

## ABHISHIKTHANANDA A Christian Advaitin

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### 1. Introduction

Three decades and seven years have passed since Abhishikthananda who inspired a generation of Indian Christian theologians attained his ever cherished Advaita Samadhi. His arrival in India and the path he dared to choose generated powerful currents in the Indian subcontinent as well as around the world. During 1960s and 70s Bangalore became the epicentre of much theological discussions and experimentations. It was the staff members of Dharmaram College, St Peters Seminary, and NBCLC, who took daring steps to develop, promote and propagate an Indian Christian theology. However, at present, after four decades, the state of affairs has changed. Even those movements that followed, like the liberation theology and its subaltern perspective, women's lib and the Dalit-empowerment movement, etc., are also missing their momentum and vigour. A bit of Orientalism emerged at certain quarters. Yet that too could not create an impact. By and large, I suspect that now we are passing through an intellectually lethargic period of time. During the papacy of John Paul II, we could have saved our face by blaming Cardinal Ratzinger's office for our lifeless performance in theologizing. Ever since Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger stepped into the shoes of the fisherman, however, the old and rigid Ratzinger who silenced dissident voices vanished and a daring, young and vibrant pope we have in the person of Benedict XVI. He seems to be the only Catholic theologian who dares to make challenging statements every now and then. It was just the other day he surprised us all with his comment on the Catholic way of using condoms! The current concern of the Indian Catholic Church seems to be social and political rather than spiritual and contemplative. Yet, since we celebrate the birth centenary of Abhishikthananda this year, it is right and fitting that we examine briefly whether his legacy has some relevance today or if his destiny is to remain merely as a part of our history.

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According to Raimon Panikkar, his colleague and confidant, in the development of Abhishiktananda's life, experience, and thought, we can discover four stages:<sup>1</sup> The first phase could be named the fulfilment phase. He arrived in India with a typical Western triumphalistic missionary mentality. He was ready to bear the 'Whiteman's burden' of educating, fulfilling, saving and winning the inferior cultures and civilizations for Christ. The second phase was of crisis on account of his encounter with Hindu spirituality, personified in Sri Ramana Maharshi that shook the foundations of his Christian fulfilment theology. Being a Benedictine monk, fortunately, he was open and was ready to listen. The tensions created by his meeting of Hindu spirituality at its highest and purest level were partly theological, psychological and spiritual. During this stage he was greatly surprised and was torn apart by two experiences, two "ultimates," two identities, two worlds of religious expression, and, in his own words, "two loves." This led him to the third phase of relativizing all conceptualizations, particularizations and formulations as "*namarupas*," which he considered as concretizations of the one, unspeakable, inexpressible Mystery. During the final two years of his life he entered the fourth and the last phase of liberation or "explosion," of all previous concepts. After experiencing the "explosion," or "awakening," which were his own cherished words, we see him redefining and re-identifying the "correspondences," which he discovered at both ends of his experience. What is fascinating is that the "explosion" which amounts to a liberation, did not destroy his faith in Jesus but transformed it.

The name Abhishiktananda could literally mean "the bliss of the anointed" or "the anointed bliss," which implies a person 'whose joy is Christ' or 'who is the joy of Christ.' The second interpretation would go beyond devotion to Christ to an actual sharing of Christ's experience,<sup>2</sup> which will do more justice to Abhishiktananda's emphasis on the importance of having the same experience as that of Christ. Christ's 'anointing' was his experience of Sonship with the Father. Abhishiktananda equated this experience of Sonship with the Hindu advaitic experience. In his view, this experience is the most important goal of human life. Abhishiktananda's entire life was a dialogue between his

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<sup>1</sup>Bettina, Baeumer, "Abhishiktananda and the Challenge of Hindu-Christian Experience," Bulletin 64, May 2000, [http://adishakti.org/\\_abhishiktananda\\_and\\_the\\_challenge\\_of\\_hindu-christian\\_experience.htm](http://adishakti.org/_abhishiktananda_and_the_challenge_of_hindu-christian_experience.htm)

<sup>2</sup>Raimon, Panikkar, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart: The Spiritual Diary (1948-73) of Swami Abhishiktananda (Dom Henri Le Saux)*, ed., Paris: OEIL, 1998, 19.

