

1. Editorial

2. Sri Jnaneswar: The Saint of Maharashtra - *Smt SavitribaiKhanolkar*

3. Leaves of an Ashrama: 7 The Expatriot as a Patriot -

Swami Vidyatmananda

4. The Gospel of Chomsky

A Comparison of Dr. Noam Chomsky's Worldview and Advaita Vedanta

Jon Monday

5. The Eligibles and the Ineligibles - *Swami Bodhaswarupananda*

6. St. Teresa, Bride of the Sun (continued)

Swami Atmarupananda

Editorial

Charity

Sri Krishna tells us that charity is one of the divine qualities; certainly it is a great and necessary virtue.

What is charity? It is not merely giving a gift, or helping or serving. It is an attitude, a way of looking at the world. Kindness, compassion, respect, sweet speaking, and prayer for the welfare of others are expressions of charity.

Charity is love of God and love of man.

Charity is living a simple life; it is a way of reducing selfishness and egotism; it helps us develop non-attachment towards the world. It is a way of sharing and caring, loving and serving. Charity is an inevitable expression of love. In a way it is a way of giving back to the world what we receive from it. *Real charity is to offer oneself to God and see the*

divine in all beings.

There are three types of charity - material, intellectual and spiritual. Of these spiritual charity, helping one to reach God, is the highest. No other charity can be compared to spiritual charity.

Charity should be practised with sincerity, humility, devotion, reverence and without expecting any return. Charity is done purely for pleasing the Lord.

Holy Mother used to say: Those who have wealth must measure it out, and those who do not have should pray for the welfare of the needy.'

Swami Dayatmananda

Sri Jnaneswar: The Saint of Maharashtra

Smt SavitribaiKhanolkar

As the mist lay slumbering on the silent river, two little shadows moved lightly on the path skirting the contours of the water. The mist muffled sound and darkness in a soft eerie substance which seemed to part easily before the steps of the young boys. They wore only loin cloths and no upper garments. They held hands and moved as if they were completely free of worldly concern. Their heads lifted up, with a slight tilt of independence seen only in Self-realised yogis. Their eyes, full of tenderness, were intent on some inner purpose. Well, the eldest was Nivrtti who could have been a little over ten years old, and the younger was Jnaneswar, his middle brother, two years his junior. On what could they be intent, skimming thus through the nebulous haze of pre-dawn hours?

Soon, Nivrtti pointed out the sacred Udumbara tree¹ by the Godavari river where Rsi Gautama taught, back in hoary antiquity.

'Jnani, this is the place. Come, let us both sit under the sacred tree and do pay attention to what I'm about to say.'

'O Nivrtti, my beloved elder brother,' pleaded Jnaneswar, 'as you are my guru, let me sit at your blessed feet so that I may worship you and imbibe fully your teaching.'

So it came to pass, as one says in stories that happened long, long ago, that the elder child initiated his little brother in the mystery of unfathomable Brahman and the whole universe.

What passed between them can best be assessed by their own lives and teachings.

Let us linger a while yet near the Udumbara tree as the river mists slowly rise and the light of Jnaneswar's eyes seems to brighten while day is already on the threshold. The inner Light of Knowledge blazed forth in tune with the newly risen sun illuminating the world. Placing his forehead tenderly on his brother's feet, Jnaneswar with tears of love streaming down his adoring face, worshipped Nivrtti with all his heart.

A few days later it was Jnaneswar's turn to initiate his younger brother Sopana and sister Mukta. Sopana must have been over six and little Mukta four or five, yet such was their inner strength and grasp of spiritual Truths combined with the holy background of their upbringing, that these successive initiations passed the sacred knowledge as from one lamp to another with ease and conviction that left no place or corner vacant for the stealing in of darkness or doubt.

Their parents were Vitthala Pant and Rakhumai, brahmins from Apegaon and Alandi. Due to a misunderstanding between Vitthala Pant and his guru, the great Ramananda of Kashi, he was forced to relinquish sannyasa and return to the life of a householder which he had long since renounced. Such unprecedented behaviour in times of brahminical influence was instrumental in the whole family becoming ostracised. Nivrtti was born in 1273 and Jnaneswar in 1275. The irate pandits of Alandi adamantly refused Vitthala Pant permission to initiate his sons in the ways of brahminhood; in other words, to enable them to wear the sacred thread. Finally, moved by his humble supplications, they relented and referred him to the more learned pandits of Pratisthana (Paithan). So the little family in their peregrinations came to settle down for a while at Tryambakeswar on the banks of the Godavari.

It was during one of their peregrinations on the Brahmagiri before daylight, that a tiger suddenly pounced on the little group, scattering them in all directions. Nivrtti, the eldest boy, fled into the recesses of the mountain, losing his way so completely that he chanced to enter a deep cave where an enchanting sight met his eyes. In the dancing light of wood and cowdung fires, he saw humans and animals mingling in undisturbed

harmony. Was he not greeted by a tiger similar to the one that had given them such fright? The big cat lay sprawled at the feet of some yogi lost in deep meditation. Back to back were deer and panthers, birds of all kinds and even snakes, coiled peacefully round pillars of branches. Nivrtti approached cautiously and discovered from one of the anchorites moving about the place that the yogi in meditation was their guru Gaininath, a disciple of Goraksanath. The yogi opened his eyes and looked reflectively at the shy young boy who seemed transparent with purity and vibrant with the inner forces of introspection and self-discipline. The boy stood as it were at the very gates of the arduous path of Self-realisation.

'Come here, child; who are you and how did you come here?' said the yogi.

Most humbly Nivrtti fell at his feet and related the events that brought him there. The yogi smiled and assured him that his coming was no accident, for his guru had correctly predicted it and urged him to initiate Nivrtti, demanding that in turn Nivrtti should initiate his brother Jnaneswar who was destined to bring salvation to many.

When the perfect guru meets the right disciple, time is no factor in imparting knowledge. Within eight days Nivrtti learnt all that there was to know. All four heavenly children were indeed ready to receive that pure knowledge of yoga. It was already ingrained in their soul, and the act of initiation was actually the revealing or rekindling of that existing fire of Truth.

When their parents saw that all their children shone with the inner effulgence of Self-realisation, radiating love that is divine, they left them to proceed to Prayag (Allahabad) at the confluence of the three sacred rivers, where they offered their lives to the One unchangeable Infinite.

This left the children free to wander where the will of God took them so they headed for Pratisthana. After rescuing the children from exhaustion, the pandits of the sacred city confronted them with a haughty rebuttal of their claims, and the priests refused to give them the letter of purification from their parent's sins. There ensued an argument with the children until Jnaneswar quoted the Vedas to the great irritation of the head priest, who snapped: 'Do not trifle with the Vedas for you are all outcastes!' But Jnaneswar patiently argued that the Vedas were being misinterpreted and that all creatures were free to recite them. Even the heavy he-buffalo passing by the temple gates was no

exception. Amidst loud guffaws, the brahmins ordered the buffalo to be brought into the assembly hall and then with incredulous stares asked the fearless boy standing humbly before them whether the animal possessed that knowledge. Jnaneswar without any hesitation assured them that it was so, for the Self indeed was manifest in the whole universe whether consciously or unconsciously. The brahmins roared with laughter and said: 'Well, let the buffalo recite the Vedas!' Still unruffled, Jnaneswar appealed to the Divine within the beast and spoke to him softly, gently stroking his forehead. The boy began to recite a passage in the *Rg-Veda* which describes the sacred letter Aum and from then on, the buffalo took over and chanted the *Rg-Veda* in a deep and sonorous voice.

The heart of the pandits underwent an instant change, and while true introspection caused them at first to remain glued to their seats they suddenly rose as one man and humbly prostrated and surrendered to the slender feet of the child they now regarded as Divine Knowledge incarnate.

