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A Biographical Sketch

> The monk is a man who lives in the solitude (Greek: *monos*) of God, alone in the very aloneness of the Alone. . . . He does not become a monk in order to do social work or intellectual work or missionary work or to save the world. The monk simply consecrates himself to God.
>
> *Abhishiktananda*[1]

> The monk is a man who, in one way or another, pushes to the frontiers of human experience and strives to go beyond, to find out what transcends the ordinary level of existence.
>
> *Thomas Merton*[2]

The "Irresistible Call"

Henri Hyacinthe Joseph Marie Le Saux was born on August 30, 1910, in St. Briac, a small town on the north coast of Brittany, not far from Saint-Malo.[3] He w as the first of seven children born to Alfred Le Saux and Louise Sonnefraud. His parents ran a small grocery business. The last of the siblings, Marie-Thérèse, later to become the confidante to whom Henri sent many letters, was not born until 1930. The young boy breathed in Catholic piety in the very atmosphere of the family home and the early signs that he might be destined for the priesthood were encouraged. At age ten he was sent to the Minor Seminary at Châteaugiron. Three years later his mother nearly died in childbirth. When she fell pregnant again the following year Henri vowed that if she survived he would go "even to the most distant mission" in God's service—perhaps to follow in the footsteps of an uncle who had gone to China as a missionary a year or two earlier. The year 1926 saw him enter the Major Seminary at Rennes where, under the influence of a friend who had died, he determined to become a Benedictine. His thirst for the monastic life and for God is evident in a letter from the young seminarian to the Novice Master of the Abbey of Saint Anne de Kergonan:

> What has drawn me from the beginning and what still leads me on, is the hope of finding there the presence of God more immediately than anywhere else. I have a very ambitious spirit—and this is permissible,

> is it not? when it is a matter of seeking God—and I hope I shall not be disappointed. . . . I feel an irresistible call.[4]

But the path to the monastery was not without obstacles: parental opposition; the reluctance of the Archbishop; the problem of his compulsory military service. Nor was Henri without his own doubts. But in 1929 he entered the Abbey where he was to remain for the next two decades. In 1931 he made his first profession and soon after completed his military service before returning to the Abbey where he was ordained as a priest in December 1935. He assisted with novices and served as the Abbey librarian, and during these years immersed himself in the Patristical and mystical literature of the Church, especially the Desert Fathers, as well as reading about the spiritual traditions of India. He was particularly taken by the work of St Gregory Nazianzen and his "Hymn to God Beyond All Names" which struck a theme which was to "accompany him all the way till his death":

> You who are beyond all, what other name befits you?
> No words suffice to hymn you. Alone you are ineffable.
> Of all beings you are the End, you are One, you are all, you are none.
> Yet not one thing, nor all things. . . .
> You alone are the Unnamable.[5]

Among his other favorite authors were Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, and Gregory Palamas.[6] By 1942, when Le Saux came to write a manuscript for his mother, *Amour et Sagesse*, he was already familiar with some of the Hindu literature and closed each chapter of this work with the sacred syllable OM. Other subjects of Abhishiktananda's later writings adumbrated in *Amour et Sagesse* are the doctrine of the Trinity and apophatic mysticism.

In 1939 he was called up for military service. His unit was captured by the Germans. Whilst his captors were registering the names of the prisoners, Le Saux took advantage of a momentary distraction to slip away and hide in a cornfield. A nearby garage-keeper gave him a pair of workman's overalls and a bicycle on which Le Saux was able to make his way home where he went into hiding before eventually returning to the monastery. After the war Fr Henri taught novices at Kergonan and also served as Master of Ceremonies, a duty he discharged with some relish.

From one of his letters written many years later it seems that he first heard the call of India in 1934, by which time he was already feeling "deep dissatisfaction" with his life at Kergonan.[7] In a 1947 letter to Fr Jules Monchanin, Le Saux spoke of his thirteen-year old dream of a

Christian monastic life in India, which had in recent years been "continually in my thought and prayer."[8] However, despite his frustrations at Kergonan he remained attached to the Rule of St Benedict and to the monastery right up to the time of his death. In his last year he wrote, "Kergonan has been the background of all that I have been able to do here."[9] The family ties with the monastery continued when, soon after his departure for India, Marie-Thérèse entered the Abbey of St Michel, sister-abbey to Kergonan.

Fr Henri's vision of a monastic life in India was not to come to fruition for fifteen years. As he was later to write of his frustrations and disappointments in these long years of waiting, "I have looked squarely in the face of a good number of them as well as at a good number of obstacles."[10] It was not until after the war that his abbot gave him permission to launch inquiries about the possibilities of a move to India, but even then the wheels turned slowly. In 1947 Le Saux wrote to Msgr James Mendonça, the Bishop of Tiruchchirappalli (Trichinopoly) in South India, stating that he aspired to "the contemplative life, in the absolute simplicity of early Christian monasticism and at the same time in the closest possible conformity with the traditions of Indian *sannyāsa*." The Bishop was himself a man of considerable vision.[11] The answer Le Saux was praying for came in a letter written on behalf of the Bishop by Fr Jules Monchanin, thus initiating one of the most important relationships of Le Saux's life and clearing the way for his momentous passage to India. From Monchanin's letter:

> Your letter came to me as an answer from God. . . . If you come his Lordship is very willing for us to begin together a life of prayer, poverty, and intellectual work. Learn as much English as you can. You will have no objection to a purely vegetarian diet (essential for the life of the *sannyāsī*). You will need unshakable courage (because you will have disappointments), complete detachment from the things of the West, and a profound love of India. The Spirit will give you these three gifts.[12]

On July 26, 1948, Abhishiktananda left his homeland, never to return. He was to join Fr Monchanin in setting up a Christian Ashram at Kulittalai on the Kavery River, there to achieve his "most ardent desire." Fr Bede Griffiths was later to describe an ashram this way:

> An ashram must above all be always a place of prayer where people can find God, where they can experience the reality of the presence of God in their lives and know that they were created not merely for this world but for eternal life.

Furthermore, "An ashram is a place which should be open to all such seekers of God, or seekers of Self-realization, whatever their religion or without any religion."[13]

Father Jules Monchanin

Let us pause for a moment to consider the manner of the man with whom Le Saux was to be so closely associated for the next decade. The first forty years of Jules Monchanin's life were quite unexceptional for a provincial French priest.[14] He was born near Lyons in 1895, decided at an early age to enter the priesthood and completed his theological training in 1922. Despite his intellectual distinction he did not complete his doctoral studies but instead asked to be sent to a miners' parish in a poor suburb of Lyons. He served in three parishes before serious illness led to less demanding appointments as a chaplain, first in an orphanage and then at a boys' boarding school. Throughout these years he continued to move in an academic milieu and applied himself to a range of studies. Since boyhood he had felt an attraction to India which now steered him towards Sanskrit, and Indological and comparative religious studies. From the early 1930s Monchanin was exploring the possibility of living some sort of Christian monastic life in India, no easy task for someone bound to Mother Church. It took many years of negotiations before Monchanin finally received the approval of the Bishop of Tiruchirapalli to work amongst the scattered Indian Christians in the region, evangelized centuries before by both Francis Xavier and Roberto Nobili. Monchanin left Marseilles for India in May 1939. For the next decade Monchanin was immersed in pastoral work in India. These were years of social deprivation, physical hardship, and acute loneliness, preparatory to the contemplative life for which he yearned.