Western traditions and the Eastern Hindu traditions that he sought to understand and to experience. He tried to describe his experience using Western language, as well as by using Hindu ideas that he interpreted. Abhishiktananda emphasised the priority of experience (*anubhava*) over concepts. He believed that all genuine religious documents and scriptures have their origin in the immediate personal experience of "seers" or *rishis*. Abhishiktananda wanted to reinterpret Christianity on the solid foundation of advaitic philosophy just as the Fathers of the Church interpreted Christianity on the basis of Greek philosophy. According to him the advaitic experience of Jesus is equally available to every human being. Abhishiktananda believed that the early Upanishads report a similar experience like that of Jesus. As per the non-monistic Advaita, proposed by Abhishiktananda the world is not an illusion. According to him the monistic interpretation of Advaita developed only at a later stage as a result of the "dialectics" of the disciples of Sankara. Following the teachings of his mentor and his inspiration Gnanananda Giri and Ramana Maharshi he made a distinction between a pure consciousness experience (*nirvikalpa* or *kevala samadhi*) and a return to the world of diversity in *sahaja samadhi*. *Sahaja samadhi* is the state of the *jivanmukta*, the one who is liberated while still in the body. Abhishiktananda believed that he experienced *sahaja samadhi* and not *nirvikalpa Samadhi* which was the ideal suggested by Ramana Maharshi, whom he tried to follow.

## 2. A Brief Biography of Abhishiktananda

Swami Abhishiktananda was born Henri Le Saux on 30<sup>th</sup> August, 1910, at St. Briac in Brittany in France. At an early age he felt a vocation to the priesthood and entered the Major Seminary at Rennes in 1926. In 1929, at the age of 19, he wrote to the novice master of Benedictine Monastery of St. Anne de Kergonan seeking admission to the Abbey, in which he expressed his desire to have immediate religious experience. He was accepted. However gradually he found that the life in the abbey was not satisfying his desire to experience God. He longed for an even deeper monasticism. By 1934 he saw his life's vocation as going to India. It appears that he believed India would help him to lead a life of simplicity and allow a greater degree of renunciation in his monasticism. He began preparing himself for going to India by studying Hindu texts which he believed would help him to communicate effectively with Hindus. Despite his desire to go to India, he was not granted permission to make inquiries about going there until 1945. He remained in Kergonan Abbey until 1948.

While functioning as the librarian of the Abbey, he got the opportunity to read the works of the Fathers of the Church, in particular those of the Desert and of the Greek. From them he learned the apophatic way of mysticism. Between 1946 and 1948, he was in charge of teaching novices at the Abbey. In 1942, Abhishiktananda wrote a manuscript for his mother, entitled *Amour et Sagesse* (Love and Wisdom). It was a meditation on the Trinity, which he considered the noblest mystery of the faith. He refers to God as being beyond our thought. As we shall see, the doctrine of the Trinity continued to be important for Abhishiktananda in his Christian understanding of the advaitic experience as well.

In 1947, Abhishiktananda wrote to the Bishop of Tiruchirapalli in India, Monsignor Mendonsa, enquiring the possibility of coming to India. In his letter Abhishiktananda indicated that he sought "to lead the contemplative life, in the absolute simplicity of early Christian monasticism and at the same time in the closest possible conformity with the traditions of Indian sannyasa."<sup>3</sup> It was Fr. Jules Monchanin, who answered his letter on behalf of the Bishop. Monchanin too shared a similar vision of an Indian Christianity. Abhishiktananda knew Monchanin through his articles. Monchanin saw Abhishiktananda's interest to come to India as an answer from God and encouraged him to join him. Abhishiktananda left France for India in 1948, with the goal of starting a Christian ashram to facilitate a truly Indian Christianity. They together founded an ashram on the bank of the Kavery River at Tannirpalli. The ashram was officially called 'Saccidananda Ashram' or '*Eremus Sanctissimae Trinitatis*' (Hermitage of the Most Holy Trinity). But it was more commonly known by the name 'Shantivanam' (Grove of Peace). The ashram was governed by Benedictine rules, but many Hindu customs were also incorporated. They dressed and acted as Hindu sanyasis. The Bishop Mendonsa was very supportive of the ashram from its very inception. He believed that the approach taken by Monchanin and Abhishiktananda would allow the Indian Church to be as Indian as it could legitimately be, just as in previous eras the Church was able to be Greek and Roman.

Abhishiktananda's visit to the ashram of Sri Ramana Maharshi was a turning point in his life. From then on he tried to move away from the then prevalent Christian attitude and theology of fulfilment and triumphalism to an appreciation of Hinduism in its own right. He was convinced that the Hindu advaitic experience of the Self was central to any dialogue with

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<sup>3</sup>James, Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told through His Letters*, ed., Delhi: ISPCK, 1989, 2nd edition 1995, 12.

