

Bridging the two worlds: Contemplation:

Rudyard Kipling, an English writer of British India days wrote in his poem, The Ballad of East and West: **“The East is East and the West is West; and the twain shall never meet, till earth and sky stand presently at God’s great judgment seat...”** People have called Kipling a racist for these words. But the following lines from the same poem seem to contradict it. **“But there is neither East nor West, border nor breed, nor birth, when two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth.”** We who are today at Shantivanam ashram may also have diverse views on the statement of Kipling. However, we know only too well that the Catholic ashram movement owes its origin to two French men, Fr. Jules Monchanin and Fr. Henri Le Saux, followed soon by Fr. Bede Griffiths, an English Benedictine monk who continued in the same spirit and kept the flame burning to our own days. Though Western in origin all these three pioneers sought to make India their adopted land and embraced the depth of India in her spirituality. It was the way of interiority or contemplation that they discovered as unique to India as seekers of God and pointed it out as the best way of bridging the West and the East. They refused to be swayed into making compromises with what they had valued as authentic particularly in the East in the pursuit of holiness. Today Shantivanam carries forward that ethos through those who have accepted the inspiration of the Founders and live it out here at the ashram or elsewhere in India or abroad.

In his book, ‘Christ in India’ Fr. Bede Griffiths maintains that Christianity in its essence must point the way to the fulfillment of the East. But before Western Christianity can do it, he says, the first lesson that Christians must learn is that of **interiority**. The Western world has been making great progress in the exploration of the external world, but the time has come to explore the interior world, the ground of our soul in which is rooted our relation to God and to our fellowmen. The Church in the West too has grown external in the practice of our religion. For us the discovery of the East, of Vedanta, Yoga and Zen becomes a means of awakening to the reality of the inner life. We need to seek the inner depth of our religion in the sources of the scriptures and the liturgy. But the study of the Bible and the liturgy can all remain external if it is not moved by the interior spirit of contemplation. When we encounter God in the depth of our soul we encounter the sacred mystery which lies at the heart of all religion.

The Hindus in India, who form the majority of the population, are not concerned only with learning about God. Their great concern is to discover God, not to learn about him but rather to know God himself, to have the experience of God in their life. It is the experience of the ultimate reality. Fr. Bede Griffiths observes, “Even those Orientals, who are westernized and have adopted western habits of thought, still have in their hearts the awareness of an inner reality which the Western people have so largely lost.” So many Western people are coming to India in search of this experience which they do not find in their lives as Christians. The fault does not lie so much in Christianity itself but the way in which Christianity has been presented in the West and was later transplanted in the East by missionaries often associated with colonizers. The loss of mysticism in

Christianity over the years in the life of the vast majority of Christians has led to a great lacuna in the practice of Christian life by and large all over the world. It has been relegated to an extent to monasteries and convents. But for the ordinary Christians, Christian doctrine and church related devotional exercises have taken precedence over a living relationship with Jesus Christ which in truth is the core of Christianity. The celebration of the Eucharist does not seem to have produced the impact of engendering this relationship with Christ in the mass of Christians. Introduction of the vernacular language in the liturgy, while making it understandable has also unwittingly taken away some elements of the mystery from the Mass reducing it to a ceremony or ritual. And we have seen in different regions the Gospel of the Beatitudes watered down as the gospel of prosperity by which those who prosper materially in life are considered blessed by God whilst those who endure sufferings and live in poverty are looked upon as less favored by God.

The popular religion of India which has been Hinduism has had its long history of Vedic religious practices and rituals. Although the archaic Manusmriti and Brahmaic laws continue to govern religious practice for the vast majority of Hindus, there is noticeably a streak of mysticism behind many a practice. The experience of the absolute, the inner reality where one is united with God, the experience of non-duality or advaita is what everyone seeks. This is what is often missing in the life of the people in Europe and America where the inner dimension of life, the experience of the absolute which is fundamental to life is absent from ordinary life. We can trace it to a possible loss of the Christ experience within the individual Christian and the community.

