

The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami

Abhishiktananda

by Shirley du Boulay

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Reviewed by Harry Oldmeadow⁵⁵

Father Henri Le Saux, a French Benedictine monk, arrived in South India in 1949 to join his compatriot, Father Jules Monchanin, in the establishment of a ‘Christian Ashram’ at Kulittalai, on the banks of the sacred Kavery River. In *A Benedictine Ashram* (first published 1951) they articulated their goal this way:

... to form the first nucleus of a monastery (or rather a *laura*, a grouping of neighboring anchorites like the ancient *laura* of Saint Sabas in Palestine) which buttresses the Rule of Saint Benedict — a primitive, sober, discrete rule. Only one purpose: to seek God. And the monastery will be Indian style. We would like to crystallize and transubstantiate the search of the Hindu *sannyasa*. *Advaita* and the praise of the Trinity are our only aim. This means we must grasp the authentic Hindu search for God in order to Christianize it, starting with ourselves first of all, from within.

In short: Vedantic philosophy, Christian theology, Indian lifestyle. The hope was that ‘what is deepest in Christianity may be grafted on to what is deepest in India’. This was not a syncretic exercise which would issue forth some kind of religious hybrid but an attempt to fathom the depths of Christianity with the aid of the traditional wisdom of India which, in the monks’ view, was to be found in Vedanta and in the spiritual disciplines of the renunciate. The bridge between Indian spirituality and the Church was to be monasticism, ‘the plane whereon they may feel themselves in consonance with each other’. They looked forward to the day when God would send to the hermitage many ‘true sons of India, sons of her blood and sons of her soul’,

priests and laymen alike, gifted with a deep spirit of prayer, an heroic patience, a total surrender, endowed with an iron will and right judgment, longing for the heights of contemplation, and equipped, too, with a deep and intimate knowledge of Christian doctrine and Indian thought...

The lifestyle at the ashram was to be thoroughly Indian: meditation, prayer, study of the Scriptures of both traditions, a simple vegetarian diet, the most Spartan of amenities. Each

⁵⁵ Harry Oldmeadow’s forthcoming book, *Abhishiktananda: A Christian Pilgrim in India*, will be published by World Wisdom Books.

donned the ochre cloth of the *sanny_s_* and lived Indian-style — sleeping on the floor, dispensing with almost all furniture, eating with the hands, and so on.

Thus it was that Le Saux, soon to be known as Swami Abhishiktananda, embarked on a spiritual journey which continued to the end of his life in 1973. Shantivanam, the ashram opened on the Feast of St Benedict, 1950, later came to full fruition under the guidance of Father Bede Griffiths, and survives to this day. The establishment of the ashram is but one chapter in Abhishiktananda's life in India. Over nearly a quarter of a century he immersed himself in Advaita Vedanta and in the spiritual practices of Saivite Hinduism, always seeking a bridge between his deeply-rooted Christian faith and the mystical awakenings which came through his encounters with two indubitable Indian sages, Ramana Maharishi and Swami Gnanananda, and through his extended meditations and austerities on the holy mountain of Arunachala. Eventually Abhishiktananda left the ashram which he had founded with Monchanin, built a small hermitage at Gyansu in the Himalayas, and adopted the life of a semi-itinerant renunciate. In the last decade of his life he wrote about a dozen books, concerned with such subjects as Advaita Vedanta, the teachings of the *Upanishads*, Hindu-Christian dialogue, the Church in India and the ideal of renunciation. Among his most captivating and striking works are *Guru and Disciple* (first English edition, 1970), *The Further Shore* (1975) and *The Secret of Arunachala* (1978). He also wrote dozens of articles and maintained a spiritual journal, running to something in the order of two thousand pages by the time of his death.

There is now a burgeoning interest in the life and work of this obscure but quite extraordinary monk. Shirley du Boulay's *The Cave of the Heart* is the second biography to appear, following James Stuart's *Swami Abhishiktananda: his life told through his letters* (1989). Stuart undertook an heroic labour in assembling Abhishiktananda's prodigious correspondence, and in weaving it into an autobiographical narrative. As well as Stuart's work we have various articles, memoirs, tributes and the like, written by friends and acquaintances of 'Swami-ji'. Then, too, there are the excerpts from his journal, edited by his friend and internationally renowned scholar, Raimon Panikkar, and published as *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart* (1998). However, du Boulay provides us with the first full-dress biography which takes account of all the available sources and traces the full sweep of Abhishiktananda's life. She follows a more or less chronological trajectory, starting with the childhood of young Henri, the first of seven children born into a pious bourgeois family in St Briac, on the northern coast of Brittany. The story ends

sixty-three years later, in 1973; soon after Abhishiktananda has experienced a series of mystical illuminations in the Himalayas he is struck down by a heart attack in the marketplace of Rishikesh, one of the sacred cities of the Ganges. Between his childhood and his final days lies a remarkable pilgrimage which took Abhishiktananda deep into the spiritual treasure-hold of one of the world's primordial traditions.

