga, that is to perform actions in a non-attached manner. After practising Karma Yoga for a length of time, the mind will become disciplined. At this stage, the scriptures recommend practising Bhakti Yoga which is intended to further discipline and purify the mind. Bhakti Yoga includes practices such as meditation, japa, worship, and devotional association. After having practised Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga for a length of time, one acquires the necessary qualifications to attain Self-knowledge. The process of attaining Self-knowledge is Jnana Yoga that involves learning about our true nature from a master, deep contemplation, and assimilation of the truth. After practising Jnana Yoga for a length of time, one acquires the Self-knowledge that eventually leads us to the ultimate destination of fulfilment.

This attainment of the ultimate fulfilment is known by various terms such as Self-realisation, God realisation, enlightenment, salvation, liberation from the repeated cycles of birth and death, and the like. To ease our

journey of Self-realisation, across the space of million years of ignorance our scriptures present the idea of God. One may wonder where God comes into the picture in this journey of Self-realisation. Interestingly, Upanishads declare that one's real nature is the same as that of God. God is an embodiment of truth, consciousness, and fulfilment.

Being Truth, God is unbounded by space and time, and is thus attributed as 'Brahman', Infinite, or the Omnipresent. Moreover, all the attributes of fulfilment, discussed so far, namely happiness, peace, security, infinitude, permanence, and truth are associated with God. The way God helps us to realise the Self is that it allows us to lead our lives based on our understanding of God, though it may be limited. If we are not convinced that our true nature is the same as that of God, at least, we can consider the world as manifestation of God. If we are still unable to consider the entire world as manifestation of God, at least we can consider certain forms as manifestations of God. We may begin the journey with a limited understanding of God, but if we lead our lives based on that understanding, gradually our understanding of God expands and eventually we see God as none other than our own Self. Therefore, God-realisation is same as Self-realisation. Until we realise God as our own Self, we can consider God to be our companion in this journey. In fact, God can be seen as the only companion. None of our family members and friends can join us in this journey that may span several lifetimes. But as the most trusted guardian and friend, God can never desert us on this long journey. Being omnipresent, God alone knows where we stand in this journey. With firm faith in God, one can overcome the obstacles on this journey. The beauty of God is that we can relate to him in any way. We can consider him as a person, an object, a gross or a subtle power,



cosmic principle, or any other notion. God helps us in the way we approach him. Further, we can consider God as our mother, father, or guru who will guide us, and if necessary, hold us in our eternal journey of fulfilment.

### ***Spiritual Practice in Present Times***

Based on the above idea, Swami Vivekananda prescribed a spiritual practice that is especially relevant in present times. He exhorted us to consider the world as the manifestation of God, and do our actions in the spirit of service to God.

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**We shall encounter various known and unknown obstacles, and may also fail. But if we are sincere to our heart's call for fulfilment, we shall not halt anywhere.**

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This practice has several benefits. Firstly, it allows us to serve God, our friend and master of this journey. Secondly, it requires us to convert all our actions as spiritual, thus giving up the distinction of secular life and spiritual life. When the entire world is a manifestation of God, we cannot treat any part of that world as secular. Thirdly, this practice generates good character in us. It drives away all weakness, as there is no secular space for their manifestation. Next, since our association with God is not limited to a temple, or during prayer, but rather a constant association, it helps in faster spiritual growth. Finally, this practice benefits the society. Since the actions are performed in the spirit of service, we cannot afford to cheat others. There is no room for corruption. In fact, since it is a service to God, we will do our best. Many of our duties in the world may be unpleasant, but if we adopt this practice, we will not shy away but discharge them boldly. Since we see God behind all the entities with which we transact in the world, we are saved from different stress problems, such as

tension, anxiety, depression, and the like. The most significant advantage is that we derive the mental maturity necessary for Self-knowledge.

To summarise the journey of fulfilment, first we realise that fulfilment is the ultimate goal of life. Then, we realise that the sought fulfilment is not limited by space and time, and hence it is infinite. Further, we observe that none of the worldly pursuits can lead to accomplishing this ultimate goal, as each of them leads to finite results. Then we understand that infinitude cannot be accomplished, but rather recognised. One can never become infinite, but rather realise that one is already infinite. To assimilate this fact, one requires Self-knowledge. To attain Self-knowledge, one has to go through Jnana Yoga, which in turn, requires one to have certain mental qualifications. To acquire these mental qualifications, one has to practise Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga which discipline and purify the mind. Based on one's mental tendencies, one should take up appropriate spiritual disciplines, practising which one gains the necessary qualifications for Self-knowledge. Finally, after knowing and establishing oneself in the Self, one accomplishes the ultimate goal of fulfilment. In fact, one realises that one was already fulfilled and would remain fulfilled. Only due to ignorance, one took upon this journey.

This journey requires sincere and committed pursuit. We shall encounter various known and unknown obstacles, and may also fail. But if we are sincere to our heart's call for fulfilment, we shall not halt anywhere. Since one has taken up this journey, one has to end it. The God, the scriptures, the masters are there to help us, but they cannot end our journey to fulfilment, until and unless, we are seriously resolved to do so. Therefore, let us strive hard, to end this timeless travel. Fulfilment is our right, and we need to claim it.



# Religion vs Spirituality: A Hindu Perspective

Rita D Sherma

THERE'S A JOKE: A tourist comes across a wall and on it is scrawled 'God is Dead—Nietzsche' and under it is written 'Nietzsche is dead—God!' The joke's allusion could be transposed to the argument that 'religion' is dead or, at least, dying and that 'spirituality' has triumphed or, at least, arising; and, of course, the supporters of religion would underscore precisely the opposite. The attitude that religion is—or should be—in its death throes, is visible in the global SBNR, 'Spiritual But Not Religious' demographic which is well represented amongst the millennial generation. It may be helpful, however, to have a history-based perspective. History would suggest that the demise of religion—or the hope thereof—may be premature to say the least. Many of the 'Major Religions of the World' started out as 'spiritual' movements and numerous other such undertakings were reabsorbed into the religious traditions from which they had emerged. There are reasons for which religion continues to survive and, indeed, thrive despite its many shortcomings. Indeed, there are also reasons why most spiritual movements—which have emerged during every century throughout history—often fail to attain the power and influence of what we call the world's religions.

## Causes of Survival of Religions

What, then, are the reasons for the long survival of religions in spite of their obvious inadequacies?

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1. *Community*: One reason is that religion offers strong bonds of community—essential not only for human flourishing but, for most of history, survival itself.

2. *Certainty*: Religion provides a sense of certainty. Few individuals have the luxury to ponder the meaning and measure of life. Apparently, it is comforting for many to have the temporal and eternal aims of existence proclaimed with certainty by the testimony of authority.

3. *Significance*: Religion not only propounds meaning in life but offers ways through which it can be enacted and fulfilled through ritual, ceremony, tradition, and rites of passage. Religion elevates, thereby, both the vital and mundane moments of each human life to the realm of the significant.

4. *Celebration*: Religion takes care of the human need for ceremony and celebration that is experienced as consequential and fulfilling by means of festivals, carnivals, the observance of holy days, and so forth.

5. *Responsibility*: Religion has and continues to provide the rationale and rubric for a life lived within the framework of familial and societal responsibility. Ethics pertaining to diverse arenas of life emerged from the world's religions.

6. *Self-Transcendence*: No other expression of the human mind has offered so many ways and means for eliciting the act of self-transcendence. Religious praxis requires sacrifice and the forgetting of the constant anxiety about the endless needs of the self. Whether it is a simple daily act such as the offering of valuable time



during a busy day for prayer, worship, meditation, or the undertaking of an arduous pilgrimage, or donating one's resources to the charitable work of a house of worship, these are the first steps towards self-transcendence without which we risk ignoring the imperative of the radical self-awareness that is the very gift of being human.

7. *Culture*: Finally, from prehistoric times, the philosophy of religion has been the matrix that has generated art, architecture, music, poetry, writing, literature, mythology, drama, dance, and perhaps most importantly, intellectual reflection on the 'big questions' of life which required the development of complex cognitive structures and sophisticated language.

### **Can Spirituality Replace Religion?**

The above seven gifts of faith pertain to religion in general and its relationship to human culture and society. The consideration that comes to mind is whether individualised 'spirituality' can measure up to the responsibilities that religion has shouldered over time or whether it simply

creates many solitudes each wrapped in its own universe of self-involved practice:

1. Can an unhinged contemporary spirituality, with no roots or anchor, sustain the kind of foundational needs that religion has supported for the greater part of human history?
2. Can spirituality without the wide-ranging framework of religious community provide material and spiritual sustenance to individuals striving on their own?
3. Can codes of ethics remain unbroken without a guiding moral force grounded in the authority of scripture founded on the experience of saints and sages?
4. Can the current lone ranger spirituality break out of self-serving moral frameworks to think beyond the needs of the small self?
5. Current streams of so-called non-religious spirituality are still heavily reliant on and *derivative* of the thought and teachings of the religions which they disdain. Can spirituality foster completely *original* forms of wisdom that can be codified in order to be handed down through the generations?

For an affirmative answer to the above questions spirituality would have to develop community; structure; traditions; lines of teaching and transmission; clear codes of ethics and morality; unambiguous and consistent guidelines for responsible behaviour; the ability to creatively channel the senses towards the sacred through sophisticated forms of art, music, liturgy, and festivity, and foster original systems of thought and practice towards self-transcendence—in other words, they would turn into religion.

### **Defining Hinduism**

As we have seen, religions have given much to humanity and they cannot be simply tossed into the dustbin of history. They are highly complex phenomena that have been and continue to be intricately interwoven with society and civilisation. In addition, when one considers the history and culture of the religions that originated in ancient India, an even more complex picture emerges. As I have written elsewhere, the problem of the brittle compartmentalisation of India's original knowledge systems into 'religions' has rendered what I have termed elsewhere as 'an interrelated ecosystem of wisdom traditions' into rigid outposts of piously defended differences:

A history of mimesis, dialogue, and cross-fertilization between the religious traditions of ancient and classical India created a culture of osmosis, of porous boundaries. Ancient polemicists of different schools of thought would argue equally against certain Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain tenets in the same document. Thus a sense of a variety of denominations, guru-lineages, and schools of thought existed without the sharp demarcations that are present today. As a result, present day Hindus are particularly prone to conflate all the religious traditions of Indian origin as part of one whole. That 'whole' however, is called 'Hindu' by them, and is identified not with a 'religion' as we understand the

word today (that is, exclusive of all other religions) but with a civilization.<sup>1</sup>

The superimposition of the exclusivism affiliated with the word 'religion' on India's wisdom network as a whole, and the identification of the 'whole with the word 'Hindu' in post-independence India has created a rift between those paths, philosophies and practices that acknowledge the Veda as canonical and those that do not—Jain, Buddhist, and Sikh religions. The term 'Hindu' is no longer just a geographic, ethnic, or civilisational indicator; in the marketplace of the world's religions, it now qualifies as a 'religion' and one that is distinct from other religions born in India.

Yet, Hindus have difficulty accepting both the disjunction from the ecosystem of Indic wisdom traditions and the concept of religion that has been thrust upon them. Why are Hindus uncomfortable with the term religion? After all, Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists embrace the concept of religion with enthusiasm. There are two major reasons. The first, as I have noted above, is the history of fluid boundaries between the knowledge systems that originated in India. The second is that, over many millennia, the Hindu ethos has been associated with an integrative paradigm. Hindus are uneasy with schismatic disjunctions between the secular and the sacred, science and religion, the temporal and the eternal. As a consequence of the discomfort with the word 'religion' Hindus have frequently asserted the Indian Supreme Court's 1995 ruling that Hinduism is not a religion, but a 'way of life'.<sup>2</sup> This description, however, causes much confusion amongst second and later generation individuals with Hindu heritage in the diaspora and amongst the millennial Hindu generation everywhere. Arvind Sharma elaborates on the source of this description:

The issue is represented by a decision of the Supreme Court of India that characterized Hinduism as a 'way of life' and not a religion. This

is significant because the decision was handed down in a context in which the defendant had been accused of violating electoral law by asking his constituents to vote for him because he was a Hindu. Such appeal to religion for soliciting votes is forbidden under Indian electoral law. The court decreed that the candidate's election was valid because the Hinduism he was appealing to was not that Hinduism that is a religion but that Hinduism that is not a religion but a way of life.<sup>3</sup>

The Hindu ethos cannot simply be a way of life because, first of all, every single human being on the planet has a way of life which renders it meaningless as a definition. Second, which way of life? Does a Hindu grandmother in a remote village in Assam have the same way of life as a Hindu neurosurgeon in Los Angeles? The answer is obviously 'no', but they do hold certain shared concepts; these need to be identified. Clearly, if 'religion' does not quite do justice to the Hindu world, neither do meaningless monikers such as 'way of life'.

Another common description of Hinduism is that it is simply 'spirituality' and not a religion. The incoherence that is generated by the Hindu assertion of the non-religiosity of the term 'Hindu'; is well exploited by the slick marketers of New Age 'spirituality' in the West and internationally. Does it matter? Is incoherence not better than rigid definitions of a multi-dimensional phenomenon such as the Hindu ethos? I would suggest that incoherence always matters.

