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The Sage of Pure Experience: The Appeal of Ramana Maharsi in the West¹

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WILHELM Halbfass's seminal study of the concept of experience in Indian religions illuminates the philosophical ambiguities of the term and its recent appropriations by some neo-Advaitins to serve apologetic ends.² Anantanand Rambachand's own study of the process of liberation in Advaita Vedanta also critically reviews these apologetic strategies, arguing that in privileging *anubhava*, they undervalue or misrepresent the importance given to *sruti* in Sankara's Advaita.³ In this article, I hope to extend the work of these two scholars, this time reviewing the unusually strong appeal of a modern adept of Advaita, Ramana Maharsi, to Western scholars and spiritual figures. I shall argue that Ramana's own, deeply inward or internal epistemology of religious experience accounts for much of this appeal to Westerners, for it promises a kind of 'knowing beyond knowledge,' an internally accessed saving experience which transcends all cultural forms, including scripture. The goal and method of this inward quest proves eminently attractive to Western scholars and devotees operating with constructive agenda in inter-faith dialogue and cross cultural studies. Moreover, the epistemological framework of internalism, largely dominant in the West since Descartes, also contributes to the appeal of Ramana in the West. Western thinkers and spiritual figures, self-consciously or un-self-consciously operating out of the introspective turn of Descartes, will find the methodology and promise of Ramana's 'inward quest' compelling. Finally, the outstanding spiritual qualities manifested by Ramana also contribute to his

appeal among thinkers and spiritual adepts in the West. Indeed, such 'meeting at the heart' in interfaith dialogue promises communion even in the face of unresolved theoretical dilemmas.

The life and work of Ramana (1879-1950), though understudied, are important for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that together they represent a version of Advaita abstracted from traditional monastic structures, thus sidestepping, at least initially, issues of institutional authority and traditional legitimization.⁴ Ramana's self-understanding and the understanding of his disciples emphasize his transformative experience of nonduality - at the age of 16, then cultivated over many years in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu - as the source of his authority. For example, Olivier Lacombe, the great French Indologist, once asked Ramana if his teaching followed that of Sankara's. Ramana, who rarely referred to himself in the first person, replied, "Bhagavan's teaching is an expression of his own experience and realization. Others find that it tallies with Sankara's."⁵ With this statement Ramana at once distances himself from Sankara and establishes his authority on personal experience. No lineage renders his teaching authoritative, but his own experience does. This theme is often repeated by his disciples, no more enthusiastically than by D.M. Sastri, "His Experience was prior to and superior to any scriptures."⁶ T.M.P. Mahadevan nuances this view in his introduction to Ramana's *Vicarasangraham*; this short guide is fundamentally based on Ramana's "plenary

experience,” and all references to scriptures or sages “are offered only as confirmations of the truth discovered by Bhagavan himself in his own experience.”⁷ Though statements such as these underestimate the role of culture in religious experience, they are indicative of the tendency to view Ramana’s experience as transcending all social and cultural constructs. Ramana’s life and teaching thus represents a particularly modern form of spirituality whose appeal in part lies in the promise of an immediate experience of the divine, uninflected by cultural forms, and available to all, regardless of culture or society.

While there is much to examine in the life and thought of Ramana, I shall focus here on the reaction to Ramana from the circle of Western scholars and religious figures who have encountered him. So far, no exposés, no *Karma Colas*, no deconstructions of his life have appeared in print. Instead, of the many sincere or fraudulent gurus that have captured the attention of devotees and scholars in recent years, Ramana’s life and teaching seems to have struck many scholars and religious figures with a similar reaction: this person is genuine, an admittedly elusive quality to determine in someone, but a quality which must be considered in reviewing the conditions and effects of religious experience. Of course the fact that many devotees and some scholars have taken Ramana to be genuine does not necessarily mean that he was. Still, their reaction is intriguing and invites a review.

A brief survey of some recent and not-so-recent responses to Ramana’s life and work highlights the unusually positive reaction to Ramana on the part of Western scholars and religious figures. Klaus Klostermaier, for example, considers him to be “among the greatest and deepest spiritual influences coming from India in recent years,” and notes that even after his death the ashram in which he lived “is somehow charged with spiritual power, emanating from him.”⁸ Heinrich Zimmer wrote a study on Ramana in 1944 which included a foreword by C.G. Jung; pared of painful