Hinduism. He sought to attain the advaitic experience by accepting Gnanananda Giri as his Guru. By spending prolonged periods of meditation in the caves of Arunachala in the South and at his hermitage at Uttarkashi in the Himalayas, he tried to live what he believed. However, Abhishiktananda had to struggle a lot to reconcile his advaitic experience with his Christian faith. As he continued his experimental investigation of Advaita, he began preferring Hindu terminology to express his religious experience, and his beliefs as a Christian transformed.<sup>4</sup> However, at times he himself was afraid that he was exchanging his Christian beliefs, and risking his eternal salvation for an illusory experience, a "mirage."<sup>5</sup> But in his final years, Abhishiktananda became convinced of the authenticity and truth of his advaitic experience. Abhishiktananda gradually gave up his dream of a community of Hindu-Christian monks; instead he devoted himself to personally being a sanyasi who was at the same time both Christian and Hindu. In 1971, looking back on the ashram, Abhishiktananda wrote, "Expansion in human terms, success, numbers are of no importance. All that belongs to the realm of *maya*, appearance, and the monk is only concerned with *nitya*, the real."<sup>6</sup> In 1968, after entrusting Shantivanam to Fr Bede Griffiths, an English monk, who joined him, he left the ashram to live the life of a hermit in his hermitage at Uttarkashi in the Himalayas and never to return.

Abhishiktananda remained a Roman Catholic priest until his death, even though at times he used to participate in Hindu worship. By way of accepting Marc Chaduc as his disciple, he arranged a joint Hindu-Christian initiation (*diksha*) led by himself and Swami Chidananda, a Hindu monk at the Sivananda ashram in Rishikesh. It was during his time with his disciple in 1973 that Abhishiktananda received what he regarded as a definitive advaitic experience. The intensity of this "adventure" removed all doubts for him, but it also resulted in a heart attack. He had further experiences, which for him confirmed the validity of his experience. After several years of life as a hermit, weakened by the myocardial infarction, he died on December 7, 1973 at Indore nursing home.

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<sup>4</sup>John Glenn Friesen, "Abhishiktananda: Hindu Advaitic Experience and Christian Beliefs," *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin*, 1998, Vol. 11, 31-38.

<sup>5</sup>Panikkar, *Diary*, 180 (27.11.56).

<sup>6</sup>Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda*, 108.

### 3. The Challenge for Christianity

Abhishiktananda's life and teachings offer a real challenge to the traditional Christianity. He tried to reinterpret almost every Christian doctrine: the nature of Christ, the uniqueness of Christ, sin, salvation, divinity, resurrection, and even whether we can justify a belief in theism. He relativized all doctrines in favour of immediate experience. Abhishiktananda regarded Sacred Scriptures as records of the human experience of the divine. According to him the problem with the Christian Church is that it tries to objectify and to essentialize salvation whereas salvation is in fact an existential decision.<sup>7</sup> However, this position challenges the reason for the existence of the Church itself. If salvation is purely an existential decision, then the necessity of the Church as an institution is reduced to the preserver of myths and dogmas. Abhishiktananda insists that the revolution brought by Jesus was defused from the very first Christian generation itself.<sup>8</sup> He says that Christianity lost its mystery and its power when it became a religion.<sup>9</sup> It formulated clever doctrines in order to shield people from the force of the immediate experience. He considered the formulas of the Church councils as an attempt to absolutize.

### 4. The Nature of Abhishiktananda's Advaitic Experience

Abhishiktananda understood his experience as advaitic but not monistic. The Western interpretation of Advaita was often monistic. Abhishiktananda insisted that although the advaitic vision is that of "not two" (non-dual) the advaitic experience is not that of "only one" (monism). He insists that the experience is neither *dvaita* (two) nor *eka* (one) but *a-dvaita* and *an-eka* which gives value both to unity and diversity simultaneously. The individuality is not swallowed up or identified with the One. He speaks of *Advaita-aneka* (not two, not one), "... God himself is both one and many in his mystery – or rather, to put it more accurately, he is not-one, *an-eka*, and also not-two, *a-dvaita*."<sup>10</sup> The distinction between Advaita and monism is crucial for understanding the vision of Abhishiktananda. It plays an important role in his attempt to

<sup>7</sup>Panikkar, *Diary*, 273 (12.5.64).

<sup>8</sup>Panikkar, *Diary*, 307 (2.11.69).

<sup>9</sup>Panikkar, *Diary*, 367 (2.1.73).

<sup>10</sup>Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1984, 135.

reconcile Hindu and Christian thought. Abhishiktananda's use of the term *aneka* (not-one) is central to the understanding of his vision.