Censure and praise did not affect the young ones. They accepted both in their serene way and then proceeded on their journey and settled for some years in a village called Nevase where Jnaneswar, still in his early teens, composed his Marathi translation of the Gita with his own original commentaries, and other immortal works of philosophy such as the Amrtanubhava, as well as verses of pure enraptured love of God. Seldom has one so young been seen to achieve and combine the sublime goals of knowledge and devotion at one and the same time. It seems as if Jnaneswar swam freely in both currents and so proved them to be one. In fact all the four children did the same with the greatest ease. True to his humble nature, Jnaneswar attributed his success and achievements entirely to the grace of his guru Nivrutti.

Meanwhile the Alandi brahmins also underwent a change in their attitude to the holy family and in sincere repentance begged them to return to their homeland. Once in Alandi, they made several more disciples including a formidable yogi said to be 1400 years old who practised Hatha-Yoga, by which he renewed his body cells at regular intervals. Changadeva, as he was called, gave up his arrogance and supernatural powers and meekly accepted young Mukta as his guru.

We must remember also that in Maharashtra of seven centuries ago, two main thought-currents were predominant among the masses: that of the Nathas and the other, the

Varkari Sampradaya of the devotees of the Vitthala of Pandharpur. Jnaneswar was quick to sense the need of the illiterate villagers, their constant yearning for a personal God they could feel as their own and confide in. Whatever they got from religion came through the mouths of pandits who spoke as they pleased, since none else knew Sanskrit. Jnaneswar brought them the Gita in their own language and embellished it with such vivid commentaries as charmed his audience wherever he taught. He named his work the Bhavartha Dipika, later known as the Jnaneswari. This was followed by the Amrtanubhava, a treatise expounding his own philosophy, as subtle and profound as his own heart.

The young ones made several pilgrimages to the sacred city of Pandharpur where they mingled with other saints and encouraged the popular feelings of devotion to a God who was both personal and impersonal, who was their constant friend and yet was everywhere in all things. The other saints, who numbered over a score, were no less worthy of admiration. They all had their trials and tribulations and came out of the fire ordeal unscathed, with their faith intact. Most of them belonged to the lower castes or were even outcastes. This did not prevent them from realising the truth of Vedantic Oneness which they achieved without the least effort or tuition. All they knew was complete surrender to God, and that act itself opened the door to the knowledge of the Self.

Does this not go to prove that the paths of knowledge and devotion converge into one through the sincerity of the devotee?

Their matchless verses (*abhahges*) proclaim ceaselessly the fact that 'O Lord, Thou art ever One, not two!' (*duja nahi!*). Even the little maidservant of Namadeva, the saint Janabai, declares the same in all her songs overflowing with pure love of Panduranga, (Krsna). So did the *mali* (gardener) Sawata: 'Thou art the well, the ropes, the bucket and the bullocks and the water flowing in peace to the blossoming plants which Thou art!'

Kanhopatra, the courtesan turned devotee of later centuries, cries to her Lord: 'The devotees are but your other forms.' Namadeva the tailor left his meal to chase a dog who had stolen a piece of bread from his plate, exclaiming: 'O Lord, please take this ghee too, lest your stomach ache after eating dry bread.'

This innate conviction of the Oneness of the Universal Spirit singles out the

Maharashtrian devotees as a class of their own, far above the concept of dualism. Besides, they all shared the same humility, the same love of God and of all his devotees, nay, of all creation. They all renounced every desire for worldly possessions and attained complete unattachment. Neither were they given to ostentatiousness or spectacular fits like epileptics. They led quite normal lives.

They were the most perfect combination of Jnana and Bhakti, which they practised every moment of their lives. True yogis par excellence. Apart from a few like Jnaneswar and his family, they were all householders.

Jnaneswar was chosen unanimously the leader of the Varkaris, the devotees of Vitthala (otherwise known as Panduranga). His deep philosophy never clashed with his teachings on Bhakti, a similarity with the great Sankaracarya. Those devotees had no inkling of difference between castes and creeds. Siva was extolled as much as Visnu, both merged into the One same Divinity. Their pure hearts were utterly free from petty bigotry, pride, lust, envy and other mind-shrinking feelings.

Saint Jnaneswar and Saint Namadeva found joy in each other's company and became close friends. They were the first proponents of the Hari Sankirtana or the mass singing of the names of God. It is still remembered in South India where every Kirtana begins with due salutation and respect to these two saints.

When he approached his twenties, Jnaneswar left for a pilgrimage to the North, accompanied by his faithful friends Namadeva and other saints. They preached as far off as Punjab.

On their return there were great rejoicings in Pandharpur where Kirtanas rocked the temple with the force of unison. It was the high tide of an ocean of joy with devotees and saints dancing in waves of bliss. By that time not only Pandharpur but the whole of Maharashtra burst forth like a forest of flowers as Kirtanas swayed villages and towns with the compulsive force of their dancing and singing the blessed names of God to their heart's content. Maharashtra resounded thus with the purifying names of 'Rama, Krsna, Hari Vitthala Panduranga!' to which they danced in complete abandon of worldly cares, without awareness of the physical world, totally intoxicated with the bliss of the Lord. No one today can even picture in his mind the bliss of what these Kirtanas must have been when one recalls that they were conducted and attended by scores of fully Self-

realised saints! God's name rose like a lion's roar invading the whole firmament. It transformed, it revived and bathed the entire universe in peace and flooded it with pure love. Blessed, blessed indeed is Maharashtra to have nurtured these great souls at one and the same time!

It was after such a Kirtana that Jnaneswar confided in his friend Namadeva that the time had come for him to leave this world. The news so stunned Namadeva that he was unable to comprehend. Jnaneswar who had always been his friend, his support, to leave them all, just like that? His mute entreaty could not shake the young yogi's resolve. 'No, Namya, I have completed all the work I had come to do and now I must leave this body by wilful Samadhi at Alandi.'

Namadeva's tears brought together all the devotees who joined their entreaties to Namadeva's. Namadeva felt that even Panduranga expressed his sorrow at such a young life about to be forsaken, but Jnaneswar soothingly and ever so gently gave them hope in the serenity of the Infinite. 'Let Panduranga keep you and guide you. Don't grieve, I shall only leave my body. I shall always be with you.'

They had to bow to the inevitable and to the will of God who worked through them in His mysterious ways. Namadeva left us eyewitness accounts of these events, as well as biographies of other saints. His rendering of Jnaneswar's departure from this world is so moving, his pangs of separation so deep that one cannot remain unmoved by his heart-rending verses.

There must have been millions of devotees and saints present at Alandi where the fasting crowds regaled themselves with five days and nights of uninterrupted Kirtanas. The river Indrayani seemed to overflow her banks with delight.

Then, on the thirteenth day of the dark fortnight of Kartika (November-December), Jnaneswar bathed and put on the new ochre cloth (gerua). They marked his body with auspicious signs and slowly and tenderly led him to the final resting place of his youthful body. Yes, he was barely twenty-one! The pit had been dug to the left of the Siddheswar temple, at the foot of an Anjana [Ajana?] tree. They spread a deerskin, relates Namadeva, and showered fragrant petals.

The incessant singing and dancing went on, radiating joy around Jnaneswar. Yet Namadeva, Sopana and Mukta could not forget their grief and pangs of agony at the

coming separation. Namadeva could not bear to look at the freshly dug pit without feeling the loss of him on whom he had come to depend so much. 'O Jnanoba, you have been our father and mother. How shall life go on without you?'

Accompanied by the saints, Jnaneswar worshipped at the Siva temple (Siddheswar) and Namadeva poured the sanctified flowers in his hands. Then, as Kirtanas redoubled in power and the name of Govinda rent the air, the heavens seemed to add heavenly Vinas and Mrdangas². Walking in front of the two elder brothers were Sopana and Mukta. Jnaneswar embraced each in turn and Namadeva, who was too upset to utter a word, silently wept on his friend's breast. The singing of Hari's name continued unabated. 'Alas,' cried Namadeva as tears rolled down his face, 'my heart is suffering unbearable torments!'

