

Circumambulating Arunachala: Transcendent Ground and Wonderful World

Beatrice Bruteau

When you have a world-class innovator like Father Bede to celebrate, it is, as this conference indicates, important to study, and to take steps to continue, the innovations. The sincerest praise is effort to expand, deepen, create further the work begun.

I see three innovative areas where Father Bede was active: 1) the dialogue between religious traditions; 2) the need for transcendence of all particular traditions; and 3) the importance of a different kind of dialogue, that between religion as such and science. Each of these can be seen as a quest for the “other half” of the soul on some level.

Any religious tradition can be seen as an “other half” to one’s native tradition, and the Bede effort is to encourage all our religious, intellectual and cultural traditions to learn from others with respect. Care may have to be exercised in doing this. One may suppose that actually adopting items from another tradition is showing highest respect. But the native practitioners of that tradition may or may not see it that way. It is possible that they will feel that their sacred items have been inappropriately appropriated. Jews, for instance, do not necessarily feel honored that Christians have taken possession of their holy scriptures, Tanach, and renamed it the “Old Testament” in contrast to their new one. (However, they have been very generous in offering to teach those Christians who want to do it how to celebrate Passover correctly.) And Hindus in some instances have objected to Christians parading themselves as sannyasins and performing Hindu sacred rituals without having been properly initiated into these states and activities. Such behavior can easily be seen as disrespect. We can, perhaps, appreciate such sensitivity if we imagine members of some other religious persuasion celebrating the Eucharist as an accessory to their usual worship.¹

In my use of the holy mountain of Arunachala, and the Shiva imagery that goes with it, I am not intending to adopt these into a foreign religion but to develop their metaphoric power in their own metaphysical context, the context of the transcendent ground and the world of particulars, a context which we can argue is already universal and common to all traditions. I will use a verse from Christian scripture and its profound ideas as parallel presentation of this same context, and I urge that we promote appreciation of this common and universal need to rise above the preferential claims of our various traditions to the transcendent itself and its expression as world.

These are my reactions to what I see as Father Bede’s accomplishments in these areas and how we might carry his work further. I want to say some more about Arunachala, but then I propose to address mainly the third of the Bede efforts, the one

concerning religion and science, with particular attention to the problem of consciousness.

The Mountain and the Shiva Metaphor

Arunachala is not really a mountain. It is a nicely shaped hill near the town of Tiruvannamalai, in South India. It is liberally studded with hermit caves and wrapt round by a pilgrim path. This is the path followed by those who perform the circumambulation, or *giri-pradakshina*. It is an arduous undertaking, as the path is about twelve or thirteen kilometers long, and it is to be covered on foot—preferably bare foot. It is further recommended that the pilgrim, freshly bathed and clad in new clothes, keep concentration by singing hymns to Shiva, repeating the Shiva mantram *Om namah Shivaya*, or by whatever means keeping the total consciousness focused on “the mystery of the Presence” in one’s own heart.²

On the summit there is provision for building a great fire, which is done on days sacred to Shiva. Shiva is worshipped as the Great God, the One who encompasses and surpasses all. Shiva expresses as all, indwells all, contains all, and transcends all. The expression and the containment are the two sides of his reality as multiple, and both are related to his inexpressible unity. The fire, which symbolizes the creative energy of God, is visible, with its flames and its smoke, as a column reaching up from earth to heaven. The phallic shape connotes, on the one hand, creative power, and on the other hand, yogic control and continence, and the vertical stance is the bond between these two. When the column is represented as a pillar of stone, the unchangingness of the Godhead is shown, its purity, simplicity, and eternity. It is the *linga*, the “sign” of Shiva.

The Shiva figure, says Stella Kramrisch in her thick volume on *The Presence of Shiva*,³ is the timeless origin of all ontic realities. It is *svayam bhava*, the “self-existent,” the source of all creativity and all finite causes. It is the “energy behind all phenomena,” says Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the coincidence of time and eternity. Shiva is destruction and dispersion, but also healing and gathering into unity; he is life and continuous creativity. The *cycles* of nature reveal the deeper truth of *no beginning and no end*. Thus, also, the *circumambulation* of the holy Mountain expresses our realization of this truth and our conscious participation in it. The unmoving Whole is always totally present—at our right hand—yet we have always a gradually changing view as we go around the Mountain. Shiva, who cannot be defined, who destroys all names and forms, is also playing in the unlimited multiplicity of created forms. The virtue of the finite is that it constantly gives way to the *new*, which is yet the Only One. As Coomaraswamy says, “The universe resounds with the joyful cry, I AM.”⁴

A famous image of Shiva shows a dead male body lying on the ground, a dancing female body standing on it, and a male body, coming to life, rising out of the corpse toward the dancer. The message is: Shiva without Shakti is Shava. Shava is the dead body; Shakti is the energy of life in vigorous movement and variety. The

intention is not to prefer one state to the other but to display both as the one Shiva. Shiva is eternity and also time, time creating, time dissolving. The Shava aspect is more often represented as the Great Yogin, rapt in meditation, high in the Himalaya, withdrawn from all finitude.