Swami Arokianadar, who taught Monchanin Tamil, and later became his disciple, testifies to Monchanin's infectious enthusiasm and erudition in all matters Indian:

> I noticed that he was very much interested in Indian philosophy, Indian history, art and literature, and social customs and manners. He taught me also to appreciate them and I could say that I learnt about India more from him than from anybody else. He gave me books on India. He helped me to understand the mystical meaning even of poems like *Gītā Govinda* or of myths like Kali. He was very much pleased when he saw me taking interest in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. It is amazingly true that he was able to talk on any subject that pertains to India, be it religious or philosophical, social or cultural, philological or ethical. In short he was an indologue.[15]

In Monchanin we find a formidable intellect, vast erudition, a refined sensibility with a deep appreciation of Europe's cultural heritage, and an ability to relate to ordinary folk. As one of his contemporaries wrote, he had a gift for understanding both ideas and souls:

> This gave him the opportunity to make intimate contacts at once with the most learned as well as the humblest, to assimilate with an extraordinary rapidity the philosophical and the scientific works of the specialists and to share the artistic emotion of painters, poets, and musicians; finally to receive with full love those who wanted to make him the confidant of their personal hopes and difficulties.[16]

Monchanin might easily have fashioned a splendid academic or ecclesiastical career; we have the testimony of some of the leading French Indologists of the day to this effect,[17] whilst Abhishiktananda said of him,

> He was one of the most brilliant intellects among the French clergy, a remarkable conversationalist, at home on every subject, a brilliant lecturer and a theologian who opened before his hearers marvelous and ever new horizons.[18]

Instead, Monchanin surrenders all to plunge himself into the materially impoverished life of the Indian villager and the life of the monk lived in the fashion of the *sannyāsī*. In 1941 he had written in his journal, "May India take me and bury me within itself—in God."[19] It was a noble ideal. Now, at last, in 1950, he was able to establish a monastic hermitage on the banks of the Kavery River.

Shantivanam: A Christian Ashram

On arrival in India, via Colombo, Le Saux was captivated by India—by its color and vitality, its history, its people, its temples and ashrams, but above all by the vibrant spiritual life pervading the whole culture. He immediately set about learning Tamil and was able to preach his first sermon in that language on Christmas Day, only a few months after his arrival. He traveled extensively in Tamil Nadu, familiarizing himself with the people, the language, the customs, with all aspects of Hinduism, and with the Indian Church with which he was now associated. He also took on his Indian name, Abhishiktananda ("Bliss of the Anointed One"), the name we will use henceforth.[20]

By early 1950 Abhishiktananda and Monchanin were ready to establish their ashram, variously known as *Eremus Sanctissimae Trinitatis* (Hermitage of the Most Holy Trinity), *Shantivanam* (Grove of Peace),

and *Saccidananda Ashram* (after the Vedantic ternary Being-Awareness-Bliss). Appropriately enough, the ashram was formally opened on the Feast of St Benedict, 21 March, 1950. Monchanin and Abhishiktananda articulated their agenda:

> Our goal: to form the first nucleus of a monastery (or rather a *laura*, a grouping of neighboring anchorites like the ancient laura of Saint Sabas in Palestine) which buttresses the Rule of Saint Benedict—a primitive, sober, discrete rule. Only one purpose: to seek God. And the monastery will be Indian style. We would like to crystallize and transubstantiate the search of the Hindu *sannyāsī*. *Advaita* and the praise of the Trinity are our only aim. This means we must grasp the authentic Hindu search for God in order to Christianize it, starting with ourselves first of all, from within.[21]

In short: Vedantic philosophy, Christian theology, Indian lifestyle. The hope was that "what is deepest in Christianity may be grafted on to what is deepest in India."[22] This was not a syncretic exercise which would issue forth some kind of religious hybrid, but an attempt to fathom the depths of Christianity with the aid of the traditional wisdom of India which, in the monks' view, was to be found in Vedanta and in the spiritual disciplines of the renunciate. However, whilst India had "her own message to deliver," it would only be "after finding her own achievement in Christ, the Truth, the Way and the Life (*John* 14.6) that she [would] be able to radiate to the world her message, imprinted, by the Word and the Spirit, in the very depth of her own culture."[23] The bridge between Indian spirituality and the Church was to be monasticism, "the plane whereon they may feel themselves in consonance with each other."[24] They looked forward to the day when God would send to the hermitage many "true sons of India, sons of her blood and sons of her soul,"

> priests and laymen alike, gifted with a deep spirit of prayer, an heroic patience, a total surrender, endowed with an iron will and right judgment, longing for the heights of contemplation, and equipped, too, with a deep and intimate knowledge of Christian doctrine and Indian thought.[25]

The lifestyle at the ashram was to be thoroughly Indian: meditation, prayer, study of the Scriptures of both traditions, a simple vegetarian diet, the most Spartan of amenities. Each donned the ochre cloth of the *sannyāsī* and lived Indian style—sleeping on the floor, dispensing with almost all furniture, eating with the hands rather than with "those strange implements that the West substitutes in a disgraceful way for the natural implements given by the Creator."[26] The skimpy bamboo and

thatch shelters which were their first abode soon had to be abandoned because the snakes, scorpions, and monkeys, perhaps claiming the rights of prior occupation, disturbed their sleep and their meditations.[27]

Monchanin had alluded earlier to the case of Dom Joliet, a French naval officer in China who became a Benedictine in 1897 and waited thirty years to realize his dream of founding a Christian monastery in the Far East. Monchanin had written, "Will I someday know the same joy, that in India too—from its soil and spirit—there will come a [Christian] monastic life dedicated to contemplation?"[28] The dream was not to be fully realized in Monchanin's own lifetime. On the face of it, the efforts of the French monks were less than successful: it was a constant struggle to keep the ashram afloat; there was little enthusiasm from either European or Indian quarters; there were endless difficulties and hardships; not a solitary Indian monk became a permanent member of the ashram. Abhishiktananda felt weighed down by practical responsibilities to which Monchanin remained quite indifferent. As James Stuart remarked, "For Fr Monchanin, study, thought, and prayer were everything, and he was content to leave the future entirely in the hands of God. If God willed, the ashram would develop; if not, he was perfectly happy to remain a hermit."[29] Abhishiktananda's personality was more dynamic, impetuous, and volatile, and he felt impatient with the failure of the ashram to attract Indian monks as permanent residents. The arrival in September 1955 of the Belgian monk, Fr Francis Mahieu, introduced new tensions into the small community, and by the end of the following year, Mahieu had left Shantivanam to establish Kurisumala Ashram (Kerala) with Bede Griffiths.[30] By the time of Monchanin's death in 1957 there seemed little to show for the hard years behind them. Monchanin was not able even to realize his desire to die in India as he had been sent to Paris for medical treatment. But the seeds had been sown. As Bede Griffiths later wrote, "It was Monchanin's vocation not to reach the goal to which he aspired, but to open the way to it for others."[31]

If the ashram did not meet the early hopes of its founders in attracting a stable community of Indian monks, it played a vital and exemplary role in the eventual flowering of the Christian Ashram movement. Furthermore, for many years it provided both a physical and spiritual hospitality, the effects of which are not easily gauged, but which surely left its mark on its beneficiaries. In the next chapter we shall meet some of the visitors to Shantivanam. During Abhishiktananda's time there they included H.W.J. Poonja ("Harilal," disciple of Ramana), Harold Rose (ex-Trappist novice with interests in Sufism and

Advaita), Raimon Panikkar (Spanish-Indian priest and scholar), Murray Rogers (English Anglican priest), John Cole (American Presbyterian missionary), Bettina Bäumer (Austrian student), Fr Klaus Klostermaier (German missionary and scholar), Vinoba Bhave (Gandhi's most well-known disciple), C.T. Venugopal (Protestant convert and railway official), Sachit Dhar (ex-Marxist Bengali), Fr Lazarus (English Orthodox priest), Devananda (Singhalese Anglican, founder of an ashram in Sri Lanka), Swami Kaivalyananda (Hindu monk), Fr Dharmanadhan (who at one time was to stay permanently but eventually moved on), Frs Dominique van Rollenhagen and Emmanuel de Meester (Belgian Benedictines), Ilsa Friedeberg (Swiss convert to the Orthodox Church), Jean Sullivan (French novelist), Philippe Franchette (Mauritian priest), Max Thurian (from the Taizé Community), Olivier Clément (Orthodox theologian), Mme Malou Lanvin (one of Abhishiktananda's many correspondents in France), as well as various church dignitaries and a host of other Indians who no doubt found some spiritual sustenance there. Nor should we forget the role that the ashram played in the religious life of the Christian villagers in the parish in which it was situated, many of them regularly attending services there. Then, too, there were many conferences, seminars, retreats, study groups and the like which took place under the aegis of the ashram, both at Shantivanam and elsewhere. It was also during the Shantivanam years that Abhishiktananda took on his life-long role as a spiritual father to the Carmelites of Bangalore, an "invisible ministry" which was highly significant both in his own development and in the lives of those to whom he ministered.[32]

