

Abhishiktananda : Identity and Loss, Conflict and Resolution
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I am honoured to be asked to honour Abhishiktananda's centenary celebration in this way and also a little intimidated, as I am not an Abhishiktananda scholar. However I will try to share some reflections on the nature of identity that arise from a reading and pondering of his intense life and literary legacy especially the book by which I first met him, *Saccidananda: A Christian approach to Advaitic Experience*.

This was first published in French in 1964 and then in an English edition that he revised in 1973 the year of his death. I went to my first copy of the book which I read as a novice. I noticed a proprietorial name written on the flyleaf and saw it was 'Paul Freeman'. This was me thirty years ago as a novice. I had changed my name not only because of the monastic tradition of taking a new name but mainly because there was another Laurence in the community at the time and who looked rather like me. As he was also the bursar I think they thought I might impersonate him at the bank and run off with the funds. So slowly I got used to being called Paul and eventually turned round when someone called that name. A few years later in another community we found the confusion of identity again but reversed. There were at one time three Pauls living together so I reverted to my baptismal name.

Perhaps this is a slight metaphor for the loss and recovery of identity that Abhishiktananda endured in his plunge into advaita.

Abhishiktananda was taught by his twenty-five years in India that spiritual transformation becomes perceptible in the psychological and physical realm. And so without psychologising his experience in a reductionist way we might be helped to understand his spiritual meaning and message by being aware of how he changed at this level. The earliest and most basic element of his religious psychology is that he **entered monastic life at the age of 11** and decided to leave for India shortly after the death of his mother. He seems to have been contented as a monk in Brittany and his desire to go to India remains relatively unexplained. Like Bede Griffiths after him he felt the call clearly and definitively but maybe for different reason. Fr Bede had endured his first great crisis of identity in wrestling with his non-belief and finally accepting first god then Christ. This led him to become a monk and that led him to India after a long period of study. Abhishiktananda by contrast seemed to have had no similar faith-crisis. In fact as his psychological phases of development unfolded he may have felt the need for a crisis of identity and went to India to induce it. He left what he called his "Gregorian peace" behind and felt at the end of his life that it would have been a betrayal of himself and what the Spirit had taught him in India to return to the West and reclaim it.

The first stage of the spiritual journey into the cave of the heart is *saguna*, the blissful discovery of God within oneself. But it is Brahman with form and is expressed in *bhakti*, the outward forms of devotion, *lila*, the games of God. At this stage we feel we are friends of God and a deep emotional and religious security is achieved. Identity poses no problem. But this is – one might say should be – followed by something more unsettling. The comfortable and comforting interplay of self-identity and divine identity is shaken. One response to this second stage is to deny and avoid it. The devotional life can be intensified to help achieve this but at a cost of spiritual openness depth and of greater personal rigidity. Perhaps Abhishiktananda was feeling this second stage develop after his long period of Gregorian peace and perhaps his psychological schedule induced him to embrace rather than evade it.

In this second stage there are many correspondences to the Nights of the Soul described by St John of the Cross and no doubt some link with the *acedia* of the Desert Fathers. It is a loss of familiar landmarks in religious identity and a consequent feeling of descending into an emptiness or void. Even our senses and ideas are confused and offer little support for the feeling of slipping and sliding into something that might become the death of God if not the extinction of our own self. A new kind of Self emerges from this experience of loss characterized by emptiness, a frightening unity and simplicity. God now seems no longer our friendly uncle but the One who is one. “He disappeared from their sight.” *Kevala*, the aloneness of God is stronger than the sense of being with God. This is perhaps the experience of being abandoned that Jesus endured on the Cross. It can lead to a degree of what Simone Weil calls ‘affliction’ that form of suffering, which contains physical and psychological elements but in which the very structure and recognisability of the self is eroded. There is both bliss and anguish on this path, alternating patterns of light and darkness which Abhishiktananda describes with vivid honesty.

If Abhishiktananda went to India to develop this second stage of his monastic quest for God he was successful. There is something at first intoxicating about it and A clearly felt this in the way he allowed India to seduce him. His intrinsic monastic desire to go deeper was encouraged by the reading of the Upanishads which describe so directly and clearly what has to happen:

When all the knots of the heart are cut here on earth, then a mortal becomes immortal. (Katha Up)

By the end of his life A had become familiar with this inner work and felt there was no turning back from it. To his late disciple Marc Chaduc he spoke confidently of the embracing this process:

The *guha* of the heart has been opened to you.. enter it from depth to depth, from centre to centre.. neither beginning nor end. For one whose eyes are opened to the darkness the only task that remains is to awaken his brothers to the ray of that holy darkness.