In the case of Hindu Dharma, the lack of clarity about its elements, about what comprises it, has led to an absence of care and concern for the disappearance of those elements. An example can be seen in the case of Indian classical music which became secular over time, particularly as a result of the appreciative patronage of the Mughal emperors. However, the origins of Indian classical music lie in the sonic theology of Hindu sadhana and the secularisation of what had been sadhana

into a form of entertainment has its price. In tandem with the movement of secular society towards newer and non-Indic forms of music, Indian classical music is fading away. Another example is Buddhist Vipassana meditation which is a sophisticated system for the ethical schooling of the mind and the contemplative training of awareness. It reached the West as 'Insight Meditation', was soon abridged to 'mindfulness', and further reduced to MBSR, mindfulness-based stress reduction. Vipassana was created for the cultivation of a sterling clarity of consciousness oriented towards the experience of non-self. It is now widely used for stress relief and pain management. While there is usually no harm in the use of a technique originally created for the transformation of consciousness for less lofty goals, the gross reductionism that it entails leads to the attenuation of both the technique and the teachings that birthed it, as we see in the examples above.


The appropriation, commodification, marketing, and sale of elements of Hindu sadhana—often under the guise of 'new teachings' purportedly created by the marketer—are widespread phenomena. The extensive writings of Swami Vivekananda and, later, Paramahansa Yogananda on the power of positive thinking was quickly adopted by many and became a vigorous part of America's popular self-help orientation. Philip Goldberg explains Yogananda's innovative style of transmission of yogic teachings:

In an unprecedented departure from tradition, he converted the instructions he had been offering on a one-to-one basis, as gurus had always done, into a home-study course. A sequence of lessons promising 'to recharge the body with energy, to awaken the mind's unlimited power, and to experience a deepening awareness of the Divine in one's life' would arrive in the mail at regular intervals ... with guidance on 'the art of spiritual living', plus instructions for meditation, concentration, and 'energization' practices.<sup>4</sup>



Yogananda's democratisation of what had been, until his innovative transmission, esoteric yogic practices, certainly helped many people. His teachings of 'affirmation', 'positive orientation', 'visualisation', and many other popularised methods of yogic psychology have percolated through Western society for over a century but are now shorn from their deep roots in yogic systems of self-transcendence. The *deracination* of these teachings from their roots in Hindu dharma is the spiritual equivalent of cutting a tree from the roots. It eventually becomes useable only as firewood. The richness of nuance, gross, and subtle levels of meaning, multidimensionality of its implications for all the layers of being, and becoming fully human and fully conscious cannot be properly transmitted by gathering its bits and pieces like spiritual driftwood.

Hindu dharma is not just religion, but it contains religion. Like every instantiation of religion, it is comprised of many elements and one of them is spirituality—a vague word which, here, implies an *unmediated* relationship with the divine. *In Hindu dharma, there is no other relationship possible.* The reason is that there are no intermediaries who can thrust themselves between the spiritual practitioner and the sacred. The priest is there simply to serve the needs of

family and community by performing the life-cycle rites, the sacraments, ritual worship for major religious festivals, and communal worship rituals. The monastic is dedicated towards one's own liberation; serves the monastic community, and the wisdom needs of the faithful by serving as teachers for the spiritually inclined. Even as gurus, the adept can only point the way. *The taste of transcendence remains a deeply personal experience.* While other religions have mystical paths, they may or may not be central to the religion as a whole. For Hindus, the mundane and the mystical are interrelated. The Bhagavad-gita does not proclaim merely that work is worship for the karmayogi. It declares that all of life is worship; all action a meditation; all service an offering. Every Hindu who holds the Gita as revelation can live under its liberating call for a society of yogis—for such a seeker, every moment is lived within the glow of the divine Presence, each instant is infused by the remembrance of the divine name. Life itself thus becomes sadhana. If this is not 'spirituality', I simply do not know what is. 

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# Meeting Spiritual Challenges in a Technological Age

Rev. Heng Sure

## ***The Dilemma: Mr Chang's Confession***

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I was standing at the podium in a lecture hall in the Computer Science Department of Taipei, Taiwan's Technology University, a Western Buddhist monk wearing brown robes, speaking to the faculty and graduate students of one of the world's most distinguished hi-tech communities. A young engineer, Mr Chang, raised a question. He related that he had a Buddhist background and had graduated from this same institution. Two years earlier he had already posted the highest marks in Taiwan's annual Information Economy qualifications examination. At that point this engineer with a bright future paused and seemed to struggle, and then he shed tears of frustration.

He said, 'My professors and my classmates consider me to be a winner, a successful product of the educational system, but I feel that I am a complete failure. I want to be a filial son, a good husband, and father, and I consider myself a failure at every job. Can you as a Buddhist monk explain to me what I'm doing wrong?'

At this the packed lecture hall fell silent. I asked him to continue:

'Because the hi-tech jobs are up in the North, in Hsinchu or in Taipei, so after I graduated I moved North from Tainan, and I had to leave

my mother who I'm supporting since my father died. Rents are higher in Taipei so my wife had to get a job as a bank teller. My two kids are in first and third grade and since we live in the suburbs and work in another part of town, I can't take them to school the way a father should. Every morning my wife and I have to leave for work before the kids so I call the kiddie taxi and send them to school in a cab. The kids are out of school by four and we're not home yet so I send them to supplementary schools: they are currently taking piano lessons, English class, computer class, and mental arithmetic class. The taxi brings them home half an hour before my wife and I struggle in. My kids don't know my face anymore; I feel a stranger to them, and a failure as a father.

'My wife and I fall asleep, stressed out, half an hour after dinner; so we've pretty much stopped communicating and my marriage is starting to feel distant; I feel I'm a failure as a husband. I asked my mother to move up with us so that I can take care of her every day and she said, "No way! I don't want to live in an empty house. I have my friends in Tainan; I'd rather have some familiar faces in my life than live in my son's empty house." So I feel like a failure as a filial son.

'All this makes my mind afflicted and upset so I feel like a failure as a Buddhist too. Who could meditate under this much stress? My colleagues and I discuss moving back down south to Kaohsiung, to the country and growing yams and

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bananas, but I'm not a farmer and even if I were, farming is hard work for an unstable income. What am I going to do?

Mr Chang's candid confession set the lecture buzzing with urgent conversations. He concluded:

'Because of my qualifications the research bureau of the Taiwanese government recently invited me to serve on an advisory committee. I've been invited to write papers and consult for the government. Even though it is quite an honour, if I accept, there goes my last bit of time with my wife and family. I think life must be so much better in Silicon Valley. I'm thinking of pulling up roots and taking the whole family to San Jose but that idea sounds disloyal to my country. Am I doing the right thing? What is

the wise thing to do? All I see ahead is more of the same sense of failure, more brokenness, and more meaninglessness.'

This heartfelt and moving story generated an hour of questions and answers that afternoon in the lecture hall.

When I related this story to my Taiwanese-American engineer friends in Sunnyvale and Cupertino they laughed in sympathy with Mr Chang's dilemma. This group had acted on the impulse to find a better life in California, assuming that life in Silicon Valley would solve their conflicts. After graduation from Berkeley or Stanford they had taken up permanent residence in California, only to discover that in a silicon society that moves at the speed of electrons,





the search for values and meaning was the same on both sides of the Pacific.

Looked at from a Buddhist perspective, one might say that Mr Chang was expressing his experience of *dukkha*, the dissatisfaction, fundamental suffering arising from humanity's insatiable appetite for material progress. He had tasted the disharmony between incessant material progress and lasting spiritual fulfilment. This may be one of the basic truths of the twenty-first century, that science and technological innovation is incapable of answering questions of meaning in human life. Looking to technology to solve fundamental issues of value is looking in the wrong place, it will never deliver satisfaction.

The human body and mind remains the ultimate laboratory for looking into questions of lasting value. Only when we employ tools of traditional and ancient technology: meditation, prayer, selfless service, and generosity, will we find the right door to begin our search for the source of meaning. Only a liberal arts education in the humanities can prepare a generation of students with the skills in critical thinking to be able to distinguish means from ends.

The problem appeared on a license plate I saw on California's 280 Freeway, while driving past Apple Computer in Cupertino. It said, 'I may be lost, but I'm really moving!'

### **Monks of the Silicon Forest?**

Why should a Buddhist monk concern himself with hi-tech issues? For one, I am certainly not a Luddite; our monastic founder was an early adopter of any tools that could help circulate the Buddha's teachings. At Gold Mountain Monastery in San Francisco in the early 1970s when our teacher explained the Buddhist sutras, we disciples captured his talks on Sony reel-to-reel tape recorders, then translated his Mandarin lectures on IBM Electric typewriters, which later

were replaced by Digilog and Osborne CPM, pre-MS-DOS computers. Now in the twenty-first century the next generation of lecturers on sutras use mirror-less digital cameras to wirelessly upload hi-definition video to a dedicated YouTube channel that is watched on computers around the globe. Appropriate use of hi-tech tools enhances spirituality in this case.

As webmaster for my Buddhist organisation of a three-language, Chinese, Vietnamese, and English website, <http://www.drba.org>, I appreciate the power of the Internet to create community as never before. I enjoy technology's benefits, such as unprecedented access to information. I can visit a website in Taiwan from my Macintosh keyboard in the Santa Cruz mountains and have at my fingertips the complete text in Chinese of the 'Book of Changes', the 'Confucian Analects', or do a search for the name of a Bodhisattva in the 'Great Perfection of Wisdom Scripture' in an online Japanese dictionary.

Speed and convenience are clear benefits of the Information Revolution. At the same time I'm concerned that society sees telecommunications correctly, as a tool in our search for meaning and happiness. Tools are not ends in themselves. We still have to wield the tools skillfully to fashion meaning in our lives. If we focus instead only on the sizzle in the pan and forget that food is meant to nourish, then we may miss one of history's important lessons.

### **Rushing to 'Technotopia'**

It was the millennium weekend, Y2K, CE 2000 and the United Religions Initiative had organised peace walks around the Bay. Two hundred people from fourteen religions had walked from the San Francisco Presidio's Interfaith Chapel down to Fort Point, a red-brick Civil War fortification on the Southern shore of the Golden Gate, where two centuries ago, Europeans had

stood up a tall, wooden crucifix in the sand and had claimed the beach in the name of distant European nations and faiths.

'Much inhumanity took place in the centuries that followed Western religion's coming here to Northern California,' said the Episcopal Bishop of California, William Swing, as we stood together in the shadow of the bridge. 'Today we're apologising to the Ohlones and the Pomos, the original residents of this land, for those mistakes and we're making a new start for religious unity and for the Earth.'

Then the peace walkers joined me in reciting the name of the Buddha Amitabha, seeking a blessing and release from suffering for all the suicides who had ended their lives there at the base of the bridge. As we chanted, I looked West and saw only the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean, the geographical end of our manifest destiny. Our national mantra, 'Go West, young men, and women,' had brought American settlers across the country to the Golden Gate, but few had found a pot of gold. Finally arriving here had not satisfied our disquiet, the itch that drove us ever Westward. When we looked for the gold, facing the water all that empty expanse of space, all we saw was our own reflection, a face of greed mirrored back, staring empty-eyed at the horizon. Hungry for meaning, craving to belong, only an echo came back: no answer out there. The shock of the unfulfilled greed, the utter nothingness of the Pacific Ocean with no foothold, nowhere to grip, many people in despair jumped into the void from the Golden Gate Bridge in a misguided gesture of surrender to the urge that brought us West.

A headlong rush towards the promised 'Technopia', a golden future of technology's paradise, if we fail to learn from the past, might bring us to a similar sudden shock at the lack of meaning in our electronic tools.

The irony of the tale is that continuing the search one step further, West until it became East, might have saved the lives of the suicides. Instead of finding an empty void at the end of the geographical search for wealth, many religions of Asia turn the direction of the search for meaning and happiness around and look inside, seeking the fullness of the Middle Way. When brought to search inside the mind, the horizon is limitless. The true gold is the Golden Mean, the unerring Middle Way, beyond both extremes.

As Internet communications shrinks our global village, Eastern spirituality has come face to face with Western technology. This interaction has allowed engineers and academics in Taiwan to hear the opinion of an American Buddhist monk on spiritual values in the hi-tech world. Together we discovered that rapid technological change carries an invisible price tag. By confusing means with ends, we have become tools of our tools. Our soul-work has not kept pace with our hand-work, both as individual consumers of technology and as a civilisation. Nobody across the globe was prepared for the speed with which human interaction has taken second place to virtual interaction. We are speaking of countries where the population has access to the Internet, certainly. But cellphones and towers are all it takes for individuals to leap the digital divide and join the rush towards virtualisation of relationships that have been analogue, face-to-face, from humanity's beginnings.

Back in Taipei at the Technology University, after Mr Chang's tearful confession, by way of solution I posed a brief quiz to the engineers and professors gathered for the Buddhist lecture.

I said, 'Let's begin with personal answers to the dilemma. Suppose each of you asked yourself: "How much has my wealth increased since last year?" Take note of your answer and keep it to yourself. Next, ask the question, "How much

has my happiness and peace of mind increased since last year?" How would you answer?

'Question number three: being completely candid, has the happiness you enjoyed last year come more from your social network, from your word processor, and spreadsheet or has it come more from your Saturday outings with the family, taking children to visit their grandparents, and your yoga and meditation practice? Do you look forward more to interaction with your grandparents or with social networking websites? With your yoga mat or your cellphone? Which one delivers the lasting value?'

