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Nature and Function of the Spiritual Master[1]

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THERE is a Vedantic notion which, being fundamental, can serve as a key in the most diverse realms, and this is the ternary *Sat, Chit, Ananda*: Being, Consciousness and Bliss. Here it will be applied to the spiritual master, not for any lack of other ways of approaching this subject, but because the Vedantic ternary provides in this connection a particularly appropriate means of access.

The master, in fact, represents and transmits, firstly a reality of being (*Sat*), secondly a reality of intelligence or truth (*Chit*), and thirdly a reality of love, union, or happiness (*Ananda*).

The element "being" which the master represents and transmits, and without which he would be as if deprived of reality and existence, is the religion to which he belongs and by which he is mandated, or the spiritual organization within the framework of this religion. The religion, or the esoteric cell which sums it up and offers us its essence, confers on man the "being" without which there is no concrete and efficacious way. The function of the founders of religion is *a priori* to give back to fallen man his primordial "being"; the first condition, then, of spirituality is to be virtually "reborn" and thus to realize the as it were ontological basis of the two constituent elements of the way, namely, discernment or doctrine on the one hand, and concentration or method on the other.

Representing *a priori* a "substance" or a "being," *Sat*, the spiritual master is *a posteriori*, and on this very basis, the vehicle of an "intellection" or of a "consciousness," *Chit:* by this is to be understood a providential doctrine which determines the flavour or style of every subsequent formulation. It is necessary to understand that this doctrine depends on a Revelation in the direct and plenary sense and that consequently its regular ramifications have a quality of absoluteness and infinitude which makes unnecessary any recourse to extraneous sources, although it is perfectly possible that formulations originating in such a source, to the extent that they are mentally compatible with the dogmatic or mythological system in question, may be extrinsically adopted by a given master and integrated into the perspective which he incarnates. Such was the case, notably, of the Neoplatonic concepts adopted by certain Sufis, or of Christianized Aristotelianism. It would be wrong to see syncretism in this, for the extraneous concepts are accepted only because they are assimilable, and they are only assimilable by reason of their inward concordance with the tradition in question, and because Truth is one. Another aspect of this question of intellectuality is infallibility: the master is in principle infallible with regard to the revealed doctrine which he represents, and which he even personifies by virtue of his "being" or "substance," of his *Sat*, so to say; but this infallibility, which is not unconnected with Grace, is conditioned by the equilibrium between knowledge and virtue, or between intellectuality and spirituality—one might

even say, between intelligence and humility.

Thus, the spiritual master must realize the ternary "being," "discernment," "concentration." By "being" must be understood the "new substance"[2] or "consecration," or "initiation"; by "discernment" is meant truth which distinguishes between the Real and the illusory, or between *Atmā* and *Māyā*;[3] and by "concentration" must be understood the method which allows the "initiated" and "consecrated" contemplative to fix himself, at first mentally and later with the centre of his being, on the Real whose evidence we carry in ourselves. It is this fixation which, being a reality of union, and thus of "love" and of "bliss," corresponds analogically and operatively to the element *Ananda* in the Vedantic ternary.

The importance in spirituality of what we have called the existential element results from the principle that it is impossible to approach the Absolute, or the Self, without the blessing and the aid of Heaven: "No man cometh to the Father but by Me" (Christianity), and "no one will meet *Allāh* who has not met his Envoy" (Islam); "whosoever gathereth not with Me, disperseth," and "without Me you can do nothing" (Christianity); "and you cannot wish unless *Allāh* wishes" (Islam). This *conditio sine qua non*, the pivots of which are first and foremost the elements of "consecration" and "orthodoxy"—related respectively to *Sat* and Chit—explains why a spirituality deprived of its bases can only end up as a psychological exploit without any relation to the development of our higher states.

The profane man being "inexistent" from the point of view at issue here, the master gives him "spiritual existence" by affiliation or consecration; next he gives him the doctrine—or "intelligence"—, and finally he gives him "life," that is to say, the spiritual means referring to the element "concentration." Now this means, which is an engagement "to the death"—for in order to "live" inwardly, one must "die" outwardly—is essentially a gift from the master and from Heaven, for otherwise it would be lacking in the indispensable Grace. Doubtless there have been very exceptional cases in which other modalities have come into play, but this was always on behalf of persons whose sanctity guaranteed their purity of intention, and protected the spiritual means from any profanation.[4]

In a word: we can only make use of a spiritual means on condition of a concrete and solemn engagement, recognizing thereby that Heaven disposes of us according to its good pleasure; and this engagement is irreversible—the way is one of no return.