This suggests that whatever the mystical and subtle depths of a new identity Abhishiktananda had by the end also found his work, his mission. One of the many dramatic and instructive paradoxes of his personality is the tension between his solitude and his extroversion. He was to the end a gregarious hermit who needed to speak and write constantly about silence. We are the beneficiaries of this tension.

He speaks frequently about being 'plunged' into advaita and he seems indeed to have jumped in to India and the second stage of his life at the deep end. The first shock of the immersion came at Arunachala and he faced the challenge of a new relationship between inner experience and outer form. He was not at first impressed by his encounter with Ramana. Perhaps his expectations got in the way. Or perhaps his intellectual frame of reference had to yield to the direct experience. But before long the impact of the sage of Arunachala made its lasting impression.

India mythology survived long after the death of the Greek gods though perhaps it has already receded greatly since Abhishiktananda's death. Is India still the same place most Westerners visit to find the 'other half of their soul'? Abhishiktananda and later Fr Bede both saw the erosion of the spirituality on modern India under the influence of economic development. Abhishiktananda felt that though one should not deny the value of this development it should – unrealistic as it might now sound with India and China as the engines of the global economy – be controlled and moderated. But when he first visited Arunachala, Vishnu and Brahma were still contesting for primacy in a mythical realm that was inhabited by the majority of the people without doubt or confusion. As the two gods competed a column of light appeared and they agreed that whoever could find its source first would be the greater. Of course neither could because it was a manifestation of Shiva, the fire of love. It took form in the first age as a mountain of diamond, in the second as a mountain of ruby and in our degraded age as Arunachala, a mountain of rock.

Abhishiktananda was drawn to the sacred mountain and learned to live in solitude there in its caves. As a western Catholic he would have been familiar with sacred sites and pilgrimage. He had lived a full devotional life as a Christian and did so on occasions with his Indian guru. But neither the physical sacred nor the rituals were mere exotic substitutes for what he had known before. In India he discovered the subtle complementarity between these external forms and his deeper experience. As Ramana taught him:

A cave is hidden in the depth of the heart, that glorious place found only by those who renounce themselves.

Arunachala taught Abhishiktananda that after twenty years as a monk his self-renunciation was just beginning in earnest. But by the end of his life, revising the English edition of *Saccidananda*, a remarkable recovery and re-integration of his initial identity had taken place. He begins the book with what seems like an apology or a pre-defence of the criticism that it was based too much on a fulfillment theology – that all religions are fulfilled by Christianity – and that it relied too heavily on the Greek concepts that formed the Trinitarian theology on which the book was built and which Abhishiktananda never ceased to love or find inspiring. He acknowledged these criticisms but defended himself that that was where one had to start.

In many ways the book is very orthodox and seems to want to be. He certainly recharges and refreshes the traditional language and concepts in the light of advaita but the fundamental Christian doctrines are defended and supported rather than undermined. In his letters and journal we see the stronger and more daring language and also his final liberation from the institutional ego of the Church. His contribution to the renewal of Christianity is immensely increased by his renewing his Christian identity so strongly.

From this long struggle he gained the authority and insight to call for a new way of seeing the Church. Contemplation, he said, should be the defining starting point of Christianity. This new perspective would clarify the role of the Church in relation to the other faiths of the human family. The Christian's job is not to make take-over bids but to be a leaven that doesn't change the substance of what it is helping to rise. This understanding of Christian identity derived from and depended on his own discovery that the 'highest religious experience exists outside Christianity'. The courage and implications of this statement are still worth exploring. Thirty years ago it was revolutionary. When he identified the legalism and rationalism of the Judaic and Greek influences on Christianity he was doing so from a hard won personal discovery and liberation from his own earliest conditioning and formation. Freed from the temptations of 'Gregorian peace' he was now attracted to a new roughness and physicality in religious symbol and experience. He said that the 'rougher the symbols' the more revelatory they could be – a long way from the protected, cultivated customs of a Benedictine cloister. The crucible of advaita in which his identity was reshaped eventually led him beyond religious perfectionism of any kind and, paradoxically, back to the unique spirit of the gospel. Like Mother Julian and many Christian contemplatives before and since, he realised the role that sin and human weakness play in the process of enlightenment and true holiness. In seeing this in the doctrine of grace and the meaning of redemption he concluded it was an insight 'beyond the understanding of the Vedantin.' He had become more of a monk and more of Christian but perhaps less of a Benedictine, as indeed St Benedict who saw his Rule as a 'little rule for beginners,' would have approved.

