

ABHISHIKTANANDA SOCIETY

Brotherhood House, 7 Court Lane, Delhi 110 054

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...It is always a great joy to be here (the hermitage at Uttarkashi). It is like another world, 'another birth', as we say in India. Here the Upanishads open up to ever greater depths. I realize that no cursory reading of the Upanishads (any more than of the Bible) can reveal their secret. We are so conditioned by our western mentality! It is easy to say that we must make our souls and our minds virginally empty. But to go on from that to actually doing so! It means quite a different angle of vision. And we have to attain this angle of vision, not conceptually, but existentially. How far my book (*Sagesse, Saccidananda*) falls short of the target! However it is probably as much as Christians can take.

Abhishiktananda, *Letter of 24.7.64*

GLIMPSES OF ABHISHIKTANANDA AT AN EARLY STAGE

by a Carmelite Sister

I had the privilege of meeting Swamiji at a very early stage in his spiritual adventure. I had come to India two or three years after him, and we met for the first time in 1953, when I had been for two years in the Carmel at Shembaganur, a community of Indian Sisters near Kodaikanal.

This is how we met. Two Little Sisters (of the Sacred Heart of Fr de Foucauld) were staying in our guest house, while they were searching for a place of their own and were learning Tamil. They had already met Fr Le Saux at Shantivanam, and he had gladly agreed to give them some talks on Indian life and spirituality. So he came to Shembaganur and, as he was staying with the Jesuit Fathers near by, he presented himself in his black habit—"You see me as a good Benedictine!" he laughed. (In those days *kavi*, saffron, his normal dress, was frowned upon by Christians—things have changed a lot since then.)

From the first we met at a deep level. On his side, having a purely Benedictine background, he was delighted to be in contact with the contemplative life of Carmel, one lived in the spirit of the pure '*nada'*' (nothing) of St John of the Cross, which was my own inspiration and guiding line. This orientation was very close to the '*neti, neti*' of the Upanishads, which he was discovering at that very moment.

On my side, having been 'parachuted' directly from a cloistered monastery in France into an even more strictly enclosed one in India, I had no opportunity of becoming acquainted with Hindu life and spirituality. But the Swami became for me a window on India, and by sharing his experience with me, he enabled me to discover many things and to taste the spiritual riches of India and my Hindu neighbours.

After that, our spiritual experience at the Hindu-Christian level was never to be separated, but rather merged in the pure Realization of the Self, from which there is no return. Though he has reached the Further Shore, I am still waiting—briefly, I hope—for the final way to bring me to the other side...

* * *

For those who know Abhishiktananda only through his writings, or who met him only in his latter years when he was well known and respected as "Swamiji"; I will try to give a glimpse of what he was like at the beginning of his time in India. It will be interesting and encouraging to see how much he changed, or rather, developed, "unfolded"—for his life was a continuous pilgrimage of deepening discovery.

When I met him in 1953, his figure, of medium height, was still youthful. His shaven head and the orange-coloured robe of a sannyasi marked him out, whether he was moving among the Hindu villagers living beside the river Kavery, or in Christian circles in Trichinopoly. No doubt at first his appearance could give a shock to the pious in these circles, but people were drawn to him by his smiling affability. His simplicity and openness, his eagerness to discover spiritual truth, combined with a burning enthusiasm, sometimes led to exaggeration and lack of discretion, and people noted his tendency to get carried off his feet (*emballement*). He suffered from a defect in his speech, which was made worse by his timidity. At times it was very difficult to follow what he was

saying (or rather, murmuring between his teeth), especially when he spoke in a mixture of Tamil, Latin, Greek, French and English! It is not surprising that many people thought him 'odd'.

He had a strong sense of wonder, and greeted every new discovery with enthusiasm. He was thrilled at the least glimpse of new spiritual experience. His previous Benedictine formation—rather rigid, and centred on the praise of God in liturgical worship, together with spiritual reading—had left little room for a deep personal experience of the Self within. In India he discovered the interior prayer of the heart in the depths of his soul, going beyond all words and thoughts to reach the *guhya*, that inner cave where the Self pervades all, and to find there the Realization of the Self at which Hindu spirituality aims through *dhyana* (meditation). His life in the contemplative ashram at Shantivanam and in the caves of Arunachala provided the setting for a real and deep experience of the Absolute. His reading and study of Hindu Scriptures (Upanishads, Gita, Vedas) also pointed the way. His experience was therefore an interweaving of Hindu and Christian experience, each influencing the other, and so intricately connected that they faced him with the 'agonizing problem' (how to understand it theologically) with which he struggled throughout the pages of his Diary.