When Shiva is joined to Shakti, then the World is created. Shakti is energy, power, movement, time, actuality, multiplicity, relation, form, novelty, development. Shiva in the Shava phase is eternity, transcendence of all form and finitude, all multiplicity and relation, all movement from one to another—for there is no “other.” But the main point is that these two apparently antithetical realities are One. A-dvaita, not double, not divided.

Shiva is not only the Being of the whole of reality; he is also its Consciousness: Consciousness as the Whole, consciousness as each individual created being.⁵ Creativity is the ex-pressed quality of this Consciousness. It thrusts itself outward and moves. Shiva is the great Dancer, whose every gesture is the presence of divine energy. This dancing, these gestures, this ex-pressed Presence is World. World is not something outside Shiva, not something left over after the Dancer has gone home, not something the Dancer can regard. All these gestures **are** the Dancer, the conscious Dancer, the Dancer as consciously present, present as Consciousness.⁶

Thus, each gesture of the World is the Being and the Consciousness of Shiva. As such, it has the same structure: eternity expressing as time, transcendence expressing as particularity, Unconditionality expressing as contingency and relation. This why the Vedantic teacher tells the pupil, “You are That!” You are not the product of That, not separated from That, not other than That, not even in relationship with That. You are Shiva itself, eternity and time, unconditioned and conditions, absolute and related, the path around and the Mountain itself.

This is the bliss of Reality, realizing oneself as both aspects simultaneously. This is why the universe resounds with the joyful cry I AM! So the Reality is said by the Vedantins to be Being-Consciousness-Bliss, Sat-Chit-Ananda.

John 1:18, The Logos Exegesis

I like to say to Christians that this whole metaphysics can be found in the following interpretation of the Gospel verse John 1:18.

No one has ever seen God.

This is because God is invisible, not because human vision is inadequate or because God is hiding. God—or better, the Ground of Being, or Source—is invisible for two

related but distinct reasons: It has no form; it does not show up against a background; it has no definition, no distinction from any other being, no environment and no opposite; and, second reason, it cannot be made the object of some other being's regard. If we are to use subject/object language, then it must be acknowledged as subject, as The Subject.

The monogenes theos, the singly generated God,
who is in the *kolpon* of the Father,

Kolpon is an interesting word. It is usually translated into English as "bosom," giving the impression of part of one's body. It isn't. It's a feature of one's clothing. If you throw a serape over your left shoulder (if you are right-handed) and secure it under a stout belt around your waist, and then puff out the material between your shoulder and your waist, you make a sort of pocket in which you can carry things—a lamb, for instance: "he carries the lambs in his bosom." But if you pursue this and look up kolpon in a classical Greek dictionary, you find that the root meaning is "hollow."

So, this "singly generated God" is in the "hollow" of the "Father," the Generator. More like a womb, then, you may say. But I want to make a different point. "Hollow" means **empty**. This, of course, brings to mind the Taoist remark that the virtue of the cup is that it is empty, you can put things in it. And it brings to mind the Buddhist term *Shunyata*, usually translated as Emptiness. This is a vast topic, but for my present purpose I will simply point out that it means (at least) what was said above about God not being seen because invisible and invisible because of having no form and not being an object.

Now we can go back to "singly generated," and clarify what is meant by "generated." I think the main thing it means is that the generator and the generated have the same "nature." This has to be a way of pointing and not an adequate definition, because we have already stressed that this Generator doesn't have a "nature." The imagery, of course, comes from the continuity of life: that which is generated carries on the same species as the parent(s) and most of the same activities as all other living things. So we can try to say that the generator and the generated are the "same" kind of being. Dismiss "kind" from our singly generated *theos*. God isn't a "kind" of being but the Ground of all being. How about "same"? That implies comparison, looking on this and on that and finding that they match up. But there isn't anything to match. And anyway you can't look at it because it can't be an object. We're going to be reduced to saying that this "generated" God is actually the very God as Generator. The continuity is affirmed; that's what "generated" means.

But now the verse gets paradoxical. It says:

That One exegetes.

That's the Greek word itself, *exegesato*. Going back to the dictionary, we find that the meaning includes spelling out, explaining, expanding into details, and interpreting the sacred mysteries. I choose to interpret this as "expressing" as the whole "created" order, as finite beings, beings with distinct forms and relations, beings that do have environments and can be objects for one another.

This is what the Source as Generated does. But it is not separated from or a different being from the Generator. The Source as expressed finitely is the very Being of the Source as invisible. That is what I allow/interpret the verse to be saying. This same Gospel has the personified Logos, intelligent order of the World, also identified as this Generated One, say "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" and "I and the Father are One" (John 14:11; 10:30).

In this context let us exploit whatever analogical parallelism we are willing to allow between this exposition and the Shiva metaphysics with its iconic representation in Arunachala and the circumambulation. Shiva is the Inexpressible One, the Expressed Many and their Nonduality. This means that the reality of the expressed forms is precisely the Presence of the Source. Presence can be pointed to by both the emptiness of the inner chamber of a temple and by the joyous fullness of artistic forms and sacred celebrations. The Presence as Expressed is not different from or separate from the Presence as the Emptiness, the Inexpressible or Invisible. Vedanta speaks of Saguna Brahman (the Ground with qualities) and of Nirguna Brahman (the Ground without qualities), and affirms that it is only One Ground.

