

# VEDANTA

## Heart of Hinduism

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## Chapter 5

# The Return of Shakti: God's Creative Power

**B**ETWEEN OUR LATE Middle Ages and the nineteenth century, no other important Vedanta schools developed in India. Philosophically this period was unproductive and merely one in which the already established schools ruminated endlessly on the knowledge they had already gained. Of course, even this period had its prominent saints and through contact with Islam and Tantric influences all kinds of regroupings did take place, but the "classical" Vedanta schools were not much affected by all this.

### **RAMAKRISHNA: SON OF THE DIVINE MOTHER**

Only around the middle and toward the end of the nineteenth century did things begin to stir again in this otherwise fallow field. The most significant and colorful figure of the time was undoubtedly Shri Ramakrishna (1836–1886). With him began the so-called Hindu Renaissance, the ef-

fects of which were soon felt in the West as well.

Ramakrishna was not actually a philosopher in the strict sense of the word, nor was he an acharya who would found a new school. He wrote no commentary on the sacred scriptures—indeed he could barely write. If we must label him at all, he would at first seem to fit in best with the theistic Vedanta schools, somewhere between Ramanuja and Chaitanya. (In his fervent love of God, Ramakrishna so much resembled Chaitanya that many celebrated him as a reincarnation of the latter.)

Yet Ramakrishna's greatness consisted precisely in his paying little attention to established categories; he could not be pigeonholed. There is no doubt that he was a great bhakta, filled with love for the personal god, but he favored worshiping him in the form of Shakti, the Divine Mother. This strongly Tantric overtone placed him outside the framework of classical Vedantic theism, its cults being confined almost exclusively to the worship of Vishnu and Krishna. He also accepted a follower of Advaita-Vedanta, Totapuri, as his guru. It was under his spiritual guidance that he experienced nirvikalpa samadhi (the state where all distinctions between God and the individual soul disappear) and had himself initiated as a monk of the Shankara order. (The Ramakrishna order, later established by his disciple Vivekananda, also clearly follows the Shankara tradition, their publications keeping mainly to the Advaita line.)

Nevertheless, neither Ramakrishna nor his disciples can be claimed exclusively by the Shankara school. In him and through him a new spirit emerged which, while still availing itself of the language of the medieval Vedanta schools for the elucidation of this or that complex of problems, at the

same time remained above the fray, as though a new freedom had suddenly opened up where the old differences no longer mattered very much.

With regard to Shankara, Ramakrishna shared his view that the various Hindu divinities should be regarded as equally valid aspects of the supra-personal Brahman; and although as a bhakta he was closest to the circles of the Vaishnavas, he often criticized the fanaticism of those among them who would tolerate only Vishnu or (especially) Krishna as the highest god. Shankara's "magnanimity" had in part been a kind of indifference: the reason he accepted the various deities as equally valid was because he saw the impersonal Nirguna Brahman as undifferentiated reality. Thus all these divinities were to him mere shadows and it did not matter very much to him which of these a person happened to worship. Shankara had considered it much more important to transcend all these maya-shadows, enabling one to enter the clear light of the supra-personal.

Ramakrishna himself had succeeded in entering this supra-personal "zone." Indeed, with the jnana—Sword of Discrimination which his Advaita guru Totapuri had pressed into his hand, he had cut off even the image of his beloved Divine Mother—root of all forms and personifications—enabling him to plunge into the ocean of absolute consciousness. But unlike Shankara he did not as a result of this experience call into question the reality of the personal god and "His" Creation. He quite simply looked on these as the *other* side of the absolute: the dynamic-creative and personal side, its life, so to speak. He did not look on the absolute as silent, unproductive space. He criticized the one-sidedness of his guru Totapuri, who

sought salvation exclusively in a rigid monism which left no room for diversity, who was incapable of accepting a more flexible Advaita that would include Shakti and her Creation. Why this one-sidedness? Why only the static, the formless, and the impersonal? Why not also the overflowing abundance of his Divine Mother? Ramakrishna often said that he did not want to play just *one* note on his flute but wanted to elicit from it all possible notes. "Why lead a monotonous life? I like to prepare fish in a variety of ways: sometimes curried, sometimes fried, sometimes pickled, and so forth. Sometimes I worship God by ritual, sometimes by repeating His name, sometimes by meditation, sometimes in song and sometimes in dance."<sup>15</sup>

In Ramakrishna's case, all aspects of the divine reality were equally valid, not because of indifference but because his intense love embraced them all—including even Christ and the God of Islam. He did not just "tolerate" them. Quite the contrary! He *lived* with them, became totally absorbed in them, and in turn discovered each to be a gateway to the impersonal absolute, in his eyes their common ground.