Monism has a tendency to deny and to devalue the world, which would lead to an 'acosmism' in actions. Only if the world of diversity has reality, then there is a basis for a more dynamic interaction with the world. A monistic understanding of reality, that insists there is nothing but Brahman will see the world of diversity as *maya*, (unreal or illusion). A non-monistic understanding of Advaita can revise this view of *maya*, granting reality to diversity as well as to unity. Abhishiktananda achieved this through incorporating the *Saivist* concept of *sakti* into his system of thought. He tried to give a more positive view of *maya* by looking at it in terms of the *sakti*, or energy of God. This would amount to a revision of the classical Hindu concepts of *maya* and *sakti*.

Abhishiktananda used non-monistic Advaita to reinterpret classical Christian ideas such as that of Creation and of the Trinity. Fr Antony Kalliath defending the position taken by Abhishiktananda regarding Advaita opines:

Advaita is often misinterpreted or mistaken as monism because everyone tries to understand it exclusively through the Advaita-vada of Sankara, which is prominently monistic in nature. Abhishiktananda understands Advaita directly from the Upanishads along with his Christian background without leaning on any Vedantic school.<sup>11</sup>

However, Ramana Maharshi, the inspiration behind Abhishiktananda is not ready to point his finger against Sankara. He comes to the defence of Sankara saying:

Sankara has been criticized for his philosophy of *maya* (illusion) without understanding his meaning. He made three statements: that Brahman is real, that the universe is unreal, and that Brahman is the universe. He did not stop with the second. The third statement explains the first two; it signifies that when the Universe is perceived apart from Brahman, that perception is false and illusory. What it amounts to is that phenomena are real when experienced as the Self and illusory when seen apart from the self.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Antony, Kalliath, *The Word in the Cave: The Experiential Journey of Swami Abhishiktananda to the Point of Hindu-Christian Meeting*, New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 1996, 369.

<sup>12</sup>Arthur, Osborne, *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi*, New York: Samuel Weiser, 1978, 16.

Abhishiktananda was absolutely convinced that the advaitic experience is ineffable. He often speaks of this difficulty of expressing the ineffable. For him any description of the ineffable is in the realm of *nama-rupa* (names and forms). Going “beyond” concepts, myths and archetypes was for him the same as a return to the original intuition of Immediate Experience. Abhishiktananda emphasized that Advaita should not be seen as an idea. The advaitic experience goes beyond all ideas:

Advaita is not an idea. It is! The lightning flashes, the eye blinks, as says the Kena [Upanishad]. Then You have either understood, or you have not understood... If you have not understood, too bad! says the same Upanishad. If you have understood, you keep quiet, says the Mundaka [Upanishad].<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes Abhishiktananda follows this advice, and says that the advaitic experience is impossible to describe and that it can only be pointed to by silence: “There is no thought about the mystery which is not already *namarupa*. The experience at the original moment cannot be discerned except in an ‘Ah’! (Kena Upanishad 4,4).”<sup>14</sup> Again he wrote,

Of course I can stammer a few words. But that will never be more than some concepts, strictly dependent on my cultural, social, religious and mental environment, on all the previous development of my thought and my consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of his insistence on the ineffability of his experiences he was a prolific writer who enthusiastically attempted to conceptualize and communicate his experiences. His personal diaries and letters give us a glimpse of the experiences he had undergone.

### 5. Abhishiktananda’s Description of His Advaitic Experience

In 1953, while in the Arutpal Tirtham cave at Arunachala, he wrote that he had had more the idea of Advaita than the *res* [the thing itself, the reality]. He wrote that he had not had the experience itself:

For the time being I am playing with Advaita. I am like someone on the point of taking a swim in the sea, who reassures himself, dips a toe in the water, and indefinitely postpones the dive which alone will give peace. I try to understand my Advaita as a Christian and a Westerner...<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda*, 227 (8.3.70).

<sup>14</sup>Panikkar, *Diary*, 370 (2.2.73).

<sup>15</sup>Panikkar, *Diary*, 371 (2.2.73).

<sup>16</sup>Panikkar, *Diary*, 66 (21.3.53 and 23.3.53).