The Gospel according to John, chapter 3, the Nicodemus story, includes the image of the wind, the Spirit, as having no known origin and no destination, but blowing freely, and then says strongly, "So it is with everyone who is generated by the Spirit (Source)." The same "structure" of presence as invisible and presence as form and as activity is asserted of every expressed version of the Emptiness. We may think of a hologram, the same picture-information in every area, regardless of scale. If you see the expressed version, you see the Invisible Source. Being Invisible (Nirvana) does not make it better; being expressed (Samsara) does not make it worse. God in ecstasy or God in enstasy is still the One God .

The "Hard Problem": How Can Matter Give Rise to Consciousness?

In the context of these brief remarks about the transcendent ground and the wonderful world expressed by the icon of the circumambulation of Arunachala, I would like to propose one topic that we might explore in our furthering of Father Bede's efforts to restore some symmetry to our souls. This one falls in the area of the relation of religion or spirituality to science, and it concerns what we call "consciousness."

Religion and spirituality can be regarded as matters of consciousness. They are also matters of behavior and of various social needs, cultural enterprises and customs, and these are interactive with the matters of consciousness: myth-style

beliefs, theology-style beliefs, feelings, attitudes, hopes, fears, dreams, mystical states, visions, and such. Part, at least, of what goes on in religion and especially in spirituality consists of dealing with such consciousness states, trying to cultivate them or change them or eradicate them, and so on. Are these consciousness states / activities / passivities themselves derived from conditions and actions in the human body? In asking this, we allow for social and general environmental interaction effects or influences or stimulations as well.

But when the human being responds to some stimulus, is that response first an act of consciousness and then a bodily action/state? And, alongside that question, is it a state/act “freely chosen”? Or is it first a bodily state and then an experience in consciousness? And, for all these questions, How? How can consciousness influence or move the body? How does the body, with its nervous system, sensory systems, hormonal system, and general structural and physiological systems, cause or bring about or present itself as what we experience and call “consciousness”? Some researchers say we have no model to answer these questions. Others say that the causal connection must nevertheless be true and they offer models which are then critiqued, often severely. A few declare that it can’t be done: consciousness is simply something else, not a material event at all. This is what they call “the hard problem.”⁷

This is a very large field, very complicated, and very controversial. But it represents a good opportunity to see how Father Bede’s efforts to promote dialogue between religion or spirituality and science could be continued and developed. Religion is generally a social enterprise and is focused mostly on social conformity and loyalty and only secondarily on private belief conformity. In some religions both of these are considered to be free acts and therefore subject to judgment and sanction. But if the neuroscientists succeed in convincing us that we have no real freedom but only an illusion of freely choosing and placing our internal and external acts, then this whole religious enterprise would be undermined. So, from that point of view, this is a serious matter for consideration. This speaks to the “religion and science” issue of Bede’s interest.

Spirituality, at least as I propose to understand it, is rather different, though not entirely. Spirituality transcends all religions and takes a different attitude toward its concerns. Where religion asks for conformity, spirituality refuses all such social pressures and tells itself it is seeking the truth, whatever that may turn out to be. It asks the practitioner to “leave home.” If you love your inherited beliefs and customs more than the truth itself, you are not apt to find the truth. Spirituality has historically addressed itself to interior experiences: observing them, tracing their origins and consequences; experimenting with modifying, rejecting, or cultivating them; classifying and arranging them in orders and sequences; and testing them for validity.

So the relation between spirituality and science is more likely to be a real conversation than that between science and religion, which have different missions in the world. But, again, if science can offer strong arguments that all our internal states (attitudes, consciousness, and selfhood) are simply phenomena, or emergents, of

participation
socialization

Science can be
oppressive

bodily interactions, then the spiritual effort to reach and identify as a transbodily Ground would be rendered illusory. In particular, if consciousness could be shown to be entirely dependent on brain activity, then there would be no natural way to argue for personal immortality. Believers would have to resort to miracle and reliance on the will of an extracosmic deity.

On the other hand, if scientific efforts should develop models that could be interpreted as supporting spiritual views of unitary, non-material ground and personal capacity to “realize” a self that is non-different from that ground, then a rather exciting and profitable interchange might very well present itself. In this case, we might have something that would constitute a valuable “other half” situation.

It is my impression that most of the people working in this field seem to be faithful materialists, but they have been obliged by the experience of subjectivity to try to construct a materially based explanation for the apparent reality of a non-material self. They have been aided in this enterprise largely by information theory, and the field is now a consortium of psychology, behavior science, brain medicine and surgery, computer science, biology, and philosophy of mind, with assistance from engineering and pure mathematics. The mutually modifying effects of all these inputs is itself a kind of model or metaphor of the generally proposed explanation, which is that consciousness is the consequence of the *interactions* among *patterns* of activity of bodily components-- mainly, but not exclusively, brain cells.