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Inasmuch as he is the guide of the personal way of the disciple—always within the general way laid down by divine authority through tradition—the spiritual master is as it were the continuation of the *ego* of the disciple. Every spiritual alchemy involves an anticipated death and consequently also certain losses of equilibrium, or periods of obscuration, in which the disciple is not fully master of himself; he is no longer completely of this world, nor yet completely of the other, and his experience seems to call in question all the existential categories of which, so to say, we are woven. In these "trials," and in the "temptations" which accompany them—for lower *māyā*, or the downward quality (*tamas*), takes advantage of the slightest fissure—the spiritual master plays the role of "motionless centre": to the temptation of giving rational form to

irrational troubles he opposes objective, immutable and incorruptible truth. The same is true in the case of temptations of inverse character, when the disciple, submerged by some contemplative state which surpasses his usual capacity—and such a state may only be accidental and does not prove any realization—may think that to some degree he has become superhuman. In this case, lower *māyā*—or the devil, which here amounts to the same thing—will not fail to suggest to the disciple that he should declare himself master, or give way to some other pretention of this kind. The case is rather like that of a drunken man who no longer perceives the true proportions of things. The master, for his part, has realized "sober drunkenness", his human substance is adapted to his spiritual state, for mastership is precisely "keeping a cool head"—without any pretention, however—in the beatific experience. All that has been said shows clearly that faith is indispensable on the part of the disciple. Without faith there is no spiritual continuity, and thus no bridging of "hells," nor any possible victory over the *ego*.

In a certain sense, gnosis transcends and abolishes faith, but only when faith is understood as a quasi-moral acceptance of revealed truths, and not as a concrete presentiment of the Inexpressible. Certainly gnosis. is a "vision" and not a "thought," but it is so only in a certain regard, for it never abolishes in all respects the veil separating the earthly creature from Pure Being.[5] Understood thus, faith—the *shraddhā* of the Hindu *chelā*—is a necessary element of all spiritual unfolding; of this order too is faith in the master, in so far as he incarnates the knowledge to be attained.[6] Moreover the master, being a living man and not a logical demonstration, relates precisely to that element of non-fixation and illimitation which is everywhere present in the cosmos and which is indispensable for the subjective realization of the theoretical data.

What has gone before clearly shows that spiritual mastership is a very special function and that it is consequently false to describe every teaching authority as a "spiritual master." The functions of "doctor" and "master" often coincide—but they may also not do so—in the same personage. The master does not necessarily write treatises, but he always possesses a sufficient doctrinal authority.[7]

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It is not the function of the spiritual master to reveal all his knowledge or all the graces which he has received. Here we are up against the whole problem of secrecy and asymmetry,[8] or of inward illimitation and the laws of life. On the one hand, a plant has need of an invisible element—its root—and, on the other, it manifests the virtualities of the latter in a way which combines rigour with relaxation, or the determined with the indeterminate; a spiritual teaching does not set out to unveil totally, or to use up totally, the truth which inspires it, nor to give it the implacable and exhaustive form of a mathematical equation. One must not seek to introduce a quasi-absolute element of achievement—and thus of petrifaction and sterility—into the very expression of the truth. It is true that, strictly speaking, this is impossible, but it is nevertheless possible to confer on doctrinal teaching concerning the most intimate aspects of the spiritual life—but not in the case of generalities—a prolixity which is remote from the effective power of assimilation of the recipient. This is what, traditionally, is blamed as a disequilibrium between doctrine and method. In other words, theoretical teaching must not exhaust in advance the acts of awareness which it aims at awakening in the disciple. The latter needs light, but he also needs an element of obscurity which will act as a leaven on behalf of the

light received, and which will help him to release the element of light which he carries in his own substance. Instead of "obscurity" one might say "generative disequilibrium," of which the *koans* of Zen Buddhism doubtless provide the best example.

Verbal demonstrations are certainly indispensable, but the symbol with its power of direct, total and unlimited suggestiveness, and its double function of unveiling (revealing) and of veiling, keeps all its rights in the subsequent order of contemplative realization. Mention must also be made of teaching by sign or gesture. Where the spoken word is insufficient, the master makes a "gash" in the soul of the disciple, he marks it with the red-hot iron of the pure symbol. This sign—which may well coincide with a humiliation—is meant to release in the disciple the necessary awareness and, at the same time, to actualize the corresponding virtue. The essential is not to fall into either extreme: we must neither despise words, which are venerable when they are what they ought to be—otherwise man would not possess the gift of language—nor imagine that we can do everything with them; here, as always, wisdom consists in putting everything in its proper place.