In 1967, Abhishiktananda expressed the fear that, despite all that he had written, his so-called experience might be nothing but a projection of his desire to exist (*besoin d'être*).<sup>17</sup> In May 1972, Abhishiktananda was in an ashram near Rishikesh. He was there with his disciple Marc Chaduc. While they were there, Chaduc had a profound spiritual experience. It was only at this time that Abhishiktananda's doubts were dispelled. He wrote in his diary, "The experience of the Upanishads is true, I know it!"<sup>18</sup> He wrote to Odette Baumer-Despeigne,

It is wonderful to undergo such an experience which brings the fullness of peace and joy beyond all circumstances, even those of death or life. Life can never be the same since I have found the Awakening! Rejoice with me.<sup>19</sup>

Abhishiktananda described the going beyond of all notions as the "explosion" of our concepts:

Again, if my message could really pass, it would be free from any 'notion' except just by the way of 'excipient.' The Christ I might present will be simply the I AM of my (every) deep heart, who can show himself in the dancing Shiva or the amorous Krishna. And the kingdom is precisely this discovery... of the 'inside' of the Grail! (...) The awakening is a total explosion. No Church will recognize its Christ or itself afterwards. And precisely for that (reason), no one likes the 'atomic mushroom'!<sup>20</sup>

It was a marvellous spiritual experience. The discovery that the AWAKENING has nothing to do with any situation, even so-called life or so-called death; one is awake and that is all. While I was waiting on my sidewalk, on the frontier of the two worlds, I was magnificently calm, for I AM, no matter in what world! I have found the GRAIL! And this extra lease of life – for such it is – can only be used for living and sharing this discovery.<sup>21</sup>

## 6. Abhishiktananda's Nondual Perception and 'Beyond'

Abhishiktananda held the view that the world is not totally unreal. The world is *anirvacaniya* or indescribable and indeterminable as either real or

<sup>17</sup>Panikkar, *Diary*, 294 (5.3.67).

<sup>18</sup>Panikkar, *Diary*, 348 (11.5.72).

<sup>19</sup>Odette Baumer-Despeigne, "The Spiritual Way of Henri Le Saux Swami Abhishiktananda," *Bulletin of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, 1993, vol. 48, Oct., 24.

<sup>20</sup>Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda*, 311 (4.10.73).

<sup>21</sup>Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda*, 308 (9.8.73).

unreal. We are actually experiencing the Reality only; yet, we do not recognize it. Due to our ignorance we are unable to see Brahman in the universe. Taking the pluralistic universe of material objects as real is *maya* which is like seeing a rope as a snake. Once the true identity of the 'snake' is revealed one would say that he had been seeing a rope. At all the times our actual perception (experience) is of Brahman even though we are often ignorant of it and misidentify him. There are two possibilities: a false perception and a true non-dual perception. Our ignorance is what causes us to mistake the rope for a snake. The ignorant do not see Brahman in the universe because of superimposition or *savikalpa* thought construction. When these superimposed concepts are removed, we experience Brahman or the Reality as it is. Our thought constructions prevent us from seeing the "true" nondual nature of reality. Abhishiktananda therefore believed that there must be a recovery of the world after the emptiness of Pure Consciousness. There is a return, an awakening from the awakening.

Abhishiktananda sometimes expresses the opinion that this further awakening is not found within Hinduism, but only in the Biblical tradition. He says that Indian seers say that those who experience the ultimate experience pass beyond their selves, and do not recover their selves. According to this view, the seer never recovers the self of his external and mundane identity. But Abhishiktananda says that the Biblical view is that Moses came down from the mountain; Paul returned from the third heaven.<sup>22</sup> Abhishiktananda insists that beyond Advaita there is a further experience, which he called *ati-Advaita*, or *Advaitatita*. In this state one experiences the mystery of the Three in One and the One in Three (Unity and Trinity). This is a trans-advaitin mystery of the Father, Son, and Spirit, the mystery of God in Himself, of the Self of God and of Being which is supra-personal and tri-personal. But Abhishiktananda also says that to speak of any numbers such as three or one is not possible when we go beyond Advaita. The sages of India were correct to say neither one nor many, but just to say, not-two, Advaita, and not-one, *an-eka*.

Abhishiktananda says that beyond Advaita, the mystery of the Trinity is revealed. The world of distinction, the *an-eka* begins to emerge again (*ressurgir*) from the *Sunyata* to which everything seemed to have disappeared. In the *kevala*, one goes beyond space and time and even beyond eternity and Being, and beyond God as conceived, in order to appear again as from the primordial *yoni* (womb). This appearing again is

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<sup>22</sup>Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, 6.

the resurrection. One passes from the 'Eternal-Being-consciousness' back again to the world of *maya*, the 'Temporal-non-Being-consciousness' (from *kevala* back to *namarupa*). It is the passing from God as 'the One' who is without any second to God as Creator and to God as Love and *kenosis* (self-emptying). For the Love of God is the same as the *kenosis* of God.