A decade after Monchanin's death Fr Bede Griffiths and two Indian monks left their own ashram at Kurisumala and committed themselves to Shantivanam. There were to be many difficult years still ahead but Monchanin's dream finally came to fruition under the husbandry of Bede Griffiths who later wrote of Monchanin's mission:

> The ashram which he founded remains as a witness to the ideal of a contemplative life which he had set before him, and his life and writings remain to inspire others with the vision of a Christian contemplation which shall have assimilated the wisdom of India, and a theology in which the genius of India shall find expression in Christian terms.[33]

There are today something like fifty Christian ashrams in India, owing much to the pioneering efforts of Frs Monchanin, Le Saux, and Griffiths. Many of these ashrams are peopled entirely by indigenous Christians who continue the task of seeking out and living a distinctively Indian form of Christianity. Amongst the most enduring of these ashrams, along with Saccidananda and Kurisumala, are Christukula,

established by two Anglican missionaries in the early 1930s, Christa Prema Seva Ashram, founded by John Winslow in 1927 in Shivajinagar (Mumbai region), Jyotiniketan near Bareilly, and the Christi Panti Ashram in Varanasi. Many of the ashrams established in the last fifty years owe their inspiration to Shantivanam and to Monchanin, Abhishiktananda, and Bede Griffiths. Whether one regards this legacy as beneficent depends on one's point of view. The Christian Ashram movement in general and the "Trinity from Tannirpalli" in particular, have come under vituperative attack from some Hindu quarters—a matter to which we will return in a later chapter. The Christian Ashram movement still awaits a thorough phenomenological analysis,[34] but what can be said here without fear of contradiction is that Shantivanam and the pioneering work of Monchanin, Abhishiktananda, and Bede Griffiths had broken the trail for this movement.

"Unknown Harmonies": Ramana, Arunachala, and Gnanananda

However, Abhishiktananda was soon to find himself moving in another direction. The die was cast as early as January 1949 when Monchanin took him to Arunachala, the *liṅga*-mountain of Lord Shiva, and to visit Bhagavān Sri Ramana Maharshi, one of the most remarkable saints and sages of modern times—or, indeed, of any times. So potent was the impact of the Sage and of Abhishiktananda's several sojourns on Arunachala that by early 1953 he was writing,

> Shantivanam henceforth interests me so little. Arunachala has caught me. I have understood silence. . . . Now *sannyāsa* is no longer a thought, a concept, but an inborn summons, a basic need; the only state that suits the depths into which I have entered.[35]

In other words, Abhishiktananda was no longer primarily motivated by the ideal of a monastic Christian witness in India but was now seized by the ideal of *sannyāsa* as an end in itself. It can fairly be said that from the early 50s onwards Abhishiktananda's life was a sustained attempt to live out this ideal.

Although Abhishiktananda's first sightings of Ramana left him somewhat dissatisfied and with a sense of distaste for the way in which the devotees venerated him, it was not long before Abhishiktananda felt the mesmerizing *darśana* of the gentle saint:

> Even before my mind was able to recognize the fact, and still less to express it, the invisible halo of this Sage had been perceived by something in me deeper than any words. Unknown harmonies awoke in my heart. . . . In the Sage of Arunachala of our own time I discerned

> the unique Sage of the eternal India, the unbroken succession of her sages, her ascetics, her seers; it was as if the very soul of India penetrated to the very depths of my own soul and held mysterious communion with it. It was a call which pierced through everything, rent it in pieces and opened a mighty abyss.[36]

One can find any number of testimonies of this kind. Monchanin himself wrote of the meeting, "I did not for a moment cease to be lucid, master of myself. And I was nevertheless captivated. . . . There is a mystery in this man, who has rediscovered the *one essence* of Indian mysticism."[37] For the moment we will restrict ourselves to juxtaposing Abhishiktananda's words with Frithjof Schuon's strikingly similar account of the Maharishi's nature and significance:

> In Sri Ramana Maharshi one meets again ancient and eternal India. The Vedantic truth—the truth of the *Upanishads*—is brought back to its simplest expression but without any kind of betrayal. It is the simplicity inherent in the Real, not the denial of that complexity which it likewise contains. . . . That spiritual function which can be described as the "activity of presence" found in the Maharishi its most rigorous expression. Sri Ramana was as it were the incarnation, in these latter days and in the face of modern activist fever, of what is primordial and incorruptible in India. He manifested the nobility of contemplative "non-action" in the face of an ethic of utilitarian agitation and he showed the implacable beauty of pure truth in the face of passions, weaknesses, and betrayals.[38]

Abhishiktananda had no real "relationship" with Ramana in the normal sense of the word—for instance, he was never in his presence alone but only as part of a group. His encounters with the Sage were few and rather fleeting, and his hopes of more sustained contact were thwarted by Ramana's passing in January 1950. But assuredly the meeting with Ramana precipitated a series of radically transformative experiences for Abhishiktananda.

In the years following Ramana's death Abhishiktananda spent two extended periods as a hermit in one of Arunachala's many caves. He wrote of an overwhelming mystical experience while in retreat on the mountain, an experience of non-duality (*advaita*), and stated that he was "truly reborn at Arunachala under the guidance of the Maharishi,"[39] understanding "what is beyond silence: *śūnyatā* (voidness)." "Ramana's *Advaita* is my birthplace. Against that all rationalization is shattered."[40]

> He who receives this overwhelming Light is both petrified and torn apart; he is unable to speak or to think anymore; he remains there, beyond time and space, alone in the very solitude of the alone. It is

> a fantastic experience, this sudden irruption of the fire and light of Arunachala.

Ramana and Arunachala alike had, he said, "become part of my flesh, they are woven into the fibers of my heart."[41]

Abhishiktananda's last extended stay at Tiruvannamalai was in December 1955, one with momentous consequences. During this period, accompanied by his friend Harold Rose, he also visited Tirukoyilur, some thirty miles to the south. From a letter written on Christmas Eve:

> I have met . . . through an unforeseen combination of circumstances, an old Hindu *sannyāsī* (they say is 120 years old; 70 or 150, what does it matter?), before whom, for the first time in my life, I could not resist making the great prostration of our Hindu tradition, and to whom I believe I might give myself over completely.[42]

The "old Hindu *sannyāsī*" in question was Swami Sri Gnanananda, or to give him the full treatment, Paramahamsa Parivrajaacharya Varya Sri Gnanananda Giri Swami, disciple of Paramahamsa Parivrajaacharya Varya Sri Sivaratnagiri Swami, belonging to the Kashmir Jyotir Mutt Peetam of the lineage of Adi Sankara Bhagavat Pada! Here is Abhishiktananda's first impression:

> He had short legs and his body was half shrouded in an orange *dhotī*, which left one shoulder bare, while one end was draped over his head. He was unshaven. On his forehead there was no trace of his hundred and twenty years!—only the three lines of ash worn by devotees of Shiva and the vermillion mark in the center. But from this deeply peaceful face shone eyes filled with immense tenderness.[43]

Interestingly, Abhishiktananda remarks that upon meeting Gnanananda he *automatically* yielded his allegiance to him, something which he had never previously done.[44] Here is his third-person account from *Guru and Disciple* (in which "Vanya" is Abhishiktananda himself):

> [Vanya] had often heard tell of gurus, of the irrational devotion shown to them by their disciples and their total self-abandonment to the guru. All these things had seemed utterly senseless to him, a European with a classical education. Yet now at this very moment it had happened to him, a true living experience tearing him out of himself. This little man with his short legs and bushy beard, scantily clad in a *dhotī*, who had so suddenly burst in upon his life, could now ask of him anything in the world.[45]

Abhishiktananda had spontaneously become a disciple of Gnanananda. In February and March of the following year, at the swami's invi-

tation, Abhishiktananda returned to his ashram at Tapovanam, there to give himself over to Gnanananda and to experience nearly three weeks "which have been among the most unforgettable of my life."[46] As Gnanananda is much less well-known than Ramana, we must here say a few words about him.

