A total depth of exchange in the present moment. The eternity of this exchange lived in the present, without snatching at a future which invariably makes you fall back to the level of pluralism and is a falling away from lived advaita... The cosmic Keshi of the Rigveda can make his way through the world totally indifferent to everything, looking neither to the right nor to the left; and he can just as well make his way with a smile for all, radiating the life of interchange, as God does when passing through time without leaving his eternity, shedding abroad his love everywhere without leaving his solitude. Ready for everything, and free from all limitation.

Abhishiktananda, Letter to Marc, 5 April 1973
(Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told through His Letters, by James Stuart, p. 292)

* * *

The Divine Reality is present everywhere, even in common people. He who knows that nothing exists apart from Him, attains the non-dual state.
Having the same feeling towards friend and foe, remaining the same in honour and dishonour, the one who knows that Brahman is always full remains happy.

Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra, verses 124-125
(from: Vijñāna Bhairava, The Practice of Centring Awareness, with Commentary by Swami Lakshman Joo, Varanasi, 2002, pp. 146, 148)

Editorial

The key-word in the quote from Abhishiktananda’s letter to Marc, his closest disciple, is “lived advaita”. Advaita, non-duality or, as some would like to translate it, “a-duality”, has become a fashion in certain esoteric circles in the West, but the question is always how far it becomes a lived reality which does not allow us to make a distinction between “us” and the “others”, between the spiritual elite and the “common people”, enmeshed in materialism and unaware of their divine destiny. The Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra, an ancient text of the tradition of non-dual Kashmir Śaivism, teaches precisely this “lived advaita”, in all circumstances and experiences of life.

The present issue continues the focus on mystical experience started in the last issue (25), one being mystical hymns from the Indian traditions (specifically Kashmir Śaivism), and the second being the account of the experience of Marc Chaduc in his own diary (which is under preparation for publication). Since a number of books have come out in this year (2005) related to Abhishiktananda and interreligious dialogue, the section on Book Reviews is important, with a special focus on the new biography by Shirley du Boulay.

We, the friends of Abhishiktananda, are surprised and overwhelmed at the ever-increasing interest in this hidden monk and sannyāsi, as testified by a number of books, theses, emails and correspondence received. As Raimon Panikkar writes, he has really become the grain of wheat that dies and lives again to bring multiple fruits by his very life.

Bettina Bäumer

ARTICLES

Abhinavagupta: The Offering of Experience
Translation from the Sanskrit Hymn
Anubhavanivedana and Commentary
by Bettina Bäumer

1. When the yogi, his mind and breath merged in the inner goal, directs his gaze outward, unblinking, himself seeing, yet as if not seeing, by your grace, Master, this is the imprint of Śiva. This reality indeed is the state of Śiva, beyond both void and non-void.

2. With half-open eyes, mind firmly collected, has gaze directed to the tip of the nose, with sun and moon dissolved at the centre of the threefold movement, he attains the supreme Principle, of the nature of Light, devoid of externality, the One Spirit, the state of Supreme Reality... What more is there to say?

3. Each word from his mouth is a supernatural mantra, the posture of his body, cause of joy and suffering, is itself the mystic mudrā. The spontaneous flow of his breath is truly the wonderful yoga. When I realize the supreme light-filled domain of Divine Energy, what does not shine?

4. A mantra illumines without distinguishing the arrangement of the letters. Mudrā is that posture that occurs spontaneously when bodily action ceases. Yoga is revealed when the flow of breath has stopped. For the good-hearted what is not wonderful? They share in the festival leading to your luminous domain

Commentary

These four condensed verses contain the mystical state experienced and described by the author, Abhinavagupta,
a state called śāmbhavimudrā in the tradition of non-dual Kashmir Śaivism, to which he belongs. This term denotes the total impregnation of the yogi or mystic with the Divine. Tantric spiritual practice has as its major components the use of mantras or sacred words, ritual gestures and poses used for invoking certain deities (mudrā), and various practices summarized under yoga, of which exercises connected with prāna (breath) are the most important. In the present context all these practices are transformed into a state of spontaneous illumination and natural existence. Different levels of the same state are hinted at in these verses, not as injunctions to be performed, but as descriptions of an experience of the highest state. Thus the reader can recognize his or her own state in the mirror of these verses, or feel inspired to reach a level beyond the usual effort associated with yoga.

The combination of mind and breath occurs in many yoga texts, but in verse one they are already merged in the inner goal. Starting with a state of complete interiority, the yogi keeps his eyes open without blinking, “seeing as if not seeing”, because even while seeing he remains immersed in his inner being. The mystical attitude which integrates the inner with the outer is technically called kramamudrā in this tradition, when the yogi, looking outside, does not leave his inner state of God consciousness. But this happens by the grace of the master, not by one’s own effort. The state achieved by this attitude is described as completely “sealed or imprinted by Śiva” (hence śāmbhavimudrā), a state that can neither be described as void or fullness, for it transcends all opposites and dualities, even this last apparent duality between void and non-void.

In fact, the term mudrā seems to be one of the key words of this hymn, for Abhinavagupta uses it consciously in all its meanings and dimensions: mudrā as a seal or imprint, as a conscious body posture or hand gesture, as a spontaneous mystical attitude, as the final divinized state of one “liberated while still living” (jīvanmukta).

In the second verse there is still some practice involved, namely the practice of centering awareness between inhalation and exhalation, symbolically described as sun and moon. In the centre shines the Light of the Supreme Reality, of pure Consciousness. The poet is at a loss to say anything more about this Reality which, to him, is so evident as to need no further comment.

The third verse actually describes the state of a jīvanmukta which is a state of complete spontaneity. The three essential elements of spiritual practice, namely mantra, mudrā and yoga, are for him/ her no practices involving any effort, rather he becomes their author and origin. His very existence reveals all the yogic practices and mystical states which flow out from him or her: every word he utters is a powerful mantra capable of transforming those who hear it, because it is charged with divinity. Every movement of his body or even the slightest gesture is itself a mystical mudrā, expressing his own divinity and im-pressing it on others. If yoga consists of any kind of breath exercise, in his case the natural movement of his breath, every act of breathing is itself nothing but yoga, union with the Divine.

At this point the author breaks out in the first person – he cannot hide his own experience which is one of all-pervading, pure Light, the realm of Energy (śaktiṁ dhāma param...).

In the fourth and final verse Abhinavagupta gives a kind of commentary of the three elements: mantra, mudrā and yoga, as they ascend from the level of individual practice (ānava in the tradition of the three means), to the completely spontaneous state of Divine union (śāmbhava). This is wonderful for the good-hearted or wise (sudhā means both), since the supreme mystical state does not remain confined to the select few, it is not an individual affair (that would be a contradiction), but it is shared with others in the great divine festival.
Notes:

1 Mudrā, or the attitude, the pose, the mark.
2 The two breaths, prāna and apāna.
3 Prāna, apāna and udāna, or exhalation, inhalation, rising breath.
4 10th-11th century, Kashmir, one of the greatest thinkers and mystics that India has produced, author of about 60 works in Sanskrit.
5 Yogi does not denote here a specialist or ascetic, but anybody, man or woman, practicing the spiritual path.

Marc, the Unborn

As for the previous bulletin Setu, we publish in this issue another excerpt taken from Années de Grâces ("Years of Grace"), the spiritual diary of Marc Chaduc/Swami Ajatananda.

The present extract refers to the extraordinary experience of enlightenment of Marc, which took place in Phulchatti ashram (near Rishikesh) where Swami Abhishiktananda and his true disciple were studying the Upanishads together for three weeks, in May 1972. Though Swamiji had caught glimpses in earlier times of the advaitic experience, it is this event which convinced him of the truth of the Upanishads and of the reality of advaita. Overwhelmed by the feeling of being himself in the presence of the True, he wrote a long meditation in his diary, in which he declared: "The experience of the Upanishads is true, I know it." From then on, he proved to be deeply affected by Marc's experience and re-lived through him, as it were, an inner awakening that had first occurred in 1953. As a matter of fact, the meeting and association with Marc, at the end of his life, accelerated an inner process which culminated in his own enlightenment experience on July 14, 1973.

As for Marc, the state of absorption he experienced in Phulchatti resulted in a new and higher level of consciousness, and became the real beginning of a stunning mystical journey from which there was no return.

The details given in this moving account may be interpreted in diverse ways according to various schools of spirituality. It is not the place here to explore the nature of Marc's understanding and experience of advaita, even less to go into a comparative study between different religious interpretations. It is hoped, though, that this short translation will shed a new light on the profound mystical insight of Marc, a year ahead of his initiation into sannyāsa, and on the depth of the Guru-Disciple relationship.

Swami Atmananda

May 10, 1972: The Ascension Vigil

Vision of the Param Jyoti, the Divine Light, through death. I find myself unable to start describing the ecstatic experience that lasted for three hours. On several occasions I thought of jotting down a brief outline, but I didn't even manage to start it: I felt it was the same thing as attempting to embrace infinity! Besides, I fail to comprehend what good there is in it. Whatever good there is about it, it is beyond any description and is not confined to any period in time, nor to any place, nor to any “experience” – for, everything that is tied up to the coordinates of time and space is nothing more than mere dream-light. Any attempt to describe Enlightenment is bound to produce nothing more than a shadow of the Real.