I proposed that questions such as these could serve as a useful yardstick for measuring how society needs to readjust, to reorient our course if we are to truly create a future worth living in. When I feel like my life is increasingly empty, or that my hands and my heart seem to be working against each other, I can investigate using this inquiry the same way a doctor probes symptoms to diagnose a disease. Do any of these questions touch the sore spot?

'How much has the harmony in my marriage and family life increased since last year?' 'How much has my engagement with social justice increased since last year?'

What if I asked myself, 'Have I kept a balance between my professional pursuits and my family life? Have I adjusted well between materialistic acquisition and spiritual growth? Have I kept a perfect balance between a sense of achievement and social responsibility?' What would be my answers?

Finally, here is the heart of the problem: 'Do I care more for technology or for the people who use it?' 'Do I care more for money or for the people for whom I earn it?' Spending time thinking through these questions begins the inner inquiry that can shed light on where answers to finding satisfaction and healthful balance can be found.

### **A Blessing for Technology**

On 5 October 2003 I was invited by my alma mater, the Graduate Theological Union, in Berkeley, California, to deliver a blessing at the dedication of their new Technology Center. Along with fellow religious, I spoke the following:

Let us first invoke Indra's Net, the interlacing net of pearls which in the Buddhist Pantheon is said to adorn the heavenly palace of Shakra Devanam Indra, lord of the 'Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods.' The net contains an infinite number of perfect, transparent pearls, each one of which perfectly reflects the totality of pearls. In each pearl one can see all the pearls and the totality of pearls is gathered back by a single perfect pearl.

May the electronic tools we use in the library reflect the totality of the spirit in the same way. May every micro-circuit that sustains our cyber-reality mirror the interdependence of the Internet. May each node, each module, each chip carry us faithfully into contact with the totality of the entire Net. May each monitor and tube reflect accurately, reliably, without bias, the data that can become information, the information that can become knowledge, the knowledge that with grace and compassion, can become wisdom.

May we never forget as we use our electronic shovels and digital chisels that the tools are means to an end, that wisdom and compassion are the ends of those means; may we use our electronic servants to clarify our human values and enhance our basic human kindness instead of leading us to serve the hardware and software tools that too often are designed to serve marketing, marketing that is in turn the servant of greed.

In this way may we make each keystroke a blessing, each printout a prayer, each slideshow a sacrament for the earth and sky.

I am suggesting in this blessing that there are everyday solutions, positive answers to the

dehumanising challenges posed us by technology. Once such solution is to become a 'Workplace Yogi'. A Workplace Yogi uses technology mindfully. If we can see the mind as a switchboard for connections that can benefit every interaction, regardless of my boss's mood, my colleague's competence or the snarls of the highway commute, then the spiritual permeates the mundane. For example, I can visualise my deeper connections with all life, that as I sit in my cubicle at work, I am made up of earth, air, fire, and water, the same four elements that I share with every being on the planet. I can use those elements to benefit and not to harm all other beings. Sitting in front of my computer I am at this moment a child of parents, a brother or sister of siblings, an employee of a boss, a student of a teacher, the descendant of my ancestors, and so on. I bring to my chair all of these relationships in each new thought. And with each new thought I have the opportunity to send goodness and blessings to every link in my interconnected network of affinities.

While I talk on the cellphone I am a living being equipped with imagination, reason, emotion, humour, discriminating intelligence, compassion, and wisdom. Once I see them, I discover abundant virtues that I can call on for more authentic sense of self, for a heightened presence and deeper satisfaction. Regardless of my bank account or my employer's assessment of my worth, I am in that thought fully empowered with qualities that make for satisfaction, for well-being, and for peace of mind. I become a better employee, a better family member, a better citizen, a better person. I expand the boundaries of the workplace and connect the brokenness between work-life and real life. I earn a real life outside my paycheck. I become a workplace yogi, and no matter how chaotic the workplace, I have my own place to

go where there is order, standards, clarity, harmony, and connection.

I gave an address at the Vedanta Society of Northern California's Labour Day gathering in Olema, and I was describing Great Compassion from the perspective of Avalokiteshvara's 'Universal Door' chapter of the Lotus Sutra. I had explained how Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara saves all beings who call her name, regardless of species, race, gender, or age, and that her vows open a universal door to all. After the talk a tall, dish-



velled young man shyly approached me. His hair covered his eyes, he wore a scruffy beard and rumpled clothes but his gaze was bright. He looked like a geek, a computer addict who paid no attention to anything but his keyboard and monitor. He was not used to addressing monks, but he clearly wanted to share something. He said, 'You know that universal door you mentioned, how the Bodhisattva uses that to connect us all?'

'Yes?'

He continued, 'I think I know how we would describe that in computer geek language.'

'Oh?'

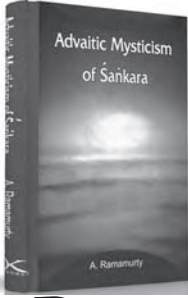
'Yeah, I think we would call her universal door, a "single-server portal with infinite bandwidth". We all fit through that door.'

'You've truly got it!' I replied.



# REVIEWS

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



## **Advaitic Mysticism of Shankara**

A Ramamurthy

D K Printworld (P) Ltd, 'Vedasri',  
F-395, Sudarshan Park, New Delhi  
110 015. Website: [www.dkprintworld.com](http://www.dkprintworld.com). 2013. x+294 pp. HB. ₹ 700. ISBN  
9788124606797.

Professor Ramamurthy's book is originally a doctoral thesis for PhD from Andhra University. It was first published in 1973 and this is its reprint. The preface is dated 1973. The author taught in Viswabharati, Santiniketan before joining the University of Hyderabad. He says that 'this book attempts to elaborate and clarify Sankara's understanding of *brahmanubhava*, in all its aspects, relying extensively on his own writings. For this, not only the commentaries, but also the *prakarana granthas* have been taken into account. In the final chapter, *brahmanubhava* is compared with what was said about the mystic experience by two of the most authoritative exponents of Christian and Islamic mysticisms, namely St John of the Cross and Jalalu'd-Din Rumi, mainly to understand Sankara's position without any ambiguity' (v-vi). Admitting that there are some repetitions, he expresses the 'hope they are not out of context' (ibid.).

Acharya Shankara's understanding of *brahmanubhava* is examined through an 'Introduction' followed by eight chapters: 'The Point of Departure', 'Description of Brahmanubhava', 'Behaviour of a Brahmajñani', 'The Way to Brahmanubhava', 'The Place of Faith, Emotions and Reasoning in Brahmanubhava', 'The Object of Brahmanubhava', 'The Validity of Brahmanubhava', 'Empirical Experience and Brahmanubhava', and 'Comparisons and Conclusions' with a bibliography and index.

The contents of these chapters constitute the theme of the book and its 'tools' of analysis. The elaboration and clarification of all these aspects of

'Shankara's understanding' is commendable. But then, can 'understanding' of the other's supreme Advaita experience interpreted through language? The one who declared in *Vivekachudamani* that 'a network of words is like a dense forest which causes the mind to wander hither and thither', has himself left us a legacy of prodigious commentaries and poetic compositions ranging from *Saundarya Lahari* to other hymns. Unless we look at *brahmanubhava* as a holistic experience which informs every aspect of life, understanding Advaita exclusively is bound to reflect the paradox of 'interpretation' in which one plants one's own understanding onto the texts. Moreover, statements like 'Brahman is real, the world an illusion' give rise to conundrums on the analytical level.

From this perspective, the various chapters linked to the centrality of *brahmanubhava*—seem to float around and not tethered to it firmly. The analyses of the three states of consciousness are not hierarchically privileged but are integrated illuminators—the one defining another. Phantoms of the brain do not explain the reality of 'illusion' or 'maya'. Once we regard it as 'illusion', the tendency will be to 'suppress' what one categorises as 'differences'. Prof. Ramamurthy's comments on yoga vis-à-vis Advaita, for instance, seem to sound categorical.

He says: 'Instead of trying to achieve an awareness of oneness of everything with the Self or the realisation that there is nothing different from the Self or *Brahman*, which culminates in perfect bliss and liberates the individual from ignorance, the cause of all differences, we observe in these states an attempt to suppress the experience of differences' (57). If I read the context rightly, it is about yoga which the author brands as 'a negative approach' because of this 'alleged suppression of the waves of Chitta'. And about the mind, Prof. Ramamurthy says: 'though the mind as mind is unreal, it is not different from the Self in reality' (ibid.).

Is 'the regenerate mind' that is suggested here? A more rigorous analysis of the three states of mind would have helped us. In our times 'virtual realities' give us insight into realities proper, if such things exist. Hence, the significance of Shankara's 'perception' of maya.

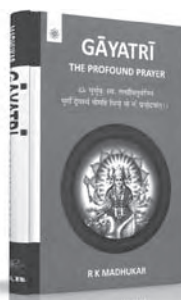
About the behavioural patterns of the *Brahmanubhavi*, the observation that the relative reality, if we call it *vyavaharika satya*, remains, is a clarification much needed in the dialectics of Advaita Vedanta. The institutionalisation of Advaita *Peethas* is itself an example. But then, the chapter on 'The Place of Faith, Emotions and Reasoning' seemed to me to link *brahmanubhava* with the mysticism of St John of the Cross and Rumi. This portion seemed to me slender and casual. For, mysticism itself is a phenomenon which has to be understood guardedly. It has to be a nomenclature which includes more than direct experience of the Reality. If in Advaita pain and pleasure—the cluster of dualities—are functional, not fundamental, the mystic would accept both. The phenomenal world runs on the axiom: 'pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.' This is 'the grace coming from God that makes us understand him', according to St John.

In his book *Studies in Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and Deconstruction* R Sundara Rajan observed that, 'interpretation which starts as an attempt at understanding may develop into a questioning of that understanding itself'. This 'hermeneutic subversion' could be rooted in the primordial structure of interpretation itself. This risk hovers over Prof. Ramamurthy's study. Our understanding is, in fact, a gift but not one to be used indiscriminately.

In effect, though it needs updating, Prof. Ramamurthy's volume is a welcome contribution. The specialist is made to think, the lay person passes by some inconclusive statements. In any case, it is worth reading. As an enthusiast—a general reader—I found helpful insights to come close to that colossal figure, Acharya Shankara. Perhaps, a re-reading in terms especially of Ramana Maharshi's Advaita would have been helpful.

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**Gāyatrī: The Profound Prayer**  
R K Madhukar

New Age Books, A-44, Naraina Industrial Area, Phase-1, New Delhi 110028. Email: nab@newagebooksindia.com. Website: [www.newagebooksindia.com](http://www.newagebooksindia.com). xxi + 351 pp. ₹ 375. ISBN 9788178224671.

The book under review titled 'Gayatri: The Profound Prayer' is a highly informative book that not only deals with the Mahamantra Gayatri elaborately but also covers the vast domain of Sanatana Dharma in a mighty sweep. The different facets of Sanatana Dharma are briefly touched upon in the initial five sections which run up to 204 pages.

Section one titled 'Religion and Spirituality' takes a fruitful survey of the global religious landscape and provides a lot of factual information about various religions of the world, with special focus on Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. The distinctive spheres of religion, spirituality, and philosophy are clearly demarcated and studied. God is demonstrated as the supreme Truth of spiritual realisation. Section two highlights the undying glory of Sanatana Dharma which is ever nourished and rejuvenated by the rich corpus of spiritual literature comprising the Vedas, Upanishads, *Vedangas*, Puranas, and *Itihasas*. Section three titled 'God Almighty—The Supreme Power' deals with the category of 'Theos', Ishvara or God, of the triangle of spiritual speculation of which the other two categories are Anthropos, jiva, and cosmos, *jagat*. The unitary principle of *nirguna* Brahman and its mystical manifestation in temporal terms as *saguna* Brahman, Personal God, are all mentioned and analysed. The fourteen worlds, *Brahmandas*, of which Hindu mythologies speak, come in for a brief study which might be considered an investigation of the cosmos.

Section four titled 'Body, Mind and Intellect' may be deemed a study of 'Anthropos' and constitutes an analysis and study of the human body from Vedantic perspective and of the five sheaths, *koshas*, and five psychic centres, chakras. The spiritual exercise of *pranayama*, the interplay of the triple *gunas*, the influence of food on our

spiritual evolution, and the crucial disciplines of mind control, *shama*, and sense-control, *dama*, are all briefly studied. Section five titled 'Spiritual Enlightenment' institutes an inquiry into the esoteric concepts of kundalini and its awakening, maya, cosmic illusion, the four yogas, the spiritual road map with its chief landmarks of japa, repetition of holy incantations; tapa, penance; yajna, sacrifice; mantras and stotras, the rituals and sacraments and so on. The *summum bonum* of spiritual realisation of Brahman, the ultimate reality beyond maya, and the trinity of gods within the confines of maya are also briefly studied. This section touches upon the concepts of heaven, hell, sin, the pivotal role of guru in the scheme of spiritual growth, the *chandās* or meter employed in Sanskrit poetry and the place of women in Vedic literature. This section may be taken to present an array of diverse ideas of Sanatana Dharma which, albeit apparently incoherent, astounds one with their variety, depth, and significance.

