

VISIT TO H.H. THE SHANKARACHARYA

OCTOBER 1972

This was the eighth visit that one of us has made during the twelve years since we were first given the Meditation. Each visit consists of about a dozen audiences at which questions are answered, but each is also a kind of examination. We never know beforehand what test we shall be given and these tests are of great variety. They are tests of our Being as well as our Knowledge. On one occasion we had to answer a written paper of about 20 questions; at other times we have taken part in festivals or processions; or appeared on the platform with him during musical or dramatic performances before hundreds of people; or have received, and replied to, testimonials by the head of his Sanskrit College, etc., etc.

At our third session on this occasion we were told to put our questions to a learned Swami trained in the eightfold path of Yoga, who spoke fluent English, having been a lawyer and a judge. During the following eight sessions we were not permitted to put any questions to His Holiness at all! He would be sitting watching the confrontation with great attention, and other leading teachers were present as well. Although the present Shankaracharya's own training had been in the Way of Bhakti or devotion, and during the last three years our questions have been more in that line, yet the Swami was an intellectual and spoke at great length in a way which appeared quite often to contradict His Holiness's own instructions to us. In this lay the test – would we be confused or antagonistic or, on the other hand, forgetful of our previous experience?

At our first two talks with His Holiness alone (3rd and 4th October), he began by saying: 'It is worthwhile to catch some of the spiritual influences which are available here. Although practically everything has been discussed before in our talks, it is so very nice to be together and to refresh the memory once again and to see each other.' The four of us then put our own questions to him along the line that had been developed by correspondence since our last visit: namely to love and remember the Param-Atman all the time, so that 'in meditation, the meditator, the act of meditation and the object of meditation (namely Param-Atman or Universal Self) should all become One, should be united in One'.

You will be having these questions and answers in due course, but before going into details about the intervening sessions with the Swami (at which some of your questions were dealt with), I think you should know the outcome. I shall therefore quote part of the last audience after the departure of the Swami:

R. We offer to your Holiness our love and gratitude for your great patience and help once more during this visit. We assure you that we are *not at all troubled* by any apparent differences in the doctrine expressed. We have recorded your previous answers (from previous visits) to all the questions dealt with by Dandi Swami and can easily distinguish between the two points of view. Much of what he said to us was very helpful and we shall continue to value it. But now we ask your Holiness for what *you* wish to say and for your instructions.

S. In the Indian tradition the Vedas are the source of all types of knowledge that are available in India, and the Vedas contain support for all aspects of approach to the Absolute. In fact, according to one's own inclinations and preferences one can find support

in the Vedas to establish the validity of the Absolute, and the purity of the ways and means adopted to reach the Absolute are all available. Just as human beings have different tastes and preferences in food – some liking sweet, some savoury, some salty, some bitter, and they always look for and improve upon these tastes – by this they quench their thirst and hunger and enjoy it. None of these tastes is better or worse than others – it is a question of the inclination which creates and opens up a way of realizing the Absolute.

As has been told often before, there are primarily three Ways – the Way of Karma (action), the Way of Knowledge, and the Way of Devotion. So there are people who can appreciate and devote their time and energy to the intellectual pursuit of the Absolute, and it is this one aspect of the Absolute which they prefer and like to work with and become One with that aspect, and for which they are equipped so that it suits them. They cannot go any other Way. Similarly, there are people who cannot appreciate the intellect and they like to work on the emotions, and through the emotional pursuit they seek to become One with that aspect; so if there are intellectual discussions, they usually shy off and prefer only those things related to emotional work. Also there are those who cannot go either through the intellect or by devotion and who prefer to do something practical. So there are three Ways to approach the Absolute, and none of them is better or worse than the others. So one has to see in oneself which one prefers, and if there are any difficulties in that context. These difficulties or doubts which arise out of the confusion of different approaches should be cleared up. Whatever Dandi Swami has said, since he belongs to the Way of the intellect, he has his own preferences and he has full support for the intellect in the Vedas, and it is entirely left to the individual to find out whether everything is clear and sort out difficulties.