For a long time I was unable to “recollect” this wonderful experience – this infinite, non-dual Light, that is both revealed
and concealed to all “memory”, as well as to any other faculty whatsoever. At the same time it is the eternal Truth underlying the very existence of my ultimate being, the non-dual ‘I’ that I AM, beyond all “I-ness”, not excluding anything from the body, nor from the mind, nor from whatever it may be: (…)  

The Circumstances  

It’s the tenth day of intense immersion in the Upanishads. We have just finished the Kaṭha Upanishad, which has always thrilled Henri so much. It narrates how young Naciketas goes all the way to face Death (Yama) in order to extract his secrets by shooting at him, like he would a deadly arrow, the question on the mystery surrounding our beings, “which even the gods have doubted in olden times.” And within the very attainment of Death, within its own secrets and in its true depth, Death itself is no more: Death is dead! The duality of life and death ceases to be. “He who knows is neither born, nor will he ever die. He comes from nowhere and nothing emanates from him. Unborn (ajah), eternal, ever present; primordial, he is not killed even when his body is destroyed.” But this cannot be really “understood”, nor can it be truly found – except by the one who has overcome death itself (cf Isa Up. 14), through the very realization of his own Self (…).  

It’s the vigil of the Ascension, the supreme ascent to Param Jyotir, or the Father from where the Spirit descends in Its fullness.  

Today it is my 28th birth anniversary. The time now is 8:30, maybe 9:00 p.m.. Henri has just gone to sleep (…). I am sitting on my bed, right in front of Henri’s bed, a candle burning on the edge of the bed. Henri, quite relaxed, and out of a state of profound inner peace, answers my questions.  

The Overwhelming Experience  

I just couldn’t comprehend the term anya (though I knew that it meant ‘other’). Obstinately, I tried to break it up into its most basic components in order to find its root, thinking that it was made up of segments, as it so frequently happens in Sanskrit. Henri, however, reminded me again that, just like a prime number couldn’t be broken up, this word couldn’t be divided into smaller syllables. “It’s like the number 23,” he said. Suddenly, I just couldn’t follow what he was saying anymore: for two to three seconds, it was a wondrous invasion of Peace – an indescribably overwhelming Peace. Then, suddenly, without any warning, I felt I was being brutally uplifted, seized and sucked upwards, up to the top of my skull. I just had enough time to murmur two words, in what appeared to be my very last breath: “I’m gone! Gone!” At exactly that moment, and in a flash, it was an entombment into total “unconsciousness”…  

There’s nothing I can say about this particular lapse of time of absolute calm (10 to 15 minutes, according to Henri): I was totally unconscious of everything, or rather, it was infinite consciousness, but a consciousness of nothing, not of light, nor that of non-light. Having just recovered consciousness, in vain I attempted at expressing the inexpressible as PURE, INFINITE LIGHT, That alone and without anything else! Accordingly, there was no recollection whatsoever that any forms (or “visions”) were seen - not when the experience actually happened, nor during the moments that ensued it. Any reminiscence of any sounds was non-existent. Nothing! No vision and nothing seen! There was no perception of the body, as there was none of the mind; similarly, there was no awareness of the within, nor of the without, and no reflexive consciousness, or non-consciousness – I AM PURE LIGHT INFINITE: Paramjyothilina (ever-dwelling in the unutterable Light Supreme).  

Those indescribable, fathomless moments – for I had no awareness of anything any longer – represent the heart of the whole experience. They constitute by themselves the experience properly speaking. Should anything extraneous
to their nature be added to them, then injury would be inflicted on the truth in which they are deeply enshrined. What was bound to follow was just their reflection on both the mind and the senses (which I found difficult to revive): mere secondary manifestations that already are infinitely apart from that Pure Light..."  

**Repercussions of the Experience**

Henri kept track of the experience: An hour and a half of complete absorption, and he also said that it had taken me from some one and a half to two hours before I could recollect him, as if I had been travelling between two worlds.

In fact, much before I could reopen my eyes, when this pure Light illumined my whole being, and even as I was still experiencing that incredible, ravishing and rapturous state, the first words that I remember hearing were being uttered by Henri: “What have you seen?” “Nothing! Nothing!” I attempted an answer – for, what form could be possibly seen in that wondrous state of unconsciousness? Not satisfied with my scanty but truthful reply, Henri entreated me once again to relate to him the experience, however ineffable it had been.

I at once let him know the first thing that crossed my mind, welling up from the innermost chambers of my heart: “LIGHT! LIGHT!”

Not that I had actually seen this Light Infinite, Pranam Jyoti. How could it be seen when there was no seer to see anything any longer? "I" was none other than Light Infinite That “I AM”, dazzling, beyond description or comprehension by the human mind: the sāvapraktāśa, svayam jyotir (self-luminous), much, much beyond the mere experiencing of inner lights – of a thousand colours-, which yogis and enlightened ones have attempted to describe. Back to the waking state, my mind was in rapture, impregnated with divine, dazzling light. It was no more the pure, non-dual vision (without a subject) of the Pure Light, and yet it was highly reflective of the glory of the Self. As

reflected in the mind, it was an overwhelmingly blinding and ravishing light. From within the depths of such an unspeakable Felicity, I briefly managed to murmur some words of response to Henri who was calling me as if from some other world, trying to re-establish contact with me: “IT IS WONDERFUL! IF IS SO WONDERFUL!” (That was repeated indefinitely in the blissfulness of divine contemplation.) “IT IS TRUE!” “YES!” “EVERYTHING IS ABSOLUTELY TRUE!” “COULD ALL THIS BE POSSIBLE?” and Henri replied, “Yes, since it did actually happen!” “It is an intense state of amazement, a wonderful realization – that of knowing that everything I have always believed in and aspired for is actually TRUE – YES, TRUE!” – so I told him. This Light beyond the worlds, this Upanishadic experience, God, the Self, the Nirvana – call it by any name, for of what good can words be?... – all is TRUE! satyam!...the expression which resounds so strongly in the Upanishads.

Wonder of all wonders when the hidden or indirect knowledge of the Mystery reveals itself so completely and so incomprehensibly true (from the truth of being: satyam, which consists of pure Sat, Being), when direct vision takes place (aparokṣa-dīśṭa) leaving no shadow of doubt to any further extent. It is nothing but joy, joy – total joy, and I find myself expressing the contents of my heart, “It is extremely beautiful!” “EVERYTHING! EVERYTHING! EVERYTHING!” meaning that one must be ready to unconditionally sacrifice everything one has: to give up everything in order to have everything... All can be attained! (...)  

From now on, and for the rest of my life, until the inevitable moment comes, when I shall breathe my very last, my life is to be devoid of any goal, and I shall have nothing to do, inasmuch as the mission that brought me to this world has been fully accomplished: it is all over!

‘Coming back’ doesn’t make sense anymore. How could my life still be lived? It seems to be impossible! That shall
be the most excruciating aspect of my existence during the months, as well as the years to come, when I shall be made a prisoner of this desert of grace. (...) I see everything within the Self. I have the perception that everything is soaked with the unique splendour of the Self: the entire cosmos seems to be eagerly and unceasingly unfolding the Glory of the Ațman. Never before had I experienced the essential truth inherent in the sloka from the Katha Upanishad so powerfully: "When It shines, all else shines out of Its own brilliancy. The whole universe reflects Its dazzling radiance!" I am compelled to close my eyes straightaway, for the vision is so blinding! I have the realization that everything is exceptionally beautiful, magnificent and luminous! Pure, self-luminous magnificence that is present everywhere! Henri's face is all Light, infinitely glorious, beyond any and all description! He can no longer be distinguished from this unique Light: svaparaksha!

Henri became transfigured: He is the PERFECT GURU – to me this is the final revelation that he is my Guru forever and ever. I have no doubts whatsoever about Henri's greatness anymore – no matter what. Consequently, no longer would I be searching for an Enlightened Teacher to show me the way to His Vision – many a time my heart longed for an encounter with a "Realized One", a towering figure who would absorb me into His Divine Vision. Not only that, but, from now on, the question that certain persons would impress on my mind, whether Henri is "realized", or not, has stopped making any sense at all. This grand experience has overfilled my heart with pure, untold joy.