We never have the impression that Ramakrishna consciously labored to achieve this synthesis of the different religious traditions; he quite simply experienced them without the slightest sectarian prejudice, then in the end declared that each revealed a certain aspect of the divine reality. He compared God to a chameleon which constantly changes color, saying that people get into arguments about it because each has seen the chameleon only briefly and one asserts that it is a beautiful red, the other that it is a bright green; that only the one actually living under the tree where the chameleon also lives knows that it takes on different colors—even sometimes seeming to be without any color at

all.<sup>16</sup> "God has many names and innumerable forms, through which we can approach Him. . . . Just as water is called by different names in various languages—one calling it 'water,' another 'vari,' a third 'aqua,' and a fourth 'pani'—so is the one Sat-chit-ananda called by some 'God,' by others 'Allah,' by some 'Hari,' and again by others 'Brahman.'"<sup>17</sup> With respect to the different religions, the oneness in all this multiplicity was so obvious to him that keeping each in a separate compartment did not even occur to him. That is why when we first read him he appears to be saying one thing alongside another. We find Advaita wisdom right alongside soul-melting love of God, elaborations on the impersonal nature of Brahman alongside words concerning the Divine Mother or the mystery of divine incarnation.

Friendly and peaceable as Ramakrishna usually was, he would clearly get angry when someone refused to accept Shakti, "his" Divine Mother (whom he also worshiped as Kali), for instance, in the name of a strict monism: "Kali is verily Brahman, and Brahman is verily Kali. It is one and the same Reality. When we think of It as inactive, that is to say, not engaged in acts of creation, preservation, and destruction, then we call It Brahman. But when It engages in these activities, then we call It Kali or Shakti. The Reality is one and the same; the difference is in name and form." He insisted that, "My Divine Mother is none other than the Brahman. . . ."<sup>18</sup> "Brahman and Shakti are identical. If you accept the one, you must accept the other. It is like fire and its power to burn. If you see the fire, you must recognize its power to burn also. You cannot think of the power to burn without fire. You cannot conceive of the sun's rays without the sun, nor can you conceive of the sun without rays. . . ." Ramakrishna never tired of explaining the relation between

the formless absolute and the personal god with his Shakti, his divine power. "What is milk like? Oh, you say, it is something white. You cannot think of milk without whiteness, and again, you cannot think of whiteness without milk. Thus you cannot think of Brahman without Shakti, or of Shakti without Brahman. One cannot think of the Absolute without the Relative, or of the Relative without the Absolute."<sup>19</sup>

Ramakrishna's conception of the identity of the impersonal Brahman and its Shakti, its personification as Mother of the Universe, resembles the Christian theological conception of the relation between the "hidden" Father and the revealed Logos, the Son, without whom nothing has come into being. Still, the spectrum in which the invisible divinity's effulgence is reflected is in the case of Ramakrishna's Shakti more colorful, perhaps, than it is in the Christian Logos, where all "darker" sides are excluded.

It is true that Ramakrishna acknowledged a reality beyond the domain of Shakti: the very Nirguna Brahman, the undifferentiated consciousness he had himself experienced in deepest samadhi. Explaining this he said, "But though you reason all your life, unless you are established in samadhi, you cannot go beyond the jurisdiction of Shakti. . . ." <sup>20</sup> And yet his experience did not cause him to give up Shakti worship. While, with Shankara, only a denial of maya's creative powers led to not-twoness or Advaita, with Ramakrishna it was precisely the vision of the inseparable oneness of the absolute and the relative that constituted *true* Advaita.

In a sense Ramakrishna recaptured the original spirit of the Upanishads where such sharp distinctions between a higher and a lower Brahman, as Shankara had made them,

did not yet exist. Of course, he did not really use the language of the Upanishads; in fact, he seldom quoted from them at all. He seemed much more at home in the world of the popular tales, the Puranas. After having absorbed the many versions of the various religio-philosophical ideas since the age of the Upanishads he simply combined and lived them. The result was a very flexible Advaita where, rather than Brahman's static aspect being the dominant one, Brahman's creative expansion came into focus again—only now, under Tantric influence, this creative power attained the status of an independent divinity as Shakti or Divine Mother. Her positively conceived creative power had now replaced the more negatively conceived maya of Shankara and of Sankhya's prakriti. Ramakrishna often stressed that only he is in possession of the whole truth who does not remain in the no-man's-land of the impersonal Brahman but returns to view all there is as Brahman—only this time with eyes open.

After Shankara's radical maya-teaching had made a roughly pantheistic misinterpretation impossible (although this, in turn, led to the danger of an equally radical acosmism to immediately appear on the horizon) the time had now come, perhaps, for inclusion of the role of the divine in the world. When Ramakrishna keeps saying that God has "become" the world, a knowledgeable Advaitin might frown and hasten to add that this "having become all this" is in fact only something that *appears* to be so. But of what use is this sort of intellectual argumentation in the face of a direct insight which floods everything with divine light? Ramakrishna had not seen a mirage, he had experienced the Brahman-as-Creation very concretely—and as something sacred. His experience thus linked up again with the

fundamental insights of the Vedic seers, insights which seemed to have been lost in the intellectualized atmosphere of many Advaita schools.

Ramakrishna saw maya as being of two kinds. He said that *avidya-maya* (the maya of ignorance) deludes, but that *vidya-maya* (the maya of wisdom) “begets devotion, kindness, wisdom and love, which leads to God. Avidya must be propitiated, and that is the purpose of the rites of Shakti worship.”<sup>21</sup> But he also stressed how much “his” Mother was in love with the play of the gunas, with the Cosmic Dance (*lila*): “The Divine Mother is always sportive and playful. The whole universe is Her play.”<sup>22</sup> She is Brahman’s “being-beside-itself,” its outer appearance. Both aspects, the dark and the light, are now reconciled.