The development of theories of chaos and complexity has helped a great deal. Just as basically *deterministic* events in large communities have *unpredictable* effects, so thoroughly *materialistic* events in the human body, by their multitudinous and complex interactions give rise to the *subjective experience* of *immateriality* and *unity*. As soon as the interacting material units have identifiable *patterns*, those patterns start to interact with one another *as* patterns—that is, they function as emergents and their pattern features have input into what happens on different levels by building a hierarchy. Elementary patterns can interact “patternwise” to constitute higher scale patterns: patterns of patterns, or metapatterns. And it is by successively higher scale metapatterns that the subsequent organization of “mind” progresses. But *pattern* is not material, so the interactions of patterns in terms of their patternness can be offered as an explanation of our experience of them as transmaterial.⁸

Trying from the Other Direction: Can Consciousness Be a Primitive?

It is at this point that someone may again ask, “But who is doing this experiencing?” Ah! That’s the illusion, the phenomenon, the appearance that there is something separate and independent, having its own root of being, who is the experiencer.⁹ But who is being deceived in this way? A possible answer is, You are. But that I am an “I” is the illusion. How can the effect of all these putative interaction patterns be “deceived”? If “I” am truly their effect, and if my act of knowing is precisely the summary and consequence of all their operations, then that

act of knowing surely ought to be accurate. Why should it be an illusion? Why not, more simply, correct? After all, who has discovered that this interiorly experienced—directly experienced, not deduced—effect of interacting patterns constitutes what we call “consciousness” and claim as our “selfhood”? It is this very effect of interacting patterns! By its “knowledge” of the interacting patterns, the “effect” has come to the conclusion that it itself is only the illusory appearance of a self and not a real independent being at all!

This is the conclusion from the typical Western objective way of observing and arguing. As Daniel Dennett says, early in **The Mind’s I**, it represents the view from the “outside.”¹⁰ Quite different is the view from the “inside,” the one in which we all claim that we directly and indisputably experience ourselves as being ourselves and being conscious. David Chalmers takes this seriously and proposes that we acknowledge a “double-aspect principle” for our study of consciousness, one that requires information always to be realized both “phenomenally” (corresponds to our interior direct experience) and “physically” (in terms of brain activity). He says, “Experience is information from the inside; physics is information from the outside.”¹¹ This strikes me as being rather like the physicists’ view of matter/energy, that it can always be regarded as either a wave or a particle, which is one way to make peace with a dilemma .

But real dilemma resolution requires that there be equal respect for both lemmas. It is, perhaps, not clear that this is available for the inside/outside case. The majority of neuroscientists want to reduce consciousness (inside) to the terms of the brain (outside). And on the other hand, we may also advance an argument that inside/consciousness/ knowledge has priority over the observed and modeled outside. In **God’s Ecstasy**¹² I remarked about “explaining” that it means to give an account of something less well known in terms of something better known. But even the better knowns are to be “explained” in terms of their respective “betters,” and so on, until...? Until we no longer feel urgently that something more must be found? Or until it can be shown to everyone’s satisfaction that this is the final explanation which explains everything else?

In this context, David Layzer says that science isn’t very good at answering Why questions (inside?), doing better on How (outside).¹³ Karl Popper points out that when we do get to the bottom of an explanation structure, we find a batch of assumptions, “conjectures,” which we do not question but take for granted. And since it is this ground of all the rest of our inside and outside experiences that we most care about, Popper says, “almost everything which is very important is left essentially unexplained.”¹⁴

I suggested (in *Ecstasy*) that we have inverted the relation between the experienced and the hypothesized when we declare the material to be the real and conscious selfhood to be an hypothesis.¹⁵ Eugene Wigner reminded us¹⁶ that the starting point in physics is never the body or particle or velocity or whatever, but our *knowledge of* whatever dimension (mass, energy, space, time, charge) we have

conceived as helpful for understanding. We even have to choose what terms we will use in gathering our knowledge. Arthur Eddington had said long ago that we let down the net of our concepts into the ocean of observation and whatever it brings up is “scientific fact,” and what slips through its meshes is not. A picture of the world is then made of these captured materials. But, complained Erwin Schroedinger, who framed that picture and arranged its contents? So which is the more fundamental reality, our consciousness or its arranged observations?

Suppose we try dealing with conscious selfhood as a true primitive, that is, something which we do not expect to explain in terms of something other than itself. After all, it is not true to say that we do not know what consciousness is. It is only true to say that we cannot say what it is in terms of something else without contradicting ourselves, since we are the ones doing the saying and deciding whether it amounts to a satisfactory saying or not. Alwyn Scott said that we should give up insisting on loyalty to strict materialism as “an index of respectability” and “face the facts.”¹⁷ What is better known to us than our own subjective experience of our own conscious selfhood? Why should we not face the fact that an explanation of subjective experience cannot be had by excluding the subjectivity and admitting as real and fundamental only an hypothesized objective arrangement of chosen concept-observations? Empirical science is supposed to be dealing with *experience*, not with what the authorities say we are permitted to believe.