In those days, at the dawn of his spiritual development, the least hint, the least spark of spiritual experience in another soul was for him an occasion for exultation. When he met someone on the way to Realization, or already diving into the depths of the *guhya*, he at once responded, sharing his own experience; it was as if in each of them the Spirit was exulting in the depth of their being.

I remember the day when he came up to Shembaganur to share with me his new discovery of the Fatherhood of God. He was still living in the South, when this great event took place in his inner life, and God revealed to him the deep meaning of the Divine Paternity. His previous formation had been focussed on Christ but now, through his Hindu experience, Christ had led him to the Father. I can still hear him as if in ecstasy, saying: "Abba! Abba! Father!", emphasizing each syllable, "Ab-ba, Ab-ba, Fa-ther!" After he had several times repeated these words with jubilation, we were both (while standing on either side of the grill in the parlour) plunged into deep silence, a living silence full of the Presence

of the Father...Abba ! Abba ! OM ! OM !

There was however another side to all this. Like any youthful genius, dazzled by the discovery of the Self, the inner *gutha*, he was astonished not to find the same experience in other religious and spiritual people. He expected everyone to live as if they too had had the same experience. At times we sense this in his letters and other writings, as Jennifer Hashmi has noted in her article in *Bulletin* No. 10 (April 1987).

Like other prophets, during his early years at Shantivanam, he did not find recognition or acceptance apart from the few true friends who were moving in the same direction. He suffered deeply from being misunderstood, and his solitude made him all the more sensitive, vulnerable, and even touchy. Any criticism or unkind remark left a deep wound, and for some time afterwards he would be very low and dejected. However, he would get over it, and once again renew his efforts to find appreciation and approval—for at this stage he had not yet learnt detachment from the opinion of others, which is the mark of a true *juani*.

I recall that once, when he came to our Carmel, he discreetly offered to give a talk to the community, but our dear old Prioress refused, as she was afraid that the Sisters would be shocked by his sanniyasi robe. He had similar experiences also on other occasions. For instance, when he appeared at the gate of a convent in Bombay, he was violently chased away by the *darwan* (porter), shouting that it was no place for beggars and sadhus! And when eventually he met the Superior and introduced himself as a priest and monk, she rushed to the phone to ask the Bishop if he knew anything about this strange person! Later, of course, we could share a good laugh at these incidents.

During these early years he was constantly hoping to find a *chela*, a disciple, who would share his vision and enable Shantivanam to develop. Several times he thought he had found the ideal disciple, but each time he realized that he had been mistaken, and hope turned into disillusionment. He had to wait until the end of his life for a true disciple to appear. This was Mark C., whose coming coincided with the last stage in Swamiji's enlightenment. At last his dream of spiritual paternity was realized, at the same time as the final blossoming of his inner life before the take-off for the Further Shore.

The fact that he was living so much on his own, while he

was meeting with so many new experiences, and at the same time was so generally misunderstood, created in him an intense need to share his thoughts and experiences with those few friends who could understand and who themselves had a contemplative experience such as he himself was seeking.

From time to time, when he felt he must tell someone else about his experiences and discoveries, he would come to Shembaganur, and in the course of our conversations in the parlour would pour out at great length the thoughts which filled his heart to bursting. He knew that he could speak with full freedom, holding nothing back. In all simplicity he allowed his thoughts to flow freely, and would perform mental somersaults without fear of being scolded or called to order at the theological level. I would mostly listen in silence, but I sometimes told him that these were spiritual acrobatics and that he was performing on a mental trapeze. Then he would come back to earth and burst into a roar of laughter. He well knew that this was all the Lord's *lila* (sport), and that he was still struggling in the depths of *maya*. We could laugh together, for he never took himself too seriously.

By nature he was a thinker, an intellectual. His mind was always active, on the move, though he strove to pass beyond the turmoil of thoughts to pure contemplation in the depth of the soul. There were moments when this was realized, as he noted for instance during his long silent retreats, and as I myself witnessed one evening long afterwards, when he was with us in our new foundation of Soso at Gumla in Bihar.

In the afternoon we had had a long talk, and he had also spoken with all the Sisters together. Then at 5 p.m., when we withdrew for our customary hour of mental prayer, he went out to walk and pray beside the small stream that flows along the edge of our compound. The scenery in that lonely spot was tinted with crimson and orange in the fiery glow of the setting sun. The solitude and silence of Carmel drew him into a deeper contemplation beyond word or thought, and he experienced something like a "Taste of the Divine", a direct contact with the Absolute, the *purvam* (fullness), which cannot be described.

