

ABHISHIKTANANDA SOCIETY

Brotherhood House, 7 Court Lane, Delhi 110 054

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My message has nothing to do with any *dharma* (religion) whatever. That is the case with every fundamental message. The message of the Upanishads, as regards its formulation, still depends on its Vedic-Brahmanic roots, but it is self-luminous—*svaprakāśa*; it reveals the depth in its proper light. It reflects it.

Similarly, the Gospel message is no more bound to the Jewish world in which it was revealed. Its universal value consumes and melts the wax vessels of the Judaeo-Greek world in which this honey was deposited. It echoes the very depths of the human heart: the message of love, of mutual giving, of relationship. The message that mankind's condition is divine. The Upanishadic message has moulded the Indian mind, and the Gospel message that of the West, though passing through channels that are further and further removed from the Source, and with waters more and more adulterated.

We have to recover the Source, and place humanity (disfracted by the *devas*, by religious alienation and superimposed sacredness) face to face with itself, with its own depth. To make man discover "that he is" at a level deeper than any external identity or any analysis of himself, even existential.

From Abhishiktananda's *Diary*, 14.12.71

WHAT SWAMIJI MEANS FOR ME

Western seekers after truth no longer come on pilgrimage to India in such numbers as they once did. East and West have come closer to each other, and both are confronted with the problems arising from the intermingling of their heritages. The same development which brought about a spiritual crisis in the West—namely, its technological culture—is now threatening the roots of tradition in those countries to which the seekers travelled as pilgrims.

It is necessary to take note of the fact that this worldwide

crisis originated in what was formerly Christian Europe—necessary, because the therapy for which we are looking can only be discovered on the basis of a correct diagnosis. This diagnosis will show clearly that the modern consciousness came to birth within a type of Christianity which separated doctrine from life. This 'unrealized' Christianity developed a grand system of universally applicable teaching which had little contact with living spirituality. The resulting gap was institutionalized in the disappearance of spiritual teachers (or gurus, such as still exist in Indian society). Their place was taken by universal doctrines.

This is what Abhishiktananda was referring to in a letter to a Carmelite (printed in *Bulletin* No. 9, 1986, p.1): "We have identified God, the Church, Christ, with the ideas that certain past generations have constructed of them"—an exact diagnosis of our problem! Thus modern man has created his ideal of 'objectivity'—of facts determined independently of the observing mind. Though it began in Christian theology, this ideal has become the slogan of the modern sciences which cannot escape a share in the responsibility for the crisis of the modern world.

"What has all this to do with Abhishiktananda himself?" For me, as a young Christian preparing myself for the priesthood in Austria, Abhishiktananda is one of the few who provide answers to the pressing questions of our time. Although I was very early attracted by Indian spirituality, I was not fully satisfied by it as it reached me in Europe. And although the guidance that was lacking in the contemporary spirituality of the Church could be found if I turned to the Indian heritage, it did not quite fit my need. None of the gurus or the teachings that I came across in my struggle for orientation fully convinced me. I always felt that something essential was missing. The vital point which none of them took into account was that the crisis of the western mind was born from a wrong idea of Christianity. They made me feel like a Tantalus, standing in the water but unable to quench my thirst, because I saw that a 'therapy' for the western mind cannot leave out Christianity in its treatment. This is not because "Outside the Church there is no salvation", but rather because our plight is the result of Christianity not being lived, not

being 'realized'. The only real cure for the sickness of our civilization must be found in overcoming the ill effects of the superficial Christian faith which has prevailed in recent centuries. Only an authentic Christianity can bring about the transformation that we need; and for this renewal we must look to the East, especially to India.

Seeking a guide on this difficult path—which means recognizing the errors of the 'Christian' West, and yet living from its authentic roots with the support given by the experience of Indian spirituality—I was fortunate to discover Abhishiktananda. In his own person he courageously followed this path of integral renewal and opened the way for those who will come after him. This Christian monk who agonized over the superficiality of Europe went forward through the transforming fire of advaitic experience. That demanded a real sacrifice, as can be seen from the painful struggle between his doubts and his faith as a Christian monk and priest. The cost of this process of spiritual purification is revealed in his *Diary*, for instance, when he faces the terrifying thought (25.9.53): "In committing myself totally to advaita, if Christianity is true, I risk being committed to a wrong track for eternity." However, trusting in God, he passed through this experience which dissolves all 'names and forms', all concepts and theories, and eventually rediscovered Christ in the depth of the advaitic experience, as it were on the Further Shore.

