Abhishiktananda Centenary
Gaunt's House
July 15th – 18th 2010

Introduction.

Abhishiktananda was an extraordinary spiritual figure. A prophet. A man of his time. Though he died in 1973, over 30 years ago, we are so lucky to live in his wake, as it were. To have his example before us as we struggle with living a spiritual life in the twenty first century. His courage in facing the problems that some of us face now is like a bright lamp on a dark night.

I never met Abhishiktananda. I so very much wish I had. Like Bettina, who will be talking to us later and who was his friend. But by writing his biography, in a curious sort of way, I feel I know him well. He has become a friend and spiritual mentor.

I had written a biography of Bede Griffiths, so to write about Abhishiktananda seemed a natural thing to do. He was, after all, one of the original founders of Shantivanam Ashram, where Bede spent so many years. But when Abhishiktananda's great friend Murray Rogers suggested that I did, I was terrified. Especially as a theologian friend had said, 'Any biography of Abhishiktananda would have to be a theological biography.' Well I am no theologian, so that scared the wits out of me. It was Murray who persuaded me to do it and I am endlessly grateful to him for leading me towards four years of such richness as I tried to swim in the same spiritual waters as this great man.

In fact I found that by following Abhishiktananda's life, with its great emphasis on experience, I did not need to worry too much about theology in the abstract, for his life was its expression. The hardest thing about writing about Abhishiktananda was writing about someone who had experienced such extraordinary spiritual heights and depths, who was so courageous in his spiritual exploration, so honest in his account of it. Hardest of all, I had to enter into the tensions of his life that caused him so much pain - the crucifixion which led to his enlightenment.
I am going to talk about the two main tensions he endured, first of being a European who fell in love with India and secondly being a devout Christian who found himself passionately drawn to Hinduism. These tensions were at the heart of his spiritual experience and at the heart of his suffering and at the heart of his extraordinary spiritual flowering.

We, half a century later, can identify with much of this, for his problems are faced by many of us today, as the world becomes one world and faiths and nationalities jostle each other in many minds. So first, that conflict which many of us experience, perhaps in being born of parents of different nationalities or marrying someone who does not share our upbringing and culture - being torn between two countries, two cultures, two languages……

1) Brittany
Two years before he died, when Abhishiktananda was 61 years old, he received a letter from a friend from Brittany which moved him deeply. He wrote back:

‘You make me dream, relive those things which I usually push into the background in order to be able to live my life in peace. … The Himalayas are splendid, and Arunachala is greater still; yet what can be compared to the sea of my Emerald Coast…? All this belongs to the depth of my being. It is like those Tridentine Masses and the Gregorian chant of the monasteries, which I would doubtless put on again like a glove….Before I send this off, a deep bow to the ocean for me, please!’ (To AMS 3.8.71)

So in this passage we see both conflicts. And I start here to remind us that Abhishiktananda was born Henri Le Saux, a Frenchman from Brittany, and though from the moment he left for India in 1948, he never returned to his homeland, Brittany was in his bones. He even said that perhaps his main reason for never returning there was that he feared that he would not be able to bear it emotionally. Though he loved India passionately and was to spend years living as an Indian Sadhu, many of them in silence and solitude high in the Himalayas, he was, as he himself said, 'terribly, terribly French.'

The Le Saux family - though to everyone's fury one branch of the family insisted on calling themselves 'Le Socks' - were a huge extended family and Henri was the first
born, until he was seven years old the only child, forming a strong relationship of
gentle intimacy with his mother. His parents lived in the charming small town of St
Briac, on the north coast of Brittany, where they ran a shop, a real corner shop with
the words A La Providence de Dieu written on two sides of the corner. I have been
there and seen that the words are still there, though the shop is now a gift shop. St
Briac is a charming small town and in Henri's day his parents sold groceries, and
Henri would have grown up with salamis hanging from the ceiling, bottles of wine
and cognac on the shelves and breathing the aroma of good coffee.

As his six siblings came along and grew up Henri became their beloved role model. It
was to him they turned, rather than their father, and when he left home it was to him
they would write, if they wanted a confidante. This feeling extended to the next
generation and one of his nieces is the meticulous guardian of the correspondence of
the man they referred to as their 'legendary uncle' - they are endearingly proud of
him.