Like most such figures, Gnanananda was reticent about his own biography but we can assemble a few facts which were gleaned from scattered and off-hand remarks made by the swami himself. It is believed that he was born at Managalapuri near Gokarna in the west of Karnataka. As a boy he was attracted to Pandharpur, the famous pilgrimage center in Maharashtra and it was there that he met Sri Sivarathna of Jyotir Mutt, who was to become the guru under whom Gnanananda underwent his spiritual apprenticeship at Srinagar, in Kashmir. After his guru departed this life Gnanananda spent many years as an ascetic in the Himalayas, including many years at Gangotri (close to the site of Abhishiktananda's own Himalayan hermitage) before embarking on travels which took him to all parts of the sub-continent, including Nepal, Burma, and Sri Lanka. During these travels he came into contact with many of the leading lights of the day, including Ramana, Sai Baba of Shirdi, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo. (Whether he physically met these figures is a matter of some conjecture, some of his followers suggesting that he was able to "know" them by virtue of his powers as a *trikāljñānī*—one who moves freely through past, present, and future.[47])

Eventually Gnanananda settled near the temple city of Tirukoyilur in Tamil Nadu, where an ashram grew up around him. The area, within the benign aura of Arunachala, had been the abode of many Tamil saints over the centuries. Gnanananda spent the rest of what, by all accounts, was an extraordinarily long life in this region, eventually passing away in 1974. (The consensus amongst his followers, including several sober-minded scholars, seems to be that Gnanananda lived for about 150 years.[48]) Gnanananda was proficient in many languages and was said to have a prodigious memory. Contrary to Abhishiktananda's assertions in *Guru and Disciple* that Gnanananda "exhibits no trace of anything extraordinary, [n]o ecstasies, no *siddhis*"[49] he was also believed to have the powers of telepathy, astral travel, astrological prediction, and various other wonder-working faculties.

Gnanananda's ashram at Tapovanam remains a lively spiritual center to this day, and is now presided over by Swami Nityananda Giri, one of the founders, in 1978, of the Abhishiktananda Society.[50] Abhishiktananda later wrote in some detail about his experiences at

Arunachala and at Sri Gnanananda's ashram at Tapovanam in *The Secret of Arunachala* and *Guru and Disciple*.[51] These fateful experiences will be considered in more detail in the next two chapters.

On the Christian-Hindu Frontier

From the early 50s onwards Abhishiktananda faced a daunting problem: how to reconcile the advaitic insight which Ramana, Arunachala, and Gnanananda had brought him with his own deep Christian commitment and his vocation as a priest and a monk. In September 1953 we find him articulating the dilemma in his diary, in all its fully-felt pain:

> What does it mean, this agony of having found one's peace far from the place and form of one's original commitments, at the very frontiers of Holy Church? What does it mean, to feel that the only obstacle to final peace and *ānanda* [joy] is one's attachment to that place, that form, that *mythos*? Who is there on either side of the frontier to whom I can cry out my anguish—who, if he belongs to this side, will not take fright and anathematize me, and if he is on the other side, will not take an all too human delight because I am joining him?[52]

He was also troubled in these early years by the failure of his abbot to seek the renewal of his indult of exclaustration (the ecclesiastical authority to live outside his monastery), and thought about going himself to Rome:

> What use would it be to go to Europe? What use in going to Rome in search of ecclesiastical authorization? When Saint-Exupery had lost his way and was flying a course between Orion and the Great Bear, he could laugh a Claudelian laugh when a petty airport official radioed to him that he was fined because he had banked too close to the hangars. . . . So it is with the letters of Fr Abbot.[53]

But it was the interior problem which was most acute. He agonized over it for many years—to put his problems before Rome? to abandon his Christian faith? to turn his back on *advaita*? There was no simple answer and it was not until his last years that the dilemma was fully resolved. In our explorations of Abhishiktananda's thought, his writings, his spiritual experience, we will find him confronting these questions again and again. Here is one of many tormented cries from his journal: "Therefore I am full of fear, plunged in an ocean of anguish whichever way I turn. . . . And I fear risking my eternity for a delusion. And yet you are no delusion, O Arunachala."[54] Nor was his predicament eased by his growing disenchantment with many aspects of the institutional church:

> If only the Church was *spiritually radiant*, if it was not so firmly attached to the formulations of transient philosophies, if it did not obstruct the freedom of the spirit . . . with such niggling regulations, it would not be long before we reached an understanding.[55]

He was deeply troubled by the thought that he might be "wearing a mask of Christianity, out of fear of the consequences" (of taking it off).[56]Abhishiktananda's spiritual crisis was at its most intense in the years 1955-56, and was to the fore during his month-long silent retreat at Kumbakonan.[57]

For the moment we can say that Abhishiktananda, with heroic audacity, chose to live out his life on that very frontier, neither forsaking Christianity nor repudiating the spiritual treasures which he had found in such abundance in India: "I think it is best to hold together, even though in extreme tension, these two forms of a unique faith until the dawn appears."[58] It was a position which was to cause him much distress and loneliness, and a good many difficulties with some of his fellow Christians, be they ecclesiastical authorities, priests and scholars, or acquaintances—though we should also note that many of his Christian friends, far from anathematizing him, showed a remarkable level of understanding of Abhishiktananda's predicament, an unwavering love of the man himself and a deep respect for the path he had chosen.

Here is Abhishiktananda in later years, pondering his journey and the two traditions which had nurtured him, both of which he loved profoundly:

> Whether I want it or not, I am deeply attached to Christ Jesus and therefore to the *koinonia* of the Church. It is in him that the "mystery" has been revealed to me ever since my awakening to myself and to the world. It is in his image, his symbol, that I know God and that I know myself and the world of human beings. Since I awoke here to new depths in myself (depths of the self, of the *ātman*), this symbol has marvelously developed. Christian theology had already revealed to me the eternity of the mystery of Jesus in the bosom of the Father. Later India revealed to me the cosmic wholeness of this mystery. . . . Moreover I recognize this mystery, which I have always adored under the symbol of Christ, in the myths of Narayana, Prajapati, Siva, Puruṣa, Krishna, Rama etc. The same mystery. But for me, Jesus is my *sadguru*.[59]

In another letter he wrote this:

> It is precisely the fact of being a bridge that makes this uncomfortable situation worthwhile. The world, at every level, needs such bridges. The danger of this life as "bridge" is that we run the risk of not belonging to

> either side; whereas, however harrowing it may be, *our duty is to belong wholly to both sides.* This is only possible in the mystery of God.[60]

He had few companions on this path. Until the Church was much more widely pervaded by contemplative awareness and open to the experience of *advaita*, ". . . there is only the loneliness of the prophet . . . and the impossibility of being at one's ease anywhere except with those few people who have an intuition of this 'transcendent' level—like traveling faster than sound, or escaping from earth's gravity, to use physical metaphors."[61]

From the Kavery to the Source of the Ganges

Monchanin's death in 1957 left Abhishiktananda in charge of Shantivanam and he struggled on with his various duties there as best he could, as if cultivating a piece of land he no longer owned.[62] Towards the end of 1958 he wrote to his friend in France, Fr Lemarié, "I no longer have any desire for a monastic institution; it is too heavy a responsibility."[63] More critical than the burden of responsibility was his growing conviction that "the completion in Christ of the mystical intuition of *advaita* is the fundamental ontological condition for the building up not in statistics, not in masonry, but in reality of the Church in India."[64] Increasingly he found himself allured to the holy sites of Hinduism and spent more and more of his time on such pilgrimages and peregrinations. Before his last years at Gyansu, when he withdrew from the world as far as he was able, he journeyed thousands of miles all over India, always traveling third class—often being able to get in or out of the astonishingly crowded carriages only through the window! Robert Stephens has characterized him as "the hermit who could not stay put."[65] He refused to fly anywhere as he believed that such a mode of travel was quite incongruous for a *sannyāsī* vowed to poverty.