I hope it has become clear why this monk is important for me. I see him embodying one answer to the question of our time. Without authentic Christian spirituality, without feeling the pain of the present situation, and without accepting the treasures offered by the Eastern tradition, we shall not be able to cope with the vacuum that has developed in the modern mind. Abhishiktananda, by fulfilling this in his own life, has become for us a sign, pointing the way to an answer—not an intellectual one, but one that calls for personal following.

The fruit of his living and dying can already be seen. In Europe I have met several people who are strongly attracted by his personality and find in his writings guidance on their spiritual path. There are Christians who have learnt from his example to gain new insights into their faith by integrating 'non-Christian' traditions. His writings challenge not only our

easy-going respectable Christianity but also some widespread illusions in the West about 'Eastern spirituality'. Even here in India I have met a number of people (Indians as well as foreigners) who are trying to find authentic Christian faith by drawing on the heritage of Indian spirituality. To such people Abhishiktananda has much to give.

As my generation has not met Abhishiktananda personally, we rely on his writings and on the few living friends and disciples he left behind. Most of them are connected with the Abhishiktananda Society, which undertakes the important task of spreading his written works. Like many others I am grateful for this service; but, important as it is, I want to emphasize that the Society has at its command more than merely the written message of Swamiji. It also contains members who knew him personally, and are therefore able to give us a true picture of this man who deeply 'lived together' the authentic spirituality of East and West. Could they not do more to share with us their experiences of Swamiji, and so give invaluable aid to other seekers on the path of renewal and transformation as they come in contact with India's spiritual heritage?

Hans-Peter Premur (Varanasi—Salzburg)

THOUGHTS AFTER READING THE DIARY

I have been asked to write about Abhishiktanandaji from the point of view of someone outside the Society which bears his name.

One of the remarkable things about him was that he not only performed a pioneering task in exploring Hindu and Christian spirituality as one experience, but was also able to put pen to paper on the subject, and at great length. Posterity therefore has some sort of map of his journey in this land of the spirit.

Ask a Christian to explain the meaning of the Trinity or a Hindu the meaning of advaita. Each will have difficulty in giving an explanation, and you will have difficulty in understanding it. Language is a stumbling-block. But poets are sometimes better interpreters; and it is significant that when a poet manages to capture a spiritual experience in some kind of imagery, there is an immediate response from the reader. For example,

The angel that presided o'er my birth
Said, "Little creature, formed of joy and mirth,
Go, love, without the help of anything on earth." (Blake)

Little flower—but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,

I should know what God and man is. (Tennyson)

Either we say at once, "Ah, that's true!" or we realize that something has been said which makes us stop and ponder. Why? Because, whatever God is, we all share Him. Swamiji's message is that God is to be found within. My five-year-old daughter told me that; and the small boy put it well, who said, "God is a feel, not a think." So what Abhishiktananda says is not something new or strange, but something we already know, even down to the level of the 'abyss'. There is no domain where He is not, and the roots of all of us go beyond where we can say anything. Abhishiktananda's role is in helping to bring us into conscious touch with our own spiritual reality, as the psychiatrist seeks to acquaint us with our hidden emotional forces. It is a process of 'realization'.

A point I would like to make is that there is no room for any sort of spiritual elitism. No one can say, "I know", and "He does not". "Unless you become as a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." Someone gazing abstractedly at a flower may suddenly experience a flash of understanding denied to hundreds who plod through the Upanishads and look up Sanskrit texts. I think that Abhishiktananda himself was perhaps a little too critical of 'ordinary worshippers'. Saying prayers, lighting candles, kneeling and standing, do not obstruct inner understanding, and I should be very afraid of judging another person's spiritual awareness from his occupation with form and ritual. Of course, not many find what Swamiji found, but while we are in this world we have bodies and minds, the body to act, the mind to think and the spirit to realize. The spirit would be the finest point of inner awareness. If realization of 'I AM' has been achieved, the mind will learn to think loving thoughts and the body to live a sacrificial life. Conversely, a sacrificial life and a loving mind will help towards the loss of the ego in the *atman*.

If the Society became an esoteric group, it might obstruct

the work of Abhishiktananda rather than further it, so I hope it will never lose the 'common touch'. After all, why should it, when one considers that OM is also responsible for ducks and lambs and rabbits?

Jemifer Hashmi (Delhi)

P. Y. DESHPANDE

A friend has left us

On 26 July 1986 Sri P. Y. Deshpande, a friend of many of us, merged in "the great unknown", as he used to say. His was the death of a yogi; in the true sense of the cessation of all activities, without tension or struggle, peaceful, his life being fulfilled (*kr̥takṛtya*). He has taught us the ultimate lesson of the "yoga of negation", *abhāvayoga*, of which he loved to speak, i.e., the negation of the enlarged 'I'.