Here at last is the “bite” we missed with Ramajuna and most theistic Vedanta schools, which saw in God only a paragon of positive virtues. The well-rounded, somewhat overly simplistic character of their theism came to be shattered by Ramakrishna, not only because of the reintroduction of Nirguna, “the altogether different,” but also because of the Tantric conception of Shakti as the totality of all there is. Shankara’s one-sidedness could be overcome only at this appropriately high level and his transcendence still be transcended. “The altogether different,” the Nirguna Brahman, is reflected again, so to speak, in the mysteriously paradoxical Shakti—and both were now fully accepted. Ramakrishna saw in Nirguna Brahman, in emptiness, the face of his Divine Mother who, outwardly, “expressed” absolute emptiness through absolute fullness.

When we study Ramakrishna’s sayings and delve deeply into the life of this great Indian mystic—whom his disciples venerated as an avatar or divine incarnation—many of the

scholastic disputes of medieval Vedanta seem quite insubstantial. One even hesitates to label Ramakrishna a Vedantin, to saddle a religious genius like him with the name of a school. In an atmosphere where only direct experience counts such labels become meaningless—were the rishis of the Upanishads “Vedantins”?—and when such names take on a more or less fixed meaning, they also take on ideological overtones. Although indeed an Advaita-Vedantin, as well as a Vaishnava devoted to Krishna, and also a Tantric, he was also much more than these labels imply. He himself used the word *Vedanta* mainly to refer to Shankara’s school, frequently criticizing its one-sidedness; indeed he prayed to the Divine Mother not to let him become a “dry jnani.” He reproached the Vedantins of the Shankara line with not accepting divine incarnation, or holding it at least to be non-essential. And when on his deathbed he said to his disciple Vivekananda, “He who was Rama and Krishna, in this body now is Ramakrishna,” he added, “but not in your Vedantic sense!” He did not want to see lost in the Advaita perspective what was “special” about divine incarnation, swallowed up, as it were, in a view where every human being—indeed every speck of dust—was simply one with Brahman.

It must not be forgotten, however, that Ramakrishna himself nudged his disciples toward Advaita. At times, he had Vivekananda read to him from the radical *Ashtavakra Samhita*, and when Vivekananda would vigorously protest against the idea that, ultimately, there was indeed only the one Brahman and refused to continue reading from this “atheistic” scripture, Ramakrishna would only smile. He was well acquainted with his disciple’s strong Shiva nature. Soon Vivekananda would himself experience non-duality:

positively, by suddenly seeing to his astonishment that all is Brahman and that the world of appearances—including his own existence—is divine; and, negatively, by being hurled into the depth of nirvikalpa samadhi, into this transcendental black hole, which gulped up everything, even himself.

### VIVEKANANDA: YOU ARE GODS!

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) was to become a passionate herald of Advaita-Vedanta who spread the universal message of his master Ramakrishna both in India and the West. As we already indicated in the introduction, in America and Europe he used the term Vedanta for the “purified” version of Hinduism he presented to his audiences, a version purged of local myth and legend. But even in India he increasingly used the name Vedanta—clearly as a unifying term of the many variant schools—as when referring to it as an extensive step-by-step structure where everything has its place, both individual worship of the personal god and the experience of the impersonal Brahman. Somewhat simplified, we might say that Vivekananda taught Shankara’s Advaita-Vedanta, enriched by the all-inclusive experiences of his master Ramakrishna—experiences which also allowed for more of the devotional bhakti-aspect, not only of Hinduism, but also of Christianity and Islam. Vivekananda often said that in Ramakrishna the intellect of Shankara and the heart of Chaitanya had come together. Like his master, Vivekananda worshiped Shakti, the Divine Mother, but called this a personal preference. And like him, he also did not sweep aside the world of maya as radically as Shankara had done

but accepted the relative as the dynamic aspect of the absolute.

Vivekananda believed he could bring together under one umbrella the various Vedanta schools—Shankara’s pure Advaita, Ramanuja’s qualified non-dualism, and Madhva’s dualism, and even the theological systems of other religions—by arranging them as stages one above the other. Ramakrishna himself had often suggested this idea, for instance when he quoted Hanuman’s words from the Puranas: “O Rama, sometimes I worship You as the One, as Absolute Abundance. Then I look upon myself as a part of You. Sometimes I meditate on You, O Rama, as my Divine Lord. Then I look upon myself as Your servant. But when, O Rama, I am graced with the highest Knowledge, I see and know that I am You and You are me.” Yet it was typical of Ramakrishna that he never gave these ideas any hierarchical structure by ranking one above the other. Vivekananda, on the other hand—appearing as he did before more philosophically trained and interested audiences—had to bring a bit more order to these different religious experiences. It seemed appropriate to him to begin with a simple dualism, at the lowest level so to speak, where man regards himself as God’s creature and sees in him an all-powerful fatherly ruler, and to end with oneness at the highest level where man, completely emancipated, has integrated the various representations of divinity and discovered that he himself is Atman, the divine Self. Of course, this kind of ranking still showed traces of Shankara’s influence and could hardly be regarded as a synthesis by, say, a follower of Madhva, still less by a Christian, Moslem, or Jew, insofar as each regarded the gulf between Creator and creature as unbridgeable. How could any of them be grateful to Vivekananda for having assigned them the lowest

level? Especially in the West, however, this step-by-step approach to the absolute made sense to many who considered traditional theology outmoded. In almost all Vedanta groups in the West, as well as in those Indian circles particularly oriented toward Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna order, this structure came to be accepted as a kind of universal Vedanta.