Most of the people of Brittany at the time were Roman Catholic, weekly church
attendance was compulsory and to go to Mass daily was not unusual. But even in
that context the Le Saux family were thought to be exceptionally devout. Henri's
father was considered rather ostentatious about his faith and was known in the town as
'Le petit Jesus' and, more kindly, dubbed 'the saint' by a small boy who noticed that he
got to church three times on Sundays. Their devoutness extended into every detail
of their lives, for instance they always put aside a bit of their Sunday gateaux for the
poor. The great festivals of the church marked their lives as clearly as they marked
the seasons, they walked for miles in those very Breton manifestations of popular
fervour known as the 'pardons' and once, on the feast of Corpus Christi, young Henri
donned a sheepskin to join the procession and became, for a few hours, John the
Baptist.

2) Kergonan

So we see Henri Le Saux as very French, very Catholic - and it was no surprise that
he was sent to the Petit Seminaire near Rennes, where there was a gentle expectation,
though not a demand, that he would enter the priesthood. Eventually he did indeed,
become a monk, entering the Benedictine monastery of Kergonan in 1929, when he
was just 19. Despite his youthful idealism it was not an easy decision for him and we begin to see the passionate determination of this man, terrified by what his life seemed to be holding out for him but never for one minute giving in, always following what he perceived to be the will of God for him. His sisters told me how hard it was for him to accept his vocation. One of them remembers seeing him, thinking he was unobserved, clenching his fists and saying, ‘My God, you can’t possibly ask that of me!’ But once he had accepted what seemed to be his fate he set about his new way of life with utter single-mindedness and dedication.

In all this I seem to be so much like a pawn, so to speak, and to be living in a kind of dream. I didn’t understand - and less than ever do I now understand - all the steps that I am taking. I can neither convince myself, nor can I even imagine, that I shall end this year in a monastery, and this idea seems to my natural mind both horrible and futile; but I feel myself driven by something which does not allow me to draw back or turn aside, and compels me, almost in spite of myself, to throw myself into the unknown which I see opening before me.’

If his vocation ever flickered it was fanned by an experience which was one of the determining events of his young life. While he was at the junior seminary his mother nearly died giving birth to her sixth child, which itself did not survive. A year later another child was expected and Henri, devoted to his mother as he was, was terrified that this time she might actually die. So terrified was he that his prayers would end with the promise that, if she were to survive, he would dedicate his life to the service of the Lord and would go wherever he was sent, even to the most distant mission.

Even having made the decision he was ambivalent about his vocation. On the one hand he was filled with joy at the thought of being a monk, hoping to find God more fully in the cloister than anywhere else. Yet often he felt downcast, and worried at the thought of the pains of monastic life. Most of all he dreaded leaving home and was realistic about the full implications of poverty: ‘I like to have things of my own, to have things which in some sense complete my ‘I’, but in the monastery I have to feel that none of the things that I use belongs to me.’ So too, sociable by nature, he dreaded the prospect of having to avoid human society and was apprehensive at the thought of the monotony with which one day would follow another, almost identical.

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1 Life - letter to RM pp4-5
2 To his novice master, Dec 4th, 1929, A le B. Coll.
He felt an irresistible call, yet he was realistic, he knew that the monastic life is hard. His letters to his Novice-Master show him struggling, asking the Novice-Master's advice again and again. He was still at the stage of decision making where he needed confirmation from outside, the inner voice not yet strong enough to make up its own mind.

Henri was passionate, devoted to his family, not given to compromise. I am always moved by this passage from a letter he wrote to his friend Raymond Mace only days after his arrival at the monastery. He was just 19 at the time.

> Of course it needs guts to become a holy monk, but despite its difficulty I feel one is bound to aim high. A monk cannot accept mediocrity, only extremes are appropriate for him.
> The richness of the monastic life I have only begun to glimpse now that I have entered it for good; and I still feel myself as if intimidated, dazzled by it; it is too vast for one to be able to grasp it all at once.
> And God in his goodness has called me into this life. Why? A profound mystery of Providence... This good fortune almost frightens me......

'A monk cannot accept mediocrity, only extremes are appropriate for him.' That phrase tells one so much about this extraordinary man who was to go to such spiritual extremes.....