God instructs the collectivity *a priori* by the revealed Word, but he instructs the individual *a posteriori* by destiny. This principle is reflected in a particular way in every spiritual method.

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Another point which must be made here is the following: granted that the human world is made of abuses, one must not lose sight of the fact that exoterism has a natural right to certain excesses, if one may so express it, which means that it is impossible for exoterism to do justice to every nuance without compromising its very existence. The disordered subjectivism of a personal mysticism is usually more false and more harmful than the contrary excess, because pharisaism at least safeguards the keys, and for that very reason never goes quite so far as to kill the spirit.

Nevertheless, as there is no rule without exception—in view of a certain aspect of All-Possibility—one must mention the cases, extremely rare in comparison with their opposites, of Kabîr, Guru Nanak, and Jakob Boehme. These cases of intrinsic orthodoxy without a traditional framework are explained only by very special circumstances, and possible only—as far as Boehme is concerned—as a result of a certain shrinkage in Catholicism from the time of the Renaissance, and—as far as the Indians are concerned—as a result of the juxtaposition, both painful and mystical, of Hinduism and Islam. In fact, exceptions of this kind are due either to contact between two powerful, ponderous, even tyrannical religions—whether rightly or wrongly so is not the question here[9]—or, as in the case of Boehme, to a sort of stifling of sapiential esoterism within the framework of a traditional civilization which had accidentally and very recently given rise to a vacuum such as Protestantism. In the present day however there are no longer anywhere in the world powerful and fervent religions dangerously bordering on one another and so giving rise to what may be called "explosions" of bhaktic esoterism, and nowhere does there still exist a powerful religious civilization which is artificially stifling its sapiential esoterism or gnosis, and though there are yet other factors—more personal and more subtle—which occur in the cases cited, they need not be taken into account here. At all events, the present-day world does not and cannot present the

circumstances making possible legitimate spiritual exceptions such as those mentioned.[10] In a world where the formal framework of the sacred everywhere becomes more and more whittled away, spirituality is more than ever linked to this framework, which is like a last witness to the truth. Spirituality has need, in fact, of a formal or psychological atmosphere of which the modern world is the very negation.

A question not unconnected with the foregoing—since we are talking here of exceptions—is the following: can the function of the spiritual master extend beyond the frontiers of a given religion? This cannot be ruled out categorically, but it is nevertheless a very precarious possibility in view of the high degree of spirituality which it demands on the part of the master, and also in view of the possible difficulty, for him, of assessing facts situated in a traditional world other than his own. Furthermore, in a case such as this, he would act as the vehicle of an "extraneous" *barakah*, and it is precisely this which presupposes a spirituality having effectively transcended the world of forms. It is necessary to stress "effectively," because universalist verbiage is one thing, and realization of the Essence is another. Moreover, in a case of this kind, there must be a sufficient reason of *force majeure*. Such reasons do exist accidentally, as is shown, for example, by the relations between the young Ibrahim ibn Adham and the monk Symeon, a master of gnosis, and also by a passage in "The Russian Pilgrim" which allows that in the absence of a *starets* the seeker may receive instruction "even from a Saracen," with the help of Heaven. Such an encounter is only conceivable if the two parties are in full conformity with their respective tradition, for the Christian must be really Christian and the Moslem really Moslem, however paradoxical this may seem in view of the spiritual communion that has to be established between them;[11] but if their understanding must be more than a philosophical abstraction, it must nevertheless include the points of departure, which extrinsically and provisionally are separative. This is not because they are separative and exclusive, but because, by their intrinsic veracity, they guarantee a true intuition of unity.

This seeming paradox is comparable to that of our relation with the Infinite. This relation cannot be unitive without first having been separative, or rather, without being separative in its basis and in our individual consciousness, for there is both an order of succession and a parallelism. The most accomplished gnostic, or the perfect *Jnani*, "prostrates himself at the feet of Govinda," which implies a separation. From a more contingent point of view, the station of unity means that the sage has transcended the level of forms, and thus also that of doctrinal formulations—which nevertheless are sacred and always remain valid in their proper dimension—but this station is independent of the question of knowing whether or not the master is informed about a given religion other than his own. The state of union implies, in this particular connection, not a *de facto* attitude, but a capacity in principle.[12] That is to say that the spiritual master must manifest, taking into account the nature of the difference of levels, both the particularism of form and the unity of spirit. He must conform to holy separation at the base, so as to be able to realize holy union at the summit.[13] One only attains to the latter by perceiving in advance the element of unity in the revealed form itself, and by loving this form for the quality which it receives from the Supraformal. For every sacred form is *Shûnyamûrti*, "Manifestation of the Void."