hyperbole (“In India he is the whitest spot in a white space,” etc.), Jung writes that Ramana “is genuine and, in addition to that, something quite phenomenal.”⁹ Jung’s enthusiasm for Ramana’s spirituality is consistent with his own intellectual agenda which includes his version of the perennial philosophy. Although his take on Ramana favors the perennial view that a single unified experience is at the core of mysticisms across cultures, Jung nevertheless tends to a cultural dualism, importing romantic notions of the ‘spiritual’ East as contrasted with the ‘materialist’ West. According to him, Ramana’s example is an important resource for the West, increasingly threatened by a lack of consciousness in a culture of commercialism and technology.¹⁰ Indian saints such as Ramana and Ramakrishna are modern prophets recalling to the West “the demand of the soul.”¹¹ Zimmer’s student, Joseph Campbell also appeals to the perennial philosophy in evaluating Ramana and Ramakrishna; sages such as these “have renewed the ineffable message perennially, in variable terms, which philosophers classify and adhikarins transcend.”¹²

While it is perhaps no surprise that Jung and Campbell, both advocates of the perennial philosophy, were impressed by Ramana, a more recent tribute is: no less than the late Agehananda Bharati, who, it is clear from his writings, suffered fools poorly, also agreed that “Ramana Maharsi was a mystic of the first order.”¹³ Bharati’s *Light at the Centre* is a conceptually astute analysis of ‘mysticism’ which carefully assesses the conditions leading to and following from what he calls the “zero experience” or “consummative experience.” While disputing the contention of disciples that Ramana was in perpetual samadhi, Bharati accepted as genuine Ramana’s claims to non-dual realization; despite questions concerning the social circumstances of Ramana’s spiritual career, Bharati nevertheless affirms that, “Ramana was an exceptional mystic.”¹⁴ And while Ramana has always drawn the positive attention of Indian scholars,¹⁵ leading

Western spiritual figures drawn to him include the late Thomas Merton (1915-1968), Bede Griffiths (1907-1993), and Dom Henri Le Saux (1910-1973).

Merton's attraction to Ramana is difficult to assess. Only indirect references to Ramana are found in his *Asian Journal*, though the editors offer considerable interesting and useful annotations. Still, the fact that Merton mentions locations associated with Ramana and the name of Mouni Sadhu, an early Western disciple of Ramana, suggests that he had more than a superficial knowledge of Ramana's career and impact. Elsewhere, however, Merton spells out his assessment of Ramana's teaching, "It is a teaching which recalls Eckhart and Tauler, but according to the Maharsi absolute philosophical monism is beyond doubt. His teaching follows in the pure tradition of Advaita Vedanta. What is important to us above all is the authenticity of the natural contemplative experience of this contemporary 'Desert Father'."¹⁶

Merton's interest in Ramana seems to follow on his growing interest in Eastern versions of non-dualism which served to nourish and to complement his long-standing interest in Christian apophatic traditions. His journal is rich with references to Sankara and the important Advaitin manual, *Vivekacudamani*, a text which Ramana himself valued, so much so that he translated it into Tamil.¹⁷ In addition to these academic references to non-dualism, Merton's journal records a particularly vivid 'peak' experience, a moving account of his visit to the sleeping Buddha at Polonnaruwa; though it is difficult to ascertain precisely what happened here, his journal suggests that the event was an epiphany which could be construed in terms of non-dualism, though Merton himself uses Buddhist terminology of *sunyata* to capture its essence.¹⁸

Bharati's and Merton's assessment of Ramana insist on the authority and authenticity of direct non-dual experience; perhaps Merton's own experience at Polonnaruwa, strangely antedating his death by only a few days, served as confirmation

of it. In any case, these assessments and positive valorizations are also seen in the reflections of Bede Griffiths and Dom Henri Le Saux, both of whom increasingly adopted Advaita paradigms to inform their own spiritual experience. Griffiths writes that "Perhaps the most remarkable example of advaitic experience is that of Ramana Maharsi."¹⁹ He considered Ramana's transformative experience to be "authentic mystical experience, that is, an experience of the Absolute."²⁰ Using the idiom of Advaita, Ramana, according to Griffiths, was a *jivanmukta*. Griffiths then engages in a comparative analysis of Ramana's mystical theology, offering parallels, as Merton, to various Western apophatic theologies, including Dionysius, Eckhardt, Ruysbroeck, and John of the Cross.

