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MODERN SPIRITUAL MASTERS SERIES

SWAMI
ABHISHIKTANANDA

Essential Writings



Selected with an Introduction by

SHIRLEY DU BOULAY

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Benedictine Monk



Despite the long years that Abhishiktananda was to spend in India, he remained feeling, as he put it, “terribly, terribly French.” Just how much France meant to him is shown in a letter written toward the end of his life to a compatriot, originally from the west coast of Brittany, who had settled in New York.

BRITTANY

OM. At noon a letter from you from Brittany. I cannot resist writing to you there at once. You make me dream, relive those things which I usually push into the background in order to be able to live my life in peace. How aptly you said that after twenty years you slipped back at once like a snake into its old skin. It seems only yesterday that we were ten, eleven years old — that wonderful age! And everything else seems to have overlaid it, like a cloak that you have put on for a long journey. . . . Perhaps behind all the high-sounding reasons that I give for refusing and arguing against any possibility of returning there, is my fear of not being able to bear it emotionally, and the great difficulty I would have afterwards in taking up my “role” again.

I have found on the map of Finistère in my old 1924 Larousse . . . your village deep in a little cove. . . . St. Guénolé, Locquénolé,

names which make me dream. I do not know Finistère; I am from St. Malo and Cap Fréhel, also deep in a cove. . . . The Himalayas are splendid, and Arunachala is greater still; yet what can be compared to the sea of my Emerald Coast (not blue as a jay's wing, like yours)? All this belongs to the depth of my being. It is like those Tridentine Masses and the Gregorian chant of the monasteries, which I would doubtless put on again like a glove, even after having lived the marvelous experience of "spontaneous" Masses or of those Masses in the Upanishadic tradition which I celebrate each morning and which help me to carry on. . . . To pass from Manhattan to the moors of St. Guénolé is probably as rude a shock as to pass from the Himalayas to a monastery on the moors of Carnac; and that is why I "feel" so much all that your letter conveys. . . . Write again soon, I feel you so much closer in our Brittany. At least I can imagine it to some extent, despite the immense changes since the war; whereas for me New York and America are at a "lunar" distance, and I guess that if I ever got there I should be *flattened* like some of the cosmonauts.

Before I send this off, a deep bow to the ocean for me, please!

—AMS, August 3, 1971, *Life*, 10–11

Abhishiktananda was a man in the grip of vocational callings—first to be a Benedictine monk, then to go to India, finally to be a hermit. But ultimately it was God himself he sought.

VOCATION

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.

—To the Novice Master, December 4, 1928, *Life*, 3

A monk cannot accept mediocrity; only extremes are appropriate for him. —RM, October 27, 1929, *Life*, 6

There is the call to remain in the cave, and there are the calls which come to you from outside, and the Spirit weaves its way through both kinds. —TL, February 16, 1967, *Life*, 213

You sometimes tell me that my life is so difficult to understand. In fact, it was hardly my own choice, it has landed on me from above, day after day, year after year. And truly it is marvelous. If at least I could pass on to the Christian world the honey which I gather in the Hindu world, and vice versa, however dislocating it may sometimes be. —AG, April 18, 1969, *Life*, 237–38

It would be a betrayal of all that I stand for, solitude, silence, and monastic poverty; I have no more sought solitude than Amos sought the role of a prophet, but once placed in that position, nothing else remains for me but to be a hermit for good, and not a mere salesman of solitude and monastic life. —RP, December 11, 1969, *Life*, 250

Beyond, always beyond! It is not your gifts, Lord, that I desire, but yourself. . . —Typescript 108, ALA, quoted in *Life*, 9

LETTER TO LOUISETTE

Abhishiktananda, who was of course born Henri Le Saux, was devoted to his family. This letter to his sister Louise, who had lost her first husband, Marcel, in the war, was written soon after the death of his beloved mother. It reflects a close and devout Catholic family, Henri already a Benedictine monk and his sister Annette considering entering a convent.

Abbaye Sainte Anne de Kergonan
 Wednesday evening, 31st Jan. 1945.

My little Louissette

So, you're worrying again about India. However, I told you quite clearly the other day what it was all about. It is a dream and a much cherished dream, but everything points to its never being anything more than a dream. So don't worry about it. Sufficient unto each day is the evil thereof.