A tiny incident tells one something of how he had changed by the time he arrived at the monastery. One of the older monks had been deputed to prepare his room. He made up the bed, set out two towels and some soap, and looked around for a mirror, in those days always provided. He could not find one and had to make do with a little piece of glass, the size of a man’s hand and broken. With a slight feeling of shame he put it in place.

Years later Henri told the old monk that on arriving at the monastery his greatest joy was this broken mirror. He saw it as a promise of the austere way of life which he longed to live; confirmation that he would not be encumbered with material possessions, but would live in bareness and simplicity. His early fear that he might want to have possessions ‘which', as he had said, 'in some sense complete my “I”',

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3 Raymond Mace, Oct 27, 1929, Life, 6
had finally gone as he embraced poverty willingly, indeed eagerly. On this issue he was never to change.

So Henri became a monk and was soon locked contentedly into the regular Benedictine pattern of prayer, work and study. The normally predictable stages from the initial welcome to the taking of final vows was, in Henri's case, interrupted by having to do his military service, but he took his final vows in 1935, typically praying that the religious life might be as he dreamt it and that he would not be 'a commonplace monk' but a sacrifice, continually offered.

Once he was a fully professed monk and an ordained priest, Dom Le Saux, as we should now call him, became the librarian, a position he loved. But again his monastic routine was interrupted as with the outbreak of World War Two he was called up. He had served as a foot soldier for less than a year when he was captured, not far from St Briac, and somehow managed to borrow a bicycle and ride home before the names were taken. Not surprisingly army life did not suit Henri, but one of his sisters told me with delight how he was rebuked by a superior because one his officers did not do a good military salute. 'Maybe, mon Adjutant, said the gentle Sergeant Le Saux, 'but he's my best grenade thrower.'

So that was Henri in the 1930s, very French, very Roman Catholic, devoted to his family, apparently set fair on the course of being a Benedictine monk in Brittany and never intending to leave the country of his birth. That was one half of this extraordinary man, his birth, his nationality and the first 38 years of his life. It was all to change.

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3) 'Another irresistible vocation.'

There are quite a few mysteries about Henri Le Saux. One of them is how, after nearly 20 years in the monastery, he was overcome by a passionate desire to go to India. How, living in a monastery in Brittany in the 1930s did he learn enough about India and Indian thought to know he wanted to go there? One of his great friends at Kergonan was Canon Lemarie, who died in Chartres recently. I wrote to him about
this and he told me he too had wondered, as there was little about India in the library, not the Upanishads and not the Bhagavad Gita. An American scholar gave me a list he had compiled of the books and articles believed to be in the library at the time, but apart from a few reviews of the missions to the East there was little to account for Henri’s interest.

But we must never forget how devoted Henri was to his family - and it is possible that his uncle, a missionary who was martyred in China and much admired by the family, had something to do with it. He had been to see Henri at Kergonan and apparently the two had disagreed strongly, the older man wondering how Henri could shut himself up in a monastery when there was the whole world to explore. The date of this meeting was 1934, the very year from which Henri later dated his longing to go to India. Perhaps his interest had started with this conversation.

Another mystery was how he managed to keep so quiet about this great longing. Nobody, not even his friend Canon Lemarie, knew anything about it. Here he was, with this great ambition that he admitted had 'completely taken him over' and he didn't say a word to anyone for ten years. One monk, though, did learn that something was up, quite by chance. He was feeding the chickens in the wood when he saw Henri wandering about, talking aloud to himself in a strange language. He was practising his Tamil and he thought no-one could hear him!

He would never have left France while his mother was alive, but when she died, in 1944, he started exploring the possibilities, admitting, many years later, that life in the monastery did not entirely fulfil him, and that it was 'in his deep dissatisfaction that his desire to come to India was born.'

For the next two or three years his letters are peppered with despairing remarks such as 'still nothing from India' and 'From India, nothing, nothing, nothing. It is almost making me ill.' But eventually, in 1947, thirteen years after he had found himself longing to go to India, he received a letter from Father Monchanin, the remarkable French priest who had been living in India since 1939 and who wanted to establish Christian contemplative life in an Indian form - exactly what Henri wanted to do.
Henri wrote back a long letter in which he said he did not want to lay down anything too firmly at this stage, but feeling it was important that he and Father Monchanin should share their ideas. It is fascinating to see both how far his ideas had already advanced and how much they were, over the years in India, to change.