How true were the words Swami Gnanananda addressed to Henri: the Guru is none other than the Self, the Ațman, and that his true nature is not really revealed until the moment comes when Ațma darsan, or the Vision of the Self, becomes a reality, in the Light of the Self, where he is no longer different from oneself. (...) Finally, towards midnight, Henri told me that we were entering into the feast of the Ascension. Upon hearing these words, it was as if my entire being was being uplifted and once again absorbed by all this Light of Lights... Isn't precisely there where the Mystery of the Ascension itself lies? Screams of wonder and silent moments of rapture... And in the depth of myself, thought-provoking words unceasingly echoed the divine revelation, "Today I have fathered you" (Psalm 2.7), and "...from my bosom, before dawn breaks" (Psalm 110.3). Birth of the unborn (ajāta: the complete mystery surrounding this name!), this body's 28th year of existence, exactly, is a clear indication that nobody is ever born, nor dead. Transfiguration, the 'passage' of life in this body into the Life of the Spirit, by the Baptism of Fire, providing a bridge crossing from death to the state of non-death of the unique AHAM, or I AM. (The English translation from the French original by Omar Djezzini has been annotated and edited by Swami Atmananda. All rights reserved)

Notes:
1 The publication of Swami Ajatananda's diary (in French) is under preparation.
3 "I don't know when I shall recover from that Phulchatti, which was lived by both of us at a depth of which even your ecstasy was only a quasi-external sign..." (Letter to Marc Chaduc, 3.6.1972, in J.Stuart, Swami Abhishiktananda. His Life Told through his Letters, Delhi (ISPCK), 2000, p.270.)
model where the Guru is supposed to be already established in the knowledge of Brahman before transmitting to his disciple. On the other hand and at the same time, Marc realized fully and definitively that Swamiji was his Guru when he witnessed his transfiguration in the Light of the Self.

16 See Swami Abhishiktananda, Guru and Disciple. An Encounter with Sri Guanananda, a Contemporary Spiritual Master, Delhi (ISPCK), 1990, p.84.

19 I, myself. The Sanskrit pronoun refers here to the divine Self (Atman).

* * *

A Letter to a Friend

by Raimon Panikkar

With the kind permission of the author, Shirley du Boulay, and the publisher (Orbis Books) we are reproducing here the Foreword by Raimon Panikkar to The Cave of the Heart. The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda (see under Book Reviews), in the form of a letter to Abhishiktananda.

Dear Abhishiktan!

Two years after your total resurrection I wrote a long letter to you. You were alive for me then. Tonight (or rather, early this morning, because I spent most of the night reading the fascinating book by Shirley du Boulay) I will attempt another stammering epistle, for thirty years later you are living in me still.

Most probably I was one of your best friends. We never disagreed, so we didn’t need to make “virtuous” efforts to

* A shorter English version of the original French text appeared in Studies in Formative Spirituality (1982).
overcome divergence of opinions, as you had to do with most people. It now dawns on me that one of the reasons for our spontaneous friendship was that you never needed to play any role with me — or rather, there was no role to play between us. I remember the rendering of that Gospel passage: "The kingdom is (neither within nor among but) between you." I took you as you were and you took me as I was. We created a between, a communion.

I wish the author of your biography had never asked me to write a foreword to her brilliant book. To speak about the ineffable is not an easy task. Shirley du Boulay has described your character in a wonderful manner, and I can only endorse what she has written. But I am not the one to write an introduction to your life. I lack the necessary "objectivity," for you are not an object for me. After reading this manuscript I am ... I cannot just say overwhelmed, impressed, or moved. Perhaps I shouldn't have left the previous sentence dangling, but ended it simply with the "I am" so dear to you.

Through the author's vivid narrative I have relived a bit of my life. Her engaging description almost made me nostalgic for what could have become my life, if you yourself had not "rescued" me. As you so well described in our pilgrimage to Gangotri, the vocation of the monk is not that of the priest. Shirley du Boulay's description rekindled so many memories and made me reenact the conversations of two passionate people, each convinced that we should deepen our lives (where the "kingdom" is), because with mere "cosmetics" we would not contribute to the radical metanoia needed both for Hinduism and Christianity — as well as for the world at large.

How you struggled and suffered to express your intuitions! It sounds strange, almost preposterous, to confess that everything you said now sounds so self-evident to me that I wonder if it does not simply come from a higher source. In any case, the force of our vision and commitment was the same — even if our language was slightly different.

In 1973 you wrote to me from the nursing home in Indore saying that, once you recovered, you would come to Banaras (now known as Varanasi) and stay with me. We had to catch up with each other after so long an absence. Alas, it was not possible. You left this body — and here I still remain. You may understand my feelings. Our relationship was advaita (nondual), and that is why I cannot just write a foreword to your biography. I need to converse with you. Anything else would appear artificial to me. Shirley will understand.

I shall not repeat what I wrote in that first letter to you of thirty years ago. I will only underline a few aspects of your life, just to add some minor strokes to the biography. For now, with the hindsight of these past decades, I better understand the significance of your stubborn existence. Form your early youth you had but one single aim: to be ekāgratā, as we say in India, or "God intoxicated," as some people might put it. India was just a symbol. The aśrama within was "calling" you.

"If the grain of wheat does not fall into the ground and die ... " You died to yourself, but the earth has received you and the fruits are visible. The changes you dreamed of for the church are not yet all fulfilled, but at least they no longer appear odd or impossible. New "winds" are blowing, in spite of passing backlashes. Nobody today raises an eyebrow on hearing that the church is not identical with the catholic government in Rome. The self-given title of the church, repeated again in the Second Vatican Council, is precisely sacramentum mundi, which in the original language of the first fathers sounds even better and deeper: mysterion tou kosmou, the mystery of the cosmos. To that mysterium we gave our loyalty.

Abhishikta! I have fond memories of our conversations. I recall how skeptical you were about my optimism. I was saying, for instance, that grammar was on my side when I
claimed that the word “monk” is the substantive and the words “Hindu” or “Christian” are adjectives. Thus, it did no violence to say “Christian monk” or “Hindu monk,” whereas it would be forcing the language to say “a Hindu Jesuit” or “a Buddhist Salesian.”

You yourself wrote that you felt you were much too French and even Cartesian in your spontaneous approach to reality. That was simply normal — a proof that you were never rootless. We are all the fruit of our culture. You were aware of this and it helped you to overcome some of your “scruples.” But you were not aware of how much you remained (like most Westerners) a disciple of Parmenides: reality could not be contradictory. And here was the source of your anguish at finding yourself to be at the same time Christian and Hindu, monothist and advaitin. For me this was no problem at all, not only because I see no contradiction but also because I do not identify reality with rationality. The real is not obliged to obey Parmenides, and we do not fall into irrationality if we are aware of it. I think that the issue of “double belonging,” of which Shirley writes, is still a false problem. I am as much the son of my father as of my mother. Nowadays to be French and European would no longer be considered a “double belonging.” Your anguish came out of a dialectical thinking. Your greatness was that you overcame dialectical thinking not by another way of thinking but through painful and excruciating experience. That experience was enormously fruitful. You remained loyal to two dialectically opposed worldviews. For this, we are grateful to you.

Dear Swamiji! I cannot write about you. I can only write to you. I was not able to assuage your suffering. I was unable to convince you because you felt I was making it too easy. Now you do not need my words, but still we profit from your struggles.

The obstacles lie on both sides. This should make us very humble. “Fundamentalism” (a word that we didn’t use) lies hidden in most religions. There is no point in discussing ideas, as you rightly said. What has immense value is your life. And you lived yours to the full.

Let me now fulfill my task of prefacing this beautiful biography. Shirley du Boulay magnificently describes your doubts and your inconsistencies: you wanted solitude, but even when you could get it you went travelling here and there; you dreamed of a pure sannyāsa, yet you fell short of the ideal; you wanted to get rid of all books, but you could not dispense with them.

Certainly you were inconsistent with your ideas. But let me defend you. They were your ideas, and you sensed time and again that what are paramount arc not ideas but life, experienced life. Your “inconsistencies” were the most consistent praxis of your experience. You allowed yourself to be led not by your ideas, nor even by your ideal, but by the Spirit that “blows” where, when, and how she “wills.” To that in-spiration you were loyal. Your greatness was that you were not conscious of it. Let me offer here a clue, a “hermeneutical” key the philosophers would say, to evaluate your inconsistencies. To qualify the metaphor, the Spirit is a wind that blew and directed you where she found least resistance — that is, toward your weaker flanks. I understand why you became so cross at Dr. Cuttatt’s critical remarks when he said the danger of a certain advaita is that it does not give enough weight to love. He was theoretically right. But this was the weakness of a certain advaita and not your weakness.

You discovered your bhakti (love of God) not as a theological reflection on the incarnation but as a lived and revolutionary experience in your encounter with Marc, your beloved disciple. With Marc your love knew no barriers.
As I wrote to you in my first letter, with Mare you “discovered a fundamental human dimension: paternity.” That love made you whole.

I was then not much younger than you, but now I am much older than you ever were; perhaps this entitles me to bear witness to your life. I know most of the persons Shirley du Boulay mentions in this biography. Many of them are no loner alive. Her book is of an immense value because it describes you as you were: a man of flesh an blood, and incarnated man, and not just a “thinking reed.” Writing about you she also describes not only the situation of the church in India but, indirectly at least, of the world at large.

Swamiji, your struggles and sufferings have not been in vain. You are becoming a symbol for spiritual survival. Was this not the message of Christ?