These ideas are important in explaining Abhishikatananda's 'non-monistic Advaita.' The trinitarian awakening breaks through the dilemma of either dualism or monism. There is a rejection of the duality that imagines we are other than the rest of the world. There is a return to the world in an experience of communion and unity. The advaitic experience shows us the falsity of dualism. This 'advaitic slumber' is 'a necessary precondition' of our awakening. Abhishikatananda holds the view that we should not stop at the monism of the Pure Consciousness experience – an awakening from the awakening has to follow. This new awareness is an awareness that "being is essentially 'being-with,' communion, *koinonia*, the free gift of the self and the mutual communication of love."<sup>23</sup> These ideas of communion are also related to Abhishikatananda's trinitarian view of Being. Abhishikatananda says that the Christian who awakes after the advaitic night once more finds himself or herself as well as the world, but now at a deeper level. There is a "recovering" of self and the world, and of the reality of time, of becoming, of particularity and multiplicity. At this stage one realizes that the world is full of value and significance, even at the level of its temporality and diversity:

God – eternal, absolutely self-existent, with all his infinite love, his creative power and his inner tri-personal life – is fully present in the tiniest speck of matter or moment of time, in the grain of sand, in the smallest microbe, in the most trivial event in the world or the life of the individual... No one has the right to say that God is there only in a diminished or downgraded manifestation of himself, from which the sage must turn away, either by thought (Greek *gnosis*) or by will (Stoicism) or by 'isolation' or contemplation (Yoga-Vedanta), in order to attain to the Real. No, the Real is precisely there.<sup>24</sup>

This is a clear statement of Abhishikatananda's view of a non-dual perception of the world, seeing Brahman everywhere and within all things. The *jnani* does not discover anything new as a result of his enlightenment. He just sees reality in all its glory. The *jnani* penetrates to the essence of

<sup>23</sup> Abhishikatananda, *Saccidananda*, 176.

<sup>24</sup> Abhishikatananda, *Saccidananda*, 128, 129.

things and there discovers Yahweh-Brahman, "the One who IS."<sup>25</sup> Abhishiktananda was fully aware that his ideas of a further awakening and communion reflect Christian ideas. He tried to discover in the Christian Advaita something beyond Vedantin Advaita.

### 7. Seeing Brahman in All Things

According to Abhishiktananda everything is a manifestation of God, but in its own unique way: When once we reach the heart of sign, we realize that everything is essentially an epiphany, a manifestation of the Lord. Thereafter what is important are not the differences and disparities between the manifold manifestations, but the quality common to all of them – and to each of them in a unique manner – of being a sign of God. This extends from yourself to every conscious being that has ever existed or will exist, from the atom or the smallest living creature to the galaxies. In everything now the heart has been discovered – the heart in which all is discovered, all is seen, all is known. There is nowhere anything but God in himself. Only then can the taste of Being be appreciated. And thereafter that taste – that, and no other – is recognized in every being.<sup>26</sup>

Abhishiktananda does not deny that there are distinctions and unique manifestations of Being. What is important is "the common quality" to them all, that they all have the same "taste" of Being. It is more important to recognize that God is present in all things than to try to understand how this is so. This is why the *anjali* greeting can be made, acknowledging God in other people.<sup>27</sup> While Abhishiktananda was meditating in the caves of Arunachala, he was disturbed by noise from loudspeakers that were set up in the town below. In his Diary he writes that even that noise may be perceived as God.<sup>28</sup> He considered seeing God in other people or creatures the same as prayer. For him to look with eyes enlightened by faith at trees and plants, at fruits and flowers, at birds and animals – all of them created by the Father to help and serve us and to be used by us in our ascent towards him – is also nothing less than prayer and contemplation. The presence of God in everything leads us to God. But the presence of God is also seen after we become awakened:

The presence of God will therefore be the first thing which the *jnani* will see in everything he sees or meets with. It is the first thing also

<sup>25</sup> Panikkar, *Diary*, 288 (12.11.66).

<sup>26</sup> Abhishiktananda, *Guru and Disciple*, Delhi: ISPCCK, 1990, 42, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Panikkar, *Diary*, 38 (8.4.52).