Vivekananda's teachings were basically variations on a single theme: that man's true nature or Self, the Atman, innately contains all within it. Man was seen as the slumbering god who, lulled to sleep by maya, dreams away one lifetime after another until, one day, he wakes up and shakes off the superstitious view that he is only a wretched creature created out of nothing by a tyrannical god. "Gradually this giant awakens and, conscious of his infinite dimensions, rouses himself."<sup>23</sup> "What the sages have been searching for everywhere is in our own hearts. . . . The freedom you perceived was indeed there, but you projected it outside yourself, and that was your mistake. Bring it nearer and nearer, until you find that it was all the time within you. It is the Self of your own self. That freedom is your own nature, and maya has never bound you. Nature never has power over you. Like frightened children you were dreaming that it was throttling you, and the release from this fear is the goal. It is not enough to grasp this only with your mind. It is necessary that you see it directly, actualize it—much more directly than we perceive this world here. Then we shall know that we are free. Then, and then alone, will all difficulties disappear, will all the perplexities of the heart be smoothed away, all that is crooked become straight, will the delusion of multiplicity in Nature be dissolved and maya, instead of being the terrifying, hopeless dream that it is now, will change into something

beautiful, and this world, instead of being a prison, will be your playing field; even dangers and difficulties, even all sufferings, will be seen in a divine light, will reveal their true nature and show us that He is behind everything, as the true substance of everything, and that He alone is the one true Self."<sup>24</sup>

Vivekananda stressed the realization of oneness so much because only it can drive away the specters of fear and weakness. As soon as we think of ourselves as isolated beings, fear is there along with the feeling that we are weak and helpless. Vivekananda took up again one of the key words of the Upanishads: the *infinite*. "It is I who am eating with a million mouths. How could I be hungry? It is I who am working with innumerable hands. How could I be inactive? It is I who am living the life of the whole universe. How could there be death? I am beyond life and death. Why seek release? I am by nature free. What could fetter me, the Lord of the Universe? The sacred texts of the world are but small sketches attempting to describe my greatness—this infinite dimension of mine. I am the universe's sole existence. Of what significance these books . . . When man has recognized himself as one with the Infinite, when all separateness has disappeared, when all men and women, all gods and angels, all animals and plants, when the entire universe has become that Oneness, then there is no fear. Can I injure my Self? Can I kill my Self? Who is there to fear? Can I fear my Self? . . ."<sup>25</sup>

Vivekananda did not, however, confine himself to such clarion calls, such flights of the spirit; he was also and above all concerned with putting Vedanta into *practice*, making it relevant to everyday life. "We must be able to apply it to every aspect of our lives. But not only this. The erroneous differentiation between religion and life-in-this-

world must go. Vedanta teaches Oneness, one life throughout.”<sup>26</sup> He called it a scandal that in the very country that gave birth to Advaita there were so many barriers in the people’s daily lives; and he did not hesitate to reproach Shankara with orthodox narrow-mindedness in the social realm. In his view, Atman consciousness should fill every man and woman with pride irrespective of gender and caste; through this knowledge of unity the old maya-barriers would then gradually disappear. His ideal was that of the universal man living fully in this oneness and at the same time having the strength to be actively engaged in this relative world.

He never understood this active commitment as “helping.” He always understood it as “serving,” serving the one God manifest in everyone, not least in the weak, the sick, the meek, and the helpless. To this end he founded and organized the Ramakrishna order. The monks of this order do not conceive of their status as monk-sannyasins as merely meaning freedom *from* something—such as freedom from the bonds of nature and society—but also as conferring upon them the freedom to serve their fellow men. This was shocking to the orthodoxy, to those who associated monasticism only with a purely contemplative life, and they reproached him with introducing Western ideas. The question as to what extent Vivekananda may have been influenced by Christian and humanistic ideals cannot be pursued fully here, but one might argue that an admission of such influence would hardly detract from his greatness. A man striving for such perfect universality as he did loses nothing by opening himself to the inspiration of traditions other than his own. A certain national pride has always insisted that all these “innovations” ultimately have

their roots exclusively in Indian soil; but this obsession with attributing everything to purely Indian traditions goes completely against the spirit of universality which India so audibly claims as her own.

At all events, through Vivekananda, Vedanta took on a form, both in its philosophical and its practical aspects, with which many Westerners could identify, even if they were not necessarily prepared to work their way through all the Brahma Sutra commentaries or accept the hairsplitting caste rules. His simplification of Vedanta meant clarification and intensification and was not a sell-out. He did not speak *about* Vedanta. He created it anew and directly communicated its spirit of fearlessness, oneness, infiniteness, joy, and fulfillment. He also wrested it from chauvinistic narrowness and merged it with the spiritual breath of all great mystic traditions—not least of all Johannine Christianity, *the* religion of the spirit.