* * *

Jacques Dupuis (1923-2004) and Abhishiktananda
by G. Gispert-Sauch, S.J.

Three days after Christmas of the year 2004 a significant theologian and friend of Swami Abhishiktananda attained his samādhi in Rome, where he had been teaching theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University for twenty years. His sudden death was lamented in the Christian theological world, specially because he was one of the few prominent western thinkers who made an effort to explain to Christian believers the significance of the religious traditions of the world, and specially of India, for their own self-understanding. Just one year before his departure his friends and admirers had published a felicitation volume in his honour with the title In Many and Diverse Ways, a phrase borrowed from the opening of the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament. The world-wide appeal of the original writer is indicated by the fact that an American and an Australian theologian edited the book honouring a European thinker about religions. The book was published by Orbis Books, (New York). Eighteen writers from all continents contributed to the Festschrift.

Fr Dupuis had learned much during the thirty-five years he studied and taught in India, prior to his assignment in Rome. One of his great sources was Swami Abhishiktananda, with whom he established not an academic relationship but a personal friendship rooted in his deep admiration for the life of renunciation the Swami had adopted since his arrival in South India in 1948, a few months before Fr Dupuis landed in Calcutta, as it was then called.

It was only towards the end of Swamiji’s life, in 1969, that the Swami and the Professor met in the Jyotiniketan Ashram in Bareilly, North India. They were both interested in proposing a plan of theological and spiritual sadhana that would enable the seekers to assimilate and integrate the spiritual traditions of Hinduism and Christianity, as well as other religions. They took practical steps to promote that plan, which however was never implemented in the way they had envisaged.

But Dupuis had known Swami Abhishiktananda earlier, through his writings. In his class notes written in 1967 he already refers to the French version of his book Sagesse Hindoue Mystique Chrétienne, published in 1965, that was later published in English with the title Saccidananda. In a section of his notes on “Trinity and Religious Dialogue” Dupuis explains the basic insights of Sagesse. Later, in an article published in 1973, Dupuis cites the writing of Abhishiktananda “An Approach to Hindu Spirituality” and uses abundantly the language of the Swami, which he would increasingly put into theological circulation, like ‘interiority’,
‘self-transcendence’, ‘non-duality’ or advaita, and later pveil or ‘awakening’.... For a theologian of a Pontifical Faculty to speak of advaita in a Christian context was a daring thing to do in the mid-seventies! The “Notes for Lectures on Christology and the Trinity” much later published in the Vidyajyoti Journal 64 (2000, pp. 598-612) were meant for the students of Fr Dupuis, although they were never delivered because of the heart attack and the samãdhí of the Swami.

In the fall of 1977 Dupuis published in the prestigious Revue théologique de Louvain an article with the title (translated) “Consciousness of Christ and the Advaita Experience.” In it he offered the insights of Swamiji on how he understood the self-awareness of Jesus Christ and the meaning of his famous sentence recorded in the Gospel of St John, “I and the Father are one.” Dupuis describes the double experience of the Swami, one of the “immense joy” arising from his experience of the Divine in him and the other of the tension between his Christian faith and the significance of his new awareness. This tension leads to a great inner silence, “a silence that the [divine] Spirit now causes to ring with the echo of the eternal Word, a silence all expectancy, a single regard toward the One who is there, simple attention, simple awakening” (Swamiji’s words in Prayer). Another interesting text Dupuis quotes is from a letter of Swamiji to his old friend Dom Emile Landry, OSB, written during the Easter season of 1973, three months before his fatal heart attack:

“Joy abides, grows, deepens in ever more intimate discovery of the essential ... The approaches are intoxicating. They cut you off from everything, but they reveal everything, like the nights of St John of the Cross. Overlapping limits, nights for the mind only, when it seeks to understand and report its categories of the Real. Here, in solitude without and within, the solitude of the Only [One], in the transcendence of all uttering and all thinking, you understand eimi, “I am” — the name under which Yahweh [God’s favourite name in the Old Testament] revealed himself. Then Easter becomes awakening to nothing new, but to what is, to that reality which has neither origin nor end.”

Swami Abhishiktananda and Fr Dupuis complemented one another. The Swami went all out for that personal experience of which the Upanishads speak, and struggled to articulate it in the categories of his faith. Fr Dupuis, an academic by training and profession, remained deeply attached to the sannyásins, perceived the value of his experience for the Christian world, and endeavoured to articulate it in ways that would be understandable within the Christian theological tradition. From the eagerness with which he spoke with Fr Dupuis I suspect that the monk also received a better self-understanding as a result of his dialogue with the theologian.

(I have written a somewhat longer account of the relation between Dupuis and Abhishiktananda in pp. 146-157 of the Festschrift in honour of Fr Dupuis mentioned in the first paragraph.)

BOOK REVIEWS

Shirley Du Boulay, The Cave of the Heart. The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda

Maryknoll, New York (Orbis Books), 2005, pp. 276, with a Foreword by Raimon Panikkar.1

Spiritual biographies are an important literature today and especially helpful for spiritual life. The author of this new biography of Swamiji is a master in this field and she has contributed important biographies of Saint Teresa of Avila,

1. See also Panikkar’s Foreword given in this issue.
Dame Cicely Sanders, Bede Griffiths and Desmond Tutu.

What is extraordinary about this biography of Swami Abhishiktananda is that the author has captured the spirit of the man without having known him in person. Most probably those of us who have known him personally (even intimately) would not be able to write ‘objectively’ about him, as R. Panikkar remarks in his Foreword, since he is so much part of us. And yet, James Stuart, his close friend and collaborator with his English books, had undertaken the first and very meticulous attempt at writing a biography based on Abhishiktananda’s personal letters. In fact, this book has served as a major source for the present biography. The great merit of Shirley du Bouley’s account lies in its literary quality which makes a fascinating reading, without sacrificing the accurateness and without becoming an idealized hagiography (the same quality which could be found in her earlier biography of Bede Griffiths).

Certainly, as far as the description of circumstances is concerned, one can feel where she is more at home or has first-hand knowledge: that is Brittany, his land of birth, the family and the monastery. The same accuracy in detail cannot be expected of the Indian circumstances which, however, are much better known from his books and earlier writings. Therefore the chapters on his early years in France are a welcome addition. The author does not try to embellish or hide Abhishiktananda’s weaknesses or crises, especially in the beginning years in India, as for example his being enthusiastic either about Gurus (such as Harilal or Dr. Mehta) or would-be disciples who later disappointed him. All the more the total spiritual transformation that happened to him in the last years of his life stands out more clearly and movingly. One can feel how the author has moved with empathy to the last and culminating phase of his life. Even having known him so well one cannot help being in tears when reading the final chapters of the book. In this way the reader is carried along with the inner journey of Abhishiktananda, culminating in his enlightenment. The biography thus becomes a spiritual reading that can inspire seekers on their own spiritual path.

The book is illustrated with only a few selected photographs. An interesting mistake is the date of Henri’s entering the monastery: 1910 instead of 1929, thus making him a monk in the very year of his birth! Most of the photo credits are missing, which could be completed in a second edition. Some minor historical details are incorrect, for example on p. 171: in his discussion with his Hindu fundamentalist friends it was he who asked them to sit in silence and meditation when words failed to bring them together — after which Sita Ram Goel is said to have remarked that Swamiji’s silence convinced him more than his words (which, in any case, he could not fully understand due to Swamiji’s speech defect combined with French accent).

An important mistake has crept in (I am told by the publisher it was a printing error taken from an earlier, not corrected version), in the account of the enlightenment experience of Marc at Phulchatti. On p.224 instead of anya which was the word in Sanskrit explained to Marc by Swamiji stands ananya, “not-other”, a word which can be split into an- and anya. This mistake should also be corrected in a second edition.

The correct word sannyāsa-dikshā (p. 225) has been incorrectly spelt sannyāsi-dikshā on p. 230 and following. The question is also if diacritical marks are possible in the case of long vowels, they could have been given through-
out the book and not only in the case of a few words.

A few precisions could be adduced in biographical details, as for example:

P. 210: The parish priest of Banaras took him to be a hippie when he saw him celebrating Mass sitting cross-legged on the floor, with flowers and incense offered (not "hearing").

P. 234: The account of the circumstances of his heart attack could add a precision: the taxi in which Mother Yvonne was travelling did not stop "right beside him" as a matter of chance. The by-passers took Swamiji to be a drugged hippie, but Mother Yvonne felt something strange which directed her to ask the taxi driver to go back to the spot where Swamiji was lying and he recognized her and uttered her name in a feeble voice.

These seem to be minor details, but they may yet carry some significance.

The Index will need revision in any further edition, especially with regard to Sanskrit and Indian names, e.g. with titles:

Francis Acharya
Vandana Mataji

** means one-pointedness (not God-intoxicated!)

Under Contacts (p. 268) the Abhishikatananda Society should be mentioned at the Brotherhood House (not the name of the Secretary which may change and has already changed).