Jnaneswar stood in their midst like a moonbeam of tender light, bowing to them all in humble leave-taking. Namadeva, Mukta and others threw themselves sobbing at his feet in a futile effort at dissuading him. Jnaneswar now could do no more than hand them all over to the care of Sri Vitthala, and with an infinite smile of love gave them assurance that he indeed would always remain their all in all.

With the assent of Nivrtti, Jnaneswar slowly descended to the waiting asana (seat). After bowing in all directions, he sat there, his hands in abhaya mudra³ resting on his lap. With his mind fixed in one single purpose, he concentrated on the rise of the Kundalini Sakti (power). Stage by stage the serpentine power rose and crossed the six cakras (psychic centres), abandoning them no sooner had it awakened them; and finally piercing the Brahmarandhra, or top of the head, he merged where he had always belonged, in the formless state of the Self. Cries of 'Glory to Jnaneswar!' resounded on all sides while Kirtanas never ceased and flowers fell in showers upon him. With tears in their eyes, the villagers rolled a heavy slab of stone and closed the aperture for ever. Nivrtti, Sopana, Mukta and Changadeva also abandoned their mortal coil within a year of Jnaneswar's becoming one with Brahman.

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Leaves of an Ashrama: 7 The Expatriot as Patriot

Swami Vidyatmananda

When reading *Orientalism* by Edward W. Said (Vintage, 1979), I fell upon a startling statement, attributed to the twelfth-century theologian and mystic, Hugh of St. Victor of Paris: "The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native soil is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the whole world is as a foreign land."

The words struck me like a blow. Not the first phrase. That was easy to agree with, and describes the bulk of humanity. By "homeland" and "soil" Hugh no doubt meant spiritual orientation. Most people are more or less comfortable in the religious homeland where they are born, and pay but passing attention to anything beyond - hence, beginners.

Nor the second phrase, for I had felt that sentiment grow in me. I no longer distinguished between creeds; religious boundaries had become obscured. I had even become unsure what was religious and what was not. As I had progressed in understanding I had become broad; I had come to realize that the spiritual impulse has moved people of all times and all persuasions in diverse but equally valid fashions. I saw the whole world as moving, in its terribly wobbly fashion (as was the case with me), towards enlightenment. Thus I could qualify, in Hugh's phrase, as already strong.

But the third proposition in Hugh's saying was astonishing: "...but he is perfect to whom the whole world is as a foreign land." What did that mean? It could only mean that, rapt in beatific vision, contemplating a wholly different landscape, one senses that the lesser soil of externals, of body, and of persons, is no longer one's home. One has already gone out of this world.

I had read a description of that condition in Swami Vivekananda's famous letter to Josephine MacLeod of 18 April 1900: "The world is, but not beautiful nor ugly, but as sensations without exciting any emotion. O Joe, the blessedness of it!... Things are all losing their relative proportions to me - my body among the first. Om That Existence!"

Yes, the mystics attain to that condition of being a stranger in their own homeland. Samsara (the cycle of rebirth) grinds on but they are somewhere else. I asked myself: Could I hope for the same? I set myself to musing about how it would feel to be a displaced person on one's former soil, existing only in the Om.

Well, for one thing, one wouldn't have to struggle any longer to prove oneself sure and capable, even to try to be recognized as "good". For another, one would no longer be

thrown into turmoil by the slings and arrows of everyday life, by black headlines, by the obligations imposed by others' loves and attachments, by the anxieties kindled by others' dislikes, by the clamour of unruly emotions, by the betrayals of the mind. High above the mele, bathed in peace. Ah, what paradise! How heavenly to find the world and one's own limiting persona in it a foreign land.

Suddenly a wave of nostalgia rose in me. Home-sickness for no-home. To exist in the Om! Could it be that yearning had come at last - that prerequisite for transcendence - yearning which I once heard compared to the howling of an injured dog. I'd always known I was born for something. Now I saw that it was for perfection, and knew that from now on I would do little else but howl until it came.

The Gospel of Chomsky

A Comparison of Dr. Noam Chomsky's Worldview and Advaita Vedanta

Jon Monday

I knew very little about Professor Noam Chomsky before I happened to watch a DVD documentary of him and his book *Manufacturing Consent*. It overwhelmed me and got me to think critically about politics, business, the world, and my personal life. I was mostly struck by the deep similarities between Chomsky's world view and that of Vedanta. I am writing this paper for two very different and distinct audiences: those who know of Chomsky, the scientist, but know nothing of the religious tenets of Vedanta, and those who know of Vedanta but know nothing of Chomsky. The point is to introduce both audiences to the striking similarities and convergence of ideas that originate from these two seemingly opposite sources. The challenge will be to cover the basic doctrines of each subject without becoming tedious, or presumptuous. So please, dear reader, bear with me if I review material that you are already familiar with.

I will be quoting from Chomsky (and his sources), Vedanta scriptures, and also the 19th century scientist Thomas Henry Huxley, 1825-1895. Huxley is included because he stands as a seminal figure between science and religion. He was a major advocate of the scientific method, an early supporter of Darwin's theory of Natural Selection, and also coined the word "agnostic" (meaning someone who finds no evidence for the existence of God, but neither does he find evidence that disproves the existence of God - and therefore keeps an open mind on the subject). He enthusiastically supported the idea

that science and religion needed to be held equally in high regard and that there need not be a conflict. I ran across a lecture given in 1859 by Huxley entitled Science and Religion, in which he discusses the problem, which is still relevant today:

"--of all the miserable superstitions which have ever tended to vex and enslave mankind, this notion of the antagonism of science and religion is the most mischievous."

"True science and true religion are twin-sisters, and the separation of either from the other is sure to prove the death of both. Science prospers exactly in proportion as it is religious; and religion flourishes in exact proportion to the scientific depth and firmness of its basis."

Many people would say that the current state of open-minded communication between the fields of science and religion is almost non-existent; and where communication does exist, it is mostly expressed as fruitless rants between sides whose dogmas prevent any real discussion of the issues. The guiding principals of both fields ought to be, as Rn Descartes believed (as paraphrased by Huxley): "Learn what is true in order to do what is right." The worst of blind science dogmatically pursues ends without consideration of the effects on the world, which we all share. The worst of blind religion dogmatically traps minds in an unreflective, unthinking, set of rules that seeks to keep out all contradictory facts. There's no need to describe the possible motives for science and religion to take these positions, as it hardly matters.

Science without a value dimension is useless, and potentially destructive; religion without self-verification is meaningless. Both science and religion ought to seek truth in the following manner: cast all dogma and assumptions aside, and drive to the core of the subject, until a universal principal or truth can be found. A simpler statement from Huxley says it clearly, "Sit down before fact like a little child, and be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly wherever and to whatever abyss Nature leads, or you shall learn nothing." This is what I feel both Chomsky and the Advaita Vedantist each practise and advocate.

Vedanta takes its name from the most ancient Hindu scriptures, the Vedas. While there are specific, historic, written Vedic texts, they are also considered to be without beginning and without end. They are the accumulated treasury of verifiable spiritual truths discovered by different mystics, saints, sages, and incarnations of God throughout

the ages.

Vedanta holds that all the major religions are true, just as many different paths lead to the same mountaintop. This is not to say that religions are all the same, but rather that they are all effectively leading to the same place. The analogy is given by Dr. Huston Smith, a leading scholar of the world's religions and former fellow colleague of Chomsky at MIT, that a pair of pants is plural at the bottom, but singular at the top. The various religions start from different positions in time, culture, and methods - but lead to the same goal: God realization and liberation.

Noam Chomsky first came to public attention for his radical theories of linguistics and later for his equally radical political and social views. In his biography, *A Life of Dissent*, he is described as having become interested in the study of language without the benefit of a theoretical background; but he was equipped with a feeling for, and interest in, historical processes, which led him to seek explanations rather than formulate descriptions. In 1955 he was given a position at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to work on the problem of machine translation of languages, which he felt was an impractical, and probably impossible, endeavour. Instead, he focused on philosophy, language, and human cognition. Over time, his linguistics theories became both accepted and lauded by some and detested by others in the field. By the mid-sixties he became identified with the anti-Vietnam War movement, and was a leading voice of dissent against the US government. His body of work, in both linguistics and politics, is as voluminous as it is significant, and includes *Manufacturing Consent*, *The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, *Language and Responsibility*, *Reflections on Language*, *Necessary Illusions*, *Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, *Syntactic Structures*, and *Language and Politics* - to name a few. An often used quote from The New York Times calls him, "arguably the most important intellectual alive".