We as Christians, according to Bede Griffiths, are seeking for this interior experience of reality which the Hindu or the Buddhist already possesses. However, they are seeking something that we already have in the Church, although it may have yet to be realized in individual Christians: it is the relation between the absolute and the relative world of time and space. The trouble is that for the Hindu mind the experience of God has been so overwhelming that it has made it difficult to affirm the reality of this world. The world and the soul are lost in God. It is the paradox of Indian philosophy that whereas Greek philosophy starts from the reality of this world and of man and leads to the knowledge of God, Hindu philosophy starts from the experience of the reality of God and seeks to establish the reality of this world. "It is here, it seems to me", says Fr. Bede Griffiths, "that the true meeting of the East and West has to take place and this is where in particular the Hindu mind needs to discover Christ. We have to show in the light of our faith that in this ultimate experience of God, the absolute being, the world and the soul are not lost, nor is the personal being of God absorbed in the impersonal Godhead, that in our Christian experience we discover the personal relationship which exists between ourselves and God and between one another. The abyss of God, as it exists beyond all human conception, is not merely absolute being, it is a mystery of knowledge and love, of personal intercommunion of an incomprehensible kind, of which human communion in knowledge and love is a faint shadow." This has to be seen by the Hindus as a lived reality in the life of the Christians. Instead of losing ourselves in God or the Absolute which is a tendency in Hinduism and even more so Buddhism, we find ourselves in Christ, the perfect man. An overwhelming sense of the sacred pervades the life of every Easterner and we can bear witness

to it in the form of small shrines erected at every nook and corner. However a haunting fear of incurring the displeasure of God or gods plays on the minds of people in India. Here is where the unconditional love of God revealed in Christ can bring about a radical change. In fact, Fr. Bede goes on to say, “we are able to discover in the depths of Hinduism its inner dynamism and its inner movement towards fulfillment which is in Christ.”

In relating ourselves with Jesus Christ, the God become man, we discover that the human and divine nature is united in the person of Christ in such a way that the human is not absorbed in the divine. In the mystical body of Christ Christians are united to God and to one another in a personal relationship of knowledge and love, in which while sharing in the divine nature, in the divine being, knowledge and bliss, they yet remain distinct in themselves, each a unique reflection of the being of God. We discover the mystery of the person: that we, each of us, are unique manifestations of God; that God gives each one of us a being which is unique which is eternally related to him and which has the purpose of final fulfillment in him. When we reach personal relationships with one another, our whole being is open to the world of creation. This truly is the way by which the East and the West can gradually meet in Christ. It speaks of the convergence of all religions in Christ. In other words, the mystery of Christ which we find in our religion can be found to be present in all religions in an embryonic form. In meeting them we shall be discovering the hidden presence of Christ at work in all religions and among all peoples. We have to admit, nevertheless, that though the fullness of truth is always present in the Church it is not always being necessarily present to any individual Christian. We have only an imperfect understanding of the mystery of Christ at any time. But we can reach a deeper understanding of it through contact with people of other religions. The Upanshads and the Bhagwad Gita can open to us certain depths that are present in the Christian Scriptures that may fail to impress an ordinary reader of the Bible.

The hidden presence of Christ in all religions is found in a life of contemplation. In his book, *New Seeds of contemplation* Thomas Merton states that “Contemplation is the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. Contemplation is reaching out to the knowledge of the transcendent and inexpressible God who is being itself. It knows God by seeming to touch him, or rather it knows Him as if it had been invisibly touched by Him, touched by him who has no hands but who is pure reality and the source of all that is real. Hence contemplation is a sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the Real within all that is real. A vivid awareness of infinite **Being** at the roots of our own limited being as a free gift of love.” Swami Abhishikttananda endorses this saying, “**The life of prayer and contemplation is simply to realize God’s presence in the depth of our being, in the depth of every being and at the same time beyond all being, beyond all that is within and all that is without.**” Swamiji continues thus “To look with the eyes of faith at trees and plants, fruits and flowers, birds and animals, all created to assist humankind in their ascent towards God is also to contemplate God in the mystery of his manifestation.”