<sup>28</sup> Panikkar, *Diary*, 45 (8.6.52).

which the ordinary man sees in the saint whose *darshana* he has the grace to obtain.<sup>29</sup>

Non-dual perception is "going beyond" the distinction of myself/not-myself. It is not a denial of such distinction. Abhishiktananda continued to regard distinctions as real. In experience, the duality of object and subject is transcended. To transcend the distinction does not necessarily mean to deny that it exists. The advaitic experience is not following up one idea by another idea. "It is not a question of trying to persuade oneself that no differences exist."<sup>30</sup> That would be to deny our experience in the name of logic. Abhishiktananda criticized the followers of Sankara who by their rigid application of concepts deny the reality of the world. He extends the criticism to Nagarjuna's dialectic, which denies subject as well as object.

### 8. Three Abysses of God: The Divine Mysteries

Abhishiktananda says that there are three divine abysses or mysteries that we successively discover in God. They are:

1. The Mystery of Unity or *Advaita*, (attained through *neti neti* or apophaticism);
2. The Mystery of Trinity or of *an-eka* (not-one or many); and
3. The Mystery of Charity or of the *kenosis* (self-giving or self-emptying).

Abhishiktananda asserts that God and creation co-exist, and the basis of this co-existence is a "mystery." Despite this co-existence, one can also say that there is no second to God (*ekam eva advitiam*) due to the totally dependent nature of the existence of creation. Abhishiktananda frequently uses the idea of "mystery" to justify holding to both the view that only Brahman is Real, and the view that the world is real. "Mystery" is an experience beyond what can be spoken, imagined or conceived. The mystery is that there is both nonduality and difference, "The individual is the mystery of God realized in a not-one (*aneka*) way in its... indivisibility as undivided non-duality (*akhanda-Advaita*)."<sup>31</sup>

According to Abhishiktananda the two aspects of the divine mystery – unity and multiplicity (*Advaita* and *aneka*) are inseparable. Both ideas must be maintained in full force, and we must not seek to diminish one in order to exalt the other. The Mystery of *kenosis* is that of the eternal

<sup>29</sup>Abhishiktananda, "An Approach to Hindu Spirituality," *Clergy Review* LIV, 3 (1969), 167.

<sup>30</sup>Abhishiktananda, *Guru and Disciple*, 80.

<sup>31</sup>Panikkar, *Diary*, 214 (17.5.58).

emergence of being from the primordial non-manifested. God has chosen to have creation, to not be without them. Creation is the *kenosis* of God, the self-emptying in love, the issuing from the One. Abhishiktananda says that this *kenosis* entails a real death of God. There is a movement from the God as One without a Second to God as Creator and God as Love, which was a *kenotic* process. God no longer has the attributes of *kevala*, *ekatva* or *Advaita*. Abhishiktananda wonders whether we can still say that God exists after this *kenosis*. The *kenosis* is a giving of God's self. This is why no one has ever seen the Father, but only the Son. Now it is in and through creation that God manifests himself. The world comes from God and it returns to God. Because of this dependence on God, *maya* is neither being nor non-being. The world is on its way towards God, like Christ, passing to the Father. There is no *maya* in the strict sense of the word, except for the person who has separated the universe from the supreme reality and who conceives God in function of this distinction.

### 9. Trinity: A Christian Solution to the Hindu Riddle

Abhishiktananda believed that the Trinity solves the problem of the One and the Many. In the perspective of the Trinity the antinomy of the *an-eka* and the *Advaita*, the not-one and the not-two, which obsessed the Indian seers for millennia, could be understood. The doctrine of the Trinity helps us to avoid both dualism and monism. The Word is both with God as well as God himself. If the Word is God, we cannot say two (in a numerical sense) of him and the Father; there is no place left for any division, duality (*Dvaita*) of any kind. But if the Word is with God, then God is not a mere monad either. In the same way the indistinguishability between Brahman and the world does not necessarily mean their identity.

Abhishiktananda affirms, "Between God and the human person there is nothing that could be counted. I do not say that the human being is God or that God is the human being, but I deny that the human being plus God makes two."<sup>32</sup> Abhishiktananda reiterates that this experience of both identity and diversity is ineffable (*anirvachaniya*).<sup>33</sup> It is not to be explained in terms of either unity or of difference. There is the non-unity of God and the human being. And there is their non-duality – and there is what is at the same time beyond non-unity and beyond non-duality.<sup>34</sup> He says that this mystery of the Trinity is something that India and even its

<sup>32</sup>Panikkar, *Diary*, 151 (5.7.56).

<sup>33</sup>Panikkar, *Diary*, 375 (17.4.73).