Section six titled 'Gayatri—Mahamantra, Mother Goddess and Meter' is the kernel of this book. The five constituents of Gayatri—Pranava or Aum, the *vyāhritis*, and the three *padās* are taken up for intensive analysis and study. The glory and efficacy of Gayatri as a Mahamantra, its precise meaning, its significance as an adoration of and prayer to the Sun deity from whom enlightenment springs and spreads, the subtle distinctions of the nomenclature of the three deities—Gayatri, Savitri, and Saraswati that are implied in the mantra, the different variants of Gayatri mantra such as Brahma Gayatri, Vishvamitra Gayatri, and so on, the anthropomorphic form and significance of Gayatri Devi, the dhyana *shlokas* of Gayatri, and Gayatri *chandās* or meter are all dealt with in detail. The significance of *Upanayana* as an initiatory ceremony of Gayatri mantra to the spiritual aspirants preferably at a young age, the availability of Gayatri *upasana* to all without any restriction of gender, age, denomination, status, and so on, and the unquestioned power of Gayatri to bestow on its *upasakas* both the mundane and spiritual benefits are all pointed out very tellingly.

Section seven titled 'Speaking from Experience' comprises the narrative by Sri Balakrishnananda Saraswati, an ardent Gayatri sadhaka,

of his wonderful experiences, worldly and spiritual, thanks to his sincere worship of Gayatri. This section also contains the illuminating answers which the swami gave to the queries of inquisitive aspirants on various points pertaining to Gayatri mantra.

Section eight titled, 'Sum and Substance' is of practical value to all serious spiritual aspirants as it recapitulates the essentials of good and purposeful living in a nutshell.

At the end of this book, there are three appendices. Appendix one quotes a judgement of the Madras High Court declaring the trans-religious and trans-denominational nature and value of Gayatri mantra. Appendix two refers to the finding of a study conducted by the Hamburg University that Gayatri mantra is the world's best divine prayer hymn. Appendix three speaks of the marvellous esteem and popularity Gayatri commands in Bali, which forms part of Indonesia with its predominant Muslim population.

'References' wherein we find the names of numerous English and Kannada books consulted by the author for writing this book, are added in the end. The author deserves rich compliments for his painstaking labour in collating facts and figures and other relevant materials and presenting them in the form a readable book. True to his name, Madhukar, which means honey-bee, the author has gathered the honey of sweet and vital information about Gayatri and offered us the honeycomb in the form of an interesting book.

To sum up, the merits of this book are: Presentation of voluminous materials in a fairly cogent narrative; relevant quotes from ancient scriptures, eminent writers, god-men, and spiritualists including Jesus Christ, Sir John Woodroffe, Swami Vivekananda, Kanchi Paramacharya, Swami Harshananda, Swami Mukhyananda, Swami Chinmayananda, and Sri Satya Saibaba at the beginning of each subsection; and authoritative evidences and proofs in support of the pre-eminence of Gayatri as the Mahamantra par excellence that promotes the aspirant's physical well-being, mental vigour, intellectual brilliance, and spiritual maturity.

This book is a testimony to the author's perseverance, diligence, painstaking labour in collecting authentic materials from various sources, and

sincerity in embodying the collected materials in the form of an attractive book with its radiant front sporting the divine picture of Mother Gayatri. It is a book that should enthuse and inspire Gayatri votaries and invite and induce others to join the bandwagon of Divine Gayatri!

*N Hariharan*  
Madurai



**Rediscovering Swami  
Vivekananda in the 21st  
Century Discourse**

Edited by: Jashobanta Roy and  
Debashish Roy

Towards Freedom, AH-202, Sector II,  
Salt Lake, Kolkata 700091. 2013. xiv  
+ 304 pp. ₹ 695. ISBN 9788182060357.

A sincere effort to contextualise Swami Vivekananda in today's socio-cultural milieu is one of the significant aspects of the considerable interest that his 150th birth anniversary has generated among the Indians. Not stopping with paying reverential homage to his great personality, scholars and academicians are eagerly evaluating the implications of his message in present-day world. One such attempt is made in the book under review which sets forth with the objective of 're-locating Swami Vivekananda in contemporary socio-political, economic, religious and cultural contexts' (blurb).

Undoubtedly Swami Vivekananda's thoughts can still continue to play a constructive role in building our nation. But for this his ideas need to be systematically studied and developed. Being more of a prophet than an academic scholar, Swami Vivekananda has not left behind a systematic work model that can be applied as is to today's challenges. In such a scenario, a book with the objective just noted is very timely.

This volume is a compilation of twenty-seven essays of which eleven are in Bengali. Swamiji's ideas on religious pluralism, sociology, emancipation of women, secularism, humanism, education, national regeneration, and so on are discussed by different authors. In grappling with the present scenario in all these fields, it is our conception of man that matters most. Swami Vivekananda's approach may be said to be an elaboration and

application of his Vedantic stand on man that 'each man should be treated not as what he manifests, but as what he stands for' (115). Hence it is appropriate that many essays in this book revolve around this central point.

Though an attempt is made herein to rediscover Swami Vivekananda in the present century, it leaves a lot to be explored. Except a few articles, the book lacks clarity of thought. Absence of serious discussions on the current trends and problems renders claims to the relevance of Swami Vivekananda unconvincing. Logical flaws in ideas, plenty of typos, inconsistencies in giving references and footnotes—all these call for a thorough re-editing of the work.

*Br. Shantichaitanya*

Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math



**Swami Vivekananda's Vision  
and Indian Womanhood:  
The Road Ahead**

Nivedita Raghunath Bhide

Vivekananda Kendra Prakashan  
Trust, No.5, Singarachari Street,  
Triplicane, Chennai 600 005. Email:  
vkpt@vkendra.org. Paperback. 120  
pp. ₹ 60.

The story of the face-off between Adam and Eve is as old as the hills. In the present age, the much-banded terms of 'woman's empowerment', 'feminist awakening', and so on, conjure up nightmares of masculine domination and feminine subordination. Women are exhorted to become aware of their 'rights' and assert them forcefully. The emphasis is on 'rights' to the pathetic relegation of 'duties' to the background. Is subjection to masculine dominance a real feminine issue which can be resolved only by aggressive assertion of their 'rights' by women? What is the reason, if any, for the supposed subjection of women to patriarchal authority?

Inspired by Swami Vivekananda's divine insight and vision, the book under review takes a refreshingly novel perspective on the much-touted problem. Its approach is rational, bold, and pragmatic. It contends that the 'bogey of women's bondage' is the inevitable corollary of the flawed Western notion of the centrality of 'Individualism'



as the governing principle of women's life. It cites instances of Indian women's spontaneous participation, in days of yore, in social life on a par with men to further the ends of dharma. Such a vibrant life of Indian women on terms of equality with men was possible because the *weltanschauung* of India in that age was oneness of Existence and organic unity of the Whole as contrasted with narrow individualism marked by obsession with personal rights and egoistic interests.

Chapter one extols the wholesome spiritual world view of the unity of Existence as the driving force of life in ancient India, the concept of the equal importance of all parts to efficient functioning of the whole and the significance and importance of the Indian concept of women's motherhood, woman as mother, as against the crass Western notion of woman as a spouse, in elevating her image as a fount of pure love.

Chapter two is a vivid portrayal of the heights of glory that Indian women of the ancient age, imbued with such lofty idealism, scaled. It also records the slow decline of Indian women's prestige that followed the repeated waves of foreign invasions. It spells out the obstacles to women's glory such as the creeping sense of complacency due to affluence and comforts, the widespread respect for monasticism with its concomitant scorn of woman as the seductress and excessive penchant for purity with its inevitable backlash. The *Purdah* system, the encouragement of child marriages, the opposition to widow-remarriage, the prevalence of the practice of Sati and the sense of horror of begetting a girl child, and a host of other unwelcome results flowed from the stage of setback to women's progress. The chapter, however, records the intactness of the basic respect for women despite the vicissitudes of women's growth-chart. The foreigners' praise of Indian women as models of chastity is mentioned. The hurdles to women's progress such as loss of indigenous system of education, Macaulay's imposition of British system of education on Indians out of selfish motives, misinterpretation of our customs and its effects, the prescription of Western solutions as universal solutions, the contamination of feminine minds of India by the craze for 'rights', an essentially Western concept born of their historical necessities, the

rise of women's liberation movement, redundant in the Indian context and the concept of women's empowerment, irrelevant for the ethos of Indian women, are all dealt with in this chapter.

Chapter three is a crucial one as it suggests solutions suited to the genius of Indian women. The major premise that dictates the conduct of Indian women is the truth of the oneness of Existence. This means that 'no person by himself/herself is important or means anything; the parameter for measuring importance is: what has been his/her relationship with those around him/her, what has s/he contributed, offered for the good of others—that is what defines the worth of a person' (64). The result of this thinking is that 'one has the right to be responsible that is, when one discharges one's duties towards the expanding layers, one's rights are taken care of by society' (65). The duty-conscious woman, inspired by ideals of motherhood, is the archetypal Indian woman who commands universal esteem and has no need of 'rights' to buttress her relevance to society. The concept of 'rights' that smacks of insularity and individualism offends against the truth of oneness of Existence. As the Indian women began to play the sedulous ape of Western ways in various aspects of their lives, they were infected with the mania for 'rights' which fattened their ego and blinded them to the glory of the truth of oneness of Existence. This book formulates the revolutionary theory that the duty-conscious and self-sacrificing Mother, the prototype of Sita of Ramayana, which all women potentially are, has no need for 'rights' to enhance their worth to society. After all, the high esteem that accrues to a duty-conscious, motherly woman makes 'rights' a non-issue.

This book is, in short, a nectarine and nutritious food thoughtfully cooked by the author out of the staple ingredients of Swami Vivekananda's lofty ideas, suitably spiced with the thoughts, among others, of Mata Amritanandamayi and Gurumurthy and sweetened by the author's own clear enunciations. This slim book is a path-breaking one ruthlessly exploding many myths concerning woman in the modern age and showing her intrinsic worth as a fount of motherly love.

N Hariharan  
Madurai



**The Philosophy of Lokayata—A Review and Reconstruction**

Bijayananda Kar

Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 41 U A Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 007. Website: [www.mldb.com](http://www.mldb.com). 2013. viii + 136 pp. ₹ 295. ISBN 9788120836921.

The philosophy of *Lokayata* or *Charvaka*, has a strong appeal all over the world. It is a strong materialistic attitude towards life. This philosophy has no faith in God and life after death. In India, those who do not believe in God or in the Vedas are known as *nastikas*. They have developed a philosophy of their own which is known as *Charvaka* or *Lokayata*.

According to *Lokayatas*, there is no soul and there is no rebirth. The visible body does not take birth after death. The votaries of this faith developed their own philosophy of eat, drink, and be merry. Obviously the philosophy attracted a large number of followers in India and other parts of the world.

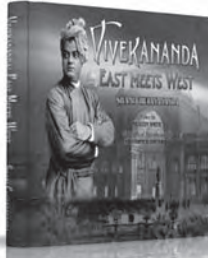
The book under review is a critical philosophical study. The subtitle of the book indicates that this is a review and reconstruction. The author Dr Bijayananda Kar, is a former professor of philosophy, Centre of Advanced Study, Utkal University and was also the General President of Indian Philosophical Congress in 2007.

The study is spread over six chapters and the philosophy of *Charvaka* is discussed threadbare in the areas of knowledge, materialism, atheism, morality, and socio-individual relationship. The *Lokayata* views on all these aspects are discussed and the reader finds himself enlightened at the end of this study.

As one comes to the concluding chapter one gets a feeling that all the doubts regarding this branch of philosophy cease to exist. The entire philosophy is examined here *vis-à-vis* modern philosophical trends. Here lies the value of this book.

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**Vivekananda: East Meets West**

Swami Chetanananda

Vedantic Society of St Louis, 205 S Skinker Blvd, St Louis, MO 63105 USA. Second Edition. 2013. Website: [www.vedantastl.org](http://www.vedantastl.org). 164 pp. \$ 36. ISBN 9780916356989.

It is rare to come across a writer who updates, with unceasing dedication and passion his contribution to his areas of interest in the light of newly found matter. It involves, obviously, irrepressible interest in the areas being updated which bring about new perspectives. In short, the new materials enrich our understanding of the subject concerned. When the writer-researcher happens to be Swami Chetanananda, and Swami Vivekananda, the theme of the volume, it is bound to be fascinating and original.

Considering the vast contribution the untiring Chetanananda has made to the quantum of Ramakrishna-Sri Sarada Devi-Vivekananda and Vedanta literature, one is assured that the new matter is bound to be the result of a dynamic process of creativity. A creativity which prevents the existing matter from becoming relics of the past. In fact, earlier 'data' gets enriched and the significance expanded.

Informing the additions to the new edition of the volume originally published in 1950 marking the centenary celebrations of Swami Vivekananda, Swami Chetanananda tells us: 'Out of the 288 pictures shown herein, 87 are from sources different from the first edition and many were added to new photographs of Vivekananda found in the collection of Ida Ansell, held by the Vedanta Society of Southern California.' Moreover, 'pictures of the Exposition in Chicago and Paris that were printed in color in Swamiji's day' are there. Above all, with the availability of sophisticated technology now, 'original antique prints are presented alongside copies of historic photographs that have been digitally tinted to simulate vintage prints. The result is a richer experience of Vivekananda's life history for the reader.'