The insights of the gospel, Abhishiktananda believed (when did he first see this?), had been 'frozen into formulas and institutions' and its invitation to experience the absolute had been diluted and corrupted by common sense. (We can see another defining and permanent aspect of his identity here, his Gallic mind. Fr Bede would have understood and agreed with what he says but as an Englishman would not have spoken so disparagingly of common sense! A cause and part of Abhishiktananda's struggle with Christian advaita was his particular cultural kind of western intellectual identity.)

He opens his last book with the biblical stories of Jacob and Manoch wrestling with God. The nature of God is revealed in the conflict although it is not a revelation that can ever be defined. 'Why do you ask my name" God asks in both stories. A's own wrestling match with God led him to see the essentially apophatic nature of our approach to God. By the end of the book he is describing the opening in our time of a new contemplative era of Christianity as a whole. This may herald the collapse of many of its precious structures but that will be a necessary part of its evolution.

The time has now come to 'launch out into the deep' (Lk 5:4).. This is our excise.. for having tried to discern and.. express the working of the one Spirit of God both in India and in the Church, and indeed in India with a view to the ultimate fullness of the church. (194-5)

What is remarkable about the route by which Abhishiktananda was led to this position is how the fundamental doctrines of his formative theological training remained intact. This is not always the case with Christian monks who plunge into Eastern thought and spirituality. Not a few, especially in Zen, have jettisoned their

Christian dogma in the process. Abhishiktananda accepted that his theological explanation of advaita would not convince the teacher of Vedanta who would still see the Trinity as a way of trying to rescue something from the conceptual ruins of advaita or trying to cling to some external, dualistic reference point through which personal identity could be kept on life-support. To his own intellectual and spiritual satisfaction, however, Abhishiktananda understood the Trinity differently.

The magnificent Trinitarian theology worked out by the early Fathers.. rescues us from despair in facing the abyss of being. (196)

Does an inner pilgrim trained and conditioned in the East react with the same sense of despair as the westerner like Abhishiktananda to the prospect of non-duality? The sense of self with which the Asian practitioner begins is culturally and psychologically very different. An ineradicable part of Abhishiktananda's identity was his western-ess and the more individuated sense of self associated with that culture. Although he adopted Indian dress and customs and immersed himself in the very different thought patterns of Vedanta he did not in the end deny or try to destroy this aspect of his identity – as many westerners in India try, superficially, to do as a way of escaping from rather than working out their identity.

In fact it led him to a deeper and richer appreciation of dogma and sacraments. However painfully he anguished over his relationship to the institution of the church and its attitudes he never lost his commitment to the Eucharist. His early precursors in the Christian desert would not have had the same problem nor even would St Benedict who maintained a sharp distinction between monk and priest and celebrated mass only weekly. The desert fathers seemed to be able to live their contemplative without great attachment to the sacraments though they usually convened weekly for mass. Abhishiktananda struggled much more intensely by being a priest and having been raised in a French Catholicism in which Eucharistic piety was strongly developed. In the end he integrated the Eucharist with advaita through a theology of fulfillment which would hardly have upset his ecclesiastical watchdogs:

When Eucharist is celebrated among the Himalayan peaks all the ancient liturgies offered there and all the penances practiced there are taken up into the worship of the Father in spirit and in truth. (189)

The *sadhanas* of the *rishis* have become 'penances' and once can almost detect a trace of the sentimental piety in which he would have been raised. This does not invalidate the achievement, personal or theological, that lies behind this hard won resolution of a struggle that lasted in him a quarter of a century.

'Everything is utterly simple,' he said echoing Ramana. Abhishiktananda But he knew that the way to simplicity, the *ascesis* of simplification, was not to be under-estimated because it was not less than the process of total self-renunciation. Like Mother Julian and all the masters of the Christian mystical tradition he understood that the goal was a 'condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything.' Advaitic thought and his Indian teachers made him more aware however of the nature of this simplicity. Firstly, there is nothing to be striven for or attained. It is all present already. And ultimately, who strives for what? It is enough to know that one is, to realize being.

This essentialism set Abhishiktananda up for a major conflict with Incarnationalism. In the state of *kaivalyam*, simple being, according to Vedic teaching I am stripped of everything that is not essentially me, everything changing and relative including the ceaseless eddies of thought. This is perfect liberty and independence, perfect self-control and clarity. But it is also terrifying to face the prospect of reducing the field of consciousness to such an indivisible point of undivided attention. So much that is precious to one has to be let go. Abhishiktananda struggled not simply with the high personal cost of such detachment but with the question of integrity. He finally concluded that not everything one may begin by being attached to needs to be thrown into the furnace of advaita. Or rather that some of the attachments are restored in a detached way.

