

Swami Abhishiktananda, Pilgrim of the Absolute*

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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

On the Banks of the Ganga

It is early in the morning, late in June, 1973. We find ourselves on the bank of India's most holy river, Mother Ganga, a short distance from the Sivananda Ashram of Rishikesh. We notice three men in the river. One is evidently an Indian swami; there is a bearded and elderly European, also clothed in the garb of an Indian renunciate; the third man, another European, is very much younger. Having discarded all his clothing the young man is being plunged under the water as the other two recite strange chants. At the end of what is apparently a religious ceremony in which all three are quite rapt, the young man is enveloped in a fire-coloured cloth, given a bowl and, it seems, told to depart. Who are these people and what are they doing? The Indian is Swami Chidananda, successor to Swami Sivananda at

* [This article is largely made up of excerpts from *A Christian Pilgrim in India: The Spiritual Journey of Swami Abhishiktananda*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008. Many issues which are only touched on here are explored in more depth in the book.]

¹ From Abhishiktananda, 'Le Père Monchanin', quoted in A. Rawlinson, *Book of Enlightened Masters*, Chicago: Open Court, 1997, p.148. An almost identical passage can be found in Abhishiktananda, *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam*, Tannirpalli: Saccidananda Ashram, 1959, p.28.

² From 'Renewal and Discipline', quoted in T. Conner, 'Monk of Renewal', in *Thomas Merton, Monk*, ed. P. Hart, New York: Doubleday, 1976, p.183.

the nearby ashram which bears his name; the somewhat wild-looking and dishevelled older man—who seems to have fallen into an ecstatic state—is Swami Abhishiktananda, a French Benedictine monk who had arrived in India nearly a quarter of a century earlier; the young man is a French seminarian, Marc Chaduc. They are conducting a “trans-religious” Hindu/Christian initiation ceremony from which the young man will emerge as a *sannyāsī* (“renunciate”) and with the new name of “Swami Ajatananda.”

How did Henri Le Saux, raised in an atmosphere of fervent Catholic piety in a small provincial town in Brittany, come, on this June morning, to be chanting Sanskrit mantras and reciting the *mahavākyas* (“great sayings”) from the *Upanishads*? Following his arrival in 1949 in the land of the Vedic *rishis* Le Saux undertook an intrepid journey of spiritual exploration. His quest for ‘the secret of Arunachala,’³ initiated by his contacts with Ramana Maharshi and glimpsed during his sojourns in the caves of the Holy Mountain, attained its goal in the last years of his life when, in the deepest recesses of the ‘cave of the heart,’ he experienced fully that inner awakening to the mystery of the Self which the Upanishadic sages had extolled millennia before. In his last years he found, too, the resolution of the acute existential tensions arising out of the ‘dual presence’ in his heart of the Christian Gospel and the *Upanishads*.

Abhishiktananda confronted many of the challenges which face the spiritual wayfarer in our own crepuscular era, in particular the problem of religious pluralism and the inter-relations of the world’s integral traditions. Abhishiktananda was immediately concerned with the encounter of Christianity and Hinduism, but his experiences and his ever-deepening reflections on this subject illuminate a range of more far-reaching issues. His life also illuminates the universal and timeless significance of the monastic vocation. In an age when we are surrounded by the clamour of false prophets on all sides spiritual wayfarers can find inspiration (in-the-spiritness) in the example of this obscure, humble and immensely courageous French monk. He is one of the spiritual luminaries of our time. This article provides an introductory overview of Abhishiktananda’s life and work.

³ The use of single quotations throughout indicates Abhishiktananda words.

Early Life and 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.⁴ He was 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. 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 monk. 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.⁵

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

⁴ On his ordination as a priest in 1935 he also took on the name “Briac” in honour of his hometown.

⁵ Letter, 4.12.28 in James Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life told through His Letters* [hereafter *Letters*], Delhi, ISPCK, 2000, pp.2-3.

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 that 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 Unnameable.⁶

Among his other favourite authors were Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria and Gregory Palamas.⁷ By 1942, when Le Saux came to write *Amour et Sagesse*, a manuscript for his mother, he was already familiar with some of the Hindu literature and closed each chapter of this work with the sacred syllable OM.

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 Father 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.⁸ His dream of a monastic life in India was not to come to fruition for fifteen years, and only after he had worked his way past many obstacles. In 1947 he wrote to Msgr. James Mendonça, the Bishop of Tiruchirapalli (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

⁶ P. Coff, ‘Abhishiktananda: An Interview with Odette Baumer-Despeigne’, *Bulletin of Interreligious Dialogue*, p.48, October 1993. For another translation of this passage and some commentary by Abhishiktananda, see *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam*, pp.98-99.

⁷ *Letters*, p.7.

⁸ 13.2.67, *Letters*, p.12.

a man of considerable vision.⁹ 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...¹⁰

Passage to India

On July 26, 1948, Abhishiktananda left his homeland, never to return. He was to join Father Monchanin in setting up a Christian Ashram at Kulittalai on the Kavery River, there to achieve his 'most ardent desire'. Father 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.'¹¹

On arrival in India, via Colombo, Le Saux was captivated by India—by its colour and vitality, its history, its people, its temples and ashrams, but

⁹ 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 Shirley du Boulay, *The Cave of the Heart: the Life of Swami Abhishiktananda*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005, p.64.