It was not until 1968 that Abhishiktananda formally relinquished the leadership of Shantivanam to Fr Bede Griffiths. After this hand-over he never returned to Shantivanam. He formalized his Indian citizenship in 1960—he had long been a spiritual citizen—and built a small hermitage on the banks of the Ganges at Gyansu, a tiny hamlet near Uttarkashi, in the Himalayas. His friend Murray Rogers gives us a picture of the humble habitation which was thenceforth to be Abhishiktananda's "home":

> It was a one-roomed house built of stones gathered from the hillside, covered with mud plaster; the upstairs portion, reached by a rickety ladder, was an attic or loft which served as a chapel and box-room; at

> the back there was a lean-to for a kitchen and, by the time I visited him, there was in front another little cell for infrequent visitors, made largely of bamboo netting and a covered porch. Here Swamiji often worked at a table. This porch was wide open towards the Ganga. . . . Except in the eyes of Swamiji himself there was apparent disorder, books and papers, pots, a lantern, a screwdriver and hammer, some dal and bengan. . . . I told him that in a previous incarnation he must surely have been related to Heath Robinson, for I swear that paper and string have never had so much to do with holding a building together.[66]

Here Abhishiktananda plunged ever deeper into the *Upanishads*, realizing more and more the Church's need of India's timeless message. He also consolidated his grasp of Sanskrit, Tamil, and English, and often participated in retreats, conferences, seminars, and the like. How appropriate that most of his books were written here, near the source of the holy river!

It was only in the last few years of his life that he resolved the tension between his Christian commitments and his advaitic experience, becoming ever more firmly convinced that the meeting place of the two traditions was not to be found in any doctrinal or philosophical formulations but in the lived reality of *sannyāsa*:

> Believe me, it is above all in the mystery of *sannyāsa* that India and the Church will meet, will discover themselves in the most secret and hidden parts of their hearts, in the place where they are each most truly themselves, in the mystery of their origin in which every outward manifestation is rooted and from which time unfolds itself.[67]

In his journal he wrote of himself as "at once so deeply Christian and so deeply Hindu, at a depth where Christian and Hindu in their social and mental structures are blown to pieces, and are yet found again ineffably at the heart of each other."[68] As Frithjof Schuon has remarked,

> When a man seeks to escape from "dogmatic narrowness" it is essential that it should be "upwards" and not "downwards": dogmatic form is transcended by fathoming its depths and contemplating its universal content, and not by denying it in the name of a pretentious and iconoclastic "ideal" of "pure truth."[69]

Abhishiktananda never denied or repudiated the doctrines or practices of either Christianity or Hinduism, nor did he cease to observe the Christian forms of worship and to celebrate the sacraments; rather, he came to understand their limitations as religious *signs*. His own "statements" on doctrinal matters, he said, were to be regarded as "no more than working hypotheses" and as "vectors of free inquiry."[70] Religious forms and structures (doctrines, rituals, laws, etc.) were *signposts* to the

Absolute but should never be invested with any absolute value themselves.[71] In this insight he again echoes Schuon who writes:

> Exoterism consists in identifying transcendent realities with the dogmatic forms, and if need be, with the historical facts of a given Revelation, whereas esoterism refers in a more or less direct manner to these same realities.[72]

It is true that Abhishiktananda many times referred to the tensions arising out of the simultaneous "presence of the *Upanishads* and the Gospel in a single heart"[73] and that he sometimes used the language of fulfillment when addressing Christians; on occasions this would seem, at least in his later years, to have been a case of *upāya*, "skilful means" as the Buddhists have it, or what Schuon calls "saving mirages."[74] As Schuon also observes, "In religious exoterisms, efficacy at times takes the place of truth, and rightly so, given the nature of the men to whom they are addressed."[75] In Abhishiktananda's case we can trace through his writings a move *away* from all notions of Christian exclusivism and triumphalism, *through* the theology of fulfillment, *towards* the *sophia perennis*.

All the evidence suggests that Abhishiktananda did indeed undergo the plenary experience and see that Light that, in Koranic terms, is "neither of the East nor of the West." In communicating that experience, and the knowledge that it delivers, Abhishiktananda freely resorts to the spiritual vocabulary of both theistic Christianity and non-dualistic Hinduism. Take, for instance, passages such as these:

> The knowledge (*vidyā*) of Christ is identical with what the *Upanishads* call divine knowledge (*brahmavidyā*). . . . It comprises the whole of God's self-manifestation in time, and is one with his eternal self-manifestation.[76]

> Step by step I descended into what seemed to me to be successive depths of my true self—my being (*sat*), my awareness of being (*cit*), and my joy in being (*ānanda*). Finally nothing was left but he himself, the Only One, infinitely alone, Being, Awareness, and Bliss, *Saccidānanda*.[77]

In 1971, in his Introduction to the English edition of *Saccidananda*, Abhishiktananda had this to say:

> Dialogue may begin simply with relations of mutual sympathy. It only becomes worth while when it is accompanied by full openness . . . not merely at the intellectual level, but with regard to [the] inner life of the Spirit. Dialogue about doctrines will be more fruitful when it is rooted in a real spiritual experience at depth and when each one understands

> that *diversity does not mean disunity, once the Center of all has been reached.*[78]

Abhishiktananda makes an interesting contrast with Monchanin insofar as he gave primacy to his own mystical realization over the theological doctrines to which he was formally committed as a Christian. As he somewhere remarked, "Truth has to be taken from wherever it comes; that Truth possesses us—we do not possess Truth," thus recalling St Ambrose's dictum that "All that is true, by whosoever spoken, is from the Holy Ghost."[79] On the basis of his own testimony and that of those who knew him in later years we can say of Abhishiktananda that through the penetration of religious forms he became a fully realized *sannyāsī*—which is to say, neither Hindu nor Christian, or, if one prefers, both Christian and Hindu, this only being possible at a mystical and esoteric level where the relative forms are universalized. As he wrote in *The Further Shore*, "The call to complete renunciation cuts across all *dharmas* and disregards all frontiers . . . it is anterior to every religious formulation."[80]

Vocation and Eucharist

There are two persistent motifs in Abhishiktananda's life in India which deserve mention here: his unwavering adherence to his vocation as a monk and to the celebration of the Eucharist. Whatever his uncertainties about where he stood in relation to Christianity and Vedanta, he was completely free of doubts about his role as a monk, a man of God. As Fr Vattakuzhy remarks in his study,

> The center of Abhishiktananda's life was his monastic consecration to which he was experientially and existentially committed. He came to India, not because he was a Christian, but because he was a monk.[81]

Raimon Panikkar addressed him on this issue in his "Letter to Abhishiktananda" (written on the second anniversary of his death):

> The center of your life was your monastic vocation. . . . You were tortured by the apparent incompatibility between Christianity and *Advaita*. Experientially and existentially committed to both, you could not solve the tension between the two, except perhaps at the very end of your life. . . . You doubted whether, out of loyalty to yourself, you should quit the Church; you hesitated to give yourself fully to *Advaita*, but you never for a moment questioned your monastic consecration, your way of life. . . . Your support was your life of a monk, and we must pay tribute to that pure and clear surrender of your existence which

> allowed you to become a *kurukṣetra* (a battlefield), while the outcome of the war was still totally undecided.[82]