Swamiji (in the Glossary) is the respectful form of addressing a Swami, it has been used in a familiar way by the friends of Abhishikatananda.

These corrections in details in no way diminish the great literary and spiritual value of the book which will go a long way to make Swamiji more known and accessible to the readers attracted by Indian spirituality and searching for a synthesis of East and West, or Hinduism and Christianity.

For fulfilling this task we are particularly grateful to Shirley du Boulay for her painstaking work, and with her, to Murray Rogers who assisted her throughout.

Bettina Bäumer

* * *


This elegant volume offers the papers presented at an inter-religious retreat seminar organized in December 1999 in Sarnath by the Abhishikatananda Society, Delhi. Sixteen scholars from various religious and philosophical traditions came from three continents to reflect on these fascinating themes mentioned in the title, that run through the religious literature of most civilizations. The book shows that the apparently contradictory themes are intimately interrelated, and that, paradoxically, it is precisely in the spiritual experience of Śunya that we get a glimpse of the Fullness we all long for.

The book is rich in content. It is interdisciplinary and interreligious, although the philosophical trend is prevalent. It is not possible to give a description of each paper. I make bold to mention three important contributors to this rich basket (pitaka) of philosophical thought and religious experience. First the contribution of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. With the authority of a long experience and of the living tradition of Tibet and with great personal humility and in simple language he explained in the concluding session his
understanding of the value of interreligious sharing. He repeatedly reminds us that however abstract and refined the concepts we discuss in our dialogues may be, they must ultimately help us to grow in loving kindness and compassion. Dialogue may indeed help us to gain a deeper insight into reality expounded in our own philosophical tradition and thus foster the process of the transformation of the mind, but above all it enables us to understand and serve the needs and purposes of the vast masses of humankind with their various mental dispositions and interests.

The second contributor I would like to mention is the internationally known philosopher and theologian Raimon Panikkar, the founder, with other believers in dialogue, of the Abhishiktananda Society. He is clearly the leading thinker in the panel discussion that closes the book putting three questions on the underlying concern of the Seminar, one of method, one of personal growth, one of philosophical and theological relevance. He also has the opening address, a “philosophical introduction” where he presents the three basic themes around which all papers will speak not as concepts but as symbols. With his characteristic verve he explains how a symbol acts differently from a concept: the latter is inward-looking, the former is open and leads to transcendence. It is better perceived as music than as language, and the idea of ‘harmony’ he introduces here may enable us to have a glimpse of what dialogue at this level involves. For harmony implies both multiplicity of sound and yet unity of beauty: it is only in such an experience of unity that multiplicity makes sense and is experienced at a higher level. Each voice of a good polyphony enriches the others without smothering their uniqueness.

The third contributor I present specifically is Dr Bettina Bäumer, President of the Abhishiktananda Society, who conceived and organized this retreat-seminar. She writes the Prologue, where with Thomas Merton she relates the Buddhist sensitivity to śūnya to ‘innocence’ and to the New Testament theme of poverty of spirit. She also introduces the other two concepts of pūrṇa and plerōma as stressed specially in the Hindu and the Christian traditions respectively. She calls for an open dialogue in the best traditions of Merton and Swami Abhishiktananda, a dialogue that would not remain at the level of concepts and intellectual enlightenment but would be even more profound in shared meditation and the common life lived by all participants during the five days of the seminar. Her own academic contribution to the seminar is a presentation of the little studied Kashmir Śāiva text Vijñāna Bhairava, a dialogue between Śiva and the Devi, which shows practical ways of meditating on the theme of śūnya and develops a theology according to which the realization of śūnya leads us to complete satisfaction.

These and all the other papers offer very rich fare on the three ‘symbols’ taken up as subject of the Seminar. Most of the scholars in Buddhism concentrate on the symbol of śūnya while scholars of Hinduism stress more pūrṇa. Plerōma appears less except in the very good paper of Paddy Meagher. One wonders why the important theme or symbol of kenōsis was not included in the overall theme as it would complete the dialogal nature of the Seminar and has many affinities to the śūnya theme. I am sure that it must have come up in the discussions. Unfortunately the editors tell us that it was not possible to include a record of these discussions, which would have considerably increased the size, and the cost, of the book. Only the last panel discussion is recorded for our benefit.

In the various references to the ‘Stanza of Fullness’ (“pūrṇamidam....”) of the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, gen-
erally also printed at the beginning of Ṭa Upaniṣad, or rather of all classical collections of the Upanishads, I missed a study or indeed any reference to the ritual background of this stanza in the Vedic sacrificial literature, as demonstrated long ago by P. Mus (in BEPEO 44 (1947-1950), 591-618). I think that attention to this source would both ground the “mystical” stanza in the concrete religious experience of our earliest ancestors in India and give to the stanza a richness that it may miss in a purely “mystical” or philosophical reading of it, as done by most authors.

The book is a precious record of an authentic interreligious dialogue which is not confined to philosophical elaborations but included a sharing of life and of meditation and prayer. It offers a model for such kinds of dialogue. It should be in every library of people loving Indian thought and the dialogue of religions. It is a tribute to Swami Abhishiktananda to whom Dr Bümer and Dr Punikkar referred several times and who was the inspiration for this undertaking. We are grateful to the editors and the publisher for offering us such a superb gift.

G. Gispert-Sauch, S.J.

* * *


This is not simply a historical study, but of great relevance for our time. In the post-9/11 political landscape, after the US-invasion in Iraq, and the terror attacks in Madrid and London, in Europe we see the Left making unholy alliance with the Right to attack multiculturalism. India is troubled by the forces of fundamentalist Hindu nationalism, which views religious plurality – especially the presence of the Muslims in India – as an evil. In this situation we welcome a book which presents Gandhi’s positive view and his recognition of religious diversity, but especially his practice as a bridge-builder between hostile members of different faiths. It is inspiring and encouraging, for Gandhi was never an idealistic dreamer of the harmony of religions, but practised his vision of a peaceful, mutually respectful relation of the religions in the midst of terrible riots and communal violence.

Margaret Chatterjee, one of the most eminent philosophers in India today, expounds in which way his pluralist attitude is based on a deep insight in the limitedness and imperfection of humans, and the fragmentary character of the human cognition, especially with regard to the Real, the Secret of reality. Nobody, no religious leader, and no single religion is possessing Truth, or the absolute standpoint. The positive acceptance of pluralism, instead of the cult of the “One”, is the expression of the realistic acceptance of our imperfection and of enjoyment of the richness of the manifold. This conviction of Gandhi is influenced by Jainism, as Chatterjee elaborates: “The Jain theory of anekāntavāda or many-sidedness he finds is borne out in his own experience. He was close enough to people of faiths other than his own, or with apparently none, to be convinced that truth is many-faceted, and that no individual has access to more than a fragment, a particular perspective. (...) The implications of the fragmentary view of truth for Gandhi are of the greatest relevance to his attitude to religious plurality. If all are in the same condition of possessing a single perspective, in adhering to our own perspective, the same courtesy must be allowed to others. More than this, it becomes a duty.” (80)

The quality of this text can be seen in the fact that the
reviewer is tempted to quote the whole book; but of course this would not be a review any more. One feels like quoting the whole text because of its pearls of insight (e.g. the significance of religious sentiments, 157ff.) and sharp analysis, and especially because of the clear, pointed, at the same time differentiated, elegant and beautiful language of Professor Chatterjee – a rare case among scholars.

After her introduction, in the second chapter Chatterjee probes Gandhi’s Hindu background, which provides in her view several clues to his subsequent approaches to religious plurality. A major clue is his growing up in the multireligious and multicultural atmosphere of Gujarat – a description full of very interesting details. It is from this background that he did not find religious plurality problematic at all – diversity of cultures and religions was in his bones (cf. 11). A part of this background is also his encounter with Christians in the two years as a student in London. Chatterjee summarizes: “His was not a Polemical standpoint, for his whole upbringing familiarized him with the many-sidedness of truth.” (20) According to her, his positive attitude towards religious diversity was part of “his overall mindset of tireless search and openness to the new.” (40)

In the third chapter Chatterjee describes Gandhi’s notion of Truth. The title of the chapter mirrors her understanding of Gandhi’s linking of ‘Truth’ and ‘non-violence’: “Truth, not Harming, and Caring”. Here one could establish a link between Gandhi’s ethical thought and the contemporary feminist discourse on an ‘ethics of caring’, which Chatterjee does not explore. Instead, she presents the position of G. E. Lessing, the German philosopher of the 18th century, on religious pluralism, which is at first sight surprising. But in the course of it becomes, convincing, as she can show “that Gandhi belongs to a brotherhood of thinkers who have wrestled with the full diapason of human powers, discerning therein the quest for truth, sometimes identifying this with the quest for God, but not always so (…)” (100) I think this historical perspective could be a consolation for us, still wrestling with the same questions.