¹⁰ 7.8.47' *Letters*, pp.14-15

¹¹ From a pamphlet on Saccidananda Ashram and from an article in *Clergy Monthly*, August 1971, both quoted in R. Stephens, *Religious Experience as a Meeting-Point in Dialogue: An Evaluation of the Venture of Swami Abhishiktananda*, MA thesis, Sydney University, 1984, p.115.

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 setting foot on Indian soil. He travelled 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”).¹²

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, 21st 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.¹³

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’.¹⁴ This was not an exercise in syncretic fabrication 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

¹² On this name see J. G. Friesen, *Abhishiktananda’s Non-Monistic Advaitic Experience*, PhD thesis, University of South Africa, 2001, p.1 and *Letters*, p.40.

¹³ In J.G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute: the Life and Work of Jules Monchanin*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1977, p.73.

¹⁴ Bede Griffiths quoted in J.G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, p.2.

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.’¹⁵ The bridge between Indian spirituality and the Church was to be monasticism, ‘the plane whereon they may feel themselves in consonance with each other’.¹⁶ The two monks 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’.¹⁷

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’.¹⁸ The skimpy bamboo and thatch shelters, 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.¹⁹

Monchanin had alluded earlier to the case of Dom Joliet, a French naval officer in China who became 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?’²⁰ 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. 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

¹⁵ Abhishiktananda & Jules Monchanin, *A Benedictine Ashram*, Douglas: Times Press, 1964, p.24.

¹⁶ *A Benedictine Ashram*, p.27.

¹⁷ *A Benedictine Ashram*, p.90.

¹⁸ Abhishiktananda quoted in du Boulay, *The Cave of the Heart*, p.63.

¹⁹ See Abhishiktananda, *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam*, pp.18-19.

²⁰ J. G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, pp.21-22.

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.'²¹

A decade after Monchanin's death Father 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 vision 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.²²

There are today something like fifty Christian ashrams in India, owing much to the pioneering efforts of Fathers Monchanin, Le Saux and Griffiths, as well as those of the redoubtable Brahmabandhav Upadhyay (1861-1907), a Bengali Brahmin, pupil of Ramakrishna, friend of Vivekananda and Tagore, and convert to Christianity.²³ Many of these ashrams are peopled entirely by indigenous Christians who seek to live out a distinctively Indian form of Christianity.

The Secret of Arunachala

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 *līnga*-mountain of Lord Shiva, and to visit Bhagavān Sri Ramana Maharshi, one of the most remarkable saints and sages of modern

²¹ Quoted in S. Rohde, *Jules Monchanin: Pioneer in Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1993, p.67.

²² Quoted in J. G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute*, p.3.

²³ Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya's original name was Bhavani Charan Banerji. After entering the Christian fold he boldly proclaimed that he would be 'the first Indian to sing the praises of the same triune *Saccidānanda* in the sacred tongues of the rishis.' In 1894 he became a *bhikhu* (wandering beggar), wearing the *kavi* dress of the *sannyāsī*, but pitching up for worship in Catholic Churches. In 1900, in Hyderabad, Upadhyay established the journal *Sophia* in which he developed his ideas about 'Christian Vedanta,' 'Christian *sannyāsa*,' *advaita*, the Trinity, monasticism and an Indian theology—precisely the themes which were to preoccupy Abhishiktananda throughout his years in India. On this remarkable person see E. Vattakuzhy, *Indian Christian Samnyasa and Swami Abhishiktananda*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1981, pp.68-73.

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...²⁴

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 50's 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 the Benedictine 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...²⁵

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.'²⁶ Abhishiktananda came to regard Ramana as 'the most manifest embodiment

²⁴ Quoted in M. Rogers & D. Barton, *Abhishiktananda: A Memoir of Dom Henri Le Saux*, Oxford: SLG Press, Convent of the Incarnation, 2003, p.2.

²⁵ Abhishiktananda, *The Secret of Arunachala*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1997, p.9.

²⁶ Quoted in S. Rohde, *Jules Monchanin*, p.33.

in our time of that experience which has been handed down in India from the days of the rishis'.²⁷ We can juxtapose 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.²⁸

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,'²⁹ understanding 'what

²⁷ Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*, Delhi: ISPCCK, 1984, pp.19-20.

²⁸ F. Schuon, *Language of the Self*, Madras: Ganesh, 1959, p.44, and *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London: Perennial Books, 1967, p.122. (The passage quoted here is a combination of two translations in these volumes.)

²⁹ Quoted in J. M. D. Stuart, 'Sri Ramana Maharshi and Abhishiktananda', *Vidjayjoti*, April 1980, p.170.

is beyond silence: *śūnyatā* (voidness).’ ‘Ramana’s *Advaita* is my birthplace. Against that all rationalization is shattered.’³⁰

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 fibres of my heart’.³¹

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...³²

The “old Hindu *sannyāsī*” in question was Swami Sri Gnanananda, or to give him the full treatment, Paramahansa Parivrajaacharya Varya Sri Gnanananda Giri Swami, disciple of Paramahansa Parivrajaāchārya 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

³⁰ Quoted in O. Baumer-Despeigne, ‘The Spiritual Journey of Henri Le Saux-Abhishiktananda’, *Cistercian Studies*, 18, 1983, p.316.

³¹ Quoted in Baumer-D, ‘The Spiritual Journey’, pp.315 & 317.

³² 24.12.55, *Letters*, p.87.