Comparisons of such mystical theologies may yield considerable fruit when carefully unpacked, but Griffiths does not engage in such systematic analysis. Still, what seems evident in each of the figures mentioned so far is that a first or second hand acquaintance of Ramana's life or work seems to provoke a visceral reaction concerning his authenticity. This is no more so than in the writings of Dom Henri Le Saux [Abhisiktananda]. In his writings, Abhisiktananda makes noteworthy references to Ramana, all of which affirm the compelling power of Ramana's life and experience. Concerning the effect of Ramana's presence at the ashram, he writes, "Above all there was the presence - that of the Sage who had lived in this very place for so many long years, that of the mystery by which he had been dazzled and which had been so powerfully radiated by him. It was a presence which overarched and enfolded everything, and seemed to penetrate to the core of one's being, causing one to be recollected at the centre of the self, and drawing one irresistibly within."²¹

Other writers have testified to the extraordinary life and example of Ramana, often in same florid style which we saw in Jung and Le Saux. Paul Brunton, for example, met Ramana in his travels, and writes, "It is impossible to be in frequent

contact with him without becoming lit up, as it were, from a ray from his spiritual orb."²² But the language of these thinkers - surprising for its emotional force - invites scrutiny and reflection. A more sober, but nonetheless positive assessment of Ramana's life and example is found in Francis X. Clooney's recent book, *Hindu Wisdom for All God's Children*, "People like Ramana testify to the continuing power of the non-dualist conviction that there is only one true self."²³ In addition to these favorable estimations, Ramana's life and thought have impacted contemporary Western gurus as well.²⁴

What is the meaning of such positive evaluations, one that is seen in devotees and scholars alike? The key of course is experience, especially the promise of 'pure experience' and its privileged method of access. Although Ramana's experience was cultivated in some isolation in Tiruvannamalai, his account of what he took to be a direct, immediate experience of realization nevertheless accords well with historical and philosophical developments that emerged in Europe since the Enlightenment. There are two legacies of these developments. We know that Enlightenment critiques of dogmatism and metaphysical speculation led apologists to emphasize feeling or experience as the essential element in religion. Beginning with Schlieirmacher and continuing with William James, Rudolf Otto, and Mircea Eliade, the category of 'experience' has been a dominant starting point in the modern Western scholarship in the study of religion. This conceptual backdrop partially explains the appeal of Ramana to the West. The report and example of so-called 'pure experience', uninflected by cultural patterns, remains for many a compelling source of inquiry, and not merely for abstract intellectual satisfaction. The thinkers reviewed here in various ways have shown deep sympathies for projects of cross-cultural understanding, engaging in more or less rigorous philosophical scrutiny of things Eastern. The operating expectation in these studies are constructive philosophical and

theological outcomes. Ramana's unique experience and subsequent teaching has provided an important resource for students and scholars interested in studies of 'mysticism', metaphysics, and interfaith dialogue. These efforts, with differing degrees of hermeneutical self-awareness and success, become part of the process of deepening inter-cultural, inter-faith understanding as they themselves become objects of reflection and analysis. Reflections on these efforts, as well as further reflection on the life and thought of wisdom figures such as Ramana, consciously probe what Halbfass called the 'unfulfilled promise' of East-West dialogue.

Second, the turn to experience in the West since the Enlightenment also reveals an epistemological shift to internalism, a method of knowing which emphasizes internal states, self-awareness, and a privileged access on part of the knower. Such a method can be implicated in programs of 'religious knowing', and thinkers such as William Alston and Alvin Plantinga have made effective critiques and contributions to such programs. But the internalist epistemological 'zeitgeist' in the West also accords well with the deeply inward, internal epistemology of religious experience of Ramana. And, if most of us are, as a colleague once said, 'un-self-conscious internalists', then the subset of those interested in religious knowing will find strong appeal in internalist epistemologies of religious experience. Moreover, while Rambachand is quite correct in emphasizing the 'external' elements in Sankara's epistemology of religious experience (above all, *sruti*), there is little doubt of the strong internalism of Ramana, who repeatedly called his listeners to 'dive within' to experience their true nature, their original state (*sahaja sthiti*). 'Self-inquiry', promoted by the penetrating question, 'Who am I?', stimulates the 'inward quest' which in eventuates in Self-realization. In advancing this program of religious knowing - a knowing beyond knowledge - Ramana at the same time profoundly relativized or modified

traditional Hindu categories or practices, the result being a construction of Advaita universal not only in theory but in practice.