If we must sort out the “contents” of his Vedanta, they are, greatly simplified, as follows: all Creation is the outward expression of Brahman, the creative potency of which continually generates new forms. In this process every being is destined to eventually rediscover his original true nature, even if only perhaps after thousands of lifetimes. Every soul is potentially divine. The purpose of life is to *manifest* this divine nature, whether it be by raja-yoga, the Path of Meditation (and control of the mind); by bhakti-yoga, the Path of Loving Devotion; by karma-yoga, the Path of Selfless Action (and service); or by jnana-yoga, the Path of Knowledge. In order that his life be as universal as possible—that it be the most perfect reflection of the abundance of the absolute—it is best to live by all these paths.

With regard to his special emphasis on karma-yoga, he could, of course, point to the Gita and other authoritative texts where the Path of Selfless Action had already been suggested. Yet Vivekananda had a much more positive motivation for such personal commitment to offer modern people than had, for instance, the Gita—with its only concrete motif being praise for a soldier's selfless commitment in war. For Vivekananda this sort of commitment was no longer foremost, combative as he himself often seemed to be. He kept using such metaphors as *physician* or *teacher*, people who are working toward a better world. He may well have found it quite absurd that many followers of Vedanta approved of the Gita's call to battle and the destructive actions of the soldier while tending to be suspicious of every positive action aimed at improving society. Vivekananda had enough of the spirit of Shiva in him to understand both: the ideal of the warrior-samurai, *and* the ideal of the monk-sannyasin who withdraws from the world. He probably saw the subtle connection between the two. For this reason, however, he may also have felt that what both were lacking was love and affirmation of life in this world, without which a really positive commitment is not possible.

Vivekananda's own affirmation was not always loud and clear, nor was it constant. Periods of strong social engagement repeatedly gave way to "otherworldly" moods when the physical world, with its many economic and social problems, seemed not to exist for him at all. One moment he speaks of a new Golden Age, the next he proclaims that there could never be an objective paradise, that there is only the subjective heavenly kingdom in the heart of the enlightened sage who everywhere sees only the Brahman. Because he almost always spoke spontaneously, one finds many

seeming contradictions in his work. This makes him seem complicated—but also very much alive. When we keep in mind the many contradictory currents that must have clashed in him, it seems astonishing that anything quite so clear ever emerged. In his utterances, West and East—today's humanistic active engagement and a thousand-year-old ascetic tradition—came together. We should be grateful to the swami because, rather than giving us a refined version of the old Vedanta from a Himalayan cave, he actually *lived* this Vedanta in his short, stormy life and, putting it to the test, as it were, also put it on its feet—all the while holding fast to transcendence as well. In spite of his many otherworldly excursions, Vedanta began for him with seeing the divine Brahman in one's own fellow men—and that is also where it ended.

He promoted Advaita not least of all because this teaching seemed to him to offer a chance of bringing into focus what all these different religious traditions had in common. As long as these religions were characterized by dualism, as long as they created a gulf between Creator and created and fanatically held fast to whatever their own image of God, regarding all others of the devil, there could be no question of unity. Like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda was not interested in artificially creating a uniform religion, but he did work toward an end where all religions—including their own sectarian trends—would look on one another as so many paths to the same goal. The end of all these approaches could not possibly be a specific person with a specific name, but could only be supra-personal divine reality revealing itself in *all* deities, incarnations, prophets, and saints, the same reality with which all humans were also fundamentally one. According to Vivekananda and Vedanta in general, man—and with him the

whole universe—is not “created” in the strict sense of the word and able, at best, to come nearer to God through Divine Grace—but *is* the divine, which through its own maya becomes seemingly finite and manifest as this or that particular individual.

This is why when addressing his audiences Vivekananda exclaimed again and again: “You are all gods!” This, the point of all his talks, was for many among them quite a challenge. And when he said that Hinduism should be more “aggressive”—as aggressive as Christianity and Islam—he did not mean that it should be about gods and goddesses, of course. He was seeking to put more emphasis on Vedanta’s universal message of the “unknown god dormant in each individual”—so often prevented from awakening by “religious” teachings about sinfulness and an evil world. “Do not speak of the wickedness of the world and all its sins. Deplore that you still see wickedness at all. Deplore that you see sin everywhere. If you want to help the world, do not condemn it. Do not weaken it more. For what are sin and misery but results of weakness. The world is made weaker and weaker every day by such teachings. Men are taught from childhood that they are weak and sinful. Teach them that they are all wonderful children of immortality, even those who are still its weakest manifestations. . . .”<sup>27</sup>

Shortly before his untimely death, this compassionate monk, whose mind so often withdrew to the uninhabited heights of the snow-capped Himalayas, so to speak, only to come down again and again into the valleys where ordinary humans dwell, wrote: “I may be about to leave this body, slip it off like a worn-out garment; but I shall not cease to work! I shall continue to inspire people everywhere—until the world knows that it is one with God.”