Are the sumptuous, radiant pictures only richly accompanying facets to the narrative of Swamiji's life and work? Is it a magnificent—sorry to use

the words—coffee-table book which adorns the rooms of the affluent? Chetanananda makes the difference clear: 'If the reader opens the book and spends one minute on each picture of Swamiji, they will spend 95 minutes in meditation.'

If the visuals alone induce the meditative experience, what could be the outcome of the reading of the juxtaposed text? That every visual has been not randomly but systematically selected in tune with the text goes without saying. For instance, thematically the text can be seen as a balance between the written saga of Vivekananda's colossal concern for the well-being of his nation alongside imparting the universal message of the spirit to the West. If the meaning of 'photo' is writing with 'light', the photos of his days in India with a shaven head and the *gerua* of a monk (35) and the full-length picture of the Swami as a delegate to the Parliament of Religions with full headgear and shoes (45), both throw interrelated radiance on images of the indigent India and the affluent America. The sartorial dimension of Swamiji has in its visual a remarkable story to tell. And Chetanananda has an impeccable flair to place them in tune with the text.

The twin visuals—not one but many—show the two historical roles that Vivekananda's agenda constituted: regeneration of India and the renaissance of the spirit to America, and as it seems now, to a world that had gone global. The radiant monastic with a turban, on the eve of the historic Parliament (60-1) and the leonine photo in Chicago, 1894 (66) with the luscious parted hair, and eyes open and serene, are in themselves a startling juxtaposition. Added to that the richly evocative photograph of the Himalayan heights on the opposite page (67) enrich one another. Can we say that the heights of spirituality embodied in his guru, he brought to the 'Wet lands' of the West? The obvious message in words: 'The Upanishads are the great mine of strength. Therein lies strength enough to invigorate the whole world' (ibid.). The affluent nations imbued with spirituality and the indigent nations with the agonising concern for integrated development based on value-enriched ethics, economics, enjoyment and equilibrium.

From this perspective the passages of the vibrant Vivekananda literature cited in this book, evoke the twin ideals of Indian aesthetics: the sweet cadences of language and their richly evocative nectar of thought. The glory of a monastic and the indescribable grace of the prophet's language blend effortlessly. Besides, there are passages from distinguished personages from all walks of life and, perhaps from all disciplines—forestalling the impression that this volume would be a laudatory tome of a swami from the Order Vivekananda founded. We have heard or read about William James but, many have not seen him: Chetanananda has given this splendid opportunity (89). Similarly, the 'agnostic and orator Robert Ingersoll', and the famous Rockefeller (88) and a mini gallery of women admirers, for example, Sarah J Farmer, Ole Bull, Sister Christine, the American Nightingale Emma Thursby, and Josephine MacLeod adorn the pages 91-93. But, I was particularly struck by the indescribably serene countenance—face is a dull word—of the sculptor Malvina Hoffman who saw Vivekananda and later sculpted bronze statues of the Great Master, Holy Mother, and Vivekananda himself. Her eyes, one would feel, registered the countenance of Swamiji enduringly and later went into her unique artistic genius (95).

I mentioned serenity: the photo of Camp Percy, New Hampshire, June 1895 where Swamiji 'went into Nirvikalpa Samadhi along this path where it winds further along the shore of Lake Christine' (75) is a striking example. Instinctively, one feels that this photo itself is enough as an object of intense contemplation and if we can enrich it with the photo of our choice of Swamiji himself in the meditative mood, perhaps, we may catch a glimpse of what serenity means: The waves in the lake, the trees on the bank, the grass on the ground and the view of a distant mountain, and above all the boat on the waters. One recalls the small three-line-song that the Great Master himself sang concerning 'some are beings entangled in the world and some are being liberated from it':

'How many are the boats O mind  
That float on the ocean of the world  
How many are those that sink!'

A comparable photo occupying an entire half page is the magnificent oceanic view of the Vivekananda Rock Memorial where he meditated (40). The sea seems rough with fishermen valiantly manning the boats and the image of Mother Kanya Kumari in the temple (*ibid.*). Impending global journey across the oceans recurs in the mind.

Alain de Botton, the well-known philosopher, in his study of what he calls 'The Architecture of Happiness' cites the famous architect Le Corbusier: 'What [modern man] wants is a monk's cell, well lit and heated with a corner from which he can look at the stars'. I cite this to refer to the houses, residences, buildings which are cornered with Swamiji's presence so carefully arranged by Chetanananda in this fabulous volume; their range is remarkable: First Unitarian Church, Oakland, California (131); facing this the Universalist Church, Pasadena, and this juxtaposed by Assembly Hall, Shakespeare Club, Pasadena (130). The Club with chairs strewn all around and paintings on the wall with one which seems to me a mother holding her child; at suitable places the pillars with foliage wrapped around and the beams on the ceiling! One of course, has some photographs of the buildings for the Columbian Exposition at Chicago (48–9), The Art Institute of Chicago (56) and the Hall of Columbus (57), The Vivekananda Cottage at Thousand Island Park, where the famous *Inspired Talks* were given (76). Chetanananda has also given us a rare glimpse of the residence of Mrs Samuel R Noble, Sister Nivedita's mother (121). On page 120 we have the photo of S S Golconda, the steamship carrying Swamiji to Madras.

I was fascinated by a rare photo of those days: On his way to a trip to Mount Lowe, Vivekananda and his party stayed at the 'famous hotel called Echo Mountain', the lobby of which appears in a photograph (129). It is quite a cute lobby with lamps, chairs, one occupied by an anonymous visitor. And juxtaposed, we have the photo of an 'Incline Railway, Mount Lowe' in which Swamiji travelled. Turn a few pages and we see a photograph of the Grande Amphi Theatre, the Sorbonne, Paris (144). Swamiji described the whole set up as 'the unique assemblage of celestial panorama on earth' (*ibid.*).

As we near the end of this magnificent volume, there are two photographs taken in Shillong (1901). There is—what should one say—the evidence of the *natural* decay of the body due to illness. One is a damaged photograph but, ironically, we can see the signs of decay but the enchanting eyes remain the same. The hair is very thick in both the photographs (154–5). The sadness is annulled, of course, when we see another photo of Shillong days.

I focused on the visual texts deliberately for the simple reason that reading the accompanying text need not be specially recommended. For the significance of the visuals you have got to go to the sumptuous citations from Swamiji as also the others. And Chetanananda's passages remain and retain the thread of the narrative. Yet 'East Meets West' not only in the use of the relative immortality of photography from the West, and the absolute eternity of the very narrative, the *imperishable romance of Vivekananda's passage* from East to West and increasingly West to East. The value of this book is enriched by Houston Smith's preface and the biographical introduction by Christopher Isherwood.

Chetanananda has the eye of a keen photographer and the elegance of a seasoned writer. And I am sure, this book is, indeed one that sustains meditation of a nature that is spontaneous. The very aesthetic excellence of the volume ignites our inner being to the depths of our consciousness.

I conclude by a passage that fits like a glove to the perennial significance of this volume: 'A specimen of experience is aesthetic if it involves the apprehension / comprehension by an informed subject ... of the formal structures, and / or expressive properties of the object, and / or of the manner in which these features interact with the other and / or address the cognitive, perceptual, evocative, and / or imaginative power of the subject.' Should I say, unaesthetically, that Chetanananda's volume is a classic in this comprehensive category?

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### **Goa—Blessed by His Sacred Touch**

Swami Atmashraddhananda

Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chennai 600 004. Website: [www.chennai.math.org](http://www.chennai.math.org). 72 pp. ₹ 20. ISBN 9788178236131.

To learn from the lives of spiritual giants, saints, and sages, we need to try to retrace their steps not only spiritually but also physically. Whenever a spiritual personality travels to different places, it can never be merely for sightseeing purposes. A personality like Swami Vivekananda travelled across the length and breadth of India and also abroad, with a massive responsibility on his shoulders to fulfil a divine mission. Thus, wherever he went, whatever he touched became *blessed by his sacred touch*. This book throws light on one such sacred journey by Swamiji to Goa in 1892 and gives us details about his stay there—seeing most of its sacred places, interacting with many people in Goa, both eminent and common.

This book begins with enlisting the places Swamiji visited during his wanderings in India followed by a graphical description of the history and cultural heritage of Goa and the details of Swamiji's visit and stay there. Then an unknown monk, Swamiji nevertheless left an unforgettable impression on the locals—so much that many of the places and articles related to him are still devotedly preserved by the Goan people. This attractive booklet bringing together scattered facts and information, along with beautifully placed pictures of related personalities and places almost re-enacts Swamiji's visit to Goa before our eyes. It also reveals the hallowed personality of Sri Subrai Naik, Swamiji's host in Goa. Particularly interesting is the fact that Swamiji spent three days in the Rachol Seminary studying Christian theology. Here, Swamiji impressed even Christian fathers and students by his spiritual genre and gigantic intellect expressing his original views on Christianity based on sound knowledge. Swamiji's portrait still adorns the library wall of the seminary.

In the appendix, Swamiji's short life and selected teachings are given which the beginners to Swami Vivekananda literature should find relevant.

This short but useful volume would definitely change our perspective of the city of Goa and link us to the ancient history and spiritual importance of this place.

PB



### **Debating Culture**

Anirban Ganguly

D K Printworld (P) Ltd, 'Vedasri', F-395, Sudarshan Park, New Delhi 110 015. Website: [www.dkprintworld.com](http://www.dkprintworld.com). 158 pp. ₹ 250. ISBN 9788124607046.

If you want to see an epic description of a whole culture,' says Wittgenstein, 'you will have to look at the works of its greatest figures; hence at works composed when the end of this culture could only be foreseen, because later on there will be nobody left to describe it. So, it's not to be wondered at that it should be written in the obscure language of prophecy, comprehensible to very few indeed.'

Wittgenstein himself appears prophetic with reference to the book under review. It seems that we have come close to the eclipse of some of our most significant figures of culture: in books which 'study' the makers of modern India, the criteria of selection seem to show either willed ignorance or conscious or unconscious surrender to the 'Western' criteria about what culture is and what it is not. For, they belong to a phase which our historians dismiss or ignore as one of many myths concocted by the vested interests. But the fact is no Hindu God-Incarnation is a member of the caste which is now thrown into the blender of margins/and centres dialectic.

There is also another trend which this book addresses frontally. It brings to centre stage what was earlier abundantly evident but now forgotten. As Michel Danino in his 'Foreword' transparently says: Open the yellowed tomes authored by a few Western Indologists of the nineteenth or early twentieth century—say, Stella Kramrisch, John Woodroffe, Sylvian Levi, Louis Renou or Jean Filiozat—and you will find, to quote the last two, 'the same comprehension, the same admiration of Indian civilization.' (vii)

All of them—and those who are not in the

list—evidence, says Michel Danino, ‘a comprehension based on a thorough study and discussion of the fundamentals of Indian culture, her thought and belief systems, her aesthetics and spirituality, her social or technological achievements. This is precisely the kind of discussion that is so rare in today’s India, as if those fundamentals should be of interest only to ageing scholars sitting in musty libraries’ (ibid.). In short, ‘what makes India “India” is of no relevance to our “modern” nation’ (ibid.).

In this ethos, Anirban’s book is of crucial significance. A closely reasoned, authentic appraisal of figures generally ignored superciliously, it neither supplants nor supplements the other writers who wrote on other figures. Anirban selects as the first figure Vivekananda and his ‘fascination’ with culture. Then we have exploration of the cultural nationalism of Ananda Coomaraswamy. We also have Sri Aurobindo’s view on Indian culture and external influence. Indian culture according to Sister Nivedita and a figure rarely considered in such a context, John Woodroffe, who not only defended Indian culture but also, almost single-handedly introduced tantric studies.

We have K M Munshi’s ‘reintegration’, Shyama Prasad Mookerjee’s ‘reforging of India’s cultural links.’ The penultimate study is on Nehru’s views on India’s culture and her national life. The remarkable feature of Anirban’s study is that, even as he evokes the core of the cultural views of these figures, he links it to their life-events so that an integral link is forged between consciousness and conduct, a cultural frame. For instance, Vivekananda’s travel all over India was dotted with his visits to culturally significant areas, whether temples or monuments like the Taj Mahal. Not as a tourist trot but, as Emma Calve, who travelled along, has noted: ‘What a pilgrimage it was! Science, philosophy and history had no secrets from the swami.’ Not only did he illumine the significance of the museums he visited, he saw them as radiant symbols of the culture of the concerned nation. And he used to give archaeological lessons! Sister Nivedita described them as ‘our first peep at Indian Archaeology’ (20). In addition to the fact that Swamiji ‘lived, moved and had his very being in sense of his country’s past,’ he showed ‘similar

enthusiasm’ to Japanese art evoked by the visit of Okakura Kakuzo (1862–1913) to India. In short, Vivekananda used one word to express his cultural involvement with India: ‘fascination’.

Ananda Coomaraswamy’s ‘national culturalism’ and its other followers sensed the ‘overshadowing’ by ‘the material ideal of prosperity of Indian aesthetic aim. And Coomaraswamy says, as a consequence ‘this loss of beauty in our lives’ ‘is a proof that we do not love India; for India, above all nations, was beautiful once, and that was not long ago’ (35). Yet, as Professor Ganguly has noted, Coomaraswamy ‘never lost sight of the world; his essential position saw no real contradiction between nationalism and internationalism’ (41). His short but subtle study ‘Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power’ gives us a new dimension especially relevant today.