Shiva and the vermillion mark in the centre. But from this deeply peaceful face shone eyes filled with immense tenderness.³³

Interestingly, Abhishiktananda remarks that upon meeting Gnanananda he *automatically* yielded his allegiance to him, something which he had never previously done.³⁴ Here is his third-person account (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...³⁵

Abhishiktananda had spontaneously become a disciple of Gnanananda. In February and March of the following year, at the swami’s invitation, 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’ (vividly recounted in *Guru and Disciple*, one of Abhishiktananda’s most arresting books).³⁶

On the role of the guru, Abhishiktananda wrote this:

The guru is one who has himself first attained the Real and who knows from personal experience the way that leads there; he is capable of initiating the disciple and of making well up from within the heart of the disciple, the immediate ineffable experience which is his own—the utterly transparent knowledge, so limpid and pure, that quite simply “he is.”³⁷

³³ Abhishiktananda, *Guru and Disciple*, London: SPCK, 1974, p.23.

³⁴ J. E. Royster, ‘Abhishiktananda: Hindu-Christian Monk’, *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, 9:3, November 1988, p.311.

³⁵ Abhishiktananda, *Guru and Disciple*, p.27.

³⁶ *Letters*, 14.3.56, p.89.

³⁷ Abhishiktananda, *Guru and Disciple*, p.29.

This was the function which Gnanananda fulfilled. Abhishiktananda stresses that it was not a question of learning “new ideas” from Gnanananda; insofar as the guru was intellectually important it was in the way in which he enabled Abhishiktananda to understand old ideas anew for ‘what the guru says springs from the very heart of the disciple’. Indeed,

What does it matter what words the guru uses? Their whole power lies in the hearer’s inner response... When all is said and done, the true guru is he who, without the help of words, can enable the attentive soul to hear the ‘Thou art that,’ *Tat-tvam-asi* of the Vedic rishis; and this true guru will appear in some outward form or other at the very moment when help is needed to leap over the final barrier.³⁸

And so it was with Gnanananda and Abhishiktananda, though perhaps the final barrier was not altogether cleared until Abhishiktananda’s last days.

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 ignited 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?³⁹

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

³⁸ Abhishiktananda, *Guru and Disciple*, pp.29-30.

³⁹ Abhishiktananda, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart: The Spiritual Diary (1948-1973) of Swami Abhishiktananda*, ed. R. Panikkar, Delhi: ISPCK, 1998, 19.9.53, p.73.

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.⁴⁰

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. 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.’⁴¹ 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.⁴²

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).⁴³ 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 Kumbakonam.⁴⁴

With heroic audacity, Abhishiktananda chose to live out his life on a dangerous religious frontier, neither forsaking the light of Christ 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,

⁴⁰ Abhishiktananda, *The Spiritual Diary*, 19.9.53, p.73.

⁴¹ This translation from R. Panikkar, ‘Letter to Abhishiktananda’, *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, 3:3, 1982, p.438—a better translation than the one in *The Spiritual Diary*, p.180.

⁴² 24.10.1960, *Letters*, p.132.

⁴³ Abhishiktananda, *The Spiritual Diary*: 12.4.1957, p.204.

⁴⁴ For a detailed account of Abhishiktananda’s inner travail during this period see du Boulay, *The Cave of the Heart*, Chs 9 & 11.

these two forms of a unique faith until the dawn appears.⁴⁵ 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*.⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷

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

⁴⁵ 1970 letter quoted in O. Baumer-Despeigne, ‘The Spiritual Journey’, p.314.

⁴⁶ *Letters*, 23.7.71, pp.331-2. (*Sadguru*: “real guru” or, sometimes, “root guru.”)

⁴⁷ B. Bäumer, ‘Swami Abhishiktananda/Henri Le Saux OSB, Pilgrim and Hermit: A Bridge between Hinduism and Christianity’ (www.monasticdialog.com/bulletins/72/baumer.htm).

impossibility of being at one's ease anywhere except with those few people who have an intuition of this "transcendent" level—like travelling faster than sound, or escaping from earth's gravity, to use physical metaphors.⁴⁸

The Way of Sannyasa

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.⁴⁹ 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'.⁵⁰ 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'.⁵¹ 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 in the Himalaya, when he withdrew from the world as far as he was able, he journeyed thousands of miles all over India, always travelling 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'.⁵² (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 Father Bede Griffiths. After this hand-over he never returned. 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. 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

⁴⁸ *Letters*, 5.7.66, p.182.

⁴⁹ Abhishiktananda uses this image in reference to his former life (*The Spiritual Diary*, 27.8.55, p.118).

⁵⁰ *Letters*, 5.7.66, p.182).

⁵¹ Quoted in S. Visvanathan, *An Ethnography of Mysticism: The Narratives of Abhishiktananda*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1998, p.72.

⁵² Quoted in S. Visvanathan, *An Ethnography of Mysticism*, p.73.

⁵² R. Stephens, *Religious Experience as a Meeting-Point in Dialogue*, p.44.

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.⁵³

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.’⁵⁴ 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.”⁵⁵

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’.⁵⁶ Religious forms and structures (doctrines, rituals, laws, etc.) were *signposts* to the Absolute but should

⁵³ Abhishiktananda, *Guru and Disciple*, p.162.

⁵⁴ *The Spiritual Diary*, 30.6.64, quoted in J. M. D. Stuart, ‘Sri Ramana Maharshi and Abhishiktananda’, p.173.

⁵⁵ F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, London: John Murray/Perennial Reprint, 1961, p.16.