### AUROBINDO: SHAKTI AS CREATIVE ENERGY

The return of Shakti, the creative power of the absolute, celebrated its greatest triumph in the figure of Shri Aurobindo (1872–1950). Like Ramakrishna and Vivekananda he was a native of Bengal. After studying in England, he initially belonged to a circle of revolutionary patriots who, not entirely by chance, looked on their “motherland” India as a manifestation of Shakti. Aurobindo at first used yoga techniques only as an aid to concentration while carrying on his political activities, but by and by yoga took possession of him, until a series of intense experiences in Alipur prison convinced him that he had to continue his work on a different plane. In Pondicherry a group of disciples soon began to form around him and his companion Mira Richards (henceforth to be known only as “the Mother”). When he died—or “withdrew”—in 1950, the once small original ashram had long since grown into an immense center of spiritual energy and become a whole “town.”

Like Ramakrishna, Aurobindo was not a pure Vedantin, at least not in the mold of Shankara. In sharp contrast to this tradition and the classical yoga of Patanjali he was not so much concerned with release from the gross and subtle sheaths of individual existence—and to drop out of the game of life through absorption in an impersonal nirvana or Nirguna Brahman—as with becoming completely receptive to the divine energy, “to invite it down,” so to speak, so that it might transform these physical and mental sheaths into perfect instruments of its omnipotence. Aurobindo did not deny that the realization of the transcendent impersonal Brahman nature in nirvikalpa samadhi was a provisional high point in human spiritual evolution. He

defended himself against the mistaken idea that he disdained this spiritual tradition which had found such perfect expression in Buddhism and Shankara's Mayavada. Responding to a remark by one of his students, he wrote, somewhat sarcastically: "Wonderful! The realization of the Self, which at the same time is liberation from the ego; being aware of the One-in-all; having completely overcome universal not-knowing; continual concentration of the mind on the Highest, the Infinite, the Eternal . . . all this is not worth the trouble, not worth recommending, 'not a very difficult step!' Nothing new! . . . Why should there be something new? The aim of the spiritual quest is to discover what is eternally true—not what is true in time. Where did you get this strange idea about the old yoga system and yogis? Is the wisdom of Vedanta and Tantrism really so trivial and insignificant? Tell me, have the Sadhaks of *this* ashram really realized the true Self? Are they really liberated Jivanmuktas, free from ego and ignorance? I said this yoga is 'new' because it aims at integrating the Divine in the life of this world—rather than solely aiming at the beyond, at a supra-mental realization. But does this justify contempt for spiritual realization, which is just as much the aim of this yoga as it is the aim of any other yoga system?"<sup>28</sup>

Yet Aurobindo also did not deny that he considered the earlier paths too negative and one-sided. In his eyes they were shortcuts to the absolute, ways that left the world and humanity behind unchanged. Even Vivekananda—who was comparatively more strongly influenced by Shankara's Advaita—had stressed more of an evolutionary process in some of his thinking. But what surfaced only sporadically with Vivekananda became with Aurobindo the very heart of an extensive and coherent system. He saw Brahman's manifest Creation not as an illusion or empty play, but as

the gradual ascent of the divine from inert and unknowing gross physical matter toward perfect, divine consciousness—an ascent simultaneous with a "descent" of transcendent reality.

Actually, the idea of this sort of evolutionary ascent was not entirely alien to Indian thinking—even Shankara had seen in the play of maya a teleological arrow pointing from plant and animal existence to human awareness—which in turn furnished the basis, the very possibility, for enlightenment. But the focus had always been on the individual freeing himself from the wheel of life-and-death, which itself would, of course, eternally continue to revolve. Aurobindo on the other hand concentrated more on mundane consciousness and mankind as such. This is not to say that he thought it possible for all humanity to suddenly attain a state of perfection; but he did have in mind larger centers where the higher consciousness would become fully manifest; indeed he did not hesitate to speak of a new "race," an elite which in the interest of this higher evolution would be completely at the disposal of this higher divine power—not forgetting, of course, to sharply distinguish this new type of "superman" from Nietzschean ideas. He was striving for a new quality of life: the Brahman should not only be experienced at the spiritual summit by man as an oasis of silence and peace, but it should also *energize* human life with its creative potency, invigorate and enrich it in a world where life was so often barren. Life would then truly deserve to be called LIFE. Shakti's creative "imaginativeness" was, after all, not exhausted, its evolutionary play (*lila*) was not over. The whole point could not be solely the creation of a few tiny isolated islands of enlightenment here and there in a sea of ignorance. The divine was to be attained and realized by man not only at the "climax of the soul," but the *whole*

man, the *whole* earth was to be the receptacle of divine consciousness and its dynamic energy. Aurobindo did not believe in casting off the sheaths of the Atman like useless parts, but in transforming them. He saw the fully realized man not as someone enlightened only in the upper strata of his being, but as one transformed by the energy of the divine, right down to the last cell of his body.