Similarly, he cleaved to the Eucharist which was an unending source of spiritual rejuvenation. However troubled he sometimes felt about the Church, even about Christianity as a whole, he never relinquished his faith in the efficacy of the rite. It may well be that it provided a kind of anchorage which could stabilize some of his psychic tensions. The editor of his journal has accented this

> often overlooked aspect of Dom Le Saux's spirituality—his Eucharistic devotion, that is to say, his rootedness in the earth, his ascent to the depth of matter—matter transfigured, divinized. It was the Mass that linked him to the Church whose function, as he said, was to preserve the Eucharist.[83]

This sacrament, Panikkar suggests, kept Abhishiktananda grounded and acted as a counterbalance to his aspiration to become an "acosmic"—which is to say "without birth, with no place, no goal, nothing."[84] Abhishiktananda himself believed there was a fundamental affinity between the Eucharistic mystery and the ideal of *sannyāsa*, and that the sacrament itself could be "a sign beyond signs," which is to say one infinitely surpassing the historical and religious context in which it first appeared.[85] Murray Rogers recalls celebrating the Eucharist daily with Abhishiktananda in his hermitage at Gyansu, in the last year of his life:

> And when I went to stay with him, Swamiji just rejoiced to celebrate the Eucharist every day. We spent hours at it! We'd go up the ladder in his *kutiya* [hut] to his chapel in the attic. It would be in complete chaos, boxes and trunks and pieces of rock. There in the middle was a little table a few inches from the floor and all his treasures were underneath so they were close by, incense and camphor and brass dishes. His stone chalice and paten bought in the bazaar at Haridwar. . .[86]

Of the Eucharist Abhishiktananda himself wrote in his journal:

> The Mass is not for getting anything whatever . . . it is like the expression of my being, like the expectation of and approach of the moment that comes in the moment that now is, in the same way as I draw breath in the power of this actual moment, bringing about also my presence to the moment which is coming.[87]

The sacrament also played a vital role in Abhishiktananda's deepening understanding of the "cosmic theophany." In *Saccidananda* he wrote:

> The basis of the Eucharist and also of the whole sacramental character of the Church is to be found in the ascent of the whole cosmos—matter and spirit—towards its Lord. The Eucharist is the *anamnesis*, or memorial of all that has been and all that will be. It is the memorial of the Passion, also of the Incarnation, and so of the Creation.[88]

Last Years

In his last years Abhishiktananda assumed the role of guru to his only real disciple (using that word in its strict sense), the young French seminarian Marc Chaduc, who was given a joint Christian-Hindu initiation (*dīkṣā*) by Abhishiktananda and Swami Chidananda. Abhishiktananda spent a good deal of time at the Sivananda Ashram in his last years and became a close friend of Chidananda. Abhishiktananda's early advaitic experience at Arunachala and Tapovanam was deepened and enriched by further experiences in the two years before his death in 1973. One particular advaitic experience must be noted, as recounted by Marc Chaduc:

> It was on the way to Pulchatti that the grace erupted. In these mountains which have sheltered so many contemplatives, overwhelmed by the interior vision, the Father was seized by the mystery of the purely acosmic one who leaves all in response to the burning invitation of God. The blessed one who receives this light, the Father told me, is paralyzed, torn asunder, he can no longer speak nor think, he remains there, immobile outside of time and space, alone in the very solitude of the Alone. Absorbed in this way, the Father relived—lived again—the sudden eruption of the infinite Column of fire and the light of Arunachala.[89]

One measure of Abhishiktananda's mystical extinction in advaitic non-dualism, and the problems this posed for some of his Christian contemporaries (and for all rigidly theistic theologies), is evident in the manuscript of a talk he prepared in the last months of his life:

> In this annihilating experience [of *advaita*] one is no longer able to project in front of oneself anything whatsoever, to recognize any other "pole" to which to refer oneself and to give the name of God. Once one has reached that innermost center, one is so forcibly seized by the mystery that one can no longer utter a "Thou" or an "I." Engulfed in the abyss, we disappear to our own eyes, to our own consciousness. The proximity of that mystery which the prophetic traditions name "God" burns us so completely that there is no longer any question of discovering it in the depths of oneself or oneself in the depths of it. In

> the very engulfing, the gulf has vanished. If a cry was still possible—at the moment perhaps of disappearing into the abyss—it would be paradoxically: "but there is no abyss, no gulf, no distance!" There is no face-to-face, for there is only That-Which-Is, and no other to name it.[90]

This passage, reminiscent of Eckhart, can take its place amongst the most exalted of mystical commentaries; it also dispels any doubts as to the validity of Abhishiktananda's own mystical annihilation, called by whatever name.

The last decade of Abhishiktananda's life saw the publication of a series of books bearing the fragrance of his long years of prayer, meditation, study, and spiritual awakening, his "literary apostolate" as it has been called.[91] The English-language versions of these books are: *The Mountain of the Lord* (1966), an account of his pilgrimage to Gangotri, *Prayer* (1967), *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point* (1969), *The Church in India* (1969), *Towards the Renewal of the Indian Church* (1970), *Saccidananda: A Christian Experience of Advaita* (1974), probably his most mature theological work, *Guru and Disciple* (1974) in which he recalls his experiences with Ramana and with Gnanananda, and *The Further Shore* (1975), his deepest meditation on the *Upanishads* and the ideal of *sannyāsa*. *The Secret of Arunachala* (1979) and a collection of several essays, *The Eyes of Light* (1983), appeared posthumously.

As his works became known in Europe he was several times invited to return to the West. Raimon Panikkar recalls one such occasion:

> A course was to be given on Indian metaphysics, especially yoga, and you were asked to preside as the "key figure," even the "guru." You could not deny the gravity of the invitation nor the possible good you might do. Moreover, you agreed that a visit to the West after so many years of absence would give you not only an insight into a changed Occident but a new perspective on India and her spiritual message. Yet you refused. I vividly remember our conversations and letters on the subject. You had an almost physical aversion to, and mistrust of, the idea of yourself as a "key figure" on a temporal mission. Instinctively you rejected the part, feeling in your heart that it would betray the plunge you had taken into an experience allowing of no return. . . . You resisted playing the *jīvanmukta*, the accomplished saint. . . . You did not accept or ever play such a role.[92]

Abhishiktananda never figured himself to be anyone special—just a humble monk. As his sixtieth birthday approached, some of his friends canvassed the idea of a special tribute with which to mark the occasion. His response in a letter to one of its proponents:

> The interest that I arouse is restricted to a very limited circle. My withdrawal to the Himalayas perhaps adds a mythical touch to my personality. In any case, I cannot imagine where you have "fished up" this idea of a commemorative volume. . . . It would be a betrayal of all that I stand for, solitude, silence and monastic poverty. . . . Nothing else remains for me but to be a hermit for good, not a mere salesman of solitude and monastic life.[93]

Mother Yvonne Lebeau, with whom Abhishiktananda became friendly at the Sivananda Ashram, has left us with a snapshot of Abhishiktananda in his later years:

> Nothing seemed to vex him; he was always smiling and happy. I treated him as my pal. He was lucid. . . . He did things without ill-feeling or criticism. . . . He was pure like a child, and strikingly honest.[94]

John Alter, the son of some friends at the Rajpur Retreat and Study Center, recorded his impressions of Abhishiktananda in early 1972:

> His eyes twinkled. That struck me immediately. His bright, sparkling gaze. And the comical nimbus of white hair. A jester in the court of God . . . with his disorganized simplicity. The first glance deepened, of course. . . . As the days opened around us, his silence—the sadness which sometimes enveloped him—his spiritual authority and experience—the realism of his instructions—his very real and practical affection for each of us as fellow pilgrims on the long path home—his delight in the day and the moment—enriched and affirmed this first impression. Nothing was denied. At the mouth of the *guha* Swamiji did know mirth. The encounter deep within the speechless silence of himself did not eclipse or deflate the garrulous human reality. . . . Swamiji knew that paradox, the comical disproportion between advaitic experience and the ordinary, daily world . . . what he made manifest in his human, often less than royal, way was the vow of "insecurity" he had taken. It was a vow which committed him to an almost unimaginable loneliness. Out of that solitude he returned to us, with a twinkle in his eye.[95]