⁵⁶ O. Baumer-Despeigne, ‘The Spiritual Journey’, p.320.

never be invested with any absolute value themselves.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸

In Abhishiktananda's writings we can trace a move *away* from all notions of Christian exclusivism and triumphalism, *through* the theology of fulfilment, *towards* the *sophia perennis*, which informs all integral traditions but is bound by none.

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.⁵⁹

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*.⁶⁰

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

⁵⁷ Abhishiktananda, *The Secret of Arunachala*, p.47.

⁵⁸ F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975, p.144.

⁵⁹ Abhishiktananda, *Guru and Disciple*, p.xi.

⁶⁰ Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, p.172.

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 Centre of all has been reached.*⁶¹

Likewise,

Real dialogue will be a purification of each one's own faith, not indeed in its essence which is pure gold but of the alloy with which it is always mixed. It will be a discovery of unity in diversity and diversity in unity.⁶²

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.⁶³ 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.'⁶⁴ 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 *dharma*s and disregards all frontiers... it is anterior to every religious formulation.'⁶⁵

⁶¹ Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, p.xiii (italics mine).

⁶² Abhishiktananda, 'The Depth Dimension of Religious Dialogue', *Vidjayajoti*, 45:5, 1981, p.211.

⁶³ For some discussion of the ways in which Monchanin and Abhishiktananda sought to reconcile Christianity and Advaita Vedanta see my article, 'Jules Monchanin, Henri Le Saux/Abhishiktananda and the Hindu-Christian Encounter', *Australian Religion Studies Review*, 17:2. Monchanin, Abhishiktananda and Father Bede Griffiths are also discussed, in the context of Christian missionizing and the Christian ashram movement, in Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004, Chapter 10.

⁶⁴ St Ambrose quoted in A. K. Coomaraswamy, *The Selected Letters of Ananda Coomaraswamy*, ed. R. P. Coomaraswamy & Alvin Moore Jr, New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre, 1988, p.108.

⁶⁵ Abhishiktananda, *The Further Shore*, Delhi: ISPCCK, 1975, p.27.

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.⁶⁶ 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), perhaps 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.

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.⁶⁷

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.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ E. Vattakuzhy, *Indian Christian Sannyasa*, p.82.

⁶⁷ *Letters*, 11.12.69, p.223.

⁶⁸ Quoted in E. Vattakuzhy, *Indian Christian Sannyasa*, pp.91-92.

John Alter, the son of some friends at the Rajpur Retreat and Study Centre, 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.⁶⁹

Knocking on Heaven’s Door

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. Abhishiktananda also spent a good deal of time at the Sivananda Ashram in his last years and became a close friend of its *ācārya*, Swami Chidananda, another who had actualized within himself the light of the *Upanishads*.

Abhishiktananda’s early advaitic experience at Arunachala and Tapovanam was deepened 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

⁶⁹ Quoted in *Letters*, p.266n.

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...⁷⁰

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.⁷¹

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.

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. 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.

In the fortnight following he spent three days with Ajatananda in complete isolation, without food, at a Saivite temple at Ranagal, close to

⁷⁰ Quoted in J. G. Friesen, *Abhishiktananda's Non-Monistic Advaitic Experience*, p.154.

⁷¹ Abhishiktananda, 'Experience of God in Eastern Religions', *Cistercian Studies*, 9:2-3, 1974, p.152.

Rishikesh. James Stuart describes this experience as one of ‘holy inebriation’, ‘like that of the *keṣī* (hairy ones) of the *Rig-Veda*’.⁷² 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.⁷³

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 Sivanananda 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.⁷⁴

He wrote in one of his last letters, ‘the quest is fulfilled’.⁷⁵ No doubt, in his last days, Abhishiktananda more than once recalled the Upanishadic verse he had quoted so often in his writings:

I know him, that great *Puruṣa*
Of the colour of the sun,
Beyond all darkness.
He who has known him
Goes beyond death.
There is no other way.

(*Śvetāśvatara Upanishad*, III.8.)

⁷² James Stuart in *Letters*, p.305.

⁷³ Quoted in M. Rogers & D. Barton, *Abhishiktananda*, p.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.)

⁷⁴ *Letters*, 10.9.73, 311.

⁷⁵ Letter to Odette Baumer-Despeigne, October 1973, quoted in O. Baumer-Despeigne, ‘The Spiritual Journey’, p.329.

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”’.⁷⁶ In a letter to Ajatananda on October 9th he feels the time is near to abandon this ‘old garment’⁷⁷ and writes to his beloved sister Marie-Therese 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’.⁷⁸ 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.

Abhishiktananda, Metaphysics and the Perennial Philosophy

Was Abhishiktananda a metaphysician, a *jñānī* who had mastered metaphysical doctrines? Had principal and universal truths “incarnated” in his mind?⁷⁹ If by this term we mean someone like a Guénon or a Schuon, one who has a clear understanding of trans-religious metaphysical principles whereby both the outer diversity and inner unity of religious traditions can be authoritatively explained, and the various antinomies unequivocally resolved, then we cannot answer the question affirmatively without significant qualifications. Although Abhishiktananda had many of the appropriate credentials, he did not move primarily in the realm of doctrinal intellectuality. This was a matter of spiritual temperament. Throughout his life, he was in the grip of immediate and overwhelming spiritual experiences, and his principal task was the resolution *in his own person* of the apparent tensions and contradictions between Trinitarian Christianity and *Advaita* Vedanta. In the course of his struggle to solve this experiential problem Abhishiktananda developed many piercing and profound metaphysical insights—how could it be otherwise for a devotee of the *Upanishads*, one who had himself plunged into the void of *advaita* and

⁷⁶ *Letters*, 28.8.73, p.309.