The spiritual is the core of Sri Aurobindo’s overall view in which art and its values occupy a prominent place: ‘A cultivated eye without a cultivated spirit makes by no means the highest type of man’ (44). The author traces Sri Aurobindo’s views on ‘Indian Culture and External Influence’: ‘confronted with the huge rush of modern life and thought’ (46). Aurobindo, says the author, ‘saw India surviving only “by confronting this raw, new, aggressive, powerful world with fresh diviner creations of her own spirit, cast in the mould of her own spiritual ideals”’ (ibid.).

Professor Ganguly finds that in Aurobindo’s thoughts on unity of nations, there is the caution that ‘if it ever materialized, would be a dead one if it insisted on a uniform unity’ (47). This is a very important aspect of the potential of globalisation. He cites Aurobindo saying that ‘uniformity is not a real but a dead unity: uniformity kills life while real unity, if well founded, becomes vigorous and fruitful by a rich energy of variation’ (48). Obviously, as embodied in his own works, Sri Aurobindo’s attitude is itself exemplary of the ‘rich energy of variation.’

Comparable, but without any radical divergence from Sri Aurobindo’s thought, is Sister Nivedita. As the author says, ‘For Nivedita and her colleagues in the cultural nationalist movement the dissemination of the symbols of Indian culture was essential for developing and recreating

a binding national unity with the focused goal of achieving freedom' (57). But, then, the core of her significance endures in her contemporising the cultural narratives of Hinduism for the young today. This is seen in her recreation of Indian myths and symbols as also her classic, *The Web of Indian Life*. Above all, her ability to institutionalise practical programs for women remains an enduring and expanding phenomenon. This area of cultural significance has not received the attention it needs.

In the second part, we have the views of the author on K M Munshi, Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, and somewhat surprisingly, Jawaharlal Nehru. For reasons not known this section seems to me slender if not casual. But we get to know some fascinating details about, specially, Munshiji: 'Like many of his generation,' says the author, 'Munshi himself had undergone a phase of struggle and a self-doubt when it came to understanding the essentiality of Indian culture in India's national life and before that in trying to understand what Indian culture itself signified' (88). One feels that this is a phenomenon which seems common among those who went through colonising. Many succumbed, some survived. And we can see both now in our midst. But then, Munshiji's Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan remains a monumental institution with its own agendas both in culture and art as also in education.

Shyama Prasad Mookerjee's pioneering step was in establishing the Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture but of great importance even today is the 'collaboration with nationalist China in expanding the University's reach' by deputing 'their scholars who would undertake rigorous study of Indian culture and civilization' (91). But, the author reiterates a fact which makes many wonder: one who 'helped conceptualize and organise a grand international cultural conference on the occasion of the inauguration of the new *vihara* at Sanchi' (96) rarely gets the core of his achievement recognised as of intense value now.

If I followed 'chronology' I should have mentioned Woodroffe earlier. But I didn't for one reason: If spirituality is the centre of Indian culture, it is necessary to look at Woodroffe's unparalleled contribution to making tantra free from the

myths which surrounded it. Any study of culture needs the roots of spiritual nourishment, to be claimed as holistic. In an ethos where tantra is subjected to perversions, it is necessary to highlight Woodroffe's enduring work.

*Debating Culture* is a significant contribution to both culture in general and Indian culture in particular. Especially valuable is the conclusion entitled 'Signposts for the Future'. Printing and get-up are in conformity with the standards DK Printworld consistently maintains. In short, this is a basic primer which needs to be read by all those who have any concern with setting right the misperception about India regarding her being a nation, based on its perennial cultural bases rooted in spirituality.

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### **Rshikas of the Rgveda**

Swamini Atmaprajnananda  
Saraswati

DK Printworld, 'Vedasri', F-395, Sudarshan Park, New Delhi 110 015.  
2013. xvi + 151 pp. ₹ 400. ISBN  
9788124606568.

Like the twanging of Mahasaraswati's lute, comes a splendid succession of incandescent names in Swamini Saraswati Atmaprajnananda's 'Rshikas of the Rigveda'. Twenty-five seer-poets like Godha, Lopamudra, Vagambharini, and Sauci Paulomi appear. Even Urvashi who would later be immortalised as a heroine by Kalidasa in his play, *Vikramorvashiyam*. Contrary to the generally held belief that the Vedas were received only by men—hence women were not even allowed to learn and recite it since medieval times—women had an important part even in receiving the messages from the eternal and channelling them into significant poetry. At the dawn of Indian civilisation, women were able to spread and teach Vedas and were called Brahmadivinis. Instead of harping upon what has not been done for women as some of our sociologists do, this book proves what women have done to keep the flag of Indian culture flying. A very important, positive publication.

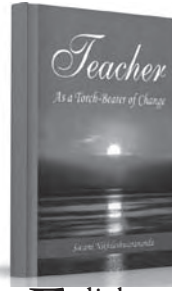
Godha was a Brahmavadini. Her voice records the typical maternal anxiety that applied correctives to the society even in those days, for the Vedas took care of heaven and earth as an integral whole:

Relax that mortal's stubborn strength  
Whose heart is bent on wickedness.  
Trample him down beneath thy feet  
Who watches for, and aims at us.  
The Goddess Mother brought you forth,  
The Blessed Mother gave you life. (17)

So we get to learn of the woman-power at the intellectual and spiritual arenas through the original Sanskrit along with a simple English rendering by the author. She has also given references to the repetitions in the different Vedas. While we need to have commentators like Swami Dayananda and Sri Aurobindo to enter into the coiled significances of the hymns, we get to have a bright and compact introduction in this book. An important point revealed by it is the avoidance of hereditary rights to become a rishi. At that distant past, each one had to remain engaged in spiritual practices and receive the mantra. A son or daughter could be known as a rishi or rishika only when he or she undertook the arduous discipline.

'A person performs special spiritual practices, including *tapas*, to become a Rishi. There is no specific procedure for becoming a Rishi. One can only become a Rishi by the grace of the cosmic powers or the *devatas*' (2). Hence the Upanishadic dictum: '*Tapah prabhavat deva prasadascha*; by the power of his austerities, and by the Lord's mercy.' An intense aspiration would definitely draw to it the answering grace. Thus a rishi is born, '*Yasya vakyam sa rishi*'; one who utters mantra is a rishi'. By writing this significant introduction to an imperative facet of the Vedas, Swamini Atmaprajnananda Saraswati has prepared a magic casement that illumines an amazing world of god-consciousness. Appropriately so, as the *rik* is described here as 'the word of illumination'.

*Prema Nandakumar*  
Researcher and Literary Critic  
Srirangam



### **Teacher As a Torch-Bearer of Change**

Swami Nikhileshwarananda

Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park, Kolkata 700 029.  
2011. 28 pp. ₹ 15. Email: rmic@vsnl.com. ISBN 9789381325094.

Enlightened, emancipated, and empowered teachers lead communities and nations in their march towards better and higher quality of life. They reveal and elaborate the secrets of attaining higher values in life and thus, are the torch-bearers in creating social cohesion, national integration, and a learning society. In the present book under review, the author attempts to contextualise the role of such teachers who could be the torch-bearers enlightening the path of pupils in particular and nation in general. The author develops his topic by pointing out the types of teachers, presenting the current scenario of education, highlighting the urgent need for spiritual culture and the role of teachers in character building as well as nation building. With his logical arguments he proves that only India is capable of leading the world steeped in stark materialism and could fulfil its need for spiritual empowerment. Here comes the onerous responsibility of teachers to prepare the band of youth with impeccable character; automatically this will ensure nation building. In this booklet packed with inspiration and powerful motivation for teachers, the author gives the examples of teachers like Sri Mahendranath Gupta, Sister Nivedita, and Swami Premeshananda, a revered monk of the Ramakrishna Order who was instrumental in transforming the lives of many youths coming in contact with him. According to the author, an electric shock is required to awaken from the deep slumber in which our nation has fallen to; and the literature of Swami Vivekananda is capable of giving such an electric shock. The success mantra given to teachers at the end is highly appealing and useful, exhorting them to have dedication, devotion, confidence, purity, patience as also to cultivate Intelligence, emotional, and spiritual quotients and always be aware of the dignity of the noble profession and the responsibility which they are entrusted with.



The author has articulated his theme very logically interspersed with instructive and inspiring anecdotes. This book is based on a talk delivered by the author, and hence has a racy, engaging style and one could not put it down until one is through with it!

The printing and cover design are also excellent, making the book a preferred choice for teachers and readers.

*Dr Chetana Mandavia*

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### **The Art of Ageing**

S K Kulkarni

Indus Source Books, Post Box 6194,  
Malabar Hill, PO Mumbai 400  
006. Website: [www.indussource.com](http://www.indussource.com). 2013. xx + 297 pp. ₹ 300. ISBN  
9788188569519.

Last scene of all that ends this strange eventful history is second childishness and mere oblivion sans tooth, sans eyes, sans taste sans everything' (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7).

The very title of the book under review makes one sit up and take notice. We are accustomed to 'Ageing' being called 'a challenge' or a 'problem' or a 'trauma'. But, how can one speak of the 'Art of Ageing'? Well, the valuable contents of this well-researched book show how it is possible to learn and master the art of ageing.

Ageing is inescapable and has to be sagaciously planned and prepared for. Ageing starts right from the moment of one's entry into this world. But the real problem of ageing raises its ugly head only when one's age crosses the threshold of sixty years—the point when one is thrust into the phase of enforced idleness and inactivity with its unsavoury implications in terms of health, finance, psychological attitude, and emotional stability. The brutal facts that an elderly person faces may be summed up as sinking health, shrunken wallet, and swollen hours. These issues have all been confronting the elderly but their severity has escalated now because of various factors, the chief among them being the break-up of the joint family system.

The book under review captioned thoughtfully as 'The Art of Ageing' with the subtitle 'Planning for a comfortable old age' is an asset not only for the grey population but also for the youth, the middle-aged, and even the adolescents. If the inevitable phase of old age is not to be a nightmare and if it is to be smooth-sailing, a planned and systematic early and mid-term life is an imperative. This nice book with its elegant get-up clearly spells out the features of a scientific program of purposeful pre-retirement living to ward off the rigours of old age. This book indicates rightly that the fight against the hardships of old age is a joint effort in which the quartet of stakeholders like the state, the private bodies, the children, and the elderly should meaningfully participate.

The opening chapter 'Four Stages of Life' emphasises the interdependence of the four stages of life, the importance of the first two stages of life—the *brahmacharya* and the *grihastha* as the most active stages of life in every respect, the necessity of well-planned living in all the four stages of life to make one's life meaningful and comfortable.

The second chapter titled 'The First Two Stages of Life in the Modern Context' stresses the vital need to cultivate and acquire the triad of education, health, and character in the first stage itself to ensure a smooth old-age life. The crucial factors of globalisation, technology, and the availability of tremendous youth-power are highlighted to build a case for their proper utilisation to promote a happy and harmonious social life. The wedlock of skills and values is advocated to avert imbalance in life with its negative consequences. The pivotal role of the householder stage in the discharge of essential duties and promotion of societal welfare is underscored. The core factors of health, discipline, and contentment are emphasised. Various relevant issues like a healthy family system, mutual love and loyalty of spouses, respect for elders, parenting, the need for financial planning, attitudinal planning and occupational planning, planning for shelter, the benefits of frugal living, simplicity of lifestyle, and the duties of women in the modern context are all briefly touched upon.

The third chapter titled 'Ageing' deals with the practical problems of the population belonging

to the third and fourth stages when irksome problems on the fronts of health, finance, interpersonal relationship, self-esteem, and spirit of independence crop up. The facts of increasing lifespan of elders, the growth of elderly population in India, the comparative situation of the elderly in the urban and rural areas, status of the elderly by gender, marital status of the elderly in urban and rural areas, the issue of widow or widower remarriages, the new phenomenon of live-in-relationship, the need to evolve systems for the caring of the elderly in the modern context when traditional self-sustaining systems like the joint family are on the wane, issues of health care, financial security, shelter, welfare maintenance of the elderly, medical support for the elderly, and a host of other issues are discussed by marshalling substantial statistical details. Topics of inter-generational relationship, the role of yoga and other physical exercises in maintaining good health, the need for nutritional diet, the need for self-occupation and avoidance of the sense of loneliness, cultivation of positive qualities, the role of senior citizens' associations, and so on, are also discussed. The subjects of provision of care for the elderly, abuse of the elderly and its prevention, offer of emotional support to the elderly and ensuring of financial, health, and companionship security to the elders are also dealt with. A comparative study of the various issues in terms of rural-urban divide and male-female divide is a special merit of the book.

Chapter four makes an exhaustive study and assessment of the new phenomenon of old age homes. The need for old age homes, the availability of different types of old age homes suitable for different pockets, the positive response of the elderly to this new trend, are all dealt with.