Above all - and here I am sure we are in complete agreement - there must be total Indianization... But, in my opinion, our starting point should be the Rule of St Benedict, for in it we have a monastic tradition which is extremely sound and which would relieve us from having to launch out into the unknown... I would like to offer to our dear Tamilians the Rule at the moment of its birth, as it were, so that little by little, with experience as the sole guide, specifically Hindu customs could be grafted onto it. On this basis, like you, I envisage the tree of monasticism once more flourishing in all its variety, with hermits, solitaries and mendicants; we have to sanctify the whole contemplative thrust of India and Christianize the monastic institutions through which she expresses the depth of her spirit..

Later he goes on to talk about the way he expects them to live:

Our life-style will certainly be very austere, much more so than is the case of our French monasteries. This will be no problem for me - quite the reverse...we must live as sannyasis, and the life of a sannyasa is a Hindu institution which has its own traditional rules to which we would submit...I dream of the day when we will be fully Tamilian, in our dress, in our lives and customs, sitting in choir for the psalms in the lotus position - if indeed we ever manage to acquire it! - and taking our meals on banana leaves, seated on the ground...

On Sunday, July 26th, 1948, the abbot invited Henri to celebrate High Mass and the monks gathered to see him off. Many of them were crying openly, because he had become a very popular monk.

So Dom Le Saux, aged 38, was about to leave France and take on another life, another nationality. And another tension, far harder to bear, was to haunt him. For the rest of his life he lived with the tension of remaining devoutly Christian while being passionately drawn to advaitic Hinduism. Now he was to be truly torn apart.

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4) India at last

Father Monchanin, the Priest with whom Henri had corresponded, met him at Trichy and took him to Kulittalai, where at the time he was living in a small Ashram and working as a parish priest. Henri took to India as if he had been born to it and just three months after he arrived, he wrote, ‘I think I have found what I have been waiting for for so long.’ It was as if he had lived there all his life; everything that might have
seemed strange was natural to him. This was all the more surprising when one remembers he had never been out of France before and that this was 1948, long before a visit to India was as natural for a European as a visit to Paris; long before Indian music, clothes, food and customs had become part of so many western lives.

He was particularly charmed by the Indian greeting:

‘No brutal handshakes as in Europe, but the gracious gesture of folded palms raised to the level of the chin. And Christians bow or kneel before their priest upon extending this greeting. In return I must give them the “asirvadam,” that is to say, I pronounce what signifies a blessing by raising my right hand, if not making the sign of the cross on their foreheads. Because I still cannot talk to them in Tamil.’

Instinctively he practised normal good Tamil manners such as leaving his shoes outside when going into a house and never letting the cup touch his lips when drinking, noting curiously that these customs were not observed by missionaries or even by Indian clergy. He happily followed other local customs, sitting cross-legged on the floor, using a banana leaf for a plate, kneading the rice and spicy sauce with his right hand, the hand he soon learnt to keep clean, reserved for eating. Already a vegetarian on principle, the simple meals of dahl and rice were totally acceptable to him, though it was so unusual for a European not to eat meat that he sometimes found himself with no alternative but to join in. One Christmas, dining with a Bishop, courtesy demanded that he shared a meal in which, ‘from the rich soup to the pudding made with eggs, there was literally nothing that a sannyasi could eat without sinning!’

Six months after his arrival he tentatively started wearing the kavi, the saffron robes of the sannyasi. He wrote to one of the monks at Kergonan of his new way of life:

‘I have completely adopted the robes and way of life of the Hindu monks. You would die of laughter if you saw me as I write. We can only succeed in our work if we become Indian right through - right to the depths of our heart and soul - right to the smallest details of daily life.’

He was already beginning to experience being both French and Indian, Christian and Hindu, Western and Eastern. This was to become the source of the most extreme and painful tension that anyone could be asked to go through in their search for God.
5) Arunachala

Henri had only been in India for a few months before he received his real initiation into Indian spirituality. He met Ramana Maharshi. From that moment he knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he was in the presence of a man who, as one writer put it, 'had been drawn so deep into the cave of the heart as to have touched the heart of the cosmos.' And I think it possible to get a glimpse of Abhishiktananda’s future spiritual life in these words he wrote:

‘...the invisible halo of the Sage had been perceived by something in me deeper than any words. Unknown harmonics awoke in my heart. A melody made itself felt, and especially an all-embracing ground-bass...In the Sage of Arunachala of our own time I discerned the unique Sage of the eternal India, the unbroken succession of her sages, her ascetics, her seers; it was as if the very soul of India penetrated to the very depths of my own soul and held mysterious communion with it. It was a call which pierced through everything, tore it apart and opened a mighty abyss.’