⁷⁷ *Letters*, 9.10.73, p.315.

⁷⁸ *Letters*, 22.10.73, p.317.

⁷⁹ See F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives*, p.11.

thereby developed *viveka*, the power of discriminating between the Real and the illusory? But to be a mystic is not necessarily to be a metaphysician, as history repeatedly demonstrates. Metaphysics requires not only a contemplative and jnamic disposition but a kind of detached and synthetic intelligence which Abhishiktananda, for all his formidable gifts, did not possess. Abhishiktananda's spiritual genius manifested itself in his *being* rather than in the objectivization of metaphysical doctrine. Put it another way: Abhishiktananda's medium was not doctrinal intellectuality but ontological realisation (though of course the two often inter-penetrate). In some respects it might be said that Abhishiktananda was essentially a *bhakta* rather than a *jñānī*: *bhakti* 'is a priori not "intellectual"; *bhakti* plumbs mysteries through "being", not through "intelligence".'⁸⁰ Nor, in the fullest sense, was Abhishiktananda a traditionalist: traditionalism is above all a metaphysical *theoria*; its leading exponents must therefore be metaphysicians. Abhishiktananda could not strictly be described as a traditionalist or perennialist if by such a term we mean one who self-consciously subscribes to the kind of exposition of the *sophia perennis* given by a Guénon, a Schuon or a Titus Burckhardt. Nonetheless, he shared a great deal of common ground with the traditionalists.

Abhishiktananda came to an ever-deeper understanding of the outer diversity and inner unity of religions. He did not always couch this understanding in quite the vocabulary used by perennialists. But many of his insights are fundamentally the same. Much of his discussion of religion as *nāma-rūpa* ("formulations-structures") demonstrates his understanding of *both the relativity and the inviolability* of religious forms, even if he did not always accent the latter as heavily as do the traditionalists. Likewise, his writings about *advaita* signal a kind of esoteric insight, even though this was not a term he often used himself—indeed, when he did so it was often in a disparaging sense, referring to what might more properly be called "occultism," "spiritualism" or "psychism," according to the case at hand.⁸¹ But there is no gainsaying the fact that Abhishiktananda *did* arrive at an understanding of "the transcendental unity of religions" which traditionalists would call "esoteric" because it is an understanding hidden from the vast majority whose disposition and sensibility are more attuned to the outward and exoteric forms of religion than to the 'inner mystery.' Let us state the

⁸⁰ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives*, p.114.

⁸¹ See *Letters*, 4.5.64. p.161. The same letter contains his disparaging allusion to Guénon.

matter slightly differently: only those of a contemplative spiritual temperament are able fully to enter the *guha*, the cave of the heart. It is also perhaps worth recalling that the very name of the *Upanishads*, the Scriptures in which Abhishiktananda immersed himself, implies an “esoteric” wisdom—‘that which is heard when sitting up close’ (to the guru and to the Scriptures themselves).⁸² Perhaps Abhishiktananda took a somewhat sanguine view when he insisted that *anyone* could enter the *guha*; this is true in principle, to be sure, but not in fact. To understand this is not to be guilty of some sort of “elitism” or spiritual snobbery (an oxymoron in any case!), but simply to recognize palpable realities. By the same token, it bears repeating that a merely theoretical understanding of metaphysics, unaccompanied by the existential “leap into the void” and by a transformative alchemy in the soul, counts for nothing in itself—a principle on which Abhishiktananda had a very firm purchase. It explains much of his impatience with the apparently endless speculations of theologians and philosophers!

A complete and firmly anchored understanding of metaphysical principles would have made Abhishiktananda quite immune to the follies of modernistic thought (whether Eastern or Western). He was unerring in his instinctive certainty that the surest guides on the spiritual path were to be found in the ancient Scriptures, in the saints and sages of yore, and in those living masters who embodied the age-old message of the rishis, quite unaffected by the grotesqueries of profane modernistic thought. However, Abhishiktananda was not altogether invulnerable to the seductive but confused theories and speculations of such figures as Aurobindo (himself prey to all manner of Western influences), Jung and Teilhard de Chardin. Occasionally such thinkers seduced him into foolish and ill-considered formulations. Take this, for instance: ‘Teilhard’s viewpoint—absolutely Pauline—is the only way to save Christianity.’⁸³ However, from another point of view it is astonishing that Abhishiktananda was able to maintain his footing in the world of Tradition as well as he did, generally turning his back on modern theorizing in such fields as philosophy, theology and comparative religion. All to his credit! Nonetheless, a fully-fledged metaphysician of the order of a Guénon would have had no interest in such works, save in their symptomatic aspects. Nor for a moment would such a

⁸² See *The Further Shore*, 76.

⁸³ *The Spiritual Diary*, 19.10.65, p.283.

one have entertained any kind of evolutionist schema, as Abhishiktananda sometimes applied to the development of religion itself—a field in which evolutionism becomes not merely wrong in its claims but particularly sinister in its effects. No doubt there is a certain contradiction, or at least confusion in Abhishiktananda's belief that the ancient Vedic rishis had unlocked the deepest secrets of the Self and his intermittent adherence to an evolutionistic model of religion. It is true that no religious man of any depth can swallow evolutionism unqualified, in either its biological or sociological-historicist guise. But to even flirt with evolutionist ideas (as Abhishiktananda does, for instance, in Chapters 5 and 6 of *Saccidananda*) is to betray some confusion about those immutable principles which are flagrantly violated by a pseudo-science which announces that 'the flesh became Word'—for this, in a nutshell, is what the biological hypothesis amounts to.