In the fourth chapter Chatterjee examines the connection between “heart-unity, soul-force and prayer”. Chatterjee reminds us: “Gandhi had a poor opinion of those who merely talked about religion, still more, of those who thought religious sensitivity could be cultivated through argument. Religious ‘agreement’ for him was not a matter of doctrinal consensus, or negotiated policy, but a meeting of hearts.” (23) In this respect, Abhishiktananda was in full agreement with Gandhi. For both, it is not primarily reason which “helps break down the boundaries between religions” – so the programmatic subtitle of Francis X. Clooney’s book “Hindu God, Christian God” (2001). Abhishiktananda always stressed (and both Gandhi and he without any anti-intellectual resentment) the primacy of “the depth-dimension of religious dialogue”, which he developed as he unfolded for example in an article with the same title in 1969. An authentic dialogue has to move the heart. On the other hand, Chatterjee clarifies Gandhi’s reserved attitude towards mysticism. For Gandhi, a deeply spiritual person that he was, the cultivation of the inner experience might have no outcome in praxis at all. For him, who had chosen the path of action (karmamarga), the world needs “substantial change” (109), and for this one has to leave the cave, the meditation room and the temple, and to search for God among the last and the least. This would imply a critique also of the spiritual attitude of Abhishiktananda.

Chapter five focuses on Gandhi’s view of the relation between politics and religion. Here Chatterjee underlines again an important element in his attitude towards religion: He never isolated the one factor of religion against other – political, economic, racial, gender – factors. “Gandhi’s perception was
that, while certain matters had a religious aspect (at least as some people thought), it was important to realize that there were other matters which did not really involve religion at all.” (24) In this chapter Chatterjee analyses Gandhi’s relation to Muslims, including his approach to the Koran, his attraction by Sufism, especially Rumi, and his position in the so-called ‘Hindu-Muslim-question’ during his time. She states, that “Gandhi’s relation with Indian Muslims were dogged by errors of judgement” (175) and criticises especially his support of the Khilafat movement, denoting it as “a political blunder” (157), which she views as “one of the landmarks in the series of events which led to Partition.” (ibid.)

Chapter seven expounds Gandhí’s relation with Christianity, beginning with unfavourable impressions in his childhood and youth, and his later deeper understanding of Christianity and Christ. Chatterjee underlines especially his contacts with Quakers and the affinity which Gandhi experienced with their ritual-free worship and “freedom of credal straight-jackets.” (28) She differentiates in regard to the usual view of an especially deep influence of Christianity on Gandhi: “Often, when Gandhi hailed verses in other’s scriptures, or rejoiced in what he heard from Christian friends, he did so because what he read or heard resonated with what he already believed to be true. In other words, he was happy to find manifold evidences of common insights based on common needs, and confirming the existence of multiple paths to Truth.” (27)

In chapter eight Chatterjee deals with his Jewish co-workers in South Africa in Gandhi’s campaigns on behalf of immigrant Indians – a theme which she had expounded in detail in her “Gandhi and his Jewish Friends” in 1992. She underlines the universalistic ethic, which Gandhi shared with his Jewish friends: “A universalist way of thinking, such as what Gandhi had encountered in the London branch of the Ethical Society, could be culled from various religions without difficulty, (...) provided doctrines were bracketed out and a common humanist platform thereby laid bare.” (29) Gandhi appears in this way as one of the forerunners of the

relativity of the historical religions, rejects the identification of ‘religion’ with the religious institutions, rather, measuring them all at the measure of ‘religion’, which he, unlike Vivekananda, did not identify with Advaita Vedanta, but defined it as that “which transcends Hinduism, which changes one’s very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies” (quoted 177).
search for a ‘global ethics’, which receives much attention today, and it shows a stage in the history and development of this idea.

The last chapter is devoted to the theme of toleration, which was a prominent feature in Gandhi’s writings on religious pluralism for many years, inspired by the encounter with liberal thought in England, and by Swami Vivekananda’s writings on toleration. Chatterjee clarifies, that toleration was not enough for Gandhi: “... Gandhi was eventually to go beyond the language of toleration and open out a horizon in which religious pluralism would be not just tolerated, but welcomed...” (32). His vision was an “… alternative society in which otherness would be associated with neither indifference or conflict, but with harmony and cooperation.” (ibid.) In 1927 Gandhi states: Since Hinduism is not “… an exclusive religion, it enables the followers of that faith not merely to respect all the other religions, but ... to admire and assimilate whatever may be good in the other faiths.” (quoted 180).

One of the insights one can gain from Chatterjee’s presentation is: Gandhi realized that mere appeals are not enough, rather, that a pedagogy of religious dialogue and understanding is necessary, keeping in mind the weakness of human nature. In his pedagogy of the Ashram life, he incorporated “… practices which had as their aim, the bringing about of understanding between Hindus and Muslims.” (151) Her analysis of Gandhi’s prayer meetings (in ch. 4) is fascinating: She shows their character as radical interreligious experiments, a (for many participants very unpleasant and hard) school of togetherness between religions. But at the same time she prevents a too enthusiastic view in mentioning that the reading of the Koran at the prayer meetings “was scarcely appreciated by either Hindus or Muslims during the South Africa days or later. Nor did Muslims often attend the meetings.” (151f)

What is exciting in this text of “a student of Gandhi’s life and work” (15), as she herself puts it: It is not a mere presentation of Gandhi’s thought, eventually within the framework of an idealization of Gandhi. Rather, it is a critical, analytical dialogue with Gandhi – for example on Gandhi’s use of Advaitic language (46). It becomes visible, that the book is written by a philosopher, i.e. somebody who asks questions and encourages questions. With this book, Professor Chatterjee has completed a remarkable trilogy, continuing her studies on “Gandhi’s Religious Thought” (1983) and “Gandhi and his Jewish Friends” (1992), and it confirms again her position as one of the eminent scholars in the field of Gandhian studies. Besides R. Iyer’s “The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi” (1973) and Bhikhu Parekh’s “Gandhi’s Political Philosophy” (1989), her works belong to the classical in-depth studies on Gandhi’s thought, and they demonstrate with great clarity the relevance of Gandhi’s ideas and practice in our time, which is darkened by the vicious circle of violence. “A new history, which would not be a record of the follies of mankind, could yet be written.” (182)

Ernst Fürlinger

* * *


The great merit of this book is that it relates for the first time the history and the work of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (DIM/MID) which was established by the Benedictine Confederation in 1978 for promoting dialogue between monks and nuns of different religions and, in par-
ticular, on the level of spiritual practice and experience. It provides the reader with a deep analysis of the meaning and challenges of such dialogue which consists, among other forms of meeting, of “Spiritual Exchanges” between Christian and Buddhist monks/nuns who spend some time in each other’s respective monasteries in Asia and in the West. It also includes the organization of interreligious seminars like the Gethsemani Encounters in 1996 and 2002 with Buddhist and Christian participants. The full and active participation of H.H. the Dalai Lama during the first encounter which took place in the Cistercian monastery where Dom Thomas Merton lived, was by itself a historic event.

Blée explains well how the specific place of monasticism in interreligious dialogue has been particularly exemplified by three pioneers whom he calls the “Fathers of monastic dialogue”, viz Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda), Bede Griffiths and Thomas Merton (p.48). The Author devotes then an entire section on the adoption of oriental meditation techniques and the masters of Shantivanam (pp.48-64). In this regard, it is true to say that Le Saux and Griffiths were more focused on having the experience of God according to Indian spirituality than just borrowing techniques from another tradition (p.63). We would like to point out, though, that it still remains unclear which method or technique Swami Abhishiktananda made use of, but he definitely was engrossed most of his time in the study of and the meditation on the Upanishads. On the other hand, he also once wrote a full chapter on the Prayer of the Name (nāma-japa), a technique that he would advise and “whose effectiveness has been recognized for centuries in the spiritual traditions alike of India and of Eastern Christianity.” Besides, in Guru and Disciple. An Encounter with Sri Gnanananda, a Contemporary Master, Swamiji recorded also the teachings of his master on meditation: “For him, dhyāna was the one essential spiritual practice [and] the only effective way of arriving at the realization of the Presence in one’s own depths.” The master who taught Vedantic sādhana, would recommend to advanced seekers the practice of ātma-vicāra and nirguna-opāsana in which all the modifications of mind have stopped and only awareness remains in its pristine purity. In fact, there is no trace in Swami Abhishiktananda’s writings of any of these methods he could have practised himself. His path was rather to experience the total renunciation and freedom of an Indian sannyāśī and to follow the call of the Upanishads to the utmost depths, “in the cave of the heart.”