The fifth chapter titled 'Health' presents three informative and illuminating articles by three highly qualified geriatricians. The article titled 'Geriatric Medical Care' deals with such problems as the risks of falling, the problems of malnutrition and under-nutrition, the issue of sexuality of older persons and the attitudinal issues of the elderly towards their senility. The remedies for the chronic problems are also indicated. The second article titled 'Mental Health

in Old Age' insists on the preservation of mental faculties and on the need to be engaged in some intellectual work towards that end. The major mental ailments of dementia, depression, and delirium are discussed and remedies are also indicated. The common old-age related problems of hearing and visual impairment, insomnia, and pain are analysed as contributory factors to psychological disorders. Spirituality and meditation are recommended as potent antidotes to mental imbalances. The third article 'Alternate Therapies for Fitness and Good Health' lists a number of useful home remedies as means of health management. A host of common ailments such as peptic ulcer, insomnia, arthritis or rheumatism, backache, knee pain, common cold, cough, influenza, constipation, indigestion, and diabetes are dealt with by indicating their symptoms and causes and also by prescribing time-tested home remedies. Reiki, meditation, acupuncture, acupressure, healing methods by balancing the chakras in the human body, crystal healing, cosmic-ray therapy, healing through music therapy, health management through yoga, mudra therapy, and other remedies like aromatherapy and body massage are all examined for their efficacious value in health management.

Chapter six titled 'Finance' discusses the importance of financial security in old age and the planning of and making adequate provision for it right from the commencement of one's earning. Various avenues of saving and options of investment are suggested. One distinctive merit of this chapter is the offer of precise formulae and a ready reckoner for planning one's savings taking into account one's earnings, the number of years left for one's service, and so on. The strategies for risk management such as health insurance policy, life-insurance policy, education policy for children, and a host of other financial provisions to be made for one's twilight years are discussed with remarkable expertise.

The appendices titled 'Demographic Transition of Population in India', 'Senior Citizens Speak Frankly', 'Articles by Eminent Senior Citizens', and 'Resources for Senior Citizens' along with the glossary and select bibliography at the end add to the value of this excellent book.

This book is a vade mecum for people of all ages to plan their post-retirement life in all its aspects so that it may be dignified, comfortable, and serene.

N Hariharan  
Madurai



### **Vivaha Samskara in Grhya-Sutras of the Four Vedas**

V R Anil Kumar

D K Printworld (P) Ltd, 'Vedasri', F-395, Sudarshan Park, New Delhi 110 015. [www.dkprintworld.com](http://www.dkprintworld.com). 2014. xvii + 476 pp. ₹ 1200. ISBN 9788124607497.

Marriage is one of the most elaborate samskaras among sixteen Hindu rituals because it is considered to be one's responsibility and religious duty towards family and society. Perhaps that is why Swami Vivekananda says, 'according to the Hindu way of thinking, marriage is rather a duty than a privilege'.

*Vivaha* rituals were fairly simple during the time of Rig Veda. If we see the history of marriage rituals we come to know that there was no dowry system till the medieval period. There were no child marriages in the period of *Grihya Sutras*.

The *Vivaha* samskaras which we see today is mainly based on the Sanskrit text named 'Brahma Karma Samuchchaya' and the base for all rituals was formed by the *Grihya Sutras* belonging to the four Vedas. *Grihya Sutras* are works that contain the details of samskaras meant for householders. Many times we have queries about the true meaning behind certain belief systems or traditions in marriages. The mantras, being in Sanskrit, are difficult for a commoner to understand. Sometimes we are unable to appreciate words like '*kanyadana*'. We also wish to decode the roots of similarities or minor differences seen in the *Vivaha* samskaras in various regions. Here we certainly get benefitted by this well-researched book. The author is a businessman having an engineering background. The theme is beautifully presented in a very neat, simple, and logical way and therefore it becomes interesting for those curious about the historical survey of Hindu marriage rituals. There are very few

books which give a comprehensive picture of all the *Grihya Sutras*. For example, a commentary by Gopinatha Dikshit on the *Hiranyakeshi Grihya Sutra* published by Anandashrama, Pune, has referred to the other *Grihya Sutras*. The present book is a major contribution of the author as he has painstakingly compiled marriage rituals of most of the *Grihya Sutras* of the four Vedas with English translation.

When we carefully read the mantras we start appreciating their subtle meaning. It is interesting to note that there was gender equality that is reflected through the *Grihya Sutras*. For example, *Apastamba Dharma Sutra* says 'a man and woman should perform religious acts together as a married couple and there is no question of separation between them' (21).

*Vivaha* samskaras display the open-mindedness and the depth of thought of the ancient religious founders and clearly show that they had a thorough knowledge of scriptures as well as of differences of customs according to various countries and villages. We see that in the marriage rituals of Punjab there is a tradition of celebrating the occasion with dance accompanied by musical instruments. This is because of the influence of the *Kathaka Grihya Sutra* tradition. There is reference to musical instruments such as *nadi*, *tuna*, *pana*, and *mridanga* and it is said, 'let her [the bride's] female companions sing and dance through the night' (223).

Though there is usually an insistence for the auspicious day and time for the *Vivaha* samskaras, some *Grihya Sutras* say, 'Some people opine that marriage can be conducted at all times' (28).

The *Vivaha* samskaras have given great respect and empowerment to women. The bride was considered to be a gift of gods. The ritual of '*kanyadana*', in which the father of the bride gifts his daughter in marriage to the bridegroom, does not appear in all texts of the *Grihya Sutras*. It is not there in the *Shankhayana*, *Kaushitaki*, *Apastamba*, *Hiranyakeshi*, *Varaha*, *Gobhila*, *Khadira*, and *Kaushika Grihya Sutras*. The father is instructed to marry his daughter to an intelligent groom (29) and intelligence of a bride was also important. Otherwise it was asked frankly:

‘Who can live with someone who is not intelligent?’ (207) The bride’s father or brother asks her to ‘be a queen over your father-in-law’ (48). *Ashmarohana*, climbing on a stone, is one such ritual where the bride is given the message of strength to be followed in her new life. She is asked to ‘be unmoving like the stone. Cause death to the evil minded and face enemies with strength’ (214).

The Saptapadi ritual which is mentioned in all the *Grihya Sutras* is one of the most elegant parts of the *Vivaha* samskaras where seven steps are taken together—‘One step for sap, two for energy, three for wealth, four for prosperity, five for offspring, six for seasons and be a friend with seven steps’ (34). The *Dhruva Arundhati Darshana* ritual represents constancy and faithfulness in married life.

There are references to various grains and plants mentioned in the context of various rituals. These references are important from the historical and ethno-botanical point of view. Classical Sanskrit literature is full of references to the inseparable pair of the Chakravaka birds, Ruddy Shelduck or *Tadorna ferruginea*—a common winter visitor to India, which is portrayed as the symbol of eternal love. The origin of this cultural belief is traced back to the Vedic literature. It is gripping from ethno-ornithological point of view. During the *Vivaha* rituals it was said ‘like the concord of *cakravāka* birds let our minds become one’ (192). These birds have a loud metallic call like ‘ang, ang’ and the grazing grounds are very noisy at dawn and dusk. They are seen usually in pairs or small groups. This particular habit might have given rise to the belief, which may not agree with ornithological information, that the birds pair for life and lament because of getting separated from its companion when the sun sets.

Thus this book presents a massive documentation of *Vivaha* samskaras and certainly it will be useful for unfolding the values and philosophy behind the Hindu samskaras.

*Dr Suruchi Pande*

Head, Department of Ethno-Ornithology,  
MES Garware College  
Pune



### **The Holy Geeta**

Prabha Duneja

New Age Books, A-44, Naraina Industrial Area, Phase I, New Delhi 110 028.  
Website: [www.newagebooksindia.com](http://www.newagebooksindia.com).  
392 pp. ₹ 80. ISBN 9788178224510.

The landscape of the literature on the Bhagavadgita is both far-flung and fascinating. It is a dense landscape dotted with a plethora of commentaries, glosses, simple expositions, and scholarly dissertations. A whole lot of enunciations and explanations of varying genre lie extended over the spectrum of Gita lore. From the simple and straightforward translation of its verses, to the more complex and critical expositions of its import, to the elaborate exploration and contemplation of its philosophy with the bar-est reference to individual verses and to the recondite commentaries of the triad of Acharyas namely Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva and their scholar-devotees, the diversity and range of the Gita literature is mind-boggling.

The book titled ‘The Holy Geeta’ that is under review may be said to come under the elementary category of simple translation of verses into English. The book contains a brief introduction, Gita verses in original Sanskrit, the transliteration of the verses in the Roman script, and English translation of the verses. The contents are printed in bold letters. The glory of the Gita, its practicality as a catalyst of day-to-day human life, its philosophical fecundity, its value in being a synthesis of almost all the well-known teachings of the world, its importance as a panacea for the doubts and despondency of mankind, its universal appeal, and its distinction of having profound commentaries are all touched upon in the introduction.

The English translation is faithful, lucid, simple, and highly readable. The merit of this book lies in its being a stimulating work of initiation of beginners into the raptures of the holy book. This book is bound to be particularly useful for readers thirsting for meaningful and practical philosophy of the spirit. Daily recitation of the Gita, regarded as spiritually beneficial, is practised by millions of the votaries of Vedanta. The recitation becomes all-absorbing and spiritually-uplifting, when it is

done with the knowledge and understanding of the import of the sublime verses. This book may be considered ideal for that kind of fruitful recitation, as both the verses and their meanings are presented in a compact and tidy format. In short, this book may serve as a launching pad for serious spiritual aspirants keen on joining the spiritual odyssey that the song celestial offers so invitingly.

The popularity of this book is evident from the multiple editions it has gone through. This book is reasonably priced to make it affordable to all English-knowing public.

*N Hariharan  
Madurai*



### **The Buddhist Dead**

Eds. Bryan J Cuevas and  
Jacqueline I Stone

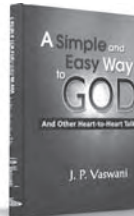
Motilal Banarsidass, 41, U A Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, New Delhi 110 007. x + 491 pp. ₹ 795. ISBN 9788120834248.

Death has always been intriguing and all major religions have developed rituals and practices to face it. Buddhism has for centuries converted the moroseness of death into an effective way to remind one of the impermanence of the world. This book ventures into a comparative study of traditions of handling death focusing on Sri Lanka, China, Japan, Tibet, and Burma.

Various beliefs of the afterlife are explored in this anthology of essays. This book does not restrict itself to the texts and doctrines regarding the Buddhist treatment of death but also focuses on the real-life practices, rituals, and also cultural implications. The giving up of the body or suicide for spiritual reasons has been dealt with by James Benn and D Max Moerman. The relationships of the dead and the living are discussed by Bryan J Cuevas, John Clifford Holt, and Matthew T Kapstein, while Hank Glassman, Mark Rowe, and Jason A Carbine talk about different funeral practices. With glossaries for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean characters and an elaborate index, this book is a unique peek into Buddhist practices regarding the dead and deserves attention by researchers, students, and admirers of this religion.

*PB*

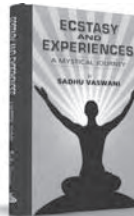
## BOOKS RECEIVED



### **A Simple and Easy Way to God**

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Sterling Publishers Pvt Ltd, A-59, Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-II, New Delhi 110 020. Website: [www.sterlingpublishers.com](http://www.sterlingpublishers.com). 153 pp. ₹ 175. ISBN 9788120760066.



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### **Stop Complaining: Start Thanking!**

J P Vaswani

Gita Publishing House, Sadhu Vaswani Mission, 10, Sadhu Vaswani Path, Pune 411 001. Website: [www.dadavaswanibooks.org](http://www.dadavaswanibooks.org). 104 pp. Price not mentioned. ISBN 9789380743202.

# MANANA

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## ***The Better Angels of Our Nature***

Steven Pinker

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi 110 017. Website: [www.penguin.com](http://www.penguin.com). xxix + 1026 pp. ₹ 699. ISBN 9780141034645.

No aspect of life is untouched by the retreat from violence. Daily existence is very different if you always have to worry about being abducted, raped, or killed, and it's hard to develop sophisticated arts, learning, or commerce if the institutions that support them are looted and burned as quickly as they are built.

The historical trajectory of violence affects not only how life is lived but how it is understood. What could be more fundamental to our sense of meaning and purpose than a conception of whether the strivings of the human race over long stretches of time have left us better or worse off? How, in particular, are we to make sense of *modernity*—of the erosion of family, tribe, tradition, and religion by the forces of individualism, cosmopolitanism, reason, and science? So much depends on how we understand the legacy of this transition: whether we see our world as a nightmare of crime, terrorism, genocide, and war, or as a period that, by the standards of history, is blessed by unprecedented levels of peaceful coexistence.

The human mind tends to estimate the probability of an event from the ease with which it can recall examples, and scenes of carnage are more likely to be beamed into our homes and burned into our memories than footage of people dying of old age. No matter how small the percentage of violent deaths may be, in absolute numbers there will always be enough of them to fill the evening

news, so people's impressions of violence will be disconnected from the actual proportions.

Perhaps the main cause of the illusion of ever-present violence springs from one of the forces that drove violence down in the first place. The decline of violent behavior has been paralleled by a decline in attitudes that tolerate or glorify violence, and often the attitudes are in the lead. By the standards of the mass atrocities of human history, the lethal injection of a murderer in Texas, or an occasional hate crime in which a member of an ethnic minority is intimidated by hooligans, is pretty mild stuff. But from a contemporary vantage point, we see them as signs of how low our behavior can sink, not of how high our standards have risen.