Why not try acknowledging subjective experience of consciousness as itself a primitive? A primary reality, a ground reality, something that cannot be explained in terms of something else, because there is nothing else prior to it or simpler than it or better known than it in terms of which such explanation might be couched? We don't experience our consciousness as a result, or a composition, or an emergent. We experience it as that which experiences everything else, directly or indirectly. We experience that we have observations and theories about our observations and that it is difficult to put the two together because of the very reflexivity built into the situation: we are trying to experience how we are caused to have the illusion that we are having this experience of being independent of the observations that we think are causing us to believe that we are independently conscious. All of that is modification of our consciousness. In our experience our consciousness is the primary reality. Our subjectivity is “the measure of things that are that they are and of things that are not that they are not.” That includes, of course, our observations and our reasoning about the observations.

But is it only human subjectivity that is this Protagorean “measure”? If subjective consciousness is a true primitive, how can it wait until human beings appear in the course of the evolution of life on Earth to be present? A true primitive must be there from the very beginning. Do other life forms have consciousness? Does it have to be a “life” form? What about complex molecules that don't yet copy themselves? What about atoms? What definition of “consciousness” shall we use? Is our human experience of consciousness a particular form of something that is still “inside” and still “self,” but more general? Does the kind or degree of consciousness

have to be matched to the complexity of the material organization it inhabits? What are the possibilities for consciousness without any material organization associated with it at all? If it is a true primitive, should this not be possible, indeed necessary? These are all difficult and awkward questions.

Father Bede's interest was the relation between science and religion. Or, let us rather say spirituality, since religion includes a great deal of social culture and other material concerns. If consciousness is an artifact of complex material motions, then spirituality is either merely a passive part of the claimed illusion or is engaged in manipulating the material motions in such a way as to produce some desired experience. On the other hand, if consciousness is a primitive, then spirituality ought to be a concern in its own right, without necessary reference to or association with material reality at all, as well as a concern with the power of the ground of selfhood to express itself in terms of matter-energy-space-time. But this may oblige us to deal with "the hard problem" from the other side: how is immaterial consciousness able to influence matter? Shall we say there can be a science of spirit or consciousness or subjective presence, just as there can be a science of matter-energy-space-time? And shall we offer these as two halves of our intention to find out the truth about reality?

A Science of the Subject

A science of the subject in its own right is precisely what Vedantic philosophers have to offer. Some of them seem to be doing the reverse of what the Western scientists have done: declaring the object-world to be an illusion. The example usually associated with this view is that of the rope mistaken for a snake. But the point is not so much that the snake is the illusion and the rope the reality as that whether snake or rope, what is perceived is at bottom Brahman, both snake and rope being modifications of that Ground. The "illusion" would lie in the mistaken belief that either snake or rope is a fundamental or ultimate being, a "reality" in this sense. They are merely forms that the Brahman takes, forms that can come and go, therefore not ultimately "real."

We can also say that if what you are trying to do is to give an account of the subject as subject, then you refrain from accounting for the subject in terms of the objects it perceives. All those perceptions occur in the subject and as such do not constitute or define or control the reality of the subject. As perceptions, they are made (*maya*) by the subject (*mayi*). That they may have independent reality of their own has to be seen as a question, not a given.

What is given is that the subject is a primitive, a first, not a derived. And it is given as *presence*. I think we may try using "subjective presence" instead of "mind," which many of the neuroscientists use, or "consciousness," whose usage is now problematic. I intend the word 'presence' to convey the idea that I am here and from here I look, I regard whatever I consider an "object" for my regard. The object exists

as an item in my awareness. And if I am not regarding any object, I nevertheless am still here, still present. I am presence, subjective presence.

Knowledge of this subjective presence is available directly, not the way knowledge of the objective world is obtained, via perception (aided by external instruments) and reasoning. We know ourselves as subjective presence simply by *being* subjectively present. It is not necessary (or helpful) to say present “to” ourselves. The self does not become, and is not treated as, an object for itself. Knowing coincides with being. This is our root experience. And it is further experienced as valuable. It is not merely being, it is good. These are all primitives, not derived and not admitting opposites. So the root experience is that our subjective presence is being-knowing-good, Sat-Chit-Ananda. And it is this, irrespective of objects for its regard.

The important thing, for the Vedantic philosophers, is not to get to the objects and discover their real natures, but to stand in the Self, to be fully the Self, to realize oneself as this unmodified subjective presence. And for that, the modifications of that knowing presence have to be transcended. Objects are limitations and obstacles to the full, unconditioned presence as subject. Can this be “proved”? No. “Proving” means deriving by consistent reasoning from already established principles. But where did those established principles come from? The experience of the subjective presence as knowing and value is the established principle.

Can this matter be talked about? In an imperfect but initially helpful way, yes. Can the way to standing in this unmodified subjective presence be taught? To some extent a person can be led to the verge of the experience. But the reality has to be experienced by oneself. That’s the whole point. It is you, and you therefore have to experience it. It is not a theory. Knowing “about” it, or “believing in” it is insufficient. You have to experience yourself as being it. And no one can do it for you.

When you have experienced yourself as this unmodified, unconditional subjective presence, have you gained something that you previously lacked? Not at all. When you look in a mirror and see your face, you haven’t gained a face, you’ve only realized that you have a face. But the experience of being the self isn’t as objective as that, and not reflexive, like knowing that you know that you know ... It is simply being aware of being by being. Unconditional being. That means that it is absolute being, eternal being, necessary being, What Is. And You are That.