How, then, are we to situate Abhishiktananda with respect to the traditionalist school? In many ways Abhishiktananda's metaphysical intelligence, with all of the qualifications above notwithstanding, was of a rare and precious kind. His thinking was forged in the fiery crucible of his own inter-religious experience and this gives his writings an urgency and existential edge unmatched by the vast majority of contemporary writers on religious and spiritual subjects. If he sometimes falls short in his understanding of both metaphysical principles and religious forms this is hardly surprising. Let us also not forget the truth of these words, from another Frenchman, 'To know is not to prove, not to explain. It is to accede to vision. But if we are to have vision, we must learn to participate in the object of vision. The apprenticeship is hard.'⁸⁴

In his reflections on René Guénon, Schuon refers to the intrinsically pneumatic or jnamic type in these terms:

The pneumatic is in a way the "incarnation" of a spiritual archetype, which means that he is born with a state of knowledge which, for others, would be precisely the end and the not the point of departure; the pneumatic does not "progress" to something "other than himself," he remains in place so as to become fully himself—namely his archetype—by progressively eliminating veils or husks,

⁸⁴ A. Saint-Exupery, *Flight to Arras*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961, 37.

impediments contracted from the ambience and possibly also from heredity.⁸⁵

There can be no doubt that both Guénon and Schuon himself were pneumatics in this sense. In other cases, such as that of Ananda Coomaraswamy, one sees in the early work a more or less latent understanding which is suddenly catalyzed by contact with the appropriate stimulus—in his case, the work of Guénon. This is not the sense we get in Abhishiktananda's work. True, there is a decisive moment, or series of moments, when the moulds in which Abhishiktananda's thought had been cast were shattered beyond any hope of repair—the encounters with Ramana, Arunachala and Gnanananda. To be sure, Abhishiktananda had been hit by lightning and was not thereafter the same man. Nor was there any possibility of ignoring the illuminations in the cave, the cave of Arunachala being but the symbolic locus of the *guha*. Abhishiktananda was too courageous to countenance the idea of turning back. However, in his case, the transformation from a French priest provincial in both upbringing and outlook to a 'knower of *Brahman*', embodying in his own self the timeless wisdom of the *Upanishads*, was to take up the rest of his life. Nevertheless, his ability to penetrate the religious forms of both West and East, and the progressive elimination of 'husks' and 'impediments' in order to 'become fully himself' does suggest something of the pneumatic. Furthermore, as Barry McDonald has recently suggested, Abhishiktananda's 'one-pointed dedication to his quest for the Real points to an extraordinary spiritual station, an experiential immersion in which it is difficult to distinguish between thought and being'.⁸⁶

To return to the question in front of us, Abhishiktananda's "relation" to perennialism. My own view, with regard to what is most valuable and vital in Abhishiktananda's thought, is that more often than not it at least loosely conforms with traditionalist thought. Here is a tiny sample of characteristic formulations which might just as easily have come from the pen of the most thoroughly traditionalist authors:

⁸⁵ F. Schuon, *René Guénon: Some Observations*, Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004, p.6.

⁸⁶ Personal correspondence with the author. October 2005.

... diversity does not mean disunity, once the Centre of all has been reached.⁸⁷

Truth cannot be given because it does not belong to anyone... truth is not the object of possession—rather, one can only be possessed by the truth...⁸⁸

Every *dharma* is for its followers the supreme vehicle of the claims of the Absolute.⁸⁹

The mystery to which [religion] points overflows its limits in every direction.⁹⁰

... what's important... is to be sufficiently “deep” in order to transcend the letter, which does not mean to “reject” it.⁹¹

[Religious] pluralism is a gift of God...⁹²

Real dialogue will be ... a discovery of unity in diversity and diversity in unity.⁹³

He is one of those who, in many respects, is a traditionalist without knowing it, if one might put it that way; he arrived at more or the less same position by a process of trial and error, as it were. It is impossible to believe that he would not have found in the work of Schuon a resounding confirmation of his own deepest intuitions. Recourse to the traditionalist authors might well have saved him much anguish by showing him the way towards a reconciliation of the different spiritual economies which were at work in his soul, sometimes in an agonizing tension. As it was—and perhaps this was part of his special vocation and his singular achievement—he had to find his way through the labyrinth alone, although he was no doubt guided by the grace which accompanies any sincere pilgrim and which came to Abhishiktananda not only through his *sadguru*, Jesus Christ, His sacraments and His Church, but through Ramana, Arunachala and Gnanananda, as well as through the inseparable companion in whom he put his trust throughout

⁸⁷ *Saccidananda*, p.xiii.

⁸⁸ *The Further Shore*, p.62.

⁸⁹ *The Further Shore*, p.25.

⁹⁰ *The Further Shore*, p.26.

⁹¹ Abhishiktananda, *The Eyes of Light*, Denville: Dimension, 1983, p.146.

⁹² ‘The Depth Dimension of Religious Dialogue’, p.206.