Henri was almost as influenced by the Holy Mountain of Arunachala as he was by Ramana Maharshi, the sage who lived there, and his three visits there changed him radically. The silence of the mountain had transformed advaita, non-duality, from an inspiring idea to an experienced reality. Towards the end of 1952 he started keeping a Spiritual Diary - one of the most extraordinary spiritual documents I have ever read. This entry about enlightenment, written after a visit to Arunachala, has a refreshing directness and simplicity.

‘Anyone who has been enlightened continues to see grass as green and the sky as blue, to consider rice as something to eat and cloth as something to wear, and the train as a means of transport. What he is liberated from is the relationship to “himself” that until then he projected onto these things. Things are seen in themselves, and no longer in dependence on “himself.” Dear ones are no less loved, but there is no longer the least attachment, the least turning back on “himself.”’

6) Tension.

On March 21st, 1950, the Feast of St Benedict, Shantivanam Ashram was inaugurated and Don Henri Le Saux took the name of Abhishiktananda, which means ‘The Bliss

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4 Donald Nicholl Foreword to Life and Letters.
5 The Secret of Arunachala p9
6 Spiritual Diary p50 July 19, 1952
of the Enlightened One, the Lord.’ Already he was beginning to experience the tension that was to drive him almost to breakdown - the conflict between his devout, deep rooted Christianity and his love for Hinduism - in particularly for its doctrine of advaita - non-duality. He had come to bring Christian contemplation, and Christianity itself, to India. But after only a few weeks he realised that people were politely letting him know they were quite happy with their own religion.

‘...alas, how far these people are from us; they speak of Christ with admiration and read the Bible; but for them Christ is only one of the many manifestations of God on the earth - Krishna, Buddha, Christ, Ramakrishna.... The nearer I come to the Hindus, the more I feel them at the same time close to me in their loyal search for God, and far from me in their psychological inability to admit that Christianity is the only authentic means of coming to God.’

He was soon to change in this feeling that Christianity was the only way of coming to God, realising that he had what he called ‘two loves.’ He quickly came to feel completely at home in Indian dress, in fact to live almost entirely as an Indian; he never lost his feeling of ‘belonging’ there - indeed others have claimed for him that he came to understand India better than any other Westerner ever has. Nevertheless he could never forget the country of his birth. After all he had spent the first 38 years of his life there! After a musical evening with European friends he wrote to his family:

‘It was as if there were two men in the depths of me - one a Hindu, who finds his happiness in the Rig-Veda and the Bhagavad Gita and delights in the recitation of Sanskrit and in Tamil music, and then another ‘being’, another ‘self’, who bears in himself a whole experience, literary and social, from a western country.’

And this was the great problem that was to torture him for years - there were indeed two men in the depths of him. It is in this reconciliation between East and West, Christian and Hindu, that Abhishiktananda has made such a huge contribution to us, not least because so many of us share his situation - if not to the same depths at least to some extent. Certainly I do. So many of us are torn between different faiths, or are Christians attracted to another faith. If it is easier for us now, it is largely because of the courage of this man and others like him.

7 F, September 16, 1948, Life, 32.
So this brave man started out on one of the most exciting and dangerous spiritual paths - and he was determined to do it by way of his own experience, not theory, not the experience of others.

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The way of experience is hard. One has only to compare the challenge of climbing a high mountain with the challenge of writing a thesis on the dangers of mountain climbing. To actually do the thing needs a particular kind of courage - and that is what Abhishiktananda had. He longed to reach the state of union, of oneness beyond the opposites, where all religions meet. And if it is any comfort to us, struggling along a similar path, it took him quite a long time. One of his teachers, experienced in assessing the advaitic state, was disappointed that by March 1957, after he had been in India for nearly ten years, he had not yet 'arrived', had not yet become enlightened. A conclusion with which Abhishiktananda did not appear to disagree.