He was a passionate lover of truth in all the stages of his life. Whenever he spoke about his first meeting with Swami Abhishiktananda, his eyes used to shine, and one could feel that it was an authentic meeting in which two great souls recognized each other—the kind of spiritual encounter of which Swamiji was ever dreaming. Indeed, it was always a privilege to meet Deshpandeji and to receive inspiration from his vigorous search for truth, from his inner freedom, his insight.

He was neither an "official" guru nor a Swami; he was free from every religious label and had no group of devotees, and yet he was a spiritual man in the true sense, free from all paraphernalia. True renunciation, true spirituality is that which is not recognizable externally. All these words have been so much misused that he himself carefully avoided using them. How much of present-day spirituality falls prey to appearances and has actually become show-business, whereas the authentic spiritual greatness of a person like Deshpande remains hidden.

Born on 11.12.1899, Sri Deshpande studied law, but being strongly attracted by Mahatma Gandhi he gave up his career to join the freedom struggle. He landed in British jails, where he undertook a hunger strike. He was involved in politics, but later refused the chance to become a minister, and devoted himself to social action and journalism. He was a noted Marathi writer, and won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1961 for his autobiographical novel, *Anamikachi Chintanika*. After

a phase of communism, he experienced a spiritual conversion which transformed his life totally. Coming into close contact with J. Krishnamurti, he moved from Nagpur to Varanasi, where he spent 17 years at the Krishnamurti Foundation (Rajghat), thinking, writing and inspiring many young seekers. Unlike Krishnamurti he did not deny tradition and scriptures, but discovered the freshness and truth of the Vedas, Upanishads, Yoga-Sutras, the Buddha and Jnanadeva. He wrote commentaries on many important spiritual texts, and his book *The Authentic Yoga* became famous, especially in its German version. His insight was always new, as it was born from his own spiritual experience. In him we have lost an authentic friend, a guru.

Bettina Bäumer (Varanasi)

REVIEW

Swami Abhishiktananda—the Man and his Message: edited by Vandana. ISPCK, Delhi, 1986. Pp. 93. Rs. 20.00 or \$ 5.00.

In this welcome addition to 'Abhishiktananda literature', Vandanaji has collected some of the talks and papers offered in the Week held at Jeevan Dhara Ashram, Jaiharikhal, in December 1985.

The meeting brought together some who had known Swamiji personally and others who only knew him through his books. It was evidently a time of mutual sharing through speech and silence, contemplation and worship, which called the participants to a deeper immersion in the Real, to the Awakening, of which Swamiji's whole being is a sign for our time. It was further enriched by the contributions of the Hindu friends who took part. In fact this Week gave an object-lesson of what the Society should be doing in addition to the work of publishing his writings (as is pointed out elsewhere in this *Bulletin*).

Some of the papers have appeared previously in periodicals, but their collection here makes them easily accessible and is a great boon: Murray Rogers' vivid account of "Swamiji—the Friend"; Odette Baumer's treatment of the Lord's Prayer as a "way of initiation", bringing together a wealth of texts from Swamiji's writings; and G. Gispert-Sauch's interesting study of "The Spirituality of Swami Abhishiktananda".

In addition, the book contains Vandanaji's Opening Talk, in which she spoke of the ways in which she herself has been

helped by Swamiji; Bettina Bäumer's penetrating commentary on an important passage from the *Diary* (a sample of what is needed on a larger scale, if we are to profit fully from this record of his experience); and a summary of the important issues raised by Sara Grant in her talk on "Questions of the Heart". We are also given brief testimonies from two of the participants and an evaluation of the Week as a whole by Bettina Bäumer.

A small complaint: the proof-reading could have been better, and in O. Baumer's paper more could have been done to indicate the distinction between quotation and comment. Also important words are missing from p. 38, para 2.

But don't fail to get this book! J. D. M. S.

NEWS

Membership of the Abhishiktamanda Society. The Executive Committee at its meeting in October 1986 discussed the meaning of 'membership' of the Society. From the beginning the *Bulletin* has been sent to all who have asked for it, but this does not automatically make them Members. Some have explicitly asked to become Members, and others who have kindly sent donations have been taken as wishing to become Members. The names of all such are proposed to the Executive Committee, and a list is kept. We value the assurance of support given by our Members, while recognizing that their worldwide distribution makes contact with us or common activities difficult to organize. Any suggestions for making membership more effective will gladly be considered. Meanwhile there are only two secretaries, one in India and one in Switzerland, who do their best to keep up with correspondence and inquiries. Should we, for example, aim at having an official representative in each country where we have members?

The Committee wishes to point out that being a Member does not entitle anyone to claim to represent the Society officially, unless they are authorized to do so by the Executive Committee.

(Other News and 'Thanks' regrettably held over.)