As for Annette, everyone must take their part seriously as to her missionary and religious vocation. When the Good Lord calls in this way and blesses a family like this, one must have enough faith to give him thanks. Maman suffered greatly, too, to see me wanting to become a monk; she accepted it and made the sacrifice. There's no question of holding back with the Good Lord. When the Good Lord asks of someone the gift of his or her life, you must understand that he is everything, and worthy of being given all, no question of bargaining, of calculating how to taste a little freedom, of doing one's bit and the rest. He is generous and we are not. For an unmarried person who wants to consecrate his or her life to God, there is normally only one way, the religious life. The rest is fantasy. Otherwise you ruin your life, you ruin your apostolic mission and prepare yourself for a less lovely heaven. Tell me, what does a little pain count for in the face of the love one owes to the Good Lord who has loved us so much and loves us so much. . . . Perhaps that's hard. That is not what it is about. Maman's example showed us that one is not on earth to play. We are on earth to love the Good Lord, to respond a little to the love that he has offered us. The ordeals are a means of making that love easier for us. I have already written it several times: is it not true that we all love the Good Lord a little, if not a great deal, more than a year ago?

It is a severe directive, I know. But it is necessary to give it. My poor little sister, I feel that all this must be painful for you. But you can carry it now; you gained much strength last year.

The Good Lord helped you greatly and has given you much. When we see each other, we will talk about it out loud. Oh we must absolutely manage to see each other privately, as Marie Thérèse says. In any case, don't worry ahead of time, not about this either. It will be at least two or three years before Annette becomes a nun and a few years more before she leaves France. In the meantime, live again all your memories since you have them with you. I can hardly think myself, without risking giving it up, and I am incapable of having a photo other than in my wallet.

As you said at the end of your letter, my little Louissette, you are much more brave than your letters sometime seem. Maman and Marcel help you. And the Good Lord teaches you to look for and to find in him both strength and consolation. Later, you will understand all these things better.

Work as hard as you can to reduce the business expenditure, get the unions moving, or other things. It could become difficult to get stock, but thanks to the capital, it will always be possible to get what is most urgent. It must be right to plan a summer season, as the Parisians will be eager to refresh themselves with a visit to the sea. You will doubtless be thinking of doing business this month to avoid the extra costs.

For Mass, it will be forty francs from now on. As far as I'm concerned, I'm sure the Good Lord takes as much notice of a Mass asked for by someone poor in need, as a thousand asked for by someone rich. So don't worry too much as to how much. But the important thing is never to stop praying for our dear ones, above all for Marcel. But be sure that our troubles and our sacrifices, bravely accepted, serve to shorten the purgatory of those we love.

My little sister, I would so love to help you more to shoulder your troubles, that I feel so strongly. But you already carry them so well, which gives me great comfort.

With a big hug, Henri

— To his sister Louissette, January 31, 1945, A. le B. Coll.

After many years of struggle, Abhishiktananda at last achieved his ambition and was given permission to go to India. He had arranged to join a French priest, Father Jules Monchanin, a highly intellectual man who had chosen to live as a hermit in a village in Tamil Nadu, where he was revered as a saint. This is part of a long letter Abhishiktananda wrote to him as he prepared to leave France.

FATHER JULES MONCHANIN

I think it will now be good to put before you the basic principles for realizing our project to which my reading and reflection have led me. I certainly do not want to lay down anything *a priori*; for me a fundamental rule is adaptation to circumstances and submission to reality. I gave my ideas very briefly in my letter of May 15. Here they are now, a little further elaborated. You must tell me what you think of them, and whether they fit in with yours. Above all — and here I am sure we are in complete agreement — there must be total Indianization; however far your ideas about this may go, I am perfectly sure of being in agreement with you. But, in my opinion, our starting point should be the Rule of St. Benedict, for in it we have a monastic tradition which is extremely sound and which would relieve us from having to launch out into the unknown — I mean the actual Rule itself, freed from the adaptations which have sometimes been imposed on it in recent centuries, with its original very flexible and universal spirit. I would like to offer to our dear Tamilians the Rule at the moment of its birth, as it were, so that little by little, with experience as the sole guide, specifically Hindu customs could be grafted onto it.

On this basis, like you, I envisage the tree of monasticism once more flourishing in all its variety, with hermits, solitaries, and mendicants; we have to sanctify the whole contemplative thrust of India and Christianize the monastic institutions

through which she expresses the depth of her spirit. And around the monastery — the indispensable center of all these varieties of monastic life, to which brothers called to a more special vocation would return for spiritual refreshment — I foresee the development of a very Hindu adaptation of Benedictine Oblates and Benedictine hospitality, in the form of an ashram where Hindus and Christians would come in search of nourishment for their spiritual life. I think the Rule of St. Benedict is sufficiently flexible, in its depth and marvelous stability, to control all these forms of monastic living — in fact, it has already done so in the greatest periods of its history. I noticed this again quite recently when preparing to give a course on ancient and mediaeval monastic history. Moreover you can easily understand that eighteen years of Benedictine life have made me deeply attached to the “holy Rule,” and that I dream of giving our blessed Father new children who will fashion a Christian India, as their elder brothers fashioned a Christian Europe. I have every hope that one day we shall discover together many interesting insights on all this; and am I sure that we shall find ourselves in agreement — your article once more convinces me of this.