We hear the same thought echoing in the words of Rabindranath Tagore in the *Gitanjali*:

“Have you not heard his silent steps? He comes, comes, ever comes.

Every moment and every age, every day and every night, He comes, comes, ever comes.

In the fragrant days of sunny April through the forest path, He comes, he comes and ever comes.

In the rainy gloom of July nights, on the thundering chariot of cloud, He comes, he comes, ever comes.”

This understanding of nature in all its forms recognizes the all-pervading presence of God in every existing object, animate or inanimate. Life naturally turns then to be contemplative.

Contemplative lifestyle is not a way of life reserved to a few people who are specifically called to withdraw from the world and take refuge in a desert. Contemplation and prayer are the very breath of life, not only for the true disciple of Jesus but for everyone who has recognized his or her calling to be human. However, contemplation cannot be taught. It is an awakening or breakthrough that happens when God chooses to do so. It is not and cannot be a function of the external self. There is a deep gulf between the transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation and the superficial external self which we commonly identify with the first person singular. We must remember that this superficial ‘I’ is not our real self. It is our “individuality” and our ‘empirical self’ but not the truly hidden and mysterious person in whom we subsist before the eyes of God. In every moment there should be a conscious search for the real self through all that is done, thought or said. The peak moments of prayer are those which are devoted to the contemplation of the mystery of God in Himself, when every faculty of mind and body are reduced to silence. The regular practice of such silent contemplation is the shortest and surest way to the state of constant attention to that presence which reveals itself everywhere in the world and in human society.

The presence of God to us is as real as the air we breathe. We do not first think of air before we breathe. Consciously or unconsciously we breathe in air and continue to live. Breathing is the most fundamental of functions that happen within our body upon which all other functions depend. Becoming aware of what really happens at every breath is becoming conscious of the presence of God because it is the Triune God who breathes life breath into us without even our being conscious of it. On close observation we shall find that the sound of the breath itself is the name of ‘Jesus’ whichever be the language used. From this initial experience of God we awaken to the ever abiding presence of God at all times in our day to day life. In other words, we awaken to the divine mystery that envelops us every moment, for as the Bible says: **“It is in him that we live, move and have our being.”**(Acts.17:28)

To pray is to realize that this infinite mystery is both inside us and outside us; it is totally immanent to us and at the same time beyond us because this mystery transcends us infinitely. It is the journey from objects of experience towards the essence of the mind. Though at times it is called self enquiry as by Sri Ramana Maharshi, it is in Christian terms self-abidance or abiding in Christ.”**I**

am the vine and you are the branches. As long as you remain in me and I in you, you bear much fruit; but apart from me you can do nothing.” (Jn.15.5) Dwelling in this state one gets to experience one’s state of being in Christ. Prayer is nothing else but facing one’s essence unveiled and exposed. It is like being aware of the screen on which a movie is being projected. “Mind,” according to Rupert Spira, “is the self-coloring activity of awareness. Meditation is the fading or dissolving of this self-coloring activity and the subsequent revelation of the colorless essence of the mind which is pure awareness itself.” Meditation may seem to be an activity of the mind towards achieving some new state or experience but later one understands it to be the very nature or essence of the mind itself. All forms of meditation or prayer require directing one’s mind towards some object and as such maintain a subject-object relationship. Whilst these may in some cases be necessary and useful, they must at some point be abandoned. For those on the path of devotion, relinquishing the object of devotion is the ultimate surrender. For those on the path of knowledge, relaxing the focusing of attention or the controlling of the mind is the ultimate test. Subject and object are two sides of the same coin. They cannot exist independently of one another. Both these must disappear if the essence is to be reached. When that happens we touch our being. That state is called meditation. **Meditation is what we are, not what we do.**

Being aware of being aware or resting in the presence of God is the only form of meditation or prayer in which the ego, the apparent subject of experience is not maintained. It is the highest form of prayer or meditation for which all others are only preparations. To become aware of the experience of being aware is to experience the essence of one’s mind which is who we are. The highest meditation is to be. The great failure of Christian practice is simply turning away of the mind from its essence. It is the turning sway of the soul from God’s being. All experience is saturated with its presence. All that we are required to do is to turn around. Lalla, a 14th century Kashmiri Saivite mystic referred to this turning around when she said, “**I traveled a long way seeking God, but when I finally gave up and turned back, there He was within me.**” Yes, it is only when we cease seeking peace and fulfillment in objective experience and turn the mind in the directionless direction, allowing it to sink deeper and deeper into the heart of awareness from which it has risen that we begin to taste lasting peace and fulfillment. It is the way of non-activity in which both the path of knowledge and the path of love or devotion meet; the experience of self-investigation and self surrender are understood to be the same.