The mind is a complex system of cognitive and emotional faculties implemented in the brain which owe their basic design to the processes of evolution. Some of these faculties incline us toward various kinds of violence. Others—'the better angels of our nature,' in Abraham Lincoln's words—incline us toward cooperation and peace.

Aggression is not a single motive, let alone a mounting urge. It is the output of several psychological systems that differ in their environmental triggers, their internal logic, their neurobiological basis, and their social distribution.

*Predatory or instrumental violence* is simply violence deployed as a practical means to an end. *Dominance* is the urge for authority, prestige,




glory, and power, whether it takes the form of macho posturing among individuals or contests for supremacy among racial, ethnic, religious, or national groups. *Revenge* fuels the moralistic urge toward retribution, punishment, and justice. *Sadism* is pleasure taken in another's suffering. And *ideology* is a shared belief system, usually involving a vision of utopia, that justifies unlimited violence in pursuit of unlimited good.

Humans are not innately good (just as they are not innately evil), but they come equipped with motives that can orient them away from violence and toward cooperation and altruism. *Empathy* (particularly in the sense of sympathetic concern) prompts us to feel the pain of others and to align their interests with our own. *Self-control* allows us to anticipate the consequences of acting on our impulses and to inhibit them accordingly. The *moral sense* sanctifies a set of norms and taboos that govern the interactions among people in a culture, sometimes in ways that decrease violence, though often (when the norms are tribal, authoritarian, or puritanical) in ways that increase it. And the faculty of *reason* allows us to extricate ourselves from our parochial vantage points, to reflect on the ways in which we live our lives, to deduce ways in which we could be better off, and to guide the application of the other better angels of our nature.

The *Leviathan*, a state and judiciary with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, can defuse the temptation of exploitative attack, inhibit the impulse for revenge, and circumvent the self-serving biases that make all parties believe they are on the side of the angels. *Commerce* is a positive-sum game in which everybody can win; as technological progress allows the exchange of goods and ideas over longer distances and among larger groups of trading partners, other people become more valuable alive than dead, and they are less likely to become targets of demonization

and dehumanization. *Feminization* is the process in which cultures have increasingly respected the interests and values of women. Since violence is largely a male pastime, cultures that empower women tend to move away from the glorification of violence and are less likely to breed dangerous subcultures of rootless young men. The forces of *cosmopolitanism* such as literacy, mobility, and mass media can prompt people to take the perspective of people unlike themselves and to expand their circle of sympathy to embrace them. Finally, an intensifying application of knowledge and rationality to human affairs—the *escalator of reason*—can force people to recognise the futility of cycles of violence.

As one becomes aware of the decline of violence, the world begins to look different. The past seems less innocent; the present less sinister. One starts to appreciate the small gifts of coexistence that would have seemed utopian to our ancestors: the interracial family playing in the park, the comedian who lands a zinger on the commander in chief, the countries that quietly back away from a crisis instead of escalating to war. The shift is not toward complacency: we enjoy the peace we find today because people in past generations were appalled by the violence in their time and worked to reduce it, and so we should work to reduce the violence that remains in our time. Indeed, it is a recognition of the decline of violence that best affirms that such efforts are worthwhile. Man's inhumanity to man has long been a subject for moralization. With the knowledge that something has driven it down, we can also treat it as a matter of cause and effect. Instead of asking, 'Why is there war?' we might ask, 'Why is there peace?' We can obsess not just over what we have been doing wrong but also over what we have been doing right. Because we *have* been doing something right, and it would be good to know what, exactly, it is. 

# REPORTS

## **News of Branch Centres**

Srimat Swami Vagishanandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, consecrated the Sri Ramakrishna Temple at **Ramakrishna Mission, Limbdi** on 1 November 2014, Jagaddhatri Puja day. Special homa and worship, procession, cultural programmes, and public meetings, presided over by Swami Vagishanandaji and Swami Suhitananda, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, were held as part of the three-day programme from 31 October to 2 November. About 200 monastics and 6,000 devotees attended the programme. The Vivekananda Cultural Centre at **Ramakrishna Saradashrama, Ponnampet** was inaugurated on 26 November. The School Education Department, Government of West Bengal, awarded the Shishumitra Vidyalaya Puraskar of 2014 to **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Ramharipur** high school in recognition of its outstanding efforts in adopting child-friendly norms and standards in education and sanitation. The award comprised a trophy, a certificate, and ₹ 25,000/- in cash. All the 13 students of **Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University** in the final year of the five-year integrated MA in Sanskrit successfully cleared the National Eligibility Test conducted by the University Grants Commission. While all of them will be eligible for being appointed as Assistant Professors in any college or university in India, the top 7 have been further declared eligible for Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) for pursuing higher studies. Adarsh Barnwal, a class-10 student of **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Katihar** school, who participated in the IGNITE-2014 national competition conducted by the National



*Sri Ramakrishna Temple Consecration at Limbdi*

Innovation Foundation, won an award for his idea 'provision of fourth light (blue) to reduce traffic jams'. The award, comprising a certificate, a memento, and a book, was handed over by Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, former President of India, at a function held in Ahmedabad on 18 November. In the 14th National Paralympic Swimming Championship held at Indore from 6 to 9 November, 6 students of **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur Blind Boys' Academy**, 2 each in Senior, Junior, and Sub-Junior Groups, have won 7 gold, 8 silver, and 5 bronze medals. A student of **Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Kozhikode (Calicut)** school has secured first rank in the state, having obtained full marks in all subjects, in the Higher Secondary Examination conducted by the Kerala Board of Higher Secondary Education this year.

Durga Puja was performed in image at Mauritius Ashrama and the following 11 centres in Bangladesh: Baliati, Barisal, Chittagong, Comilla, Dhaka, Dinajpur, Faridpur, Habiganj, Jessore, Narayanganj, and Sylhet, and also at the Narail sub-centre of Jessore Ashrama. At Dhaka centre, Begum Rowshan Ershad, the leader of opposition of the Bangladesh National Assembly; Mr Mirza Abbas, the convenor of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party for Dhaka city; Sri Goutam Chakraborty, former Water Development Minister; Dr Kamal Hossain, former Law Minister; Sri Pankaj Saran, High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh, and several other distinguished persons attended the Durga Puja



celebration. On the Ashtami day, nearly 15,000 people witnessed the Kumari Puja and were served cooked Prasad.

The renovated Vivekananda Grove at the Olema Retreat of the **Vedanta Society of Northern California, USA** was inaugurated on 31 August. The grove has been serving as a memorial to Swamiji and as a site for meditation since 1963. Its meditation platform is made of stones brought from different places in America which were visited by Swamiji. As part of the renovation, a statue of Swamiji has been installed in the grove.

The **Vedanta Society of Sacramento** celebrated its golden jubilee with a day-long programme on 1 November, Jagaddhatri Puja day, with worship, homa, and a musical performance. About 200 devotees attended the programme.

*Vivekananda Grove at the Olema Retreat of San Francisco*



**Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Dhaka**, held the inaugural function of the centenary celebration of its high school on 8 November. Mr Md. Nazrul Islam Khan, Secretary, Ministry of Education, Government of Bangladesh, inaugurated the programme along with the other dignitaries. The programme also consisted of a rally, a musical performance, and a drama on Swami Vivekananda. Swami Suhitanandaji consecrated the Universal Meditation Centre at Swami Vivekananda College of **Ramakrishna Mission, Fiji**, on 27 November.

### ***New Math and Mission Centre***

A new branch centre of the **Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission** has been started at **Shimla** in Himachal Pradesh. Its address is 'Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, C/o Himalaya Brahma Samaj, Near A G Office, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh 171003', phone: 0177-2659755, email: <rkms Shimla@gmail.com>.

### ***Relief***

**Hudhud Cyclone Relief · Andhra Pradesh:** **Visakhapatnam** centre distributed 100 kg lentils, 160 kg onions, clothes, and 30 blankets among 200 affected families of Kondarajapalem village in Vijayanagaram district on 31 October.

**Flood Relief · Jammu & Kashmir:** **Jammu** centre continued its relief work among the victims of flash floods and landslides in the state. The centre gave 3,000 bricks to a family in Mawa-Karora village in Jammu district on 10 June. The centre also distributed 160 blankets, 20 shawls, 20 jackets, and 20 sets of utensils (each set containing 2 cooking pots, 5 plates, 5 mugs, 5 spoons, and 1 ladle) among 160 families of Subhashnagar, Bithur, Udheywala, and R S Pura areas in Poonch and Rajouri districts from 31 October to 15 November.

**Fire Relief · West Bengal:** On 27 November, **Kamarpukur** centre distributed 100 kg rice, 100 kg potatoes, 22 food packets (each containing


rice flakes, puffed rice, and gram), 13 blankets, 11 bed-sheets, 15 woollen jackets, 13 saris, 15 lungis, and 8 children's garments among 11 families of Ramachandrapur village in Hooghly district, whose houses had been gutted in a fire.

**Distress Relief** • The following centres distributed various items, as shown against their names, to needy people: **Baghbazar, Kolkata:** 1,643 saris in September. **Chandipur:** 33 saris and 62 dhotis from 23 September to 7 October. **Karimganj:** 240 saris and 240 dhotis on 4 November. **Sari-sha:** 1,163 saris and 83 dhotis from 24 September to 21 October. **Vrindaban:** 600 kg rice, 600 kg wheat flour, 150 kg dal, 150 kg mustard oil, 300 kg salt, and 75 kg sugar to 300 old widows on 1 November.

**Winter Relief** • 4,178 blankets were distributed among needy people through the following centres: **Antpur:** 552; **Bhubaneswar:** 104; **Gadadhar Ashrama, Kolkata:** 243; **Garbeta:** 300; **Gol Park, Kolkata:** 450; **Ichapur:** 300; **Jalpaiguri:** 250; **Jammu:** 250; **Jamshedpur:** 169; **Khetri:** 53; **Malda:** 407; **Manasadwip:** 200; **Sikra Kulingram:** 650; **Swamiji's Ancestral House, Kolkata:** 250. Besides, **Baghbazar** centre distributed 100 pairs of shoes and 100 sweaters on 13 October, **Garbeta** centre distributed 50 sweaters from 14 October to 13 November, and **Malda** centre distributed 94 fleece jackets on 23 and 25 November, among poor people.

**Rehabilitation** • The night shelter for the poor and homeless constructed at Rohini, Delhi, by our **Delhi** centre was handed over to the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB) in a function held on 12 November in the presence of Sri M Venkaiah Naidu, Union Minister for Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, Government of India.

### Free Child Eye Care and Eye Camps

Eye camps and child eye care programmes were conducted by several centres of the Ramakrishna Mission. Some of the centres provided patients with free spectacles and vitamins. A cumulative report is given here in two tables, covering the period from 1 December 2013 to 30 November 2014. 

Eye Camps			
Centre	Patients	Spectacles	Surgeries
Baghbazar	330	206	-
Bankura <sup>2</sup>	5,964	797	1,521
Chengalpattu and Chennai Math <sup>1</sup>	1,282	472	173
Darjeeling	98	16	3
Garbeta <sup>1</sup>	2,436	291	404
Ghatshila	237	139	33
Jamshedpur <sup>2</sup>	962	-	549
Kamarpukur	215	-	172
Kanpur	110	8	-
Khetri <sup>1</sup>	1,809	-	572
Lucknow	14,787	-	2,815
Madurai	2,129	54	370
Mayavati	1,018	-	270
Medinipur	92	-	24
Mumbai	306	163	70
Nagpur	409	203	32
Naora	874	233	247
Porbandar	797	-	212
Rajahmundry	478	76	39
Rajkot	2,337	-	712
Ranchi Sanatorium	46	-	16
Salem <sup>1</sup>	2,873	642	158
Saradapitha <sup>2</sup>	2,622	-	564
Sargachhi	3,619	85	195
Silchar	2,379	47	539
Ulsoor	3,687	-	1,552
Vadodara	218	29	31
Varanasi Home of Service	367	-	352
<b>Total</b>	<b>52,481</b>	<b>3,461</b>	<b>11,625</b>

<sup>1</sup> Includes data for November 2013

<sup>2</sup> Includes data for October and November 2013

Child Eye Care Programmes		
Centre	Children	Spectacles
Chandigarh	1,174	-
Dehradun	5,377	-
Jamshedpur	1,973	201
Khetri	10,288	1,264
Kanpur	312	-
Lucknow	16,604	747
Ranchi Morabadi <sup>1</sup>	1,598	-
Salem	236	32
<b>Total</b>	<b>37,562</b>	<b>2,244</b>

<sup>1</sup> Includes data for September to November 2013

# Swami Vireswarananda - *A Divine Life*

Editor : Swami Chaitanyananda

English Editor : Swami Satyamayananda & Shri Tirthankar Dasgupta



The English Edition of the above book will be **published shortly at Ramakrishna Mission, Khar, Mumbai.** The book comprises of the life, teachings, letters and selected special discourses of Revered Maharaj, alongwith about 200 Photographs, in two volumes, contributed by senior and junior monks, nuns, devotees and admirers from India and abroad.

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The Bengali Edition of the above book (already published) is also available from various Centres of Ramakrishna Mission and the following Distributor :

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