Like Simone Weil, his absolute sense of God as the source of being made him conclude that only God can claim to be. For Simone Weil this was a less personally harrowing but no less absolute prospect than for Abhishiktananda. It led her to her concept of deconstruction, the unmaking of self that has to be the creature's response to the experience of God. Catherine of Siena perceived the same horizon of being when she said that 'the creature is not... only God is.' This radical insight into the *sunnyata* of the self was awakened in A by his contact with Hindu advaita but, in fact and as he knew, it is no less a biblical thought reflecting the mystery of the paradox of God and creation:

Jewish tradition makes two seemingly contradictory claims about God. On the one hand, we are taught that God withdraws (or contracts the divine light) in order to make space for the world, and for human beings within it. But on the other hand, we are told that God is always with us, even and especially in our times of need. How can God simultaneously contract and be with us? This ostensible contradiction is in fact no contradiction at all, and instead conveys a profound truth about God's relationship with us: God is radically present while still making space for us. (Rabbi Shai Held)

As he found the path on which he could best pursue his new identity he had, perhaps unconsciously, come to India to find, Abhishiktananda struggled with the question of how he could be simple, nondual and be true to the identity of his Christian faith. He accepted that once in contact with Being all that dares to claim a share in being falls into nothingness or rather disappears into Being itself. The old self can no longer recognize itself or preserve its own identity. This was the heart of Abhishiktananda's anguish and his bliss.

We might perceive two kinds of identity crisis for him therefore corresponding to the two Nights of St John of the Cross, psychological and spiritual. Firstly, Abhishiktananda endured the pain of withdrawal from the familiar images and ideas about God and therefore about himself. The fact that these two images are so interdependent suggests why religious people, of any persuasion, cling so tenaciously to their God. To allow God to be redefined is to have your very sense of self and all its support structures undermined. Perhaps as his identity underwent such pressure as he was embraced by the intoxicating inclusivity of India Abhishiktananda's idea of God and the purpose of religion must be influenced as well. This is the night of the senses. Secondly and at times intensely he underwent the night of the spirit where God seems to withdraw to an infinite distance and even to punish because the sense of

absolute distinction between God and self seems so unforgivingly absolute. As he said it is not just the sensual ego or the realm of thought that is challenged but the actual self in its place of origin. Remarkably Abhishiktananda's faith endured both these nights without the temptation to preserve himself by escaping from faith altogether. This perseverance in his passion is what makes him significant and trail-blazer of our time.

Experiencing how the I AM of God obliterates the human I AM brought him to his crisis. What place, he asked, is then left for ideas, obligations or acts of worship of any kind whatever? His previous identity as a Catholic boy inheriting his parents' faith, as a monk and priest was called into the rigorous examination. However, crisis is two-faced. It is scary and it pumps adrenalin. It is dangerous and full of new opportunity. Most people would like to change but no one likes crisis because it rips the steering wheel from our hand and makes us helpless. Yet from the abyss that opens up in a full-blown crisis a new way of knowing and seeing can emerge that is wisdom.

What came to Abhishiktananda's rescue was not a new idea of God. He had accepted the unknowability of God. But a new way of seeing himself and this new way of seeing was a rediscovery of the meaning of the person of Jesus. Although he felt at times torn away from church and sacraments in this crisis of identity he felt plunged more fully into Christ. It was not so much theology as a Christ-centred anthropology that redefined who he was. What happened was not a new image of Jesus or a regression to a merely devotional faith centred on his humanity but a re-experiencing of the Spirit. It is the spirit who facilitates the recognition of Jesus. This recognition is not only cognitive. *Non solum discens sed patiens divina*. As Aquinas said we are not only learning the things of God we are feeling, experiencing, undergoing them

The spirit, he claimed, takes us beyond even the annihilating, advaitic experience of pure being and into the mystery of Jesus' own experience as the unique Son of the One God. In this way alone, he said, can we discover that Being is a *koinonia* of love, a communion that is expressed in everything that exists. With lightning speed this leads him to see that being flowers in communion and inter-subjectivity. The world, multiplicity and the value of all human relationships is thus rescued from the annihilation threatened by advaita. Even the church with which he had so many problems could now be understood in a new light as a manifestation of *agape*. If 'God comes to me in all my temporality and contingency' the sense of *who I am* is forever transformed. It leads Abhishiktananda onto a wonderful statement for the spiritual search many are making in our time:

Man is the revelation within God himself of the ultimate depth of divine love and the final manifestation of his glory. (130)

It struck and moved me deeply when I was with Fr Bede for a week shortly before he died to see how close and intimate he felt to Jesus. Abhishiktananda emerged from his long nights of advaita in an awakening to the meaning of Jesus both theologically and psychologically. Without diminishing the absolute nature of what he learned from Ramana he concluded that Jesus' experience is more complete than Ramana's (83). When the last veil is torn aside he saw that 'only in Christ can the isolation of the atman-brahman unfold into communion, so that the solitary *aham* opens up to the *tuam*, the Thou, of mutual yet undivided love' (88).