⁹³ ‘The Depth Dimension of Religious Dialogue’, p.211.

his Indian sojourn, the *Upanishads*. As he wrote in his journal, ‘The inner mystery calls me with excruciating force, and no outside being can help me to penetrate it and there, *for myself*, discover the secret of my origin and destiny.’⁹⁴

Abhishiktananda’s Legacy

Abhishiktananda’s life and his writings have touched many people, both in the West and on the subcontinent. We could trace his influence in many fields—the indigenization of the Indian Church, monastic renewal and the revivification of contemplative spirituality, the spread of the Christian Ashram movement, inter-religious dialogue, the fertilization of Christian theology by Eastern influences, the study of comparative religion, and so on. It can hardly be doubted that, in the words of Raimon Panikkar, Abhishiktananda was ‘one of the most authentic witnesses of our times of the encounter in depth between Christian and Eastern spiritualities.’⁹⁵ His ultimate significance, however, rests not on what he *did*, his outer activities in the world, but on who he *was* and, we might say, still is. Abhishiktananda might well have said, as Gandhi did, ‘My life is my message’.

If we share Frithjof Schuon’s view that ‘the only decisive criterion of human worth is man’s attitude to the Absolute’,⁹⁶ then Abhishiktananda’s life was exemplary. From his youth until his passing he consecrated his life to God—in the full plenitude of that word. His earthly journey was an unfaltering pilgrimage, a return to God Whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere.⁹⁷ It was a quest which Abhishiktananda undertook with unyielding courage, fortitude and tenacity, leaving behind all that was not conducive to the search for God. As he himself wrote, ‘Spiritual experience... is the meeting-place of the known and the not-known, the seen and not-seen, the relative and the absolute...’.⁹⁸ This was no place for the faint-hearted! His spiritual heroism consisted in overcoming his very human fears to make the “leap into the void”; it was his faith which gave him courage, that ‘attachment with the very depths of our being to the

⁹⁴ *The Spiritual Diary*, 194.56, quoted in Panikkar, 435.

⁹⁵ R. Panikkar quoted in J. E. Royster, ‘Abhishiktananda: Hindu-Christian Monk’, p.308.

⁹⁶ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives*, p.22.

⁹⁷ The phrase is attributed to Hermes Trismegistus (*Book of Propositions or Rules of Theology*, said to be by the Philosopher Termegistus, prop.2).

⁹⁸ Abhishiktananda, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*, p.112.

Truth that transcends us',⁹⁹ and the selfsame faith which motivated his austerities, his renunciation, his allegiance to *sannyāsa*. As Schuon reminds us, 'Sincere and integral faith always implies renunciation, poverty and privation, since the world—or the ego—is not God.'¹⁰⁰ By the same token, 'there is no spirituality devoid of ascetic elements'.¹⁰¹

During one of his silent sojourns on Arunachala, Abhishiktananda was importuned by some pesky boys with questions about his identity. Rather than breaking his silence, he wrote down the following words: 'Like you, I come from God; like you, it is to him that I am going; apart from that, nothing else matters.'¹⁰² He found God—or the Self—in the innermost chamber of the lotus in the cave of the heart. But he saw God everywhere: in his *sadguru*, Jesus Christ, in the "call of India," in his fellows, in the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Although his life evinces some of the penitential and sacrificial character of the faith in which he was reared, Abhishiktananda's life was full of joy and a delight in all of God's creation. Little wonder that he felt such an affinity with the Saint of Assisi.

In an essay on Gandhi, George Orwell observed that all of the Mahatma's sins and misdeeds, like his worldly goods, added up to a very meagre collection.¹⁰³ The same might be said of Abhishiktananda. His human faults were of a very minor order, perhaps most evident in his sometimes troubled relations with his fellow-monks at Shantivanam—occasional irascibility and impatience, now and then a failure to understand a point-of-view different from his own, a tendency to sometimes make harsh judgements. But these are of very little account next to his generosity and compassion, his openness, warm-heartedness, and good humour, as well as those other character traits to which we have already drawn attention.

As a bridge-builder between the spiritual traditions of West and East the most obvious comparisons are with his fellow monks, Bede Griffiths and Thomas Merton, whilst we may also remember figures such as William Johnston, Klaus Klostermaier and Richard Wilhelm, and the great German theologian and comparative religionist, Rudolf Otto, with whom he shared an understanding of the 'astonishing conformity in the deepest impulses of

⁹⁹ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p.128.

¹⁰⁰ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives*, p.129.

¹⁰¹ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives*, p.131.

¹⁰² Abhishiktananda, *The Secret of Arunachala*, p.35.

¹⁰³ G. Orwell, 'Reflections on Gandhi', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Vol 4: In Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, p.525.

human spiritual experience', independent of 'race, clime and age'.¹⁰⁴ These were all Europeans with a deep *existential engagement* with Eastern spirituality in its various forms. I am inclined to share James Royster's judgment that 'It is, in fact, doubtful if any Christian monk in the second half of the twentieth century has taken more seriously than Abhishiktananda the deep call to discover and explore experientially the ultimate ground that unites monks of different traditions.'¹⁰⁵

In *A Benedictine Ashram* Father Monchanin and Abhishiktananda anticipated the day when Shantivanam might open her doors to the '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...¹⁰⁶

Do we not, in fact, have here a snapshot of Abhishiktananda himself? That he was a man imbued with the deepest "spirit of prayer" is attested by his whole life. His "heroic patience" is evident in his fidelity to the call of India, to his vocation as a monk, to his membership in the Mystical Body of Christ's Church, and in the attentive equanimity with which he awaited the messages of the Spirit. He had an "iron will," not in the service of his own ego but in the pursuit of "the one thing necessary" and in his loyalty to Truth. Few men have made a more "total surrender" than this monk who put his hand to the plough and did not look back. As a young man of eighteen, considering his monastic vocation, he had written,

...I feel myself driven by something which does not allow me to draw back or turn aside, and compels me, almost in spite of myself, to throw myself into the unknown which I see opening before me.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ R. Otto, *Mysticism East and West*, New York: Meridian, 1957, p.v.