I would most particularly like to preserve the non-clerical character of the primitive Rule. The clericalization of monastic life restricted its appeal to, or rather, its capacity to respond to, the contemplative potentialities of the Christian spirit; the Middle Ages had to institute lay brothers who, in spite of the holiness attained by many of them, are only half-monks, lacking in particular the Office in choir which is at the very heart of Benedictine life, or more precisely, of all monastic life in community. If we give a clerical character to the monastery that we envisage, this will minimize its value. . . . I would like to throw wide open to Hindus the gates of a fully monastic life, to open them to all the many people in India who seem to be touched by the call of mysticism.

The conventual prayer would of course be in Tamil, for it should be the source and choice fruit of the private prayer which will fill the day. At the traditional canonical hours, dividing up the times of work (here again we would only have to apply the Holy Rule), we should have, not an exact replica of the monastic Office, but a wise adaptation of it, based on the Psalms, the scriptural Canticles, with readings from the Bible, the Fathers, and the lives of the saints. And instead of our magnificent but untranslatable hymns, why not adopt specifically Hindu spiritual compositions? St. Gregory the Great told Augustine of Canterbury to preserve for Christ the beautiful temples of idols; could we not preserve for him the beautiful tones inspired in Hindu poets by their deep love for God, even if this is externalized in invocations to Shiva or Kali?

You must be familiar with the experience in China of Père Lebbe, whom I often call the most authentic disciple of St. Benedict in our day. His success, based on the very same principles which I am suggesting, has been remarkable, while other foundations in his neighborhood, where they tried hard to reproduce the European way of life or twentieth-century Benedictinism, are stagnating.

Our lifestyle will certainly be very austere, much more so than is the case in our French monasteries. This will be no problem for me, quite the reverse. As you say — and as de Nobili, Britto, and those who followed their lead did in the past — we must live as *sannyasis*, and the life of *sannyasa* is a Hindu institution which has its own traditional rules to which we should submit. Not indeed that we should set out to compete with Hindu ascetics — on the contrary, as Benedict did long ago, we will have to show the supreme importance of the interior life, and the subordinate place of externals; all the same, there is a minimum to which we must conform, and here again experience alone will be our guide. The Lord will give us the necessary

strength. Thank God, I enjoy excellent health, even if the regular life of a monastery has not accustomed me to severe shocks, and my age is quite favorable (I am thirty-seven) . . . but above all I trust in the Lord. Besides, I expect it will be possible to find a place with a healthy climate, not too extreme. . . .

Monastic life cannot be healthy without serious work — “Idleness is the enemy of the soul,” says St. Benedict — and history shows that laziness is a risk faced by all monks, Christian, non-Christian, Western or Eastern. In my view work should be both intellectual and manual, according to the individual aptitudes of the monks. For my own part I much prefer intellectual work, but I think we should also bear in mind brothers who may have a more limited intelligence, but are nonetheless capable of a life of contemplation. In any case the need to support ourselves will probably leave us no option. Gandhi has asked Christian monks to give an example of manual labor. The bishops are asking us for a whole range of intellectual work (books, periodicals, publications, to start with!); and more generally, a rethinking of Christian dogma in Hindu terms, and a Christian reinterpretation of Hindu thought.

The latter task is what most attracts me. Still, whatever work we undertake, I am sure that in accordance with the most healthy monastic tradition it must be kept in its proper place, and not become an end in itself. We do not want to start an agricultural estate, or a center for stockbreeding, or a publishing house, or a university; if the Lord grants this — and he surely will after two or three monastic generations, as he did in Europe — it will be splendid, but that will not be our aim. We are monks, seeking to enter even in this life into the kingdom of God. St. Gregory in his *Life of St. Benedict* (c. 3) has a sentence which for me is the fundamental monastic motto: “Alone in the sight of the supreme Beholder, he lived with himself.” All the social usefulness of monasticism (economic, or religious and intellectual), if it is to be kept in its right place, must be a *fruit*, not

an end in itself. And our exclusively contemplative aim must be all the more stubbornly defended, because the bishops will need us and our participation will appear supremely useful. We shall have to protect ourselves in the same way as we are having to do just now in France. . . .