God is beyond the grasp of thought or intellect as testified by the book, ‘The Cloud of unknowing’ which asserts that, “**By love He can be caught and held, by thought never.**” Therefore the images and statues we may use for our prayer do not tell us anything about God but only helps our mental concentration to remain fixed. We must go beyond them to what they point. We may use signs and objects as aids to prayer but with perfect detachment supported by them but transcending them to the Reality that everything points to. As the Eastern saying goes, “**When the wise man points the finger at the moon, the fool sees the finger.**” This is what happens to most religions, religious practices and rituals. People tend to settle down with signs instead of seeking to go where signs point. “The Spirit alone searches the depths of God.” (1Cor.2:10). Even the human manifestation

in Jesus of Nazareth has to be left behind because that too is a sign. Or else we run into the danger of treating Christ as a historical object and seek to manipulate him when indeed he is a mystery beyond human comprehension. The Risen Christ was beyond the grasp of even his closest followers. But we can grasp him in the Spirit in the depths of our being today. To have the mind open and awakened to the mystery of God in Himself and in his manifestation in the universe is to live by faith. In other words, it is to be in touch with the Risen Christ here and now. **“Faith is the guarantee of the things we hope for and the certainty of the things that we do not see.” (Heb.11:1)**

We become contemplatives when God discovers Himself in us. There is a Sufi saying which goes, **“I searched for God and found only myself. I searched for myself and found only God.”** Thus our knowledge of our self is God’s knowledge of himself. Hence in the mystical Christian tradition the resting of the mind in the heart of awareness is known as the practice of the presence of God or the surrender of the mind to God’s infinite being. It is resting of the mind on its own essence, the simple experience of being aware. The ultimate perfection of the contemplative life is not a heaven of separate individuals, each one viewing his/her own private intuition of God. Contemplation is not ultimately perfect unless it is shared. The contemplative is not isolated in himself or herself but liberated from the external and egotistic self by humility and purity of heart. The more we are alone with God the more we are with one another. And the more we go out to one another in work and activity and communication according to the will and charity of God, the more we are multiplied in him and yet at the same time we are in solitude with one another. The more we are alone the more we are together and the more we are in society, the true society of charity, not of cities and crowds, the more we are alone with Him. We all become doors and windows through which God shines back into His own house. When the love of God is in me, God is able to love you through me and you are able to love God through me. If my soul would be closed to that love, God’s love for you and your love for God would be denied that particular expression which it finds through me and no other. Let us live in this love and this happiness, in the love of Christ and in contemplation for this is where we find ourselves and one another as we truly are. It is only in this love that we become truly real for it is here that we most truly share the life of One God in Three Persons.

The words of the following song express this beautifully:

I love you with the love of the Lord, and I love you with the love of the Lord.

I can see in you the glory of my king and I love you with the love of the Lord.

How do we as embodied human beings find God who is spirit? Well, it was to facilitate this for us that the Incarnation took place in time and space. **“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, the glory of the only Son coming from the Father.”** (Jn.1:14) This historic entry of God into human history is what makes real the presence of God in all matter and form known as the Cosmic Christ. If God became flesh in time the way to find God too is through

the flesh. A human being cannot fall in love with an abstract God. Hence God had come to meet us by becoming one among us. In Christ God has come into our human world and made his home among us. However, it was not a once and for all event that ended with Jesus of Nazareth. But rather in Jesus humanity was taking a leap forward recognizing the presence of divinity in every human being. When God took on human flesh and became man in Bethlehem 2023 years ago he was taking on the inward part of the human person which is called the ground of the soul. It is that which is nameless within us beyond space and time reflecting the transcendence of God. The incarnation was not merely a temporary taking on human nature but a perennial entry into the inward part of the human person. Meister Eckhart considers this to be the real incarnation, much more than the taking of human flesh and blood in a particular cultural and historic situation. **The descent of God into the Ground of the Soul is the real incarnation.**