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As the very term "spiritual master" often gives rise to disproportionate and offensive-sounding assimilations, it would be useful to say a few words on the question of hierarchical differences. The misunderstandings concerned, be they serious or slight, are at bottom of the same order as the common error which, analogically speaking, would assimilate the circle to the sphere, on the pretext that both figures are round—a typical error, to be found in the most diverse domains, but above all in history and psychology. In the first place, either we apply the term "spiritual master" to the founders of religion — in which case the term can no longer be applied to the sages who succeed them and who are not prophets in the proper sense of the word —or else it is the sages whom we call "masters"—in which case it would be improper to use the term "spiritual master" in the case of beings such as the founders of religion, or the *Avatāras* of Vishnu,[14] because this would be a tautology casting a slur on their supereminent dignity and equating them with their representatives. It might indeed be asked whether the term "master is appropriate for the greatest of the latter—Christ's Apostles, for example—for the very same reason, *mutatis mutandis*, since their greatness is proved by the fact that they alone were the direct disciples of the "Word made flesh" and that they participate instrumentally in the Revelation.[15] This distinction is entirely legitimate in this connection, but there are also reasons which allow one to disregard it, as we shall see later.

In comparing a Benedictine master—of the fifteenth century, for example—with St. Benedict, and then comparing the latter with St. John, we obtain a sufficiently clear picture of the principal degrees, not of spiritual mastership in itself, but of its manifestation in breadth, for it is important not to confuse an almost cosmic function with inward knowledge. Certainly the most eminent saint or sage, by his traditional position, is always in possession of the "greater" or the "whole," but the less eminent does not necessarily represent a "lesser" as far as his inward reality is concerned, although, even on this level, there may be relations of "dimension" or "breadth" to be taken into account in favour of the most glorious figures on the traditional "iconostasis." This factor is of especial importance when the figure concerned incarnates a non-supreme mode of spirituality—for example, the cases of Rāmānuja and Confucius, the latter, incidentally, being greater than the former—so that one might be tempted to place these eminent figures below *a jnānî* of lesser dimensions. This would be an optical illusion, especially in the case of the Chinese Revealer, whose inward reality necessarily immensely—transcended the role which was assigned to him by Providence.

Be that as it may, it should not be too difficult to understand or to feel that, from the point of view of cosmic breadth, theurgic power, and the capacity to save, even a Shankara is not the equal of Krishna, and that from an analogous point of view, no later master can be the equal of Shankara; no *roshi* can replace Bodhidharma, any more than the latter can be equated with the Buddha. Nevertheless, in comparison with the worldly and the profane, and with regard to them, every true master is altogether close, not only to the great instructors of "apostolic" rank, but even to the founding *Avatāra*, and this is a compensatory truth which lets us better appreciate the cult of the master in India and elsewhere.[16] The cosmic breadth of the *Avatāra* and of his direct prolongations obviously presupposes spiritual perfection, but inversely, this perfection does not imply the cosmic rank of the very greatest, whence the inegalities already referred to.

Doubtless it is not always possible, or, for that matter, necessary, to avoid every

ambiguity, for example to settle the question as to whether there is a real difference between the "apostolic" degree—for example, that of a Nāgārjuna—and certain later, but particularly eminent manifestations, such as Padma Sambhava in Tibet and Kôbo Daishi in Japan, who are so to say, central reverberations of the Spiritual Sun in a new world.[17] On the other hand, it is always possible and even necessary in the other cases to take account of the evidence of the facts and of traditional opinion, out of respect for the irreplaceable majesty of the divine manifestations.[18]

But these considerations must not cause us to lose sight of the compensatory truth just mentioned, namely, that every spiritual master is mysteriously assimilated, by his knowledge and his function and by the graces attaching to them, to his prototypes and—both through them and independently of them—to the primordial Prototype, the founding *Avatāra*. On the level of this synthesis, it could even be added that there is but one sole Master, and that the various human supports are like emanations from him, comparable to the rays of the sun which communicate one self-same light and are nothing apart from it.