In reading material written about and by Chomsky, you don't get an indication that he has any religious beliefs. In fact, he seems to be the perfect agnostic; as far as I can tell, he is not an atheist. Chomsky's main objection to religion seems to be that he thinks it requires irrational beliefs; he also has doubts about the purpose and utility of organized religion. However, I've found Chomsky's linguistics research and his political worldview to have strong parallels to the Jnana Yoga path of Advaita Vedanta (knowledge of the supreme reality, or Brahman, arrived at through reasoning and

discrimination). They are too similar to be mere coincidence.

In an email, I asked Chomsky (who describes himself as an anarcho-syndicalist) about a comment he made in the film, *Manufacturing Consent*, "--you mentioned the idea of a spiritual transformation, what did you mean by that?" To my great surprise and delight, he wrote back, "I don't recall the reference to 'spiritual transformation' but I'm sure it had no religious connotations. Rather, it must have had to do with significant change of consciousness, values, perceptions, etc., possibly even a reference to comments of Rosa Luxembourg..."

I researched Rosa Luxembourg and found many references in her writing that could (with a little editing) be religious essays, which talk about personal liberation, freedom, rebirth, and spiritual transformation. Of course, her references were all political - dealing with early socialism in Russia. Only the vocabulary is the same. Or is there a deeper connection?

I got further clues into Chomsky's religious outlook from an interview I found online:

"Do I believe in God? Can't answer, I'm afraid. I'm not being flippant, but I don't understand the question. What is it that I am supposed to believe or not believe in? Are you asking whether I believe there is something not in the universe (or the universes, if there are [maybe infinitely] many of them), and that somehow stands above them? I've never heard of any reason for believing that. Something else? What? There are many concepts of spirituality, among them, various notions of divinity developed in the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic religions. Within these, the concepts vary greatly. St. Augustine and others, for example, argued that one should not take seriously the Biblical account of God as an exaggerated human, and other Biblical accounts, because they were crafted so as to make the intended message intelligible to humans -- and on such grounds, he argued, organized religion ought to accept persuasive conclusions of science, a conception that Galileo appealed to (in vain) when he faced Papal censure.

"Anyway, without clarification of a kind I have never seen, I don't know whether I believe or don't believe in whatever a questioner has in mind."

In my research on Chomsky, I've discovered, among other things, that he has a multitude of very vocal critics, in both the political and linguistics fields. In a particularly vicious article I found on a right-wing, neo-conservative website, there was a good

encapsulation of Chomsky's theory of grammar (if you ignore the childish sarcasm), together with an analogy of its extension to religion that happens to be one of the very points I want to make:

"Prior to Chomsky, linguists engaged in a lot of data collection to understand the diversity of human language. However, Chomsky rejected this approach. He wanted to look into something 'deeper' (academese for 'pretentious and nonexistent'). So he invented something called 'universal grammar' which is somehow programmed into us at birth. Now it is obvious to anyone who's studied a foreign language that there is no such thing as 'universal grammar': there are a lot of differences between any two languages' structures. How does Chomsky account for these differences? He claims that we formulate 'deep structures' in our heads using 'universal grammar'. Then we use 'transformations' to change these (invisible, nonexistent) 'deep structures' into 'surface structures' (which are what we actually say and write). There are innumerable problems with this.

"Imagine if some professor said that there was a 'universal religion' programmed into us at birth. What if this person were, say, Buddhist? How would he explain the diversity of faiths around the world? He would say that all deities are 'transformations' of the 'underlying Buddha', all religious codes (e.g. the Ten Commandments, Sharia) are 'transformations' of the 'underlying dharma (Buddhist law)', etc. But, you then ask, how could a Muslim knowing nothing of Buddhism be an 'underlying Buddhist'? The professor would answer: 'Underlying religion' just IS."

Chomsky discovered universal grammar by diving deep into the idea of language, not just the particular use of a particular language. Not content to just compile lists of language attributes, he wanted to know the underlying principals of human language. He holds that if beings from another planet came to Earth, they would conclude that we all spoke dialects of the same language - they're that similar.

Similarly, Vedanta holds that if one dives deep into religion, not any particular religion, but the very idea of religion, one can find the underlying universal principals that support all the world's faiths. That is Vedanta; that is what a few enlightened teachers have learned, practised, and taught. To someone fixated on the surface reality, living only in the realm of appearances, names, and forms, everything is diversity, but one

who penetrates the surface finds unity.

It is not remarkable that true science and true religion happen to share a common and effective research method. Both Jnana Yoga and science teach that with dogma and pre-conceptions cast aside, with a clear mind, through pure reasoning, discrimination, and experimentation, a person can discover the true nature of the thing being studied - in whatever field.

What is truly remarkable to me is the extension of this inquiry by Chomsky into the very nature of our society, and how that worldview parallels Vedanta. I'm specifically referring to the Vedic idea of Maya, which can be loosely translated as "illusion". It refers to the deceptive nature of the temporal world. Vedanta holds that we are victims of Maya when we regard the objects and impressions of our perception as having an independent existence. They are illusions and only God has an absolute existence. He is called Brahman, Jehovah, Allah - different names for the same creator of the universe.

The Vedantic view of this world describes human experience as a movie projected onto a screen. We normally are only aware of the movie, but there is an underlying reality onto which the movie is projected. Maya is described as the force of nature that holds people's attention on this illusion. What gives that force its power is the desire people have for things - be it personal power, sensual pleasures, good health, or possessions. People crave things because they think it will make them content with their lives. But all too often, the objects of desire only bring the desire for more things, and ultimately disappointment (all people, no matter how healthy or wealthy, will eventually die, all power is illusory, and, of course, you can't take it with you).

Chomsky's view of Western society is that there is an underlying power structure that seeks to perpetuate itself by distracting people from real issues. This is achieved through consumerism (greed) and preoccupation with useless activities, such as spectator sports. He sees the entire US political spectrum, from Democrats to Republicans, liberals to conservatives, as part of that same power structure which controls the news and events, all of which have a profound impact on people's lives. This is richly described in *Manufacturing Consent*. While on the face of it, it would not seem that this power structure would be necessarily malevolent, but he makes the point that the underlying greed, consumerism, mixed with an oil-based economy inherently pits the "haves" against the "have nots". The ecology, native populations, and the poor are the

inevitable victims of that power structure.

I'm not suggesting that there is a direct link between Chomsky's linguistics studies and his view of the world, except to this extent; like the Jnana Yogi, he used his considerable powers of honest intellectual inquiry to study the world and has seen something true about how the world works, which happens to be in close accord with Vedanta's view of Maya.

Chomsky (paraphrasing his comments on Saul Kripke, a professor of philosophy at Princeton) acknowledges that reality is only apparent - being a table seems to be an essential property of a table. But, suppose we discover that the designer of this particular object had intended it to be a hard bed and that it is so used. Surely we would then say that the thing is not a table but a hard bed that looks like a table. But the thing is what it is.

Vedanta also holds that there is an essence of things beyond name and form. Say you walk into a darkened room and see a snake on the floor; you will experience fear, anxiety, and want to run away. But, with the light turned on you see that it is just a piece of rope, which you mistakenly perceived as a snake. The true nature of things can be known, through the light of reason. The world that we perceive with our normal senses is not reality, but is a projection onto Reality - which can be rightly perceived through a spiritual transformation. In the Chandogya Upanishad there is a discussion of knowledge of the true nature of things:

When Svetaketu was twelve years old, his father Uddalaka said to him, "Svetaketu, you must now go to school and study. None of our family, my child, is ignorant of Brahman."