Some of this reminds one of Christian ideas like the Resurrection, which involves the body as well; or the "new heaven on earth." But Aurobindo sought his roots also in Indian, especially Vedic, tradition. We see this in something he wrote in an early letter to "the Mother": "We have conquered heaven, but not the earth; yet the perfection of yoga consists, as the Vedas say, in 'uniting heaven and earth.'" <sup>29</sup>

Other things in Aurobindo's work have an occult Gnostic ring. It is probably mainly this feature that puts off some "pure" Vedantins and keeps them from surrendering to the world of Aurobindo. But although Aurobindo put strong emphasis on the personal god, the Purushottama of the Gita, and never concealed his aversion to an impersonal monism, even the bhaktas have a hard time with him. For while a bhakta has in his head, and especially in his heart, nothing but pure love of God—to whom he surrenders everything, including all thought of the future and the social transformation of this world—there is a certain Faustian trait in Aurobindo, a great aspiration, an "experimenting from below," so to speak. Typically, he said of Ramakrishna that, with all his greatness, he had only known pure love of his Divine Mother, nothing else. In a way he is right: Ramakrishna left all plans for improving the world to his Divine Mother. Still, one might ask what could prevent her from creating in Aurobindo and his

Shakti (the Mother of the ashram) a new bridegroom here on earth and through them preparing for a new stage in evolution? What does it mean, after all, to leave everything to God? Assuming He were interested in raising life in this world to a new level, would He not need as his medium human beings who were completely receptive to His higher power? Viewed "from below," many a human endeavor might look like Faustian striving, mere human exertion, while what it would really be all about would be the struggle of divine consciousness with the sluggishness of the coarser sheaths.

How tough this work really was became particularly apparent when Aurobindo endeavored to suffuse even the consciousness of the bodily cells with divine light. The resistance was tremendous. In the end he probably did not achieve much more in this regard than so many great yogis before him—namely the ability to leave the body consciously and serenely when his earthly mission is for the time fulfilled.

Yet even for the critically inclined observer there is no question that we are dealing in Pondicherry—as in other projects such as Auroville—with one of the greatest and most forward-looking adventures in this century. The impulse Aurobindo gave to India can hardly be overestimated: the emphasis on evolution, history, the person, and the community—together an extremely important counterpoint to the purely individualistic salvation-teaching of classical Vedanta. Vivekananda had already sensed that many Indians lacked positive motivation. "This idea of Satya-Yuga [Golden Age] is what will really reinvigorate India, believe me," he wrote in a letter.<sup>30</sup> In Aurobindo's work we have a perspective which knows not only a perfectly immutable absolute—besides an empty idling in

maya—but also a vision of the conscious transformation of the world, its banner emblazoned with hope. This is a vision which also appeals to young Westerners looking for motivating guidance on how to act. Classical karma-yoga, as taught in the Gita, is actually only about the fulfillment of duty—a kind of action for action's sake—a way of purification which ultimately brings release from what was perceived, after all, as a vale of tears. Such karma-yoga required skill and extreme concentration as well as perseverance and humility, but not really much creativity. It does not seek to restructure and transform anything, but only to ensure that the wheel of life is kept turning—and that the one involved, once purified by this selfless action, is at last freed from this wheel.

Perhaps some products of this newly awakened creativity look to us a little quaint now; but we have to admit that something was set in motion here which makes the earlier alternatives of withdrawal from or commitment to the world seem quite outdated. The mere “spiritualists” were not interested in transforming the world and those committed to it were not able to transform it—at least not in a positive sense—because they were still acting at the ego-level and often only made things worse. But the point now was to combine progressive, creative action with transformation of consciousness, which begins with opening up and stepping aside in order to become receptive to spiritual strength “from above.” The supra-mental reality, regarded by Aurobindo as the ultimate aim, transcended the earlier antithesis of static immobility versus creatively productive activity and was thus closer to the Brahman of the Upanishads than to the strongly ideological absolute of Shankara.

That Aurobindo was by no means just a philosopher

influenced by the West, but is to be counted among the rishis, is clearly shown by his commentaries on several Upanishads, as well as a number of pre-Upanishadic texts, which often exhibit entirely new insights. He thus combined ancient Vedic intuitions with today's humanitarian expectations. The connecting link was precisely the positive spirit, the *yes* to this world, and with it, directly or indirectly, a rejection of a religion which renounced the world and which, although occupying a proper place in the spiritual evolution of man, could not claim to be the last word for all time.

#### RAMANA MAHARSHI: PURE BEING

Ramana Maharshi, the sage of Arunachala, who also died in 1950, appears to be the exact opposite of Shri Aurobindo. In his life and sayings we see little of a “return of Shakti.” Spellbound and absorbed by an immutable absolute with no room for evolutionary development toward “a new earth,” he still seems to belong entirely to the old Advaita school of Shankara.

Had Ramana Maharshi, however, been only one more representative of this school, he would hardly need mentioning here. There have always been, and there still are, enough representatives of the Shankara tradition in the twentieth century given to much wordier proclamations of this tradition and the Mayavada teaching than this rather taciturn sage. What made Ramana Maharshi so extraordinary was that he so clearly, directly, and uncompromisingly embodied the truth of this teaching (the same truth Aurobindo knew) that even those who could not live without

active engagement in the world rarely failed to admire him. In the figure of this enlightened sage we are face to face with something irreducible: sheer and perfect being, unconcerned with the disputes among those holding different views. For many, one look into his eyes meant more than the study of all the Vedanta scriptures combined, including all of Shankara's commentaries. It was as if all that was not essential to this teaching had over the centuries been burned so that we could now be shown the naked truth in the person of this holy man. The medieval scholastic attire is gone once and for all, and we are astonished at how modern and contemporary eternal truth can be.