It must be significant that it was in the final success of his search for an adequate disciple – if that is the right way to express it – that Abhishiktananda found the consummation of his theological struggle and the fixing of his personal identity which brought him such peace at the end – even though the peace was born of an intense passionate experience that seems to have broken his body.

Finally he had found the simplicity he came to India for. It was expressed for him in the essential simplicity of the gospel itself. Jesus, he said, did not teach meditation, rites, dogma or set up institutions. He taught us to love one another. This commandment is obeyed in the small encounters of daily life, in the raising of families, in friendships, in our defence of the poor and oppressed. Even in these natural human relationships, however, the ego can creep in to create attachments and seek to control and possess through its projecting its own desires and fears on the other. Abhishiktananda had long believed that in Being itself there is no desire. Perhaps what he learned at the end, and still not perfectly, is that desire is not destroyed but transfigured by the love of the other and eventually purified of all ego.

After he initiated Marc into sannyasa Abhishiktananda characteristically recognized a tinge of envy in himself for the higher degree of renunciation that his disciple seemed set to attain. Abhishiktananda felt he himself hadn't gone far enough. He realized, however, in this relationship, a sign that *saccidanada*, the Trinity, is not an abstraction because it is manifested in the human exchange of the gift of self, in the way a gaze is held and exchanged.

Self-awareness only comes to be when there is a mutual giving and receiving
for the I only awakens to itself in a Thou. (176)

Perhaps only in the I-Thou relationship, at the heart both of advaita and of the human quest for the Self, is the crisis of identity transcended.

'Grief melts away like snow in May as if there were no such cold thing.'

Abhishiktananda had been anguished in the midst of his advaita – if it was full advaita he had experienced – and he knew what it was to be torn into pieces. But in the end he found the peace that the world cannot give and the wholeness he had long and faithfully been seeking in Christ

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Only Christianity, for Abhishiktananda, could answer the challenge of advaita. Advaita is unassailable and therefore must be integrated. At times he speaks as if the two are mortal enemies and this perhaps reflects certain depths of the night into which he was periodically plunged. Later he would see that this encounter between two fundamental religious insights is a moment of evolutionary growth for humanity. For Abhishiktananda, as for Bede Griffiths and many other Christians of their era India was the field of this meeting. At least, we might say, it was. All that India symbolised and taught has now been released into the public domain. In a similar way the indigenous wisdom of Tibetan Buddhism has through a political crisis been thrown open to the world. That sense of the absolute that sometimes seems to make Indian

religions claim to be the source of all experience of God – as Christianity used to claim to be the only means of salvation - has been set loose in the western mind recalling it to its own mystical traditions.

We can better see now that ‘the East’ is a state of mind, perhaps even reflected in a hemisphere of the brain, rather than only a geographical location. As the material centre of power shifts – has shifted already – from the North America and Europe to Asia a shock the system of western culture is being felt that could lead to a new spiritual awakening. The shock of economic and political power that is dawning on the Asian mind is threatening the delicate eco-balance of their ancient spiritual traditions embedded in their cultures. The westernized affluent Indian today is likely to look amusedly or contemptuously at the westerners coming through his airports, ignoring his 6 star hotels and seeking out traditional ashrams or commodified gurus. It is an interesting cultural shift, one that Abhishiktananda and Bede Griffiths both saw happening.

Abhishiktananda is a powerful guide for us as we seek to celebrate the ‘marriage of east and west’ in the 21st century. And to understand what these nuptials mean. He is above all an individual witness not an example to be blindly imitated. But we can see that he immersed himself so deeply in advaita that he risked both his essential and his religious identity – for him they were inseparable. This alone should encourage us to see that radical change need not be feared. What is real is neither born nor dies but changes form. Then he teaches us by *how* he emerged from this immersion with a newly radiant Christian faith. He has not concluded the search for a new language of faith for our time because this search is restarted as soon as it is finished. But he communicates immense confidence that this can be done in our time. That is what prophets and trailblazers do.

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