The scope of the present review does not allow us to rehearse the inspiring and often poignant story of Abhishiktananda's life — his happy childhood which instilled an abiding love of his family and his homeland, the long years in a French monastery, the second World War, the 'call of India', the struggle to establish a Christian ashram in South India, the dramatic meetings with Ramana and Gnanananda, the direct and momentous lightning-strike of *advaita* (non-duality), the search for some sort of *experiential* and *existential* reconciliation of Vedantic non-dualism and Christian Trinitarianism, the lonely years of self-interrogation and self-doubt, the intrepid exploration of a foreign spiritual universe, bringing him finally to a resolution of the theological and existential predicaments entailed in the attempt to fully fathom the depths of the two religious traditions to which he was heir. Readers will find this story sympathetically and elegantly rendered in du Boulay's splendid biography.

Shirley du Boulay has a well-earned reputation as an intelligent, clear-eyed and sensitive biographer, having previously given us engaging studies of such figures as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, St Teresa of Avila and Father Bede Griffiths, another bridge-builder between the spiritual worlds of East and West, and one of Abhishiktananda's friends and associates. In her treatment of Abhishiktananda she navigates a skilful course between the Scylla and Charybdis which lie in wait for the unsuspecting biographer of religious subjects — the temptations of sentimental hagiography on one side, a corrosive 'debunking' exercise on the other. The biography is clearly a labour of love in tribute to a man whom the author admires deeply — and, indeed, what better motive could there be? She is also attuned to the spiritual modalities which shaped the life of this pilgrim of the Absolute. Abhishiktananda's personal life is portrayed in some detail and the book sheds much light on his hitherto little-known life in France. *The Cave of the Heart* is generously illustrated with many photographs, not only of Abhishiktananda at various stages in his life, but of his family, friends and teachers. The biography is not marred by the heavy-handed and impertinent psychologism which is so much in vogue these days. This highly readable book is written with a light and deft touch, and is burdened with neither unnecessary theological

speculation nor pompous academic theorizing In the end, du Boulay is interested not only in the contours of this particular life but in its exemplary significance. Both in his own person and through his writings Abhishiktananda communicated a timeless teaching about the inner unity of all the great religious traditions, a message of the most urgent significance in our own troubled times.

Many years ago, in *Sufi Essays* (1971), Seyyed Hossein Nasr wrote of

those vocation it is to provide the keys with which the treasury of wisdom of other traditions can be unlocked, revealing to those who are destined to receive this wisdom the essential unity and universality and at the same time the formal diversity of tradition and revelation.

To be sure, Abhishiktananda belonged to this small company. Much of Abhishiktananda's thought, tempered in the crucible of his Indian experiences, was in accord with the *sophia perennis* which has been so authoritatively expounded in recent times by figures such as René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon and Titus Burckhardt. Abhishiktananda did not have recourse to their work and he occasionally succumbed to some of the prejudices of modernity; but he intuitively understood that the surest guides on the spiritual path were the great Scriptures, the teaching and example of the saints and sages, and the religious forms and spiritual practices sanctioned by Tradition. In his case this meant an immersion in both the Gospels and the *Upanishads*, a devotion to both the Church Fathers and to his Indian gurus, an unflinching fidelity to his monastic vocation, and an untiring search for the *inner meaning* of the religious rites and disciplines of both Latin Christianity and Saivite Hinduism. He also came to the hard-earned understanding that the necessary formal diversity of religions is complemented by an inner harmony — by what Schuon called 'the transcendent unity of religions'. As Abhishiktananda wrote in *Saccidananda* (first French edition 1965), '...diversity does not mean disunity, once the Centre of all has been reached.'

If pressed for a criticism of du Boulay's book, one might suggest that this aspect of Abhishiktananda's life and work is not given the kind of close-grained study which it deserves. It might also be argued that our biographer marvellously evokes the mystical riches of the Catholic tradition but that the further reaches of Hindu spirituality are perhaps sometimes beyond her grasp. But it would be mean-spirited to dwell on those things which the book does not do — let us rather give thanks for its very considerable accomplishments. *The Cave of the Heart* will perform a noble service in bringing the attention of a much wider audience to one of the few

spiritual luminaries of recent times. In our own crepuscular era, the story of Abhishiktananda's life will provide hope, inspiration and guidance for all genuine spiritual wayfarers, no matter on what particular path they are travelling. Here are the closing lines from this fine biography:

Here was someone who risked everything, who reached his goal... Abhishiktananda was a pioneer who had the courage to break boundaries and to forge a path that inspires and illumines people today... Over his sixty-three years he himself was transformed, but the significance of his life has not stopped there. This was a man who joined a small group of people whose lives have changed our perception and reminded us that we are all capable of simply 'being' and that the Awakening is there for all of us (p242).