Thereupon Svetaketu went to a teacher and studied for twelve years. After committing to memory all the Vedas, he returned home full of pride in his learning. His father, noticing the young man's conceit, said to him, "Svetaketu, have you asked for that knowledge by which we hear the unheard, by which we perceive the unperceivable, by which we know the unknowable?" "What is that knowledge, sir?" asked Svetaketu. "My child, as by knowing one lump of clay, all things made of clay are known, the difference being only in name and arising from speech, and the truth being that all are clay; as by knowing one nugget of gold, all things made of gold are known, the difference being only in name and arising from speech, and the truth being that all are gold - exactly so is

that knowledge, by knowing which we know all."

This is an example of the Vedantic discussion of the Universal Principal of human life and existence: don't just be content with knowing the names and forms of the things around you, but seek to know your true nature.

The terms Chomsky, and his influences, use to describe a more practical and humane society are often found in religious writings: liberation, spiritual transformation, freedom, etc. It's perhaps the method of arriving at these goals where Chomsky and Vedanta differ. Chomsky seeks a transformation of society, through political change, brought about by groups of like-minded people. Vedanta holds that society (this whole world as described as Maya) will not change its core nature, but it is the individual who can break free of its grip, experience a spiritual transformation, and become liberated. Only by an individual becoming free, are they in a position to influence others in society by their example.

As mentioned earlier, many of Chomsky's sources and statements can be, with just a few changes, perfectly in line with Vedanta. Here is an example from *Manufacturing Consent*:

Chomsky is asked, "How far does the success of Libertarianism, Socialism, or Anarchism really depend on a fundamental change in the nature of man and his motivation, his altruism, and also in his knowledge and sophistication?"

He answers, "I think it not only depends on it, but in fact, the whole purpose of Libertarianism and Socialism is that it will contribute to it. It will contribute to a spiritual transformation. Precisely that kind of great transformation in the way humans conceive of themselves, and their ability to act, to decide, to create, to produce, to inquire. Precisely that spiritual transformation that social thinkers from the left-Marxist tradition, from Luxemburg on over through anarchist-syndalists have always emphasized. So, on the one hand, it requires that spiritual transformation, on the other hand, its purpose is to create institutions which will contribute to that transformation.

And now, with just a few changes:

Vedanta is asked, "How far does the success of Religion really depend on a fundamental change in the nature of man and his motivation, his altruism, and also in his knowledge

and sophistication?" Answer: I think it not only depends on it, but in fact, the whole purpose of Religion is that it will contribute to it. It will contribute to a spiritual transformation. Precisely that kind of great transformation in the way humans conceive of themselves, and their ability to act, to decide, to create, to produce, to inquire. Precisely that spiritual transformation that religious thinkers from the Early Christian fathers, Buddhist scriptures, Vedic tradition, from the Baal Shem Tov through the Sufi mystics, have always emphasized. So, on the one hand, it requires that spiritual transformation, on the other hand, its purpose is to create institutions which will contribute to that transformation.

Just as the laws of physics existed and were true before their discovery, and would still be true even if all humanity forgot them, so it is with the truths that lay at the core of human existence. Religion, in its highest expression, embraces those truths, and Chomsky seems to have discovered them without a religious context, just as the ancient Rishis discovered them without a scientific context.

Where Vedanta and Chomsky differ most is that Vedanta scriptures also seek to explain the original cause of our state of existence. Chomsky, like many scientists, may believe that this is unknowable, and therefore not legitimately discussed. Again from the Chandogya Upanishad:

"In the beginning there was Existence, one only, without a second. Some say that in the beginning there was nonexistence only, and that out of that the universe was born. But how could such a thing be? How could existence be born of nonexistence? No, my son, in the beginning there was Existence alone - one only, without a second. He, the one, thought to himself: 'Let me be many, let me grow forth.' "Thus out of himself he projected the universe; and having projected out of himself the universe, he entered into every being and every thing. All that is, has its self in him alone. He is the truth. He is the subtle essence of all. He is the Self. And that, Svetaketu, That art Thou."

In Advaita Vedanta, it is not necessary to believe all this. What does matter is to seek the eternal truth of existence and lead an intentional life. Chomsky has shown that he has, in my opinion, "learned what is true, in order to do what is good" - living his life this way, by example, is in the Vedantic sense, a religious life, and need not be so in name.

The Eligibles and the Ineligibles

Swami Bodhaswarupananda

From one point of view the field of spiritual effort, the plane in which the soul strives to march back to its original home of perfection from where it strayed long ago, is an area in which there reign utter equality of opportunity, and sameness of results for identical effort, and the democratic atmosphere with its absence of privilege. The Lord's declaration in the Bhagavadgita 'I am the same to all beings; to Me there is none hateful, none dear' is the royal proclamation of a divine socialism not however based on any cold and dry and inconsiderate sameness, for the Lord is quick to add: 'But those who worship Me with devotion, are in Me, and I too am in them.'

The position is like this. There is fire. Its quality, its mission, is to give heat. Anyone who approaches fire gets warmed. He who keeps at a distance from it does not reap this benefit. The Lord's grace descends on His devotees, not however owing to any attachment on His part. Solar light falls all over, but in a dirtless mirror it is well reflected. So too the Deity which is omnipresent by its very nature is clearly manifested in hearts from which the dirt of nescience has been removed through the infilling of devotion.

The most remarkable thing about the human attempt to scale the heights of Reality is its extreme rarity of occurrence. Very, very few yearn for the light of true realization and the bliss of final beatitude in spite of the fact that what is assuredly got as the result of an intense quest after the ultimate is unmixed joy as well as peace everlasting. Men foolishly forego abundance and plenitude in a mad preference for the paltry and the fleeting. Despite the rationalism they fancy they are endowed with, they do not effectively realize what is for their permanent welfare. They opt for a moment's indulgence and an age of agony, rather than for a stern initial restraint to be followed by great and growing good. Such short-sightedness, such a suicidal disregard for one's own welfare on the part of the common man is a matter for pity. To this regrettable characteristic of human nature the Lord Himself makes a reference when He says in the Gita: 'Among thousands of men one perchance struggles for perfection.'

The path to perfection is not a bed of roses on which one can walk merrily along. The Upanishad speaks of the path to be as inaccessible as a razor's edge, which when sharpened, is difficult to tread on. Therefore it is not surprising that the practice of spiritual effort is not for all, is not even for the many; it is for the elect. The world of

men may be divided into two sections, in regard to the pursuit of spiritual ideals - a large one of ineligible and a small one of eligible.

Man no doubt forms the crest of evolution, but it is unfortunately not every man that rises to his fullest stature, utilising to his lasting advantage his latent possibilities. Many a man is guilty of wasting precious hidden talent. Though all men have a human exterior, many among them have an animal interior. Such men have naturally no credentials based on capacity, for entering the spiritual field. It must not be felt that there is any unkindness in this rejection of them, on the ground of their being unfit for a higher pursuit. It is rather a sense of realism that lies behind this sifting of men into eligibles and ineligibles. Sri Ramakrishna points out: 'A good and experienced Guru does not entrust valuable and exalted precepts to a worldly man, for he is sure to misinterpret and misuse them to suit his own mean ends.' He cites in this connection the example of an earthen pot once used for preparing curd. If milk is kept in it, the milk gets curdled. If it is used for cooking, it may crack upon the fire. Supreme wisdom cannot profitably be passed on to those who do not pant for it.

Sri Krishna after teaching the Gita to Arjuna at some length ends with uttering to him, in the intense brevity of just two verses, His Supreme Word, the profoundest of all. These two verses coming at the close of the Gita are to this effect:

'Occupy thy mind with Me, be devoted to Me, sacrifice to Me, bow down to Me. Thou shalt reach Myself; truly do I promise unto thee, for thou art dear to Me. Relinquishing all Dharmas (duties) take refuge in Me alone; I will liberate thee from all sins; grieve not.'