Finally, the appeal of Ramana must also be located in the quality of human presence which he embodied. Western Christian thinkers and adepts working at the interface of Hindu-Christian studies have an important resource in their faith tradition - the so-called 'fruits of the Spirit' - in the rapprochement of religions. Witnessing extraordinary examples of these fruits - kindness, patience, self-control, compassion, joy, love, peace, goodness, gentleness, trustfulness²⁵ - in persons of any faith tradition naturally arouses wonder, admiration, and gratitude for such outstanding human presence. While theologians and philosophers will continue, quite properly, to reflect upon Christian and non-Christian metaphysical claims and theorize over the plurality of religions, witnessing the extraordinary spiritual fruit of great saints is a 'happy provocation', i.e., it pulls us close to the heart of another - and to the heart of another's tradition - resolving, for a time, philosophical differences into a communion of affect and will. Outstanding human qualities inspire precisely because of their universality. That these 'fruits' have a divine source in the Christian tradition strongly suggests that meeting 'at the heart' will not only will inform our efforts in interfaith dialogue but even be a necessary requisite to it.

Notes

1. I wish to thank two anonymous reviewers, whose instructive comments have sharpened the focus of this article. Additionally, I would like to thank Frank Clooney, S.J., for his constructive suggestions on the penultimate draft of this article.
2. Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), ch. 21.
3. Anantanand Rambachan, *Accomplishing the Accomplished: The Vedas as a*

Source of Knowledge in Sankara (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991).

4. I say 'initially,' since issues of control and authority of the ashram periodically surfaced in the years following his death.
5. Arthur Osborne ed., *The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi*, 6th ed. (Tiruvannamalai, India: Sri Ramanasramam, 1993), 9; a Western edition of the same text has recently been published by Samuel Weiser, Inc. (York Beach, Maine: 1996).
6. D.M. Sastri, preface, *The Maharshi's Way: A Translation and a Commentary on Upadesa Saram* (Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam), i.
7. T.M.P. Mahadevan, preface, *Self-Enquiry (Vicharasangraham) of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi* (Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam), iv.
8. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York), 395-396.
9. Heinrich Zimmer, *Der Weg zum Selbst: Lehre und Leben des Indischen Heiligen Shri Ramana Maharshi aus Tiruvannamalai*, edited, with a foreword, by C.G. Jung (Zurich: Rascher Verlag, 1944). Zimmer's book includes a biography and German translations of Ramana's *Ullatu Narpatu* and *satsang* conversations. Jung's quote above is reprinted as the foreword to *The Spiritual Teaching of Ramana Maharshi*, Shambala Dragon Editions (Boston and London: Shambala, 1988), ix.
10. Jung, foreword, *The Spiritual Teaching of Ramana Maharshi*, x-xi.
11. *Ibid.*, x.
12. Joseph Campbell, "Appendix A: The Six Systems," in Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, ed. Joseph Campbell, Bollingen Series no. 26 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1951), 614. Interestingly, Campbell's comment is the 'last word' (i.e., last sentence) in Zimmer's book.
13. Bharati, *The Light at the Centre*, 29.
14. *Ibid.*, 89.
15. For example, T.M.P. Mahadevan, the late chair of the Radhakrishnan Institute for the Advanced Study of Philosophy at the University of Madras, who translated a number of small texts by Ramana, and

- Arvind Sharma, *The Experiential Dimension of Advaita Vedanta* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993).
16. Thomas Merton, review of Arthur Osborne, ed., *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi* (London: Rider and Company, 1959) in *Collectanea Cistersciensia*, vol. 27 (1965): no. 1, 79-80; "C'est une doctrine qui rappelle Eckhart et Tauler, mais chez le Maharshi le monisme philosophique absolu ne fait pas de doute. Sa doctrine est dans la plus pure tradition de l'Advaita Védantiste. Ce qui nous importe surtout à nous c'est l'authenticité de l'expérience contemplative naturelle chez ce "Père du Désert" contemporain." English translation above is mine.
 17. I am currently preparing an article for publication, "Mystic as Translator: Ramana's *Vivekacudamani*," based on paper I delivered at the 12th International Congress of Vedanta held at Miami University of Ohio, September 13-17th, 2000.
 18. Merton, *Asian Journal*, 233-236.
- Klostermaier cites excerpts from these passages as a side-bar titled, "Thomas Merton's Enlightenment" in his recent book, *Buddhism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: One World, 1999), 186.
19. Bede Griffiths, *Christ in India: Essays Towards a Hindu Christian Dialogue* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1984), 205.
 20. *Ibid.*, 206.
 21. Abhisiktananda, *Guru and Disciple* (Delhi: ISPCK), 2.
 22. Paul Brunton, *A Search in Secret India* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1970; reprint, 1994), no page given (Brunton's prose comment under a photo of Ramana).
 23. Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu Wisdom for All God's Children* (Orbis: Maryknoll, NY, 1998), 32.
 24. Flood, *Introduction to Hinduism*, 271. See also Andrew Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions* (Chicago and LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1997), 489.
 25. Galatians 5.22.