Many words and phrases have been used to describe this state - it is often called the search for God, but it has also been called realization, enlightenment, awakening, satori, the advaitic experience, Nirvana, a state of Being, kensho, living in the present moment, the search for the Holy Grail, even the search for ‘That which cannot be named.’ Abhishiktananda mostly used the word ‘awakening’. For him it was not enough to know about enlightenment, any wish he might have felt to theorize was secondary to the experience, to making the journey himself – to awaken to it’s reality. He felt compelled to answer the question ‘Who am I?’ and to learn to live in a state of pure Being, every moment a present moment. Following the twists and turns of this search for the Holy Grail is as enthralling a journey as a human being can make, and like any journey with such a prize, it is dangerous. Abhishiktananda was well aware of the dangers and he was probably not too surprised by the anguish through which his chosen path led him. It must have been like being in love with two people at once.

Advaïta is so overpowering - disappearance in the One! And so is Hindu worship...... I am torn, rent in two, between Christ and my brothers; my brothers more even than my blood...When I pray per Christum, they cannot follow me. And I can no longer rejoice in our feasts as formerly, because my people are not with me. And I cannot unite myself to my people in their symbolic religion, because I am a priest of the true religion, and thus I fail to have communion with my people in what is the highest and most divine in them.‘'
‘...because I am a priest of the true religion...’ - there was the core of it. Not only was Christianity deep in his bones, instilled by his parents, nourished by his family and his time in the monastery at Kergonan, he had, as he later said, a ‘visceral attachment to the Christian myth’. He was not just a Christian by conviction and by intellect, he was a Christian instinctively and intuitively. For him, at this deep level, Christianity was the true religion; further he had taken solemn vows as a priest of that religion. How could he taste the waters of another faith without feeling disloyal?

‘What gnaws away at my body as well as my mind is this: after having found in advaita a peace and a bliss never experienced before, to live with the dread that perhaps, most probably, all that my latent Christianity suggests to me is none the less true, and that therefore advaita must be sacrificed to it...In committing myself totally to advaita, if Christianity is true, I risk committing myself to a false path for eternity.’

The problems were incessant and unrelenting. His Diary is full of outbursts, sometimes measured, sometimes in pure anguish. In a moderately detached mood, he wrote that the gulf between Christianity and Hinduism was that Christianity, born in a climate of Judeo-Greek thought, is basically realistic, taking man and the earth he lives in seriously and placing great importance on our present lives. But for Hindus - and so great is his involvement that here he writes ‘us Hindus’ - ‘such a view of reality has no meaning. We feel too deeply the abyss between the permanent and the impermanent.’ More often the anguish pours out of him that he should have found peace so far from the place and form of his original commitment:

Who is there on either side of the frontier to whom I can cry out my anguish - who, if he belongs to this side, will not take fright and anathemize me, and if he is on the other side, will not take an all too human delight because I am joining him?’

He summed up his dilemma in a few words:

From now on I have tasted too much of advaita to be able to recover the “Gregorian” peace of a Christian monk. Long ago I tasted too much of that “Gregorian” peace not to be anguished in the midst of my advaita.

And of course he had to face that great stumbling block to anyone struggling with Christianity in relation to the other faiths; ‘I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.’ And he gave the controversial line a twist: ‘The Church claims to be the Only way of salvation. The advaitin claims that he has
understood the message of Jesus better than the Church." How does someone who has been, who still is, so close to the Church for so long, cope with that understanding? His intellect told him to find Christianity at the core of advaita, but his heart could not follow. Years later he wrote to his friend Raimon Panikkar:

".. You cannot be torn apart in the depth of your soul, as we are by this double summons (from advaitin India on one side, and from Revelation on the other), and by this double opposition (from India and the Church, in their ritualism, their formalism and their intellectualism), without being lacerated even physically.”

7) The Awakening.

There is no doubt that the pain he experienced, torn between advaitic Hinduism and Christianity, enabled him to communicate with others who found themselves in a similar position. He had lived it himself, suffered the anguish of ‘double-belonging’. He knew all too well that he ran the risk of not belonging to either side; his calling, his demanding, almost impossible calling, was to belong wholly to both sides. And he was beginning to realise the value his experience could have for other people.

This is what he wrote to his sister Marie-Thérèse:

‘What contrasts! I do my best to be at ease everywhere, but there is an inevitable tension. But it is precisely this being torn apart between India and Europe, between Vedanta and Christianity which enables me to live the fundamental experience and to express its mystery to some extent.”