We are all inclined to think of incarnation merely as a historical event of a by-gone era which has only a remote symbolic significance for our life today. We are thereby forgetting that God became a human being in history so that he might give birth to you and me as his Son today. For this to occur we need to hold in right balance the divinity and humanity of Christ. The divinity and humanity of Christ has to be held in right balance to have a correct notion of Christ and subsequently of ourselves. If we want to know what it truly means to be human, Jesus is the supreme example and demonstration. Over emphasis of Jesus' divinity would be at the expense of his humanity. We would have difficulty in reconciling ourselves with the physical elements in him as well as in ourselves. If, on the other hand, we stress the humanity of Christ at the expense of his divinity we would lose sight of the transcendent element. It is very hard to face the fact for a being to be divine and human, spiritual and material, mortal and immortal. The temptation is always to simplify the picture, to get rid of the painful paradox by suppressing one of the components. A being that is wholly spiritual and divine, will not be troubled by the humiliating worldly facts of suffering, weakness and death. That was the objection that a Hindu friend of mine in Tiruvannamalai made when I mentioned to him of the sufferings that Christ endured on the cross: "Father, if Christ were God, how could he have suffered?" But the Christian understanding of the Passion of Christ is that Christ did experience every bit of the suffering he was made to endure in perfect solidarity with all men and women. He did so out of perfect love for mankind but with the sure hope of resurrection. This is the way open to every human being to make life on earth endurable and growth producing.

On the other hand, if we see ourselves as purely earthly beings that belong entirely to this world only, we could cheerfully get on with the task of improving our environment without being distracted by thoughts about the beyond. The immediate consequence is to fall into desperation or depression at seeing failure at every corner. Hence to be truly human it becomes incumbent on us to accept the paradoxical nature of our existence. It is the only way open to truth and life. If we accept this fact about Jesus of Nazareth, we ought to accept the same in the reality of our being too.

Most people consider this state of affairs to be irreconcilable and get used to living a false image of themselves. What is abnormal passes off as normal in real life. It is a diseased state that prevents us from being our true selves. It is this disease that Christ has cured through his Incarnation. In becoming man he becomes true Man in whom the potentialities of the human state are actually realized. In the Incarnation, God took on human nature, entering the Ground of the Man Jesus. God and man are united in the historical event that took place in Bethlehem about 2000 years ago so that they are united here and now in the mysterious event which Eckhart calls the birth of God in the soul. **The historical Incarnation in the past and the mystical incarnation in us, here and now, are two aspects of the same mystery of the union between God and man.** The far-off event in Bethlehem is truly fulfilled and understood only when it becomes a present reality enacted within ourselves uniting us with God now. “What good is it to me”, says Eckhart, “if the Son of God was born to Mary years ago but is not born in my person and in my culture and in my time?” Hence if we enter the Ground we shall encounter Christ, God the Son. Not only shall we encounter the Son, we shall become the Son ourselves. Meister Eckhart confirms this saying, **“The eye with which I see God is the same with which God sees me.”** However, this union is not ontological in nature as the divine and human nature are in Christ but in us it is a mystical union by which Christ himself becomes the source and principle of divine life in me. We shall share the same union the Son has with the Father and the Spirit. “On that day you will know that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you. (Jn, 14:20).