However, I, and the brother of whom I have spoken, dream of the day when we will be fully Tamilian, in our dress, in our life and customs, sitting in choir for the psalms in the lotus position — if indeed we ever manage to acquire it! — and taking our meals on banana leaves, seated on the ground.

— JM, August 18, 1947, *Life*, 22

FULFILLMENT THEOLOGY

For many years Henri Le Saux held the view generally taken by Catholics at that time, that all religions would find their fullness in Christianity — a position known as “fulfillment theology.” It is surprising he was still writing from this point of view after many years in India as Swami Abhishiktananda, this passage being written after his first pilgrimage to the High Himalayas in 1959. However he was soon to change and to become one of those most sensitive to the realization that there is one inexpressible mystery beyond all names and forms, thus clearing the way for many who were drawn to that understanding but who lacked the confidence to accept its truth.

It was therefore entirely right that Christ himself should also go up to the Himalayas, just as once he went up to Jerusalem and to Calvary; and that he should go there, no longer only in the persons of those who are indeed his own, yet know it not, and who worship him under images and symbols whose final meaning they do not perceive — but now also in the person of those whose forehead has been marked with the sign of the cross and

who bear his name written on their hearts; and that in their bodies, weighed down with fatigue, he should offer to the Father the price of man's redemption; that in their eyes, enchanted by the beauty of the peaks, he should express to the Father the radiant joy of the redeemed; and that finally through their eager lips he should refresh his church from marvelous springs of water. . . . So the Christ would fulfill all symbols and crown all expectations, and at last unite all signs in the Reality which he himself is.



For Christ himself is also the God of the heights. Seated on a "mount" he gave the charter of the Gospel to the disciples; on a "mount" he appeared to them in his glory; and finally he led them to a "mount" to give them his last blessing before disappearing from their outward eyes — and this final Transfiguration was even more mysterious than that of Tabor and heralded his ultimate *darshana*, his manifestation in the Spirit at the center of their hearts.

Shortly before his death he had said to those who were looking for him: "When I am lifted up from the earth — first on the cross, and then in the Ascension — I will draw all men to myself."

And at the last, when he comes again, he will appear on the clouds, himself veiled, as scripture says, in that "Cloud" which veiled the summits.



Christ is the peak of which every earthly peak is a sign. He is that Height which rises up to heaven itself to lay hold of Being and Life. In his Head he even penetrates the supreme mystery of the Father. The earth below is his footstool — or rather, the solid ground in which his roots are sunk deep within the very stuff of our human nature.

He it is who is the true meaning of the myth of Shiva, practicing austerity in the Himalayas, who received on his head the stream of grace from on high and let it flow down his body upon mankind. He is the Mediator, the One in whom God makes himself known and grants to all the joy of contemplating his very Face.

He is that Column of Light and Fire, celebrated in the myth of Shiva-Arunachala, with one pole penetrating the heavens and the other plunged into the earth, of which no one, whether man or god, could ever learn how high it rose — higher than all heavens — or to what depth it descended — deeper than the very center of the earth. . . .



It was surely fitting that a Christian also should come and worship in these high places, that he should come there to “fulfill” all signs, myths, and images, and to enable the vast sacrament of the cosmos to pass from the sign to its reality in Christ, in the Eucharist.

Beyond all question it is right and proper for the Christian, more than for any other, to come and meditate here on earth’s ascent towards heaven through her snow-clad peaks, and on the descent from heaven to earth of the life-giving waters in the form of dark rain-clouds — and so of the meeting of both in the mystery of those high peaks, which seize and hold on their flanks the water of heaven and then pour it out in blessing on the earth.

Christ towers over all, the Everest of God’s self-manifestation. He is the Source from which is poured out in torrents the grace and love of God. At Golgotha, from his side, pierced by the soldier’s spear, sprang the church, and with it also the water and the blood, signs of the washing of rebirth and the life-giving chalice.

It was necessary that the Christ should tread the path up the Mountain which he himself is. It was necessary that in the

person of his own he should climb up to *Himself*, in that pilgrimage which will only be completed on the Last Day at the final Consummation; for, according to St. Paul, the fullness of Christ will only be achieved when at last all are in him, and he himself is henceforth and forever all in all.

The time of the church is in truth nothing else than the completion of this ascent to the mystery of the Spirit. Indeed the church's continuance in the world and the Christian's pilgrimage are set in this time—the time of the ascent to Jerusalem, of the ascent to Calvary, of the return to the Source.

The Source is the Heart of Christ, the bosom of the Father.

— *Mountain*, 19–22