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[1] This article is appearing concurrently in a volume to be presented to His Holiness the Jagadguru Sri Sankarācārya Svamigal of Kānci Kāmakoti Pitha in celebration of the 50th anniversary of his investiture.

[2] "And put on the new man," as St. Paul says

[3] Or between *Nirvāna* and *samsāra*, in Buddhist terms.

[4] The seeds of sanctity are fear of God and a sense of the sacred, to say the least. It must be recognized that these qualities are totally absent from the general mentality of this sacrosanct "modern age."

[5] To think otherwise is to misinterpret certain ellipses in sacred teaching. Doubtless the circle is a perfect adequation with regard to the point—it "is" the centre—but it nevertheless remains different from the latter; likewise for the radius.

[6] Shrî Shankara: "My refuge is neither my mother nor my father, nor my children nor my brothers, nor any others. May my supreme refuge be the foot which my *guru* has placed on my head." *(Svatmarirûpana* 146, 148).

[7] The case of the saint having the quality of *Pratyeka-Buddha* (Buddhism) or of *Fard* (Islam) should be recalled here. He has no spiritual posterity properly so called, but nevertheless acts by his presence.

[8] According to an old adage—Chinese, if I am not mistaken—"he who knows ten must only teach nine." But this law of the secret also concerns the disciple. As a contemporary Hindu master has observed: "the *sadhaka* must not reveal his spiritual experiences except to his *guru* or to a saint.

[9] We must not forget that exoteric ostracism has its rights, the human world being what it is.

[10] At most there are still a few exceptions of this kind among the Hindus, but they derive from conditions peculiar to Hinduism; these conditions cannot be transferred to non-Hindus lacking the same heredity, to mention only this factor. The same attitude can have a completely different subconscious meaning—and efficacy—on the part of a Hindu and on the part of a European. It should be added that it is almost normal for these facts to escape, all too often, the Hindus themselves, who cannot be expected to understand spontaneously all the implications of something that is situated completely outside their traditional universe.

[11] The situation may appear in a somewhat different form in the case of Hindus and *Indian* Moslems, for reasons which have been alluded to above. In the present day, however, modernistic influences seriously compromise the advantages of the spiritual climate of India.

[12] The inward and essential knowledge of a theologically exclusive Moslem may be infinitely closer to the Christ-given mysteries, for example, than the mental and sentimental universalism of a profane despiser of "separatist dogmas."

[13] "When one has attained (perfect) Love, one must not despise social rules (institutions and rites), but rather conform to them (without attachment to their fruits)." *(Nārada* Stara, *62).*

[14] The *Avatāras* of Vishnu did not found religions, except the Buddha. It should not be lost sight of that Hinduism is like a symbiosis of diverse religions, though this does not mean that it does not of necessity comprise within itself certain fundamental ideas (the *Veda*, the castes, the *Trimûrti*, the cult of the cow) which might be called "dogmatic"—this word having for the present author a most venerable meaning—

although dogma takes on a different aspect for Hindus as compared with Semites owing to the "pluridimensionalism" of Hinduism, which readily reduces anti-nomial aspects to their unique essence and can consequently tolerate the juxtaposition of the most seemingly contradictory formulas. The exclusion of Jainism and Buddhism proves that Hinduism is not an amorphous mass which will absorb anything.

[15]On the one hand, St. John is not Christ, and, on the other, no Christian mystic could equate himself with the author of the Fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse. The relation between the Prophet, his son-in-law All, and the sufis is an analogous one.

[16] This cult, however, loses all its meaning, when it is accompanied by the errors just mentioned. One may well believe that a given master possesses an inward knowledge which equates him mysteriously with Rāma or with the *Rishis,* for example, but one gains nothing, and compromises everything, in imagining that he is better than they.

[17]St. Francis of Assisi and St. Bernard are similar cases, the first having been adopted directly by Christ, and the second by the Virgin.

[18]One of the worst of abuses is the pretention of making a "psychological" analysis of an *Avatāra,* basing oneself on deeds and gestures, when in fact one is in the presence of an order of greatness which totally eludes profane investigation, Let us note here that Rāmakrishna often used the term *Avatāra* in a wide sense. including all avatāric modes—"total," "partial," "major" and "minor"—and in this he is hardly to be blamed, firstly because in his teaching he clearly defines the transcendent nature of the "Man-God," and also because he himself was effectively situated in the "Divine Ray"