Fabrice Blée who wrote a doctoral thesis on the history and significance of the North American experience, was well placed to recount the various stages of the organization of the monastic interreligious dialogue of Catholic initiative. There were the founding meetings of Loppem (Belgium) and Petersham (USA) organized by the AIM in 1977, which led to the creation of two sub-committees in 1978: NABEWD for North America and DIM/MID for Europe. Two chapters (pp.65-109 and pp.111-146) read nearly like a novel with all the controversies and suspicions that surrounded the NABEWD due to some liturgical issues (like the practice of intercommunion at the Petersham meeting), the lack of communication with the European DIM, and the sponsorship of a particular type of contemplative prayer (“Centering Prayer”) while neglecting the monastic and interreligious dialogue itself. According to Blée, it was the publication in December 1989 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (Vatican) of a divisive Letter on Christian meditation that would somehow accelerate the reorganization and improve the coordination between the two sub-committees. The document has been interpreted in various ways and gave rise to many critical reactions. In a way, “the Letter encourages what it denounces”
(p.129) and was an opportunity for the monks in dialogue to draw up an answer, based on a large consultation: Contemplation and Interreligious Dialogue. References and Perspectives Drawn from the Experiences of Monastics (1993)\(^{19}\). The document is structured around the issue of adopting -- as Christian monks -- contemplative practices developed in other religions, and shows the relevance as well as the required conditions of such an approach. This "interior" dialogue\(^{19}\) of monks deeply committed to the search of the Absolute, as well as its outer form in the "Spiritual Exchanges", is by itself a spiritual path. It is "probably the most significant type of spiritual interreligious exchange" and should also result into a new religious consciousness within the Christian tradition. Altogether, the document marked a new stage in the practice of dialogue for Christian monks and nuns of the West\(^{19}\), by which pioneers like Monchanin, Le Saux, Griffiths and Merton who entered personally in that interior dialogue, were given institutional status within the monastic milieu\(^{16}\). More recently, as the Commissions of DIM/MID were celebrating their twenty-fifth anniversary in 2003, a special issue of their International Bulletin was released, focusing on the new interest of monks and nuns towards a spirituality of dialogue: Monastic Experiences of Interreligious Dialogue\(^{17}\) (pp.147-152). This contribution was first intended to present a profound and clear testimony - on the level of experience - to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, who was preparing a document on a Christian spirituality of interreligious dialogue. However, it offers also a reaction, in the light of monastic experience, to the Declaration Dominus Jesus\(^{18}\) (2000). Since the Declaration directly concerns the theological foundations of the monastic dialogue, we are surprised at the total absence of reference about it in Blée's book.

On the other hand, another essential contribution of Blée is his presentation and critique of the document on "New Age" issued by both the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Pontifical Council for Culture in 2003\(^{19}\). According to the Author, the document seems to label as "New Age" some of the most authentic Asian practices of meditation (p.176-180). He further admits that today "the debate within Christianity stands less between a Christian vision of faith and a non Christian one, than between a mystical approach of truth and a more dogmatic one" (pp.180 and 184).

We wish to make a final observation: Blée devotes many pages to the "desert of religious otherness" (p.187-198), a theme which has been taken up as the title of his book. In our opinion, the title is somewhat questionable although it points at some true aspects of any dialogue in its early stages. Indeed, the 'desert' does not denote here anymore a geographical place where the monks and nuns used to dwell and struggle historically in their search for God, but it lies now also in the relation to the other and more specifically to the monk/nun of another religion. It is nevertheless a fact that at the deepest level of spiritual experience, the other individual is no more seen as another. Many mystics have gone beyond the otherness and have realized the "no-otherness" or universal oneness. We may refer only to St Francis of Assisi’s Canticle of the Creatures...

In conclusion, we have greatly appreciated the book of Fabrice Blée and found it quite informative and stimulating. It is definitely a must for all those involved in the dialogue of spiritual experience.

Swami Atmananda

Notes:
1 See the websites of the General Secretariat of DIM/MID established in 1994 (www.dimmid.org) and MID, the North American regional commission (www.monasticaldialog.org) which was first known as NABEWD (North American Board for East-West Dialogue) until 1993.
2 The four lectures and many hours of actual dialogue during the 1996
Gethsemani Encounter have been culled in a small book which is of immense interest for all who are engaged in dialogue (and surprisingly not mentioned in Blée's bibliography): H.H. the Dalai Lama, *Spiritual Advice for Buddhists and Christians*, ed. Donald Mitchel, 1998

\[\text{Prayer, Delhi (ISPCK), 1989, p.95.}\]
\[\text{Delhi (ISPCK), 1990.}\]
\[\text{Meditation.}\]
\[\text{Ibid, p.65.}\]
\[\text{A general term for spiritual practice.}\]
\[\text{Lit. "Self-inquiry", a Vedantic type of meditation, made famous in modern times by Sri Ramana Maharshi. See ibid, p.68. Swami Abhishiktananda mentioned more than once that Sri Gnanananda's teaching was a perfect echo of that of the Maharshi.}\]
\[\text{Lit. "Meditation on the attributeless [Brahman]", a meditation without object which aims at mental vacuity. "Enter into yourself, to the place where there is nothing, and take care that nothing enters there. Penetrate within yourself to the place where there is no more any thought, and take care that no thought arises there! There where there is nothing: Fullness! There where nothing is seen: the Vision of Being! There where nothing more appears: behold, the Self! That is dhyanam." (Ibid, p.65).}\]
\[\text{Swami Abhishiktananda used to quote this expression which begins a famous verse in Sanskrit sung by Sri Ramana Maharshi in the year 1915, and in which the latter condensed his whole experience. See Sri Ramana Gita, Tiruvannamalai (Sri RamanaSamram) 1998, ch.II, v.2, p.47.}\]
\[\text{Le dialogue interreligieux monastique. L'expérience nord-américaine. Histoire et analyse, Montréal, Université de Montréal, 1999, 496 p.}\]
\[\text{Aide à l'implantation Monastique. From 1976 onwards, the anagram would stand for "Aide inter-monastères" or "Alliance for International Monasticism". About this organization, see the excellent study of Jean Leclercq, Nouvelle page d'histoire monastique. Histoire de l'AIM (1960-1983), Paris (Publications de l'AIM), 1986, 224 p. It is the AIM who prepared and convened the meetings at Bangkok (1968) and Bangalore (1973) which were the stepping stones for the understanding of the necessity of dialogue with monastics of other religions.}\]
\[\text{First released in the Bulletin of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and published the next year in MID Bulletin 49, January 1994. Above all, the document is the work of Pierre de Béthune, OSB, who initiated the project and wrote the final text. Eventually, it was published under his name: By Faith and Hospitality. The Monastic Tradition as a Model for Interreligious Encounter, Leominster, Herefordshire (Gracewing), 2002.}\]
\[\text{Raimon Panikkar even uses the neologism 'intrareligious' to underline the importance of the inner dimension of dialogue. See R. Panikkar, The Intrareligious Dialogue. New York (Paulist Press), 1978.}\]
\[\text{In 1994 the time had come to grant more autonomy to the monastic dialogue by setting up a new structure: The Abbot Primate of the Benedictines, in agreement with the Cistercian Abbot General, erected the DIM/MID sub-committees into a General Secretariat of all the regional commissions. Pierre de Béthune, OSB, has been its Secretary General since then.}\]
\[\text{We should mention here that Blée also acknowledges throughout his book the major role played in this work of dialogue by figures like R. Panikkar, C. Tholens, OSB, P. de Béthune, OSB, and many others.}\]
\[\text{Also published in MID Bulletin 70, March 2003.}\]
\[\text{Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, Dominus Jesus. Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus and the Church, Rome (Liberaria Editrice Vaticana), August 2000. It is worth noting that the Declaration contains a chapter (VI) on "The Church and the Other Religions in Relation to Salvation".}\]
\[\text{Jesus Christ, the Bearer of the Water of Life. A Christian Reflection on the New Age, Rome (Liberaria Editrice Vaticana), January 2003.}\]

* * *

Mary Margaret Funk, *Islam is...*, New York (Lantern Books), 2003, pp. 120.

A dialogue between Christians and Muslims is essential today for overcoming hardened prejudices and mutual misunderstandings. The Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) has given more importance to Buddhist-Christian dialogue, based also on the closeness of monastic structure and spiritual discipline. Sr. Mary Margaret Funk (known to her friends as Sister Meg) has worked as Executive Director of MID for many years, and she got involved in Muslim-Christian dialogue, of which this little book bears
testimony. The book expresses great sympathy and understanding of Islam and her friendship with Muslims in the United States, and it can be of great help for Christians in their approach to Muslims. It is clear that the book was written after September 11, 2001, and all the more is its actuality. The author addresses the burning questions usually raised in connection with Islam, like the position of women, the question of violent fundamentalism and of the possibility of democracy. I particularly like her reflection on the origin of Islam in the desert, and the meaning of the desert in Christian spirituality.

The book has an introduction by Dr. John Borelli, Associate Director for the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. He rightly points out: "Sister Meg shows how dialogue is not an isolated activity but an aspect of the spiritual life." (p. 12).

The friendship of the author with Muslims and her living dialogue is shown in the Afterword by Dr. Shahid Athar, who, being a physician, is very much involved in Christian-Muslim dialogue and peace movements.

Abhishiktananda figures at the end of the booklet in the context of "A Select Bibliography on God-Consciousness" (p. 109).

Bettina Bäumer

A REPORT

The following report will be of interest to the readers of SETU as one of the activities of the members of the Society.