Abhishiktananda’s growing spiritual stature and the influence he was coming to have on people were born of his life style. His spirituality, radiating from him more and more, was the fruit of the life he led; it came from his insistence on learning from experience rather than from theory, it had its roots in the long hours he spent in solitude and silence. But eventually his tensions were resolved. He was to reach his goal in the most dramatic and complete way.

It happened after spending a few days of searing spiritual intensity with his disciple Marc Chaduc. He had bought some provisions and was running for the bus when it happened - a full scale, serious heart attack. He lay helpless on the pavement for, he
thinks, half an hour, when a French woman who knew him slightly was passing in a taxi, which happened to stop right beside him; she recognised him and called the doctor.

He was seriously ill, but this physical illness was to be the great climax of his life. Over the next months he talked and wrote about it gratefully, sometimes ecstatically, always with a sense of wonder.

'Really a door opened in heaven when I was lying on the pavement. But a heaven which was not the opposite of earth, something which was neither life nor death, but simply “being”, “awakening”...beyond all myths and symbols."

He had reached his goal. His disciple Marc Chaduc called it ‘the definitive Awakening beyond all else, the final explosion.’

How can one talk about such an experience? Abhishiktanada tried to, and we treasure his words. He said that ‘the Awakening is independent of any situation whatever, of all pairs of opposites...One awakes everywhere and once and for all.' For him this serious heart attack was not a physical tragedy but ‘a marvellous spiritual experience’, and he rejoiced. At last he was free to be, simply to be, and along with this realisation he knew that this grace was not only for him, it was for others. He longed to share the experience which had eluded him for so many years; to say to others, as others had said to him: ‘in this quest you run about everywhere, whereas the Grail is here, close at hand, you have only to open your eyes.’ Whatever time he had left was an unexpected extension; he must not misuse it, he must use it for others, though he had no idea how. He knew better than most that words were not enough, nevertheless he would try using them. He would say, ‘Look, it is in the depth of yourself, it is that very “I” that you are saying in every moment of your conscious life, even in the depth of your consciousness when you dream or sleep.’

His excitement was such that, whenever he had the strength, he wrote to his friends telling them of his marvellous adventure. These do not read like the letters of a sick man, they were written by someone who had had the most important experience of his life and who was rejoicing in it. They are astonishing letters:

While I was waiting on my sidewalk, on the frontier of the two worlds,
I was magnificently calm, for I AM, no matter in what world!
That to his sister. And to a friend, he used the analogy of the sea: ‘It seemed to me as if I was navigating between two ‘shores’ of being that man calls life and death, and to discover myself in the middle of the great current of Being Itself which has nothing to do with either life or with death.’ It was ‘like the marvellous solution to an equation’:

‘I have found the Grail. And that is what I keep saying and writing to anyone who can grasp the figure of speech. The quest for the Grail is basically nothing else than the quest for the Self. A single quest, that is the meaning of all the myths and symbols. It is yourself that you are seeking through everything.’

For years he had longed for this moment, lived for it, suffered for it; yet now it had arrived and it was so simple. ‘The discovery that the AWAKENING has nothing to do with any situation, even so-called life or so-called death; one is awake, and that is all.’

‘It is at the same time a wonderful experience of “cruising” between death and life, discovering that one IS!’ Sometimes he expanded his thinking, for instance on the distinction between notion and experience and how even after his own awakening experience

‘I can only aim at awakening people to what “they are”. Anything about God or the Word in any religion, which is not based on the deep I-experience is bound to be simply ‘notion’, not existential. From the awakening to self comes the awakening to God - and we discover marvellously that Christ is simply this awakening on a degree of purity rarely if ever reached by man.’

But mostly it was sheer joy that he wanted to communicate. ‘It is wonderful to pass through such an experience which makes you find full peace and happiness beyond all situations, even of death and life. Life cannot be the same any more, because beyond life we have found the Awakening.’ Sometimes a single phrase was enough: ‘The awakening alone is what counts.’

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6800 words  c. 46 minutes

ii
September 25, 1953 Diary 73.
iii
March 8, 1953 Diary 62.
September 19, 1953 *Diary* 73.

September 27, 1953 *Diary* 74.

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February 22, 1953 *Diary* 59.


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21. Ibid.

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*OB. Letters Spiritual and Theological* 171.