Although this Self is strictly beyond anything that can be said by limited concepts, there is, nevertheless, a good deal that can be and has been said about how you can bring yourself to the purely unconditioned awareness by removing or transcending the objects in view. And this, we may offer, is the science of the subject. It is partly an analytical science but mostly an experimental/experiential science. The way of teaching it, highly developed in the East, is not unknown in Western philosophy.

Plato says, in the Seventh Letter (340c ff) that the teacher must be knowledgeable, the pupil must be apt, that a long interaction between them is necessary, much of it consisting of reasoning, and that finally this realization, “suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, ... is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining” (341d, see also 344b). But “the first and highest principles” cannot be written about, and anyone who had come into comprehension of them would never commit them to writing, for such a person “would have felt the same reverence for the subject that I do” and would not put it out publicly. Neither would that person write it down so as to remember it, “for there is no danger of anyone forgetting it,” once the mind grasps it (344e). That this insight includes realization of one’s immortality is discussed in the *Phaedo*.

Thirteen hundred years later, Shankara said similar things. In the *Vivekachudamani*¹⁸ (hereafter VCM, followed by verse number), he gave a description of the worthy teacher: virtuous, not compelled by desires, one who knows the Foundation by union with it, who is calm, “a boundless reservoir of mercy” and a friend of all who come for instruction (VCM,33). But success in guiding the pupil to full realization depends crucially on the aspirant’s qualifications. One should be intelligent and learned, skilled in following and designing arguments that illuminate the nature of being. One must be able to discriminate between what is of true value—the Eternal Ground of all being, and what is not—the objects of the senses. Firm in this understanding, one must turn away from basing value in sense experience and tolerate with equanimity both the pleasant and the painful; one must be able to bear all afflictions without complaint or seeking redress. And most of all, one must renounce all claim or interest in any reward for good behavior, here or hereafter, and set all one’s awareness and strength in an overwhelming desire for truth and liberation (VCM,14-30; cf. NT, Jn. 8:32).

This freeing knowledge is of one’s true nature: that the inner awareness, “I,” is Atman, the subjectively experienced Eternal Ground, imperishable and unfettered by finite forms. Ordinary experiences of the senses and the emotions and the mind are modifications of this Ground, called Atman, which is in no way different or separate from Brahman, the Ground of all being. Liberation is experienced when one no longer “identifies with” the modifications but with the Ground, Atman. This state is gained only by “perfect knowledge,” that is, *insight*, which is not knowing-about by means of concepts but knowing by actually *being* the truth.

Liberation is not gained by faith or religious affiliation, by worship or sacrifice, or by knowledge of scriptures and scholarly expertise in them. Attitude and what I will call intention-energy are necessary. Renunciation of sense-objects and self-serving relations and actions is elementary. Intense yearning for freedom is essential. Shankara’s *Vivekachudamani*, verse 31, says that devotion holds the supreme place. There is some debate about what exactly is to be considered “devotion.” Dualists say it is extreme love for God, an incarnation of God, or perhaps one’s guru under the guise of the God actually available to one and in turn devoted to

the seeker's aspiration to self-realization. Nondualists, such as Shankara in verse 32, "maintain that the inquiry into the truth of one's own Self is devotion."

The point is that while realization is an "insight" matter, there must also be this energy from the affective or emotional or will and value domain. This aspect of our activity shows also after realization. Verse 37 says, "There are good souls, calm and magnanimous... who, having themselves crossed this dreadful ocean of birth and death, help others also to cross the same, without any motive whatsoever." They do good to others "unmasked, out of their heart's nature, unobserved and unsought." Verse 38 continues: "It is the very nature of the magnanimous to move of their own accord toward removing others' troubles."

The reason for this is that realization of the Universal Being, Brahman, which is all that exists, enables the enlightened to recognize it present as the Atman core reality of every person. All persons are necessarily "equal" in reality and value, and are spontaneously treated equally by the knower of Brahman. "Equal" is not quite the correct word, because the insight insists on the absolute unity of all. It is not so much "I am equal to you" as "I am in you and you are in me": "You and I are One."

Both the discrimination leading to insight and the intention-energy that must power and accompany it are laid out in various traditions in great detail. Shankara speaks of both renunciation and cultivation. The former includes not only our activities but our social identification. We are told more than once not to identify with our family lineage or social class (caste). Then we are to cultivate the even-mindedness that promotes the equal respect for all spoken of above. Having renounced seeking the usual sources of pleasure and resenting the many pains and difficulties of human life, we are urged to practice being contented, straightforward, calm, forbearing, forgiving, and compassionate.

The structure of human consciousness is next explained. There are several ways of doing this in the different schools. A frequently used way is in terms of the *koshas*, or sheaths, levels of consciousness nested inside one another. The outermost is matter (body made of food), inside which is the energy body, supported by breath and other movements. Then comes mind, receiving, processing, and directing the acting on and remembering of the information from the environment. Within this is intellect, which understands and reasons and sees to some extent, appreciating value. Last is the sheath of contingent happiness. Our sense of identity, of "who we are," can gradually shift inward and upward through these grades (VCM,367,369ff).