Having spoken out this last and sublimest instruction to His mighty disciple who with his delusion destroyed and his doubts cleared was only too ready to do His word, Sri Krishna immediately issued a prohibition. He told Arjuna, 'This is never to be spoken by thee to one who is devoid of austerities, or to one who is bereft of devotion; nor is it to be spoken to one who does not render service; nor to one who cavils at Me.'

Four classes of persons are specified here as totally ineligible to be told that which has been taught to Arjuna. They are infertile ground and any seed in such ground will not sprout. The teaching should not be wasted on such men as they.

Austerity is the test of spiritual earnestness. The aspirant must take to penance, and

practise the needed amount of mortification in order to counteract the tyranny of the flesh over personality and be ceaselessly given over to meditation and adherence to moral virtues. Every man has his duties according to his station in life and his soul-maturity, and these duties must be performed thoroughly, ungrudgingly and effectively. Also, all the faculties of man must be tuned to austerity.

The Gita speaks of different aspects of austerity. Physical austerity consists of the adoration of deva and dvija, guru and prajna (gods and the twice-born, preceptors and wise men); it also lies in purity and straightforward conduct, continence and non-injury. Verbal austerity is made of speech that causes no worry and is at the same time truthful, agreeable and beneficial; the study of the Vedas is also an element in it. These two austerities must be complemented by mental austerity which shows forth as serenity of mind, an attitude of kindness, silence, self-control, and purity of heart. In other words the man of austerity must possess composure and indrawnness, must not be harsh, must not be sense-bound, and must be free from any double-dealing in himself. Persons not endowed with the virtues mentioned above are ineligible to hope for and receive spiritual light. The scriptures speak of the effect of tapas (austerity) in glowing terms, saying that through austerity one attains everything worth having and attains the supreme state. Speaking of those who take to the 'fervent amendment of their whole life' and 'live most strictly under the cloistered discipline', the Imitation of Christ says: 'They seldom go abroad, they live retired, they are fed on the very poorest, they are coarsely clad, they labour much, they talk little, they keep late vigils, they rise early, they spend much time in prayer, they read frequently, and keep themselves in all discipline.'

Next among the ineligible, to the one who is devoid of austerity, is singled out the one who has no devotion (bhakti) to his credit. Devotion implies an attitude of respect and faith towards not only God, but also the Guru who is the pathfinder to God. The abhakta (the one not endowed with devotion) can hardly cognize the sublimity and the subtlety of the Lord's own utterance. To treat the abhakta to an expounding of the Song Celestial is to pour heavenly music into deaf ears. The true devotee's aspiration is well brought out in this passage of Thomas A Kempis:

'Who will give me, O Lord, to find Thee alone, to open my whole heart to Thee, and enjoy Thee as my soul desireth, and that no one may henceforth despise me, nor anything created move or regard me, but that Thou alone mayst speak to me, and I to

Thee, as the beloved is wont to speak to his beloved and a friend to be entertained with a friend.'

The third group of ineligibles consists of those who do not render service to the Guru (teacher). They too by their very nature are impervious to the message of spiritual perfection. The potency of Guru-seva in the field of spiritual effort is very great, and words can convey no idea of it; it is an experience to be felt and enjoyed. The Sanskrit word susrusa used in the Gita to mean 'service' also signifies the wish to hear. So the sense may also be taken to imply that the Scripture is not to be spoken to one who does not wish to hear it. An irrepressible yearning is the initial requisite to be possessed before one is qualified to listen to the scriptures.

The fourth factor of non-eligibility is the habit of cavilling at God. Cavilling at God is indicative of a deep-rooted aversion of the mind to all that is pure and holy, and reveals that base elements have gone into the make-up of the mind. 'Opposite poles attract' may be a law in electricity but in the psychological and spiritual realms what holds good is only the dictum 'birds of the same feather flock together'. There the pure and holy alone get to like the pure and the holy. The impure and the unholy are discarded from those realms even as the excreta of the crow are discarded with aversion by men. While minds that are impure and are consequently ineligible for the higher life abhor and recoil from the manifestation of the Divine in the person of a prophet or a preceptor, minds that are pure and are therefore eminently eligible for the higher life recognize, rejoice over, and reverently adore the advent of an Avatara (God-man). When God comes down as man quite a number miserably fail to recognize the Divine Descent. Not that His glory does not stream out in a thousand dazzling streams. But even if a hundred suns rise together, can a blind man have any idea of their brilliance? Those whose mind's eye is totally blind can form no idea of divine glory, even if they are in the very presence of that glory.

While the lot of the ineligibles, with their aversion to austerity, their lack of devotion, their indifference to service and their delight in denigrating Divinity, is to be deplored, it is not as if they face eternal damnation. The soul of man being essentially divine, there will come a time even to them when in their mad downward course they will stop, consider, turn back and march up. The Gita itself makes a very optimistic mention of this. The Lord says, 'If even a very wicked person worships Me with devotion to none else, he should be regarded as good, for he has rightly resolved. Soon does he become

righteous, and attain eternal Peace, O son of Kunti; boldly canst thou proclaim that My devotee is never destroyed.'

In the kingdom of God welcome always awaits the prodigal son. Krishna's generous assurance is re-echoed by Jesus also, when he narrates the parable of the sheep lost and found and adds, 'Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.'

The person who wishes to join the privileged ranks of the eligibles and hates to be relegated to the base multitude of ineligibles must not be weighed down by thoughts of the extreme smallness of the number of the former and of the hugeness of that of the latter. There is nothing to prevent him from walking into the right entrance, though as the Bible says, 'strait is the gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth into life, and few there be that find it.' He can easily take to the good way rather than to the pleasant one if only he listens to the still, small voice of God in him that persistently gives him the right advice, and does not, as the many do, allow himself to be swayed by sirens' voices. There is always a higher call in operation in every man, and a lower call too. Man must wisely and with a set determination discard the lower call, and tell the tempting Satan, in Christ's own words, 'Get thee hence, Satan.' Then the path becomes increasingly easy.

There are three big obstacles, however, to this happy consummation. The first is the extreme feebleness, if not the utter absence, of the right urge. How can a man be expected to go to the fountain of drinking water or even of very nectar, if he feels no thirst in him! If there is a dryness in his heart, ennui in his mind, a lassitude in his nerves, so far as the higher life is concerned, and he lies inert like a deflated tyre, how can he make an upward move? The remedy for this sorry state of affairs is resorting to satsangha, sacred company. Satsangha is highly efficacious, and imperceptibly transforms and reforms the person who seeks it. The blackest charcoal through a mere closeness to glowing embers sheds its darkness and gives out light and heat. The wondrous powers of Satsangha are clearly brought out in an anecdote narrated by Paramahansa Deva:

'In the Puranas we are told that when Uma, the Mother of the universe, incarnated Herself as the daughter of the Himalayas, She blessed her father with the vision of the various manifestations of the Omnipotent Mother. But when Giriraj (the king of the mountains) asked Her to show him the Brahman of the Vedas, Uma said, 'O father, if you

wish to realize Brahman, you must live in the company of holy men - men who have entirely given up the world.'

If holy company can lead one to God realisation itself what good can it not do to the aspirant?

We have Sri Ramakrishna's categorical assertion to this effect:

'The companionship of the holy and the wise is one of the main elements of spiritual progress.'

They say that when a man is in the grip of alcoholic intoxication, the administration of rice-water (water in which rice is washed) dissipates his intoxication. Sri Ramakrishna tells us that the society of pious men is comparable to the rice-water; it relieves worldly men drunk with the wine of vain desires from their intoxication.

The second of the big obstacles referred to above is doubt, unbelief. As the field of spirituality is a region in which sense-proofs are not possible, and super-sense perceptions are not to be had at the start itself, scepticism is an inevitable experience, in the beginning. To counteract this hesitancy to take things on trust, the earnest seeker must study trustworthy biographical accounts of realized souls. These accounts are like travel-diaries and route-maps of pioneering adventurers and explorers, and are of much use to latter-day pilgrims.