To live in Christ is to live in a mystery equal to that of the incarnation. As Christ unites in His one person the two natures of God and of man, so too in making us his friends, he dwells in us, uniting us intimately to himself. Dwelling in us he becomes as it were our superior self. We become a new man, a new self, spiritually and mystically having one identity – at once Christ and myself. This becomes possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. If this divine life is in me the accidental happenings such as pain and pleasure, hope and fear, joy and sorrow will not matter much to me. They are not my life and have little to do with me. Describing the soul’s relationship with God, Mechthild of Magdeburg marvels at “the powerful penetration of all things and the special intimacy which ever exists between God and each individual soul.” (*Flowing Light* 3.1)... The paradox enchants her: God is everywhere and surely, therefore, impersonal; and yet in relation to the individual soul, God is entirely intimate and surely, therefore, personal.

To live a contemplative life we need to go beyond the boundaries of ourselves to nature itself. Cosmic Christ is everywhere. “The entire planet is anointed and messianic,” says Fr. Richard Rohr. “All bears the Christ mystery. We must tune in to our ability to see beyond the physical reality that surrounds us, and awaken to the vast unseen world that exists. Then we can begin to see beyond sight and to hear beyond sound. We see the underlying structures that support our world and life begins to take on a new shape, new meaning. When we live as multi-sensory beings, we find that we are able to comprehend the language of every living thing. We hear the voices of trees, and understand the buzzing of the bees. And we come to realize that it is the interwoven substance of these floating rhythms that hold us in delicate balance with all life. Then, our life and our place in

creation begin to make sense in a whole new way. Our vision expands to see the overall order of our path and tunes into a whole new source of information.”

We move from the stone to the plant world and learn how to appreciate growing things and see God in them. In the entire natural world, we see the footprints or fingerprints of God. “Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, namely his eternal power and divine nature, are clearly seen in the things that he has made (Rom.1:20). Once we can see God in plants and animals, we might learn to see God in our neighbors. And then we might learn to love the world. When all of that loving has taken place, when all of that seeing has happened, we might be capable of loving Jesus. I am reminded of what the English poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, **“Earth is crammed with heaven and every bush is aflame with the glory of God, But only those who see take off their shoes; the rest just pick the berries.”**

We are called to radiate the divine presence to and from one another. As we read in 2 Cor.3:18 **“And we with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the glory of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect.”** Humanity has the responsibility to increase the glory that is the divine presence in the cosmos. Teilhard De Chardin thought that “besides his mystical body, Christ also has a cosmic body spread throughout the universe. And just as the mystical Christ has still to attain his full growth, so too has the cosmic Christ. We are called to birth the Cosmic Christ in self and society. The encyclicals of Pope Francis, *Laudate Si*, is an open invitation to us to take care of nature and nurture it and Fratelli Tutti exhorts us to take care of our brothers and sisters with even greater zest..

Paul celebrates the theme of our being other Christ and our growing into other Christ when he says, “I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. I live this mortal life by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.’ (Gal.2:20). He sees his work of preaching the Good news as that of giving birth to the Christ. “I must go through the pain of giving birth to you all over again Until Christ is formed in you” (Gal.4:19). Jesus then becomes two persons for us. First he is the crucified one who lives in all of us. Second he is the power of the mystical life resurging in all of us. Because he is the one who defies death, through his resurrection, he is the one who calls us to mysticism. The Cosmic Christ assures us that nothing is trivial for nothing is unconnected to the whole. All is a source of awe, wonder, wisdom and the presence of God. “All creation is waiting with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God... We know that the entire creation has been groaning in one act of giving birth” (Rom.8:19, 22).

Our life, whether we are born in the West or the East, is meant to be for the glory of God. It can bloom to its fullness only when we bask each day in the sunshine of God, contemplate him and share Him with our brothers and sisters. When Sri Ramana Maharshi was asked about the quintessence of Bhagawad Gita he quoted verse 20 of Ch.10: **“I am the soul, prince victorious, which dwells in the heart of all things. I am the beginning, the middle and the end of all that lives.”** In his prayer to the Father as given in John 17:20-21 Jesus says: “ I pray not only for these

but also for those who through their word will believe in me, so that they may all be one, as you Father are in me and I am in you.”

May we all, whichever be our land of birth, whether we be fair-skinned or colored, forever continue to seek to know him the Indweller of our hearts, in true awareness and thus attain our life’s real goal.

Fr. Sebastian Thottippatt

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