Reasoning points out that all these levels of consciousness are contingent on circumstances beyond themselves as well as within themselves; their phases and forms come and go, and their contents, whatever they may be, are essentially *finite*. None of them is the Self, the Atman. But the Atman is found at the center of the whole set of sheaths, transcending them all, but also empowering them all. They all are, so to speak, forms or modifications, or projections and expressions of the Atman itself.

We are urged to meditate intensely on experiencing ourselves as *being* the central Atman. We are not to *look toward* the Atman as a goal beyond, distinct from, or separate from, ourselves. We are not on a “journey” to it. We are simply trying to wake up to the fact that we are it—that’s what we have always been, what we always are (VCM,380,381). This has initially to be a conscious and persistent effort. We need to hear the truth from our teacher, reflect on it, give the mind constantly to it. We are to become proficient in remaining in a long unbroken flow of consciousness around this root reality of our being. Although we at first need to stop other activity to concentrate on this thought, we must become able to maintain it while acting, in fact to *act from* this awareness more and more. Shankara presses us in strong terms to be constant and faithful in this practice (VCM,321-329) and promises that “as the mind becomes gradually established in the Inmost Self, it proportionately gives up the desires for external objects. And when all such desires have been eliminated, there takes place the unobstructed realization of the Atman” (VCM,276).

The state gained is not an “altered state of consciousness” such as can be induced by drugs, fasting, whirling, staring, self-hypnosis, or any such devices. It is a clear insight into how everything is, and it is maintained in ordinary waking consciousness. Swami Siddheswarananda, commenting on the Mandukya Upanishad, says that the Mandukya “teaches us ‘to see Brahman with open eyes.’” Coming into this realization is “not a matter of personal development ... not the outcome of a discipline.” The insight is not “practiced as one would practice yoga.”¹⁹

The essence of the insight is that the Ground, called Brahman if we are speaking of the ground of the universe which we behold, and called Atman if we speak of the ground of our subjective self, is the whole of reality. Shankara tells us, “Whatever is manifested,” that is, appearing in the various finite forms of the universe, including human beings, “is the Supreme Brahman Itself, the Real, the One without a second [that is, having no “other,” no environment, no opposite, no further context ²⁰], pure [not compounded of simpler beings], the Essence of Knowledge,” without beginning or end, “eternal ... indivisible ... formless, undifferentiated, nameless, immutable, self-luminous” (VCM,237-238). He assures us that the tradition insists that the manifested is not something separate from the Ground (VCM,478). Perhaps we could say that the manifestation is “consubstantial with” the Ground. And this affirmation is made of any and all manifestations, without exclusion or preference.

Shiva Nataraja and the Wonderful World

Now let us go back to Arunachula and to the circumambulation of the holy Mountain as representing Shiva in his aspect as Nataraja, king of the dance. Shiva dancing is the “other half” of Shiva transcendent and is what I am calling the “wonderful world.” As indicated in the beginning of this essay, the Shiva theology

allows the transcendent aspect and the expressive aspect to co-exist in reality and value. Shankara's effort was directed to enabling us to see that all the dancing of the world is nothing separate or different from Shiva transcendent. There is only Shiva, transcendent and dancing. And we are That. We as Atman are both transcendent and dancing as world. This dancing is what I called "God's ecstasy," a kind of flaring out of divine exuberance. For the world is truly wonderful, and the more one studies it, the more wonderful it is understood to be. This is probably the most important relation between science and spirituality. Spirituality that has missed, neglected, or denied the wonderfulness of the world is out of touch with reality!

A twentieth century Indian philosopher-yogin has taken up this point and developed the theme that the Transcendent's expressivity is an essential aspect of What Is. Aurobindo Ghose (d. 1950) has argued that the world is not an illusion or a mistake or an accident or a testing ground for souls. It is the Ground's own natural and spontaneous, even intentional, act. Thus the world is never separate from the Ground, never something else or other. It is the Ground in action and the action is the Ground. This is why the image of the Dancer is so appropriate.

Aurobindo sees the Absolute as having three Poises: Transcendent, Cosmic, and Individual. The Transcendent we are already familiar with. The Cosmic Poise is a Conscious Energy which is the global foundation for the Individual Poise of numerous beings of various sorts.²¹ This Cosmic Conscious Energy suggests that we answer the question raised earlier as to whether all levels and kinds of beings in the universe shall be said to have "consciousness" in some way. David Chalmers had allowed that some kind of panpsychism might be possible and even expected, for if consciousness is a primitive, where (and why?) should we draw a line between those conscious and those not?²² Especially as there are animals close to us who are obviously conscious.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin also put forward the view that all of the cosmic order is both conscious and complex, and that the two traits evolve together, consciousness advancing as complexity increases.²³ Such a view helps us to attempt a definition of embodied, finite consciousness as the activity of receiving information about significant aspects of the conscious one's environment and processing this information in a way that can specify a behavior that is a relevant response to the received information. By this definition even a proton could be said to be "conscious," for it can detect the presence nearby of another proton and either repel it by the electromagnetic force or adhere to it by the strong nuclear force.