For the man of today no biography fulfils the purpose of a reliable guidebook so well as that of Sri Ramakrishna. This is because the Saint of Dakshineswar is a fact of today and though what has been recorded of his realization is breath-taking in the extreme, every syllable of it is true and is founded on personal experience, and this fact has been verified by his disciples who believed only after the most rigorous testing and questioning. In Sri Ramakrishna we find the most extraordinary manifestation of soul-power ever released for the good of the world.

Yet another obstacle to progress is gullibility. The spiritual seeker must be quite discriminating and critical. Because he has been told of one person who saw God and talked with God, he must not imagine that every claimant to spiritual realization is perfection incarnate and is a saviour. Beware of false prophets! If one wishes to be

poisoned one must provoke a cobra and not a water-snake.

The most heartening factor in taking to the life of the spirit is the destined assuredness of victory. This victory may at the worst be delayed, but not altogether withheld. The soul must some day flow into and get merged in the Divine. With this sense of a belongingness in final beatitude should the spiritual stripling take his first step in the fascinating field of God-quest. The workings of Divine grace (in accordance with which if the devotee takes one step forward to the Deity, the Deity takes ten steps towards him) will guide the quest aright and to success.

To the question 'Will all men see God?' Sri Ramakrishna gave this heartening answer: 'No man will have to fast for the whole day; some get their food at 9 a.m., some at noon, others at 2 p.m., and others again in the evening or at sunset. Similarly, one time or other, in this very life or after many more lives, all will, and must, see God.'

The ineligibles too are, in the Providence of God, potential eligibles.

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St. Teresa, Bride of the Sun (continued)

Swami Atmarupananda

When the news reached Don Alonso that his daughter Teresa and, under her influence, his son Antonio had both entered the monastic life, he didn't know at first what to say. Now he was confronting not only Teresa, but God. Going to the Convent of the Incarnation and then to the Dominican friary, he swallowed his fatherly concern and gave his consent and blessings.

A few days later Teresa received the habit. From the time she entered the convent, she began to experience a new and strange joy, a joy which remained with her throughout the rest of her life. Everything connected with the religious life she loved. Even while sweeping the convent floors, she who was accustomed to servants, was overjoyed to think that now she was free of her adolescent vanities. She came to understand the great value of using force on oneself to do something for God, even though it be as painful as her leaving home had been.

Yet sanctity didn't come easily. She was often blamed unjustly by her seniors for various

things, a humiliation which she was not used to bearing silently. Nor did she like to admit her ignorance by asking other sisters about things she didn't know: how to behave in certain situations or what to do in choir. Furthermore, singing was conspicuously not one of her many talents; embarrassment at this made her perform even worse in choir than she needed to have; for this young lady, so punctilious, had never hated anything as much as ridicule. Only her joy at being a nun sustained her, until she learned to humble herself and admit her ignorance. Soon she reached a point where she got pleasure in asking her sisters' advice if she had even the slightest doubt about something, and thus actually gained their love and respect.

In her childhood she had sought martyrdom for the sake of reward. As an adolescent she had been inspired to enter a convent with the fear of hell. Now Teresa determined to rise above all self-centredness. There was a nun in the convent infirmary who was dying a most miserable death. All the other nuns were afraid to approach her because of the utter loathsomeness of her condition; except Teresa. She marvelled at this nun's patience, and took upon herself the task of nursing the poor woman. As she dressed the nun's ulcerous stomach, the stench was so terrible that she had to run out of the room with nausea. But repugnance was changed to compassion, and she would return smiling to continue her service of love. Now Teresa prayed that God give her any illness He pleased if only He would give her such saintly patience as this nun displayed, for she had not forgotten her childhood stories of the martyr-saints who earned heaven so easily and quickly. Her desire, however, was no longer for a self-gratifying reward; rather she was so anxious to rise above her limited existence and attain that which lasts 'for ever' that she was willing to accept any means possible, even sickness unto death.

A year after taking the habit, Teresa was professed. While making her vows she was full of determination and enthusiasm, but soon she was to discover just how difficult a task it was that she had set herself.

Even before entering the convent, she had been plagued with fainting fits. Now they became more severe and frequent. She also suffered often from fever, heart trouble and many other ailments. Had her prayer for illness been granted, or was it the result of the new way of life, less nourishing food, and the excessive austerities she was indulging in to gain self-control? Whatever it was, before passing two years at the Incarnation her condition became so serious that she was almost never fully conscious, and sometimes

lost consciousness altogether.

Don Alonso was alarmed; his doctors said that she should be taken home where she would get better food and care. He arranged for her treatment, with a medicine-woman in the town of Becedas, as she was not faring well under the quaint but potentially dangerous professional medical care of those days. So she got leave from the convent to stay some months with her sister Maria in the countryside in order to gain some strength before proceeding to Becedas.

On the way to Dona Maria's, Teresa once again stopped to visit her Uncle Pedro. This good man was waiting only for his son to grown up before himself becoming a monk. He talked long with her about her spiritual progress and her aspirations. She told him that the only means she had found for fixing her attention was vocal prayer, which she practised daily. Don Pedro told her that prayer was all-important; but by prayer, mental prayer was to be understood - mental prayer! How miserably she had failed to practise it! She had received no proper spiritual guidance at the lax convent of the Incarnation. He took a book from the library shelf, *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*, by Francisco de Osuna, a Spanish Franciscan priest.

'Read this, Teresita, you will find here the instruction you want.'

As she thumbed through the book, her heart throbbed with excitement to find every page speaking directly to her needs, in that typical Franciscan language of intimacy and love.

"... Vocal prayer, as you have seen, is a petition we make to God to ask Him for what is necessary for us... The second form of prayer, that is without pronouncing the words with the lips, leaves us free so that our heart alone speaks to Our Lord... The third, which may be termed mental or spiritual, is that in which the highest point of the soul, sustained by love, soars upward to God in the purest and most loving way possible on the wings of desire...

"... in the first we kiss His feet. In the second we kiss His hands. In the third we give Him a kiss on the lips."

'You like it? It's yours, Teresa.'

Saying goodbye to Uncle Pedro, her heart filled with gratitude, she proceeded to her sister's, and in the spring of 1539 went on to Becedas for treatment. The treatment lasted several months. In the meantime she was practising assiduously the instructions given by Osuna in his book. She began to progress quickly, and was soon raised to the Prayer of Quiet. She sometimes even glimpsed the Prayer of Union.* The effect of this was so great that, though she was only in her early twenties, it seemed that she trampled the whole world underfoot in supreme detachment.

But the treatment given by the medicine woman, which had begun gently enough, was becoming unbearably severe. Teresa was given so many purgatives over such a prolonged period that her body shrivelled up, and she could only take liquids. The pain in her heart, which she had come to get cured, became so much worse that she felt as though her heart was always clamped between sharp teeth. People feared that she would go mad, so her father had her brought home in July. The doctors in Avila gave up all hope for her life.

Her pain was so terrible that all wondered at the patience with which she bore it. Indeed, both points of her earlier prayer seemed to have been granted: sickness and ideal patience. But how much can the human frame endure? On August 15, after three months of the most excruciating pain, she said that she wanted to make confession and receive communion. Don Alonso thought this desire was a sign that she despaired of life, for every devout Catholic wishes to make a last confession and receive absolution and the sacrament of Communion from a priest before departing from this world. So, blinded by love and trying to bolster her courage, he refused to call a priest, saying that when she recovered her strength somewhat, everything would be arranged.

But that night a priest had to be called, for Teresa was found lifeless on her bed.

On arriving, the priest was promptly ushered into Teresa's candlelit room, where she lay in corpse-like stillness. Don Alonso could hardly speak to greet him; he shook with grief as he motioned the priest towards his beloved daughter's bed.

The Father was to perform the sacrament of Extreme Unction, the last rite performed by the Catholic Church over the dying soul. But now as he examined her, he found that she was no longer dying but dead already.

'Dead? Impossible!' cried Don Alonso in disbelief, at the priest's words. 'Not my Teresa.'