Ajatananda Ashram: Interreligious Ashram in Tapovan (Rishikesh, Himalayas).

Current situation and vision for the future

The new interreligious ashram in the Indian Himalayan foothills was founded in 2003 on Abhishiktananda Society's initiative, to fulfill the dream and the vision of Swami Abhishiktananda [see Setu No 24, pp.40-41 and No 25, pp.33-34]. The ashram became autonomous in 2004 as it is a tradition in India that monastic ashrams should be self-governing and run by the monks themselves. Therefore, the management was handed over to an independent Trust which would carry out the financing of the project, although the place would remain the property of the Society. The new residence was eventually named ‘Ajatananda Ashram’ since this interreligious and intermonastic project had derived its inspiration from both Swami Abhishiktananda and his main disciple Swami Ajatananda (Marc Chaduc).

Last year, we have been busy in building a few more rooms on the 1st floor and enlarging the meditation room which is underground. As to date, the community life is still in an embryonic stage. Indeed, the building-up of such an interfaith experiment needs time, reflection, patience, and moreover, it requires a truly profound call and a solid spiritual maturity from each member. There should not be any rush for this. It is expected, though, that we will be able to start the full-fledged life of the ashram sometime in the course of this year. The ashram will be able to accommodate seven people, including resident monks as well as guest monks. Sincere spiritual seekers of all religious backgrounds who are interested in silence,
meditation and, generally speaking, the monastic way of life, will be also welcome as guests for their retreats.

Ajatananda Ashram will be essentially a monastic community whose members are animated by a common search for Truth at the heart of all religions, while belonging themselves to different religious denominations. In reality, the search for God or the Absolute, the essence of monastic life, and the monastic interreligious dialogue are deeply interrelated. Many believe also that the next natural development in the present-day monastic interreligious dialogue is precisely to live together, as monks of differing religious traditions, in a monastic setting. In this living together, they are deeply convinced that spirituality is one and transcends the framework of any particular religion.

The essence of dialogue is a meeting of persons. As a matter of fact, all monks travel from similar backgrounds and speak the same spiritual language... They recognize each other as co-pilgrims on the same spiritual journey: indeed, they all have the same aspiration for God, the Divine, the Absolute - and they live the same life of radical renunciation. Their prime goal is not to know Truth intellectually but to experience Truth, or to search for God and experience union with Him. Therefore, they usually prefer sitting together in silence, contemplating the divine Presence within the Heart, rather than discussing beliefs and comparing theological concepts. Hence, the particular characteristic of the intermonastic dialogue is that it is a dialogue at the level of experience and not of the intellect alone.

It is my experience that meeting with monastics of other Traditions - with utter reverence and respect for each other's faith or dharma - is a source of immense joy and love, and always leads to a deepening of one’s own spiritual path. In our small interreligious ashram in Tapovan, at the bank of Ganges, we would like to experiment in the coming years with this new monastic living together, certain that saṃnyāsa is the deepest spiritual meeting point of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Christianity- to mention only the religions of India which have developed a monastic tradition with deep historic roots. Obviously, because of its ecumenical or universal nature, the ashram itself cannot be formally affiliated to any religious organization/institution. On the other hand, each ashramite will remain faithful to his own particular faith, status and religious practice, and will maintain links of profound and true communion with his own tradition. As a matter of fact, such a creative experiment cannot be done at the cost of denying orthodoxy or unity.

Practically, this means: sitting together in silence and deep contemplation for a few hours each day, observing silence of the lips for half of the day, studying and sharing together on spiritual topics, eating (or fasting) together, practising hospitality towards spiritual seekers from various traditions, etc. Our community life does not involve rituals of any kind, except for short prayers, some chanting and spiritual readings. We have no chapel, no temple, but we pray and meditate in a simple meditation room. No common worship is held. Everyone, though, is free to conduct rituals privately (if authorized by his own tradition). However, despite the fact that there isn't any common participation in worship, our spiritual commitment is intense and enhanced by a sense of profound communion in silence, beyond barriers.

As monks, we have no mission, no teaching, no ministry. Our call is to live for God, the Divine, the Absolute, and to share the blessings of the holy path with all fellow human beings. Our way is of silence, seclusion and contemplation. Yet, we offer to monastics and spiritual seekers the opportunity to get together and experience contemplative life.
in an interreligious monastic brotherhood. Our hope is that more and more people will awaken to their own spiritual depth and will in the end contribute to peace, unity and freedom to the earth itself.

Swami Atmananda

For any information, please write or email to Ajatananda Ashram, P.O. Box 249 201 (Uttaranchal), India; email address: ajatananda@rediffmail.com

Extracts from the Correspondence

The following are some samples of the many encouraging emails and letters which the editor receives.

From the Bishop of Varanasi, Patrick D’Souza, co-founder of the Abhishiktananda Society:
March 11, 2005
My dear Bettina,

I want to thank you for the perseverance with which you are publishing the bulletin of the Abhishiktananda Society. It means much work, ad you are doing it consistently. May God bless you.

Yours in our Lord
Patrick D’Souza, Bishop of Varanasi

From a Franciscan Sister in Andhra Pradesh:
Dear Bettina Bäumer,
Greetings of peace!

Thanks for sending me SETU, Bulletin of the Abhishiktananda Society. I relished the spiritual feast you offer on the Indian Christian spirituality through the various write-ups in this issue.

Sr. Mary John Kathikatt fmn

From Tiruvannamalai:
Bettina-ji,

my name is Michael Hightberger and I am living in Sri Ramanasramam in Tiruvannamalai. Abhishiktananda has been the driving force of my inner life for more than a decade. The fire and sincerity of purpose evident in his writings was the principle cause for my restlessness... Inspired by Swamiji I came to India on a brief leave from the monastery for what was intended to be a two-month stay which turned into five years!

I love the publication...

Michael

From Sister Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, former Executive Director of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID):

Dear Bettina,

I wrote a little review for Patrick Hart on Shirley’s new book. I enjoyed it. I see the work you are doing to be invaluable... in all the legacies around today for Merton, Bede Griffiths, Basil Pennington, Thomas Keating... your efforts are the most serious and I feel continue the original concepts and questions in the light of our times...

Meg

NEWS AND PUBLICATIONS

The Rev. Monodeep Daniel, member of the Brotherhood House, has been elected Secretary of the Abhishiktananda Society by the Executive Committee (December 3, 2005). The outgoing Secretary, Swami Atmananda, has been elected Vice-President of the Society at the same Meeting.

New Life Members of the Society:
Mr Michael Weldon (Skreen, Ireland), Prof. André Didierjean (Strasbourg, France), Mrs Rose Trapnell (Charlottesville, VA, U.S.A.), Mr Alias M.V. Thamby (Delhi).
New Honorary Members of the Society:

Swami Brahmananda (French Sannyasi living in India), Dr. Christian Hackbarth-Johnson (Author of “Interreligiöse Existenz. Spirituelle Erfahrung und Identität bei Henri Le Saux”, Dachau, Germany), Mrs Shirley du Boulay (Biographer of Swami Abhishiktananda, Oxford, U.K.)

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Recent Publications:

Shirley du Boulay. The Cave of the Heart. The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda, (Foreword by Raimon Panikkar), Maryknoll (Orbis Books), 2005, 276 pp. (See Review)


Swami Abhishiktananda, Marukara, transl. into Malayalam from The Further Shore (First Part: Sannyasa) and ed. by Emmanuel Vattakuzhy, Avolichal (Santhi Sadan Ashram), 2005, 78 pp.

N.C. Joseph, Om! Abba!, Kochi (Poornodaya Book Trust), 2005, 44 pp. [This booklet is a free translation of the last chap. “OM! Abba!” in Swami Abhishiktananda, Prayer, supplemented by personal commentaries of the Author]


Forthcoming Publications (2006):


Swami Abhishiktananda. Selected Writings, (Modern Spiritual Masters Series), ed. by Shirley du Boulay, Maryknoll (Orbis Books) [Working title]
Harry Old meadow, Abhishiktananda A Christian Pilgrim in India (probably to be published in Australia)

Thesis on Swami Abhishiktananda (under preparation):


* * *

Official website on Swami Abhishiktananda and the Society: www.abhishiktananda.org

The Abhishiktananda Archives of the Society have been transferred from the Vidyajyoti College of Theology to the new Library Extension of the Brotherhood House (Delhi) where the Society has its registered office. They are accessible to scholars who ask permission in advance from the Secretary.

Important notice for subscribers of SETU:

Many subscriptions have been received through the website of the Society. Though the Bulletin is sent free of charge, we have to ask for contributions/donations towards the cost of printing and postage. New subscribers will receive the current issue, but the following issues will be sent only after receiving a contribution (by cheque/demand draft in the name of the Abhishiktananda Society, Delhi).

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Please inform us about any book, article, research thesis or seminar which refers to Swami Abhishiktananda and is likely to interest the readers of this Bulletin (to be sent to the Editor: see address below.)

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