Knocking on Heaven's Door

Early on the morning of June 30, 1973, a small group of people gathered on the banks of the Ganges, close to the Sivananda Ashram at Rishikesh. We have arrived back at the scene at which we started—Chaduc's initiation, in which Swami Chidananda "co-opted him into the host of monks and seers of India" and Abhishiktananda "united him with the succession of monks that goes back to the desert Fathers, and behind that to Elijah," and from which he emerged as Swami Ajatananda ("Bliss

of the Not-born"), immediately to set off as a wandering beggar.[96] In a letter to Murray Rogers Abhishiktananda wrote,

> Marc has received *sannyāsī* in the Ganga from Chidanandaji and myself. Very simple ceremony, but it was simply too beautiful. The three of us were simply radiant. Deep in the Ganga he pronounced the old formula of renunciation. I join him; he plunges into (the) water; I raise him up, and we sing our favorite mantras to the *Puruṣa*. He discards all his clothes in (the) water, and I receive him as from the maternal womb. We envelop him in the fire-colored dress. We communicate to him the *mahavākyas*, and I give him the "envoi": "Go to where there is no return.". . .[97]

This lovely ceremony on the banks of India's most holy river, in the company of his disciple and the Hindu holy man, was to be one of the last formal events of Abhishiktananda's life. Soon after he wrote to Ajatananda,

> It was too wonderful that morning of June 30. . . .
> Your *dīkṣā* moved me
> To the depths of my being,
> stealing me away from myself,
> losing me in infinite space, where I no longer know anything,
> where I look for myself in vain! OM![98]

In the fortnight following, he spent three days with Ajatananda in complete isolation, without food, at a Shaivite temple at Ranagal, close to Rishikesh. James Stuart describes this experience as one of "holy inebriation," "like that of the *keśī* (hairy ones) of the *Rig-Veda*."[99] Ajatananda wrote of Abhishiktananda at this time:

> These were days when Swamiji discovered ever deeper abysses of the soul. . . . The inbreaking of the Spirit snatched him away from himself, and shone through every inch of his being, an inner apocalypse which at times blazed forth outwardly in a glorious transfiguration.[100]

On July 14th, in the Rishikesh bazaar, shopping for groceries before returning to Ranagal, Abhishiktananda was felled to the ground. Mother Yvonne Lebeau, his compatriot and friend from the Sivananda Ashram, happened to be passing and was able to come to his assistance. He had, in his own words, been "brushed by Siva's column of fire," an experience he described as his definitive "awakening," his discovery of the Grail, whose physiological accompaniment was a massive heart attack:

> Really a door opened in heaven while I was lying on the pavement. But a heaven which was not the opposite of earth, something which was neither life nor death, but simply "being," "awakening" . . . beyond all myths and symbols. . . . That coronary attack was only a part, but an essential one, of a whole process of grace.[101]

He wrote in one of his last letters, "the quest is fulfilled."[102] As Confucius said, "one who has seen the way in the morning can gladly die in the evening"—but, to his own surprise, Abhishiktananda lingered on for several months, concluding that the only possible reason for this "extension" was the opportunity to share something of his final awakening with his friends. He was taken to Rajpur and thence to Indore to be cared for by the Franciscan Sisters in the Roberts Nursing Home where he found "a homely atmosphere, medical attention, suitable food, and all that 'for the love of God.'"[103] In a letter to Ajatananda on October 9th he feels the time is near to abandon this "old garment"[104] and writes to his beloved sister Marie-Thérèse a fortnight later: "When the body no longer responds to the guidance of the spirit, then you understand St Paul's agonized desire to be relieved of it."[105] Finally, on December 7th, after a day during which he had spent much time contemplating an icon of Elijah, and with prayerful friends at his bedside, Abhishiktananda crossed to the further shore.

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We will bring this sketch towards its conclusion with a few personal reminiscences from three women. The first, Bettina Bäumer, met Abhishiktananda in 1963, at Shantivanam, and later spent a good deal of time with him on his visits to Varanasi. In her reflections about Abhishiktananda she draws attention to several aspects of his personality and character which could only be fully appreciated by those knew him intimately:

> He had the gift of drawing out the best in a person and lifting her up to his own level . . . his great simplicity of life, and his indomitable faith in the spirit of India . . . he was never discouraged from the path he had chosen, and he never lost faith. In fact, there were not too many who could understand him and he passed through phases of loneliness. . . . Another sign of his true contemplative spirit was his love for nature. . . . Another aspect of the human side . . . was his sense of humor. He could laugh at himself and did not take himself too seriously. Unlike some spiritual persons, he did not mix up the seriousness of his concerns and ideals with his own person.[106]

An unnamed Sister of the Sacred Heart, a participant in a 1972 seminar on ashram life, remembered Abhishiktananda this way:

> He could be "a child among children.". . . To me he was the embodiment of what "Unless you become as little children. . ." means. His joy, spontaneity, and total inner freedom made us feel completely at home with him.[107]

Early in 1973 Abhishiktananda took great pleasure in the visit of an American friend with whom he had corresponded for fifteen years. She was Mrs Ann-Marie Stokes, also a Breton but for many years resident in New York where she was deeply involved with Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement. After meeting her in Delhi he took her to Haridwar and Rishikesh and to the retreat center in Rajpur. Later they met up with Marc Chaduc. After Abhishiktananda's passing Mrs Stokes wrote a small recollection for a memorial volume which eventually found its way, in truncated form, into James Stuart's biography. There are no metaphysical flights in the piece, no theological ruminations, no weighing up of Abhishiktananda's significance—rather, some deeply affectionate memories of the person himself. From a few excerpts we can catch some further glimpses of Abhishiktananda's personality:

> Fifteen years of correspondence create both friendship and an image, but the living image was slightly different, more subtle, more shaded, harsher, more imperative. And then the little personal touches—using beautiful stilted French, memories of his humanities as he entered the monastery, he would sometimes interject a slang word, common to college boys of his time, that added great flavor to his conversation. Impossible feats were his daily bread, but the usual little materialistic things became great undertakings and filled him with misgivings. Whilst traveling, he was agitated and constantly in a hurry; and I can still remember those scalding cups of tea taken by the roadside. . . . His asbestos-lined throat had absorbed them while we were still wetting our lips. . . . He slept on the ground on a blanket in a corner among his books, his only possessions. . . . Simone Weil and her ardent wish to be a bridge between cultures and religions was often quoted, and also her magnificent thoughts on the Holy Grail. . . . We differed a good deal about suffering and its impact, and suddenly he said an extraordinary thing: "I do not know either suffering or evil.". . . Little by little I discovered his tremendous intelligence—how beautiful a gift he had surrendered—and his eminently poetic personality, not only as a poet—"Arunachala" is a great poem—but in his poetic view of things. There too I discovered his absolute poverty and his insecurity by probing (he never complained), worn like a splendid mantle and embellished by the immense value he gave to the "invaluable.". . .