<sup>34</sup>Panikkar, *Diary*, 101 (9.4.55).

most strong yogis could not discover. According to him the Trinitarian experience goes beyond and transcends the experience of Hindu *jnanis*. Jesus' statement "the Father and I are one" (*Ego et Pater unum sumus*), should be regarded at the same time as in Dvaita and in Advaita.<sup>35</sup>

## 10. Conclusion

Abhishiktananda's non-monistic Advaita affirms the reality of both unity and diversity in the world. He challenged monism that questioned the reality of the world and insisted on *an-eka* (not one). He was also in conflict with dualism that upheld the existence of a world opposite to God. It is the Christian Trinitarianism that inspired Abhishiktananda's non-monistic understanding of Advaita. It encouraged him to affirm a unity in diversity, or transcendence in immanence. However, his interpretation of the Trinity was unorthodox. According to him the Father, who is *ekam advityam*, One-without-a-Second, gives Himself in love in the process of kenosis in manifesting the world or Son. This process is the evolution from the One. The Spirit is the unity between Father and Son, and brings us back unity in the process of involution until God is again all in all. Abhishiktananda calls this the Pleroma.<sup>36</sup>

Abhishiktananda believed that the Trinitarian experience is present even within Hinduism. He argues that a non-monistic interpretation of the Upanishads can uphold both a static and dynamic conception of Brahman and the idea of *sakti* expresses the dynamic power of Shiva in the creation of the world. It is the over rationalization of Upanishadic teaching by Sankara that lead to the degradation of world as *maya*. He taught that in the advaitic experience of *kevala*, or *nirvikalpa samadhi* Brahman is experienced as Advaita beyond all dualities, space and time, and distinction between subject and object. A person having this experience will no longer fear death because he or she knows the eternal nature of the true Self. If a person survives the *kevala* experience, he or she returns to the world of diversity; which is the *sahaja* experience of *jivanmuktas*. The advaitic experience is an experience of wholeness rather than just a part of our being. Abhishiktananda held the view that it can be experienced, though such experience cannot be described in conceptual terms.

<sup>35</sup>Panikkar, *Diary*, 32 (3.4.52).

<sup>36</sup>John Glenn Friesen has done an excellent study on *Abhishiktananda's Non-Monistic Advaitic Experience* for his Doctorate in Literature and Philosophy at the University of South Africa (2001). I am indebted to the above said thesis for many ideas found in this article. <members.shaw.ca/abhishiktananda/Abhi.thesis.pdf>

Though Abhishiktananda was very much influenced by Upanishads he utilized other systems of thought including Buddhism and Kashmir Saivism to facilitate his search for the reality. He understood the *kevala* experience in terms of the Christian concept of purification taking place in the Dark Night of the Soul often described by the Western mystics. He interpreted the *sahaja* stage as the resurrection from this “death.” This is a distinctly Christian interpretation of *sahaja*. Abhishiktananda considers the advaitic experience as an experience of Being “I am who am” revealed by Yahweh in the Bible. He says that in our own advaitic experience we are also invited to have the same experience of Jesus, who recognized his nondual relation with God his Father. It is not evident from his writings whether he ever experienced the *kevala* experience in the sense that he described it. It was his disciple Chaduc who had an experience and Abhishiktananda might have had a vicarious experience of it. His own experience was not until his near-death experience in his heart attack in 1973. Though it does not appear to have been an experience of *kevala* in the sense of Pure Consciousness, that does not mean that he did not achieve an advaitic experience in the sense of *sahaja*.

Abhishiktananda’s search for truth and experience, thus, forced him to borrow heavily from all the sources available to him so much so that it is difficult to confine his thoughts into any one religion. He relativized all religions, just as he relativized all concepts. He considered all doctrines as products of conceptualization in the realm of *namarupa* (names and forms). Yet, he acknowledged the necessity of myths, religions, rites and rituals, as well as concepts for the purpose of sharing our experiences.

Abhishiktananda was a monk, mystic, and bridge builder. He made an important observation that though ‘Advaita’ means “not-two,” it does not mean “only one.” In other words, Advaita is not monism. This allows a distinction between God and created reality while yet affirming their unity. He knew that doctrinally Advaita and Christianity contradict each other, and there is no way to combine or resolve these doctrinal expressions. However, he believed that the experience of Advaita transcends conceptual expression. Therefore Abhishiktananda made himself a laboratory of spiritual alchemy to prove that Advaita is not in conflict with Christian doctrine. He became a voice crying in the desert of humanity’s mediocrity, blind rigidity and fanaticism. Abhishiktananda’s greatness consists in having lived within himself the symbiosis of two traditions, the Hindu and the Christian, in so real a way that both became part of himself, without ever being able to reject or disown either.