That evening we had planned that he should lead us in singing bhajans during our time of recreation; but when he returned from his walk, he took me aside and begged to be excused, as it was impossible for him to speak. After receiving

such a grace, he had to remain alone in silence. When I gave my consent he smiled, and the light in his eyes told far more than any words that could have passed his lips. So we parted with "OM".

The most striking impression that I retain from those early years of contact with Swamiji is that his life was one of constant movement between solitude and the world. As the ocean waves ebb and flow on the seashore, so he would often retire to one of his hermitages to taste the Divine, to plunge into the *guhā*, the Abyss of the Self; but he could not remain there for long, and would soon return to his fellow men. It was not his calling to be a solitary hermit, and he had to come back to the shore of this life, to put his experiences to the test, to share them with others, letting them also draw from the gushing waters of the same Source...

This is surely something that can inspire our life, whatever may be our situation in this world. We cannot live as a hermit, a sadhu, a '*guhantara*' (dweller in the cave); but we can always keep alive in the depth of our being a thirst for the shore that is 'within'. We can always find time to withdraw for periods of solitude and silence, immersed in the Ocean of the Self, and then return to the shore of this world, refreshed by the water of divine life. To enter into the cave of the heart—even if it can only be for a short while, for a few minutes, in the midst of a busy life in this world—will always enrich us, and will be a source of enlightenment for others. The contact with the Divine will become deeper and deeper, as we advance on the road towards the *purnam*, the fullness.... So we may share with Swamiji a glimpse of the radiant light of the all-pervading Self...

OM ! Purnam ! OM !

Sister Theresa

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NEWS

Poland. In Warsaw the "Pilgrims of East and West" hold regular meetings for prayer and reflection. Mr Gorsky plans (bureaucracy permitting) to start a periodical with the same title, which will contain excerpts from the writings of Abhishikhananda, B. Griffiths, T. Merton, etc. and also translations of classical Eastern texts, of which very few are available in Polish. Their 1988 Summer meeting in the Tatra

Mountains followed an intensive programme from 4 a.m. until 7 p.m., plus an hour's vigil from midnight. During the meeting the mountain hut in which they were living was totally destroyed by fire, but they carried on undeterred !

France. Mrs. O. Baumer-Despeigne will be 'animating' a weekend (4 Nov.) at the Dominican monastery of L'Arbresle (near Lyon) with a paper on "An experiential meeting between two spiritual traditions, Hindu and Christian", based on her correspondence with Swamiji.

U.K. Dr Raimundo Panikkar has recently completed his Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen. In November next Sister Sara Grant will be giving the Teape Lectures, "Confessions of an Advaitic Christian", in Cambridge.

The address of the secretary, if needed, from 1 July to 20 Sept., 1989 will be c/o The Georgian House, Curridge, Newbury, Berks RG16 9DX.

Publications. *Souvenirs d'Arnachala* has been published in German by Herder as *Das Geheimnis des heiligen Berges*. The French original is also to be reprinted by Desclée de Brouwer.

Saccidamanda has been published in Italian by E.M.I., Bologna.

DONATIONS RECEIVED WITH THANKS since June 1988

Mr R. Rajkumar, Fr M.M. Balaguer, Shri Dharan Paul, Fr Peter Viegas, Fr A. Veilleux, Fr J.W. Groff Jr, Sr M. James, Miss E. Nesbitt, Rev. C.M. Rogers, Mr Andrew Rawlinson, Sr Myriam Dardenne, Fr C. Gispert-Sauch, Fr A. Kalliath, Rev. John R. Cole, Rev. A.W.J. Walker, Mrs A.M. Stokes, Prof. John H. Mansfield, Prof. James E. Royster, N.A.B.E.W.D. (Sr M. Pascaline Coff), Fr R. Stephens, Lotus Yoga Centre (Ms. F. Middleton), Mr M. Salep, Mme E. Lefebure.

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4. *In Spirit and Truth : an essay on Prayer and Life*—a translation of the Appendix to the French edition of *Prayer*.
Paper cover : in India, Rs. 10.00; overseas, \$ 2 or £ 1.
5. *The Mountain of the Lord : a pilgrimage to Gangotri* (reprint)
Paper cover : in India, Rs. 10.00; overseas, \$ 2 or £ 1.

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