> The bazaar fascinated him with its handicrafts, and he gravely gave advice on my purchases. And then we made our way to Rishikesh, to Sivananda Ashram. Its director, Chidanandaji, was a deeply admired friend. The mutual relationship of these two men was a joy to behold. . . . Several times it happened that Swamiji would say: "Now I can go, my message has been heard," his Nunc Dimittis. All his modest desires had been granted in this world, and the other unlimited one seized upon him from time [to] time.[108]

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It can hardly be doubted that, in the words of his friend Raimon Panikkar, Abhishiktananda was "one of the most authentic witnesses of our times of the encounter in depth between Christian and Eastern spiritualities."[109] One measure of this was the considerable esteem in which Abhishiktananda was held in some Vedantic circles. Father Gispert-Sauch recounts a visit to the Sivananda Ashram where he discovered that not only had Abhishiktananda's writings on *sannyāsa* (later published as *The Further Shore*) been serialized in the ashram's monthly publication, but that they were obligatory reading for all of the novices, and that the novices discussed these essays with Swami Chidananda who regarded them as giving "beautiful expression to the authentic meaning of *sannyāsa* in the Indian tradition."[110] Abhishiktananda himself came to embody and to live this ideal. There can be no more fitting epitaph for Swamiji than one of his favorite Upanishadic verses, to which he returned again and again:

> I know him, that great *Puruṣa*
> Of the color of the sun,
> Beyond all darkness.
> He who has known him
> Goes beyond death.
> There is no other way.
> (*Śvetāśvatara Upanishad*, III.8.)

Notes

1. From Abhishiktananda, "Le Père Monchanin," quoted in A. Rawlinson, *Book of Enlightened Masters*, 148. An almost identical passage can be found in Abhishiktananda, *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam*, 28.
2. From "Renewal and Discipline," quoted in T. Conner, "Monk of Renewal," 183.
3. On his ordination as a priest in 1935 he also took on the name "Briac" in

honor of his hometown.
4. L 4.12.28, 2-3.
5. P. Coff, "Abhishiktananda," 2. For another translation of this passage and some commentary by Abhishiktananda, see *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam*, 98-99.
6. L 7.
7. L 13.2.67, 12.
8. L 18.8.47, 15.
9. L 22.9.73, 312.
10. Letter to Fr Monchanin, 18.8.47, in EL 11.
11. As well as supporting the radical experiment proposed by Monchanin and Le Saux, the Bishop made many decisions which, in the context of the times, were courageous and controversial—permitting these priests to don the garb of the Hindu *sannyāsī*, for instance, or encouraging their visits to Ramana Maharshi's ashram. On the question of visiting Hindu ashrams and the like, see du Boulay, 64.
12. L 7.8.47, 14-15.
13. From a pamphlet on Saccidananda Ashram and from an article in C*lergy Monthly*, August 1971, both quoted in Stephens, 115.
14. The biographical information following is taken from J.G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, and from S. Rodhe, *Jules Monchanin*, after *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam* the two best sources available in English.
15. Swami Arokianadar, "He Taught Me to Appreciate my Motherland," in Abhishiktananda (ed), *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam*, 107.
16. Dr Biot, quoted by E. Duperray, "A Sign of the Spirit," in Abhishiktananda (ed), *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam*, 99-100.
17. J.G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, 16.
18. Abhishiktananda, *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam*, 2.
19. J.G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, 56.
20. On this name see Friesen, 1, and L 40.
21. In J.G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, 73.
22. Bede Griffiths quoted in J.G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, 2.
23. BA 24.
24. BA 27.
25. BA 90.
26. Abhishiktananda quoted in du Boulay, 63.
27. See Abhishiktananda, *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam*, 18-19.
28. J.G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, 21-22.
29. J. Stuart in L 52.
30. For a clear-eyed and sensitive account of some of the difficulties in the inter-relations of Abhishiktananda, Monchanin, Mahieu, and Griffiths, see du Boulay, 153-155.
31. Quoted in S. Rohde, *Jules Monchanin*, 67.
32. The phrase "invisible ministry" is Bettina Bäumer's.
33. Quoted in J.G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, 3.

34. For some material on the Christian ashram movement see H. Ralston, *Christian Ashrams: A New Religious Movement in Contemporary India* (1987); Sister Vandana Mataji, *Gurus, Ashrams, and Christians* (1978), and "Spiritual Formation in Ashrams in Contemporary India" (1990); Sister Vandana Mataji (ed), *Christian Ashrams: A Movement with a Future?* (1993); Philipos Thomas, "Christian Ashrams and Evangelization of India," *Indian Church History Review*, 11, 1977.
35. Quoted in M. Rogers, *Abhishiktananda*, 2.
36. SA 9.
37. Quoted in S. Rohde, *Jules Monchanin*, 33.
38. F. Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 44, and *Spiritual Perspectives*, 122; the passage quoted here is a combination of two translations in these volumes.
39. Quoted in J.M.D. Stuart, "Sri Ramana Maharshi and Abhishiktananda," 170.
40. Quoted in Baumer-D, 316.
41. Quoted in Baumer-D, 315, 317.
42. L 24.12.55, 87.
43. GD 23.
44. J.E. Royster, "Abhishiktananda: Hindu-Christian Monk," 311.
45. GD 27.
46. L 14.3.56, 89.
47. See Friesen, 100.
48. See C.T. Indra et al, *Swami Gnanananda*, 2.
49. GD 15.
50. For an article by the swami on Gnanananda, see "Sadguru Sri Gnanananda," *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, Bulletin 64, May 2000; website. Includes detailed reference to Abhishiktananda.
51. See also Baumer-D, 314.
52. D 19.9.53, 73.
53. D 19.9.53, 73.
54. This translation from Panikkar, 438—a better translation than the one in D 180.
55. L 24.10.1960, 132.
56. D 12.4.1957, 204.
57. For a detailed account of Abhishiktananda's inner travail during this period, see du Boulay, chs. 9, 11.
58. 1970 letter quoted in Baumer-D, 314.
59. L 23.7.71, 331-2. (*Sadguru*: "real guru" or, sometimes, "root guru.")
60. B. Bäumer, "Swami Abhishiktananda," website (italics mine).
61. Abhishiktananda uses this image in reference to his former life. D 27.8.55, 118.
62. L 5.7.66, 182.
63. Quoted in S. Visvanathan, *An Ethnography of Mysticism*, 72.
64. Quoted in S. Visvanathan, *An Ethnography of Mysticism*, 73.
65. Stephens, 44.

66. M. Rogers, "Swamiji the Friend," 24.
67. GD 162.
68. Diary 30.6.64, quoted in J.M.D. Stuart, "Sri Ramana Maharshi and Abhishiktananda," 173.
69. F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, 16.
70. Baumer-D, 320.
71. SA 47.
72. F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, 144.
73. Letter to Odette Baumer-Despeigne, January 1969, quoted in Baumer-D, 310
74. F. Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, 185, n2.
75. F. Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man*, 8.
76. GD xi.
77. SAC 172.
78. SAC xiii (italics mine).
79. St Ambrose quoted in A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Letters*, 108.
80. FS 27.
81. Vattakuzhy, 210.
82. Panikkar, 446.
83. R. Panikkar, *Introduction to Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*, xxi.
84. R. Panikkar, *Introduction to Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*, xx.
85. See FS 50-52.
86. M. Rogers, *Abhishiktananda*, 15.
87. D 1.12.1970, 324.
88. SAC 59.
89. Quoted in Friesen, 154.
90. EG 152.
91. Vattakuzhy, 82.
92. Panikkar, 435-436.
93. L 11.12.69, 223.
94. Quoted in Vattakuzhy, 91-92.
95. Quoted in L 266n.
96. L 6.7.73, 303.
97. L 3.7.73, 302.
98. Quoted in Baumer-D, 327.
99. James Stuart in L 305.
100. Quoted in M. Rogers, *Abhishiktananda*, 34. (The fact that this kind of language is used indiscriminately about all manner of dubious "gurus" should not blind us to the fact that, in some cases—and this is one—such language is perfectly appropriate.)
101. L 10.9.73, 311.
102. Letter to Odette Baumer-Despeigne, October 1973, quoted in Baumer-D, 329.
103. L 28.8.73, 309.
104. L 9.10.73, 315.

105. L 22.10.73, 317.
106. B. Bäumer, "Abhishiktananda," website.
107. Quoted in L 264.
108. Quoted in L 287-289.
109. Panikkar quoted in J.E. Royster, "Abhishiktananda: Hindu-Christian Monk," 308.
110. G. Gispert-Sauch, "The Spirituality of Abhishiktananda" in Vandana (ed), *Swami Abhishiktananda*, 70.

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