According to Aurobindo, we (presently embodied as human beings) can be conscious in all three poises, for the three are fundamentally one, What Is.²⁴ This being granted, Aurobindo proceeds to speak strongly for the reality of the world as Divine Presence and accords it a purposeful existence. Its multiplicity and variety are divine expressions, gestures and features of what we have called Shiva's Dance. The creative intention is spontaneous (natural, inevitable) self-expression on the part of the Divine Ground and has as its value the joy of creating beauty and happiness.²⁵

Aurobindo deals with the reality and value of the world in the context of its pain, fear, and destructiveness by developing the theme of evolution. The world is in process. It is making itself and passing through a series of what we now call “phase transitions.” It has a long way to go yet to clear itself of what we consider its disobliging features. But Aurobindo has high hopes for it, especially since it has evolved human intelligence, discovery and invention abilities, and moral sensitivity. One needs to consider that if the materialist scientists/philosophers are right, human moral, esthetic, and personal presence abilities are rather impressive behaviors for a bunch of carbon molecules, even fancy ones. Teilhard remarked in the same way, that the universe has already passed through so many marvelous evolutionary stages, we should be completely justified in expecting that it will continue and will do even more wonderful things.²⁶

Their shared feeling is that there must be some built-in drive in the natural world to pass from one transformation to another. This drive seems to operate by means of randomness (to get variety) and selection (to secure fitting in with the rest of the world), as well as by alternating speciation and symbiosis. But the overall character of the whole enterprise is such that it is difficult to avoid seeing it as the expression of some profound universal purpose expressing itself in the cosmic hierarchy of reiterated relative transcendence and inclusion. And it arises from and continues by, basically, a handful of simple natural laws regulating a few primitive kinds of being. Why should we not call this “wonderful”? Why not celebrate it under the image of a Dancing Deity?

Thus, Aurobindo sees all our efforts in science, art, community life, and spirituality as united in a grand drama, the Purnadvaita—integral nondualism: the whole, enormously varied, amazingly evolved and transforming world, which is the One Being, the Transcendent and Cosmic Absolute, dancing. And we, as we go round the holy—whole—mountain of Reality, participate in the dance, observe the other figures of the dance, the continuous unlimited creativity of this Divine Dancer, “in whom we live and move and have our being,” indeed, who we **are**. With our mystic consciousness merged in the Transcendent, we are delighted by the circumambulation, the wonderful complexity and novelty expressive in apparently endless ways by the One Presence.

Afterword

I propose that, in honor of Father Bede, we develop the area of science and spirituality, studying science to understand better and appreciate the wonderful world, and practicing spirituality to experience the totality of the Real, Brahman/Atman, our own subjective presence and our participation in the objective presence of the world, as what we have here called Shiva Transcendent and Shiva Dancing, Arunachula circumambulated.

Endnotes

1. See Shirley du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness: A Biography of Bede Griffiths* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 210ff.
2. Abhishiktananda, *The Secret of Arunachala* (New Delhi: ISCPK, 1979), 115.
3. Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Shiva* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 162-64; see also 37, 158-59, 168-69, 433.
4. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), 73 and its note 3, 75 and note 4.
5. Kramrisch, 21, 424.
6. *Ibid.*, 428.
7. For a summary of these, see Beatrice Bruteau, *God's Ecstasy: The Creation of a Self-Creating World* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 152-62.
8. John G. Taylor, *The Race for Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999), 122-23.
9. See, for instance, Tor Noerretanders, *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size* (New York: Viking, original 1991; tr. by Jonathan Sydenham, 1998).
10. Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett, *The Mind's I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul* (New York: Bantam, 1982), 8-10.
11. David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 305; for "double-aspect," see 284-87 and *passim*.
12. Bruteau, *Ecstasy*, 157-59.
13. David Layzer, *Cosmogenesis: The Growth of Order in the Universe* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990), 260.
14. Karl R. Popper and John C. Eccles, *The Self and Its Brain: An Argument for Interactionism* (Boston: Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 554.
15. Bruteau, *Ecstasy*, 159.
16. Eugene Wigner, "Are We Machines?" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 113 (1969): 95-101.
17. Alwyn Scott, *Stairway to the Mind* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1995), 167.
18. I have used *Vivekachudamani of Shri Shankaracharya: Text, with English Translation, Notes and Index*, by Swami Madhavananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 6th ed., 1957).
19. Swami Siddheswarananda, Lectures on the Mandukya Upanishad, "The Metaphysical Insight," Vedanta Center of Atlanta (2331 Brockett Rd., Tucker, GA 30084).
20. It is not a case of God vs. World, God vs. Satan, God vs. humans, bondage vs. freedom (VCM, 570), sin vs. redemption, lost vs. saved, etc.
21. Beatrice Bruteau, *Worthy Is the World: The Hindu Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1971), 48.
22. Chalmers, 305, 297 ff.

^{23.} Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (Harper & Row, 1961), and Beatrice Bruteau, *Evolution Toward Divinity: Teilhard de Chardin and the Hindu Traditions* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1974).

^{24.} Bruteau, *Worthy*, 49.

^{25.} *Ibid.*, 170.

^{26.} Bruteau, *Evolution*, esp. 162 (in a long section on both Aurobindo and Teilhard).