¹⁰⁵ J. Royster, 'A Dialogue in Depth: A Monastic Perspective', *Quarterly Review*, 9:2, Summer 1989, p.78.

¹⁰⁶ Abhishiktananda & J. Monchanin, *A Benedictine Ashram*, p.90.

¹⁰⁷ *Letters*, 3.6.29, p.4.

Throughout his life he had the courage to defy convention and to surrender to the unknown. Like all mortals he made mistakes but, assuredly, in the things that matter most, he showed “right judgment.” He not only longed for but attained “the heights of contemplation.” He never ceased his prayerful study of the Christian Scriptures, and of the works of the great saints and doctors of the Church of whom he had the most “intimate knowledge” while his understanding of the Indian tradition came through Ramana, Gnanananda and Arunachala, and through his immersion in the tradition’s loftiest and most venerable Scriptures, the *Upanishads*. How much he loved the *Chāndogya* and the *Bṛhadāranyaka*, and what delight he took in sharing their secrets!

Although it was the Sage of Arunachala who exerted such a powerful influence over Abhishiktananda’s life, in some ways it was that other great Indian saint of modern times, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who might have served as a spiritual exemplar. Strangely enough, Abhishiktananda seems to have known little of Ramakrishna himself. The only references we find in his books, journals and letters concern some of the more disturbing aspects of the Ramakrishna Mission, founded by the redoubtable Vivekananda against the express wishes of the Master himself. Ramakrishna might have provided an inspiration for Abhishiktananda in at least two respects. Firstly, it was Ramakrishna’s “ontological plasticity” which allowed him to penetrate foreign religious forms in a more or less unprecedented fashion. As Schuon remarks,

In Ramakrishna there is something which seems to defy every category: he was like the living symbol of the inner unity of religions; he was, in fact, the first saint to wish to penetrate foreign spiritual forms, and in this consisted his exceptional and in a sense universal mission... In our times of confusion, disarray and doubt he was the saint called to “verify” forms and “reveal,” if one can so express it, their single truth.¹⁰⁸

No one with any sense of proportion would elevate Abhishiktananda to the quasi-prophetic status of Ramakrishna. But is there not in Abhishiktananda’s life an echo of the Paramahansa’s mission to “penetrate foreign spiritual forms” and to “reveal” the “single truth” enshrined in the two traditions to which he became heir? Ramakrishna was a Hindu *bhakti*

¹⁰⁸ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives*, p.115.

who penetrated and “internalized” the spiritual forms of both Christianity and Islam; Abhishiktananda was a Christian monk who plunged into the boundless experience of *advaita* as extolled in the Vedanta. Secondly, there is some affinity between the bhaktic character of these two spiritual personalities, Ramakrishna and Abhishiktananda, one which is expressed ontologically, in realisation—in their being—rather than intellectually, in the unerring understanding and exposition of doctrinal orthodoxy in both its extrinsic and intrinsic senses.¹⁰⁹

Abhishiktananda lived a life of contemplative spirituality, disciplined by his monastic vocation—a life dedicated to prayer, solitude and silence. Whilst it is true that Abhishiktananda often found himself embroiled in “activities” of one sort and another, he was ever replenishing his soul by drinking from “the waters of silence.” As Schuon reminds us, ‘Love of God, far from being essentially a feeling, is that which makes the wise man contemplate rather than anything else.’¹¹⁰ Abhishiktananda lived a life of prayer, remembering his own words that ‘To pray without ceasing is not so much consciously to *think* of God, as to act continuously under the guidance of the Spirit...’¹¹¹ In his war-time memoir Antoine de Saint-Exupéry observes that there is “a density of being” in the monk at prayer: ‘He is never so much alive as when prostrate and motionless before his God.’¹¹² Here indeed, in prayer and contemplation, Abhishiktananda himself attained the full “density of being.”

Abhishiktananda’s life might be considered as the living out of St Basil’s four principal elements of spirituality: *separation* from the profane world, *purification* of the soul, Scriptural *meditation* which infuses the discursive intelligence with Divine Light, and unceasing *prayer*. Schuon formulates these elements in this way: ‘in renunciation the soul leaves the world; in purification the world leaves the soul; in meditation God enters the soul; in continual prayer the soul enters into God.’¹¹³ Renunciation, purification, meditation, prayer—the very hallmarks of Abhishiktananda’s vocation, one which recalls the words of Swami Ramdas, another of India’s great saints: ‘a sustained recollection of God, destroying all the distempers of the mind,

¹⁰⁹ On this distinction see F. Schuon, *Language of the Self*, p.1.

¹¹⁰ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives*, p.157.

¹¹¹ Abhishiktananda, *Prayer*, London: SPCK, 1974, p.18.

¹¹² A. de Saint-Exupéry, *Flight to Arras*, p.73.

¹¹³ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives*, p.198.

purifies and ennobles life.’¹¹⁴ In the end they brought Abhishiktananda to that wisdom which is the “perfection of faith” and to that peace which “passeth all understanding.”

¹¹⁴ Swami Ramdas, *The Essential Swami Ramdas*, ed. S. Weeraperuma, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005, p.16.