R. It is a great surprise to the Doctor to find someone more intellectual than himself!

S. (laughs) The Vedas are supposed to be the most authoritative collection of the Scriptures. Everything has to be referred to the Vedas. Only if it is supported by the Vedas can a System be honoured in India. So everybody tries to look to the Vedas for threads of support. In the Vedas, and particularly the Upanishads, it says in one place that without Knowledge it is not possible for one to attain Liberation. All those people who are inclined to the intellectual way have always quoted this part of the Vedic text to show that nobody, whoever he may be, who has not learnt about the Absolute and learnt the Knowledge thoroughly, can liberate his soul from the duality of birth and death.

Similarly, there are quotations given by devotional people, taken from the Vedas, to show that, without *devotion*, no liberation is possible – and they say, after all, knowledge is only a dry thing, and what use is knowledge to anyone! It is only through devotion one should approach the Absolute – forget all knowledge and forget all activity!

But the adherents of activity can also quote certain things from the Vedas to show that, unless you put the teaching into practice by performing right actions, nothing will happen; so all your knowledge and devotion are of no use unless you express them in performing your day-to-day obligations.

(Note: H.H. had previously explained that the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is the cream of all the Vedas, is based on these three; the first 6 chapters being devoted to the Yoga of Action (Karma), the next 6 to the Yoga of Devotion (Bhakti), and the last 6 to the Yoga of Knowledge (Jnana).)

Common man hearing quotations from all these three sources usually gets perplexed, for he is neither fully capable of all activity, nor of all knowledge, nor can he fully devote

himself to the Absolute because he has to live his householder's life. There alone is the need for enquiry for anyone who, after hearing different views and being perplexed, should get everything clear for his own sake.

Here is an example:

Once in a village an elephant appeared and the news went around so everyone wanted to experience the elephant. Unfortunately most of the inhabitants were blind, and yet they had the desire to experience the elephant, so they were led to it. The mahout (or man in charge of the elephant), let them experience by touching the elephant, and of course they each touched a different part. Having experienced, they assembled together and wanted to verify that they had experienced the real thing. The one who felt the feet said an elephant was a pillar, the one who had felt the tail said it was like a stick, and so it went on, with the ears, trunk, tusks, fat tummy, etc. – each describing according to the type of previous experience to which they could relate it. Then they started refuting each other: 'Yours was not the proper elephant, yours was illusion, mine is the only real one, etc.' Later on the mahout told them, 'You cannot have the vision of the complete elephant. All you can do is put together all these experiences of different people of 'elephants' and out of these experiences a novel creature should be imagined which is known as 'elephant' – but it is the sum of all these parts and *something more*, which represents the unity of the creature known as elephant.'

In the same way, because of the different quotations from the Scriptures, it is possible and it is usual for some sort of conflict or doubt to arise in the minds of people. They must make an effort to get it clarified because there are people like this mahout, in our spiritual life, who are available to dispel the doubts.

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COMMENT

Before we send more, we would like you and your people to consider this answer carefully, as it expresses so very well the spirit of the Shankaracharya's tradition and the 'Way of Liberation'. You will probably realise that it is not only in the Indian Vedas that support for almost any individual approach to the Self or God can be found, but in other inspired writings such as the Talmud, Koran, Zendavesta, and the Christian Gospels also. A teacher of the Fourth Way must acquire the power to give to each individual what he or she asks for and avoid all spiritual arguments and disagreements, going inward to the Source of Truth within himself. For Truth is always the same, though expressed in many different ways.

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At the end of our last audience as the Shankaracharya wished us goodbye, he said that 'he offers his blessings for the development of all those souls scattered all over the world under your leadership. May they prosper.'

(He had made it quite clear that all of you who look to me, must expect answers to their individual questions not from him but from us, out of our own understanding, based on all the volumes of recordings of his sayings that we have made over the years.)

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