Please, God, no!' Since the death of his second wife, he had lived in perpetual mourning, wearing nothing but black. The only light remaining in his life came from his religion and his children. Now his favourite child lay dead. His groans filled the house as the priest went ahead with the last sacrament; the rest of the family waited in speechless sorrow.

The next day Teresa showed no sign of life. On the second day the doctors held a mirror before her nostrils, but it remained unclouded by breath. Yes, she was dead. As someone was examining her face with a candle in hand, a few drips of molten wax fell onto her eyelids and hardened there. The third day a grave was dug for her at the Incarnation, her body washed and wrapped in a funeral shroud. In a Carmelite monastery the rites for the dead were performed. On the fourth day the nuns came from the Incarnation to take her body for burial. Don Alonso, however, refused to surrender the corpse. In the madness of his grief he claimed to be able to hear her pulse; besides, rigor mortis had not set in, nor was her body as cold as a dead body should be, even four days after her death. No, he insisted, she was not dead. The nuns couldn't reason with him, crazed as he was, so they knelt beside Teresa's bed in prayer.

But what was this? - suddenly Teresa opened her eyes, breaking the wax that had long since hardened over them! Her first words were to ask once again for the sacrament. Her 'death' had been but a syncope lasting for four days - something sixteenth century medicine was utterly incapable of handling.

For four days nothing had passed between her lips; as a result her throat was now so constricted that she choked even on water. Her tongue had been bitten to pieces. All her bones seemed to be out of joint and, except for one finger of her right hand, she was completely paralyzed from the neck down. Terrible confusion reigned in her head. So miserable was her condition that she cried out in pain if anyone so much as touched her, and she had to be moved about in a sheet - one person taking one end and another the other.

After continuing in this pitiable state for about eight months, she desired only to return to her convent, so she was carried there, an invalid at the age of twenty-five. She who had nursed the nun dying from an ulcerous stomach, was now nursed by her sisters; and her pain was not a whit less than the nun's had been, nor did she display any less marvellous patience, so that all who saw her were amazed. God had indeed heard her

prayer.

But He wasn't content to let her life end in such a senseless martyrdom. After returning to the convent, she slowly began to improve. Slowly indeed: 'When I began to get about on my hands and knees, I praised God, ' she wrote later. 'All this I bore with great resignation, and, except at the beginning, with great joy... I was quite resigned to the will of God, even if He had left me in this condition for ever... [I] talked a great deal about God, in such a way that all were edified and astonished at the patience which the Lord gave me...'

At this time she scrupulously avoided all evil-speaking and determined especially not to speak ill of anyone in the slightest degree. 'I must not wish or say anything about anyone which I should not like to be said of me,' she resolved. So perfect did she become in this austerity of speech that people knew they could turn their backs on her and yet be quite safe; they could unburden their hearts before her without fear. Those around her were so struck by this quality of innocence that they also made it a habit never to speak ill of anyone.

The rapid progress she had made in prayer at Becedas had given her a taste of divine love. It was this which had given her such fortitude in her sufferings, and it was this which she now wished to intensify. She began to yearn for health so that she could be alone when she prayed, for the infirmary offered no solitude.

As earthly doctors could do nothing for her, she turned to 'heavenly doctors' - the saints of the Church, to whom Catholics have always turned when they have had some special need to be fulfilled. Teresa chose St. Joseph, the father of Jesus, as her advocate before Christ. Her reasoning was this: just as Jesus in His earthly incarnation was a most obedient and loving son to Joseph, so now He listens to St. Joseph in the spiritual world, and most eagerly grants whatever St. Joseph asks of Him. She began to commend herself to this saint with deep devotion, and kept his yearly feast with the greatest solemnity. She also began to have masses said for her benefit. St. Joseph, the lowly carpenter, accomplished what learned doctors had completely failed to do.

One day as she was crawling on all fours, she felt within herself the power to rise up. Slowly and carefully she raised herself onto her feet: after three years as an invalid, she could walk! Teresa was overwhelmed with joy. Now she would be allowed to return to

her room where she could immerse herself in solitary prayer, now she could once again engage herself in God's service!

The other nuns were amazed at this miracle worked by St. Joseph. She for whom they had once dug a grave, was now attending choir again. Talk of the miracle filled the convent and spilled over into Avila. The townspeople began to visit the convent to see for themselves.

'Dona Teresa de Ahumada is wanted in the parlour.' Teresa was sad to be called from her cell to meet the curious visitors. She had sought health only to be alone with God, but now she had to satisfy her superiors who were trying to capitalize on the miracle which had been worked in her. She was embarrassed to be the centre of so much attention.

But the more she was called to the parlour, the more she took interest in her visitors, for she had always had an inordinate desire to please people. Her grateful heart was warmed by the least show of kindness from others, and she began to give more and more of her time, attention, sympathy, and charm to her visitors. Soon she was happy to leave the solitude of her cell when called to the parlour.

During the last few years, Don Alonso had grown closer to his daughter. Though always austere and deeply pious, there had been something missing in his religious life: genuine spirituality. This Teresa supplied, first by giving him Osuna's Third Spiritual Alphabet to read. Then when she found that he was responsive, she began to teach him indirectly and tactfully what she had learned and experienced of mental prayer. He came often to the convent to talk with Teresa about God, and he began to progress in the contemplative life.

After Teresa's 'miracle', however, she herself began to fear mental prayer. Having been paralyzed for three years, and seriously ill for an even longer time, she felt such joy in her renewed vitality that she began to engage in vanities like most of the other nuns in the lax Convent of the Incarnation. She began to take more joy in meeting visitors than in thinking of God. This made her feel so guilty - for her ideals were still the highest - that she couldn't bear to face in prayer the God who had showered her with so many favours. So she punished herself with mediocrity: 'How can I presume to pray, I who have been so faithless and unkind to God? Am I better than these other nuns, that I should practise mental prayer while they who are so much more virtuous practise only the

prescribed vocal prayers?' She thus stopped practising mental prayer. A year after stopping, she told her father about it, though she gave as an excuse her bad health. (The effects of her paralysis continued intermittently until her fortieth year, and she was more or less ill all the rest of her life.) Don Alonso, himself austere and truthful, accepted his daughter's words as the whole of the truth, but since Teresa had always had a horror of lies, she felt all the more guilty for using her illness as an alibi. Then, on Christmas Eve 1543, Don Alonso de Cepeda died, leaving Teresa grief-stricken.

Teresa talked with her father's confessor about her spiritual problems. He told her not to give up mental prayer under any circumstances. Once again she began to pray, but for the next twelve years she was like a tiny boat tossed helplessly on a stormy sea. Her allegiance was divided between God and the world: when she was with God in prayer, she waited anxiously for the bell signalling the end of prayer time; when she was engaged in vanities in the parlour or with the other nuns, she felt guilty for not thinking of God. Sometimes for months at a time she would regain her spiritual perspective, then again would be absorbed into the collective mediocrity which prevailed at the Incarnation.

Her spiritual directors understood neither her nor the mystical life; they tried to persuade her that there was nothing wrong in joining in with the frivolities of the other nuns. The effect of this anti-contemplative advice was to reinforce in Teresa the false humility which said: 'Don't be so egoistic as to think that you can be a contemplative.' On the other hand, her deep sense of discrimination told her that she was wasting her life. Thus she was in danger of being torn in two by these conflicting tendencies.

Her misery was made worse by the fact that the nuns thought highly of her. They saw in her an unusual degree of sincerity, selflessness, charity and sympathetic understanding. Yet her ideals were so high that even her virtue appeared, in her own eyes, vain and hypocritical. Thus, with her deep insight into her own failings and revulsion for hypocrisy, every word of praise from her sister-nuns seemed to lacerate her heart.

In this way days passed into weeks, weeks into months, months into years, but Teresa couldn't rise above her environment. She, whose childhood had been so auspicious and who as an adolescent had been so spirited, she who at Becedas had progressed so rapidly in mental prayer and who even now was praised by all the nuns at the convent for her

extraordinary virtue, feared that her life was doomed to failure. (To be continued)

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