In Aurobindo and Ramana Maharshi we see two prototypes who, although differing sharply in many ways, are at the very least equal in stature. They represent, respectively, the static and the dynamic view of divine reality. In actual practice, certain dangers are obvious in both approaches: at the static-passive end, too much of a closed system involving a certain sterility, a perfection somehow negative and wanting; at the dynamic end, an overemphasis on the quest—one that never really aims at the ultimate—a constant becoming and Faustian striving that is itself elevated to the status of something absolute and sees beyond every peak only still farther distant peaks. Of course, Aurobindo himself can hardly be blamed for such romanticism. He was, after all, just as much at home in sheer being as Ramana Maharshi was; and anyone familiar with the life and sayings of Ramana Maharshi knows how open in all his perfection this sage could be. Although arrived and wanting nothing more, he did not give the impression of being dead to the world. Rather, he embodied in a much quieter way than Aurobindo the truth that being is also being alive. (Actually, Aurobindo also lived very much secluded during the last

decade of his life, almost more withdrawn from public view than the "passive" sage Ramana—to say nothing of Ramakrishna, and especially Vivekananda.)

The story of Ramana's spiritual awakening is already part of the classical lore of modern Vedanta. Once, while his mind was intensely focused on dying, the apparently previously quite normal boy suddenly awakened to the reality of the Atman, the true Self—not to be confused with our limited mortal ego. After this realization, nothing could keep him at his parental home. He left, as he wrote in a note, "to look for the real father." Eventually arriving at the sacred mountain Arunachala, he spent the next five years in almost uninterrupted meditation. For a long time his pronouncements were extremely brief. We can hardly find anything resembling a "development" in his life. His awakening was sudden; it was not the result of any refined yoga method, and his later meditation was just a constant rootedness in the absolute. Ramana Maharshi alluded only to a progress from nirvikalpa samadhi to *sahaja samadhi*. He understood this as temporary immersion in absolute consciousness followed by normal everyday awareness. But over the years even this kind of immersion, this "disappearing" in the absolute, ceased, and *sahaja samadhi* remained his natural state, a state of awareness and spontaneity that governed all he did, whether he was speaking to someone or feeding a dog.

For many people in this century Ramana Maharshi thus became the epitome of the legendary Vedantic *jivanmukta*, "the one liberated in this body." Contributing still further to this reverence was the circumstance that no sensationalism surrounded this holy man. Seekers were not offered champagne here, but crystal-clear mountain spring water. The Advaita he embodied had lost its pedantic and some-

what cumbersome dogmatic trait. What remained was only the continually repeated question "Who am I?" which every visitor had to keep asking himself over and over again. Ramana avoided responding instantly to questions with the Vedantic clarion call: "You are Brahman, Infinite Being. . . ." To such assertions—almost ready-made answers—he preferred silence, a silence where the truth would have to emerge without words. A Ramana Maharshi may not motivate us to great deeds; but he is the mirror we now and then need if, in our willful activities, we want to avoid kidding ourselves. This, by the way, applies equally to those who have no use at all for reshaping and transforming the world, who wrap themselves in private piety and allow the silence of meditation to lull the mind. In this connection the Ramana quotation we introduced in the section on "Deep Sleep and Illumination" shows how unpleasantly revealing the sharp eye of this enlightened holy man can be for such people. His incorruptible eye is not so much concerned with detecting whether someone is leading an active or a contemplative life; but it does detect instantly when someone with the wrong attitude then also tries to defend it on ideological grounds. Almost anything can be used to serve in such a defense, even Vedanta.

Besides Shri Aurobindo and Ramana Maharshi there were and still are a great many yogis, holy men, scholars, and others, who have made a name for themselves in twentieth-century India and who, to a greater or lesser extent, also cite the Vedanta doctrines as their authority and have found a following in the West. We find eloquent philosophers like S. Radhakrishnan alongside silent sages; ardent and deeply humble bhaktas like Ram-Das alongside fashionable gurus whose well-organized "lectures," although larded with quotations from the Upanishads, barely

convey the spirit of these books. Besides the swamis of the Ramakrishna Mission, it was above all Paramahansa Yogananda and Swami Shivananda of Rishikesh, and their respective organizations, who ensured the dissemination of Vedanta philosophy to the West. For many pilgrims to India in search of an enlightened soul the great Ananda Mayi Ma became the focus of attraction; others found their guru in the miracle-worker Sai Baba. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who became so popular in the West, actually belongs to the traditional Shankara lineage; but when looking at the excesses of the organization one may sometimes wonder whether Shankara would have recognized himself in this meditation movement. In the case of others, such as Bhagvan Rajneesh, Vedanta is only one of many adornments in their outwardly uniform but intellectually multicolored array. The younger generation of the West cares little, in any case, about strict demarcations; for them Vedanta shades off into elements of Zen and Sufism, and Yoga methods mingle with Western therapy. This brings us to the subject of our last chapter, which is intended to throw some light on how the West relates to Eastern thought, in this context particularly to Vedanta. Because of the complexity of the subject it is obvious that only a few aspects can be discussed here. The religious and philosophical East-West dialogue cannot be covered in a chapter, nor indeed in a whole book. This will be a task for coming centuries—if we still have that much time left for it.