

## MARIO PIANTELLI

### THE « MYSTICAL » ATTITUDE AND ITS INDIFFERENCE TO WORLDLY VALUES AND COMMITMENTS. SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE INDIAN OUTLOOK

« Let the ignoramuses, possessed of pain and discomfort, revolve on the wheel of births and deaths to their heart's content, caring as they do for sons and so on; full with supreme blessedness, caring for what should I mesh in it? Let those who crave to go to the other world perform rites; made up of all the worlds, why should I perform, what, and how? Let those who are specifically entitled to do so expose the authoritative texts or indulge in daily recitation of *Veda-s*, but such is not the case with me, due to actionlessness. Sleep and begging, ablution and purification neither do I wish for, nor do I carry out; and if the onlookers imagine so, well then, what should mean such aliens' imagination to me? [...] Let those to whom Reality is unknown take on the role of auditors; knowing It, whence should I do so? Let those who are consumed by doubt reflect on It, not I, doubtless as I am. Let he who is under the wrong impression of reality of the world practice continuous representation of Reality; to what purpose such practice, when there is no such misapprehension? Never do I take part in exchanging body and Self! There is the habit of saying « I am a human being » even without exchanging them: it is spread given the residua of accustomed practice for a long time. [...] Since there is no distraction and agitation in me, neither is there concentration of dispersed attention on my part: either distraction or concentration (*samādhi*) are actually changing moods of mind-stuff. For me, who

am formed of perennial awareness, what distinct experience could ever take place? Accomplished is what was to be accomplished, attained what was to be attained, such indeed is my firm conviction! [...] Well then, even if I have accomplished what was to be accomplished, the intention to help the world being there, I do indulge in behaving according to the path of authoritative texts: which harm for me? Let the body carry out worship of God, ablution, purification, begging and so on, let the voice repeat « Om » and recite as well the Vedāntic statements, let the mind dwell upon Viṣṇu or be engulfed in the blessedness of the Absolute; I am but the witness thereof: nothing at all in these happenings do I carry out, nor cause to be carried out »<sup>1</sup>.

We shall take as our starting point these reflections, which a highly respected Indian *guru* of the Advaitic persuasion, flourishing in the 14th century, advised his pupils to cultivate in order to further their conviction about their real nature, namely the eternal Consciousness-Presence-Blessedness forming the background of the changing mirage of the world: their *Ātman*, the most intimate self which is also *Brahman*, the Absolute « Enlarger » from which, in which and to which phenomena are born, subsist and come back.

In point of fact, similar reflections could be suggested even leaving out both the unreality of the world, or « acosmism » if one likes Greek new terms, and the identity of *Ātman* and *Brahman*: witness the different theological readings of the well-known parallel passages in *Bhagavadgītā*, IV, 16 ff.; V, 8, ff. XIII, 29; XIV, 19; XVIII, 16 etc., particularly on the part of Vaiṣṇavite schools. Even classical *Sāṃkhya* could be attuned, in a measure, to the same outlook, which is pervasive in regard of Indian « mystical » approach to experience as a whole.

Of course, being God somewhat strenghtens the unconcernedness on the part of a man looking impassively to the drama of worldly life, but it is not essential. Both the playing of a role with due detachment in such drama and the limiting oneself to a disinterested witnessing of it, two positions we find recommended with equal urgency in Indian teachings related to *mukti*

---

1. VIDYĀRĀNYA, *Pañcadaśī*, VII, 255-270, repeated in XIV, 42-57.

or freedom from the world's limitations and human identity at large, simply require to dis-identify oneself from bodily events and mental life alike. With Buddhist teachers, even the contrarywise identification with a lasting consciousness is left out! So, our passage is fairly typical, and we can presently look a little deeper into it to catch something of the spirit of Indian outlook.

The first part of the considerations there suggested takes advantage of a rather narrow — one would even be tempted to say egocentric! — standpoint. The disciple is actually encouraged to part from the attitude of worldly people, even such as could be judged pious ones on Indian standards, by disparaging those who undergo the duress thereof. The insistence is not so much on actual impossibility to carry out any activity for somebody who is a naked witness of exterior events, as on lack of motivation for undertaking it.

Only gradually the perspective is enriched and made deeper, till the denial of one's being human at all. Even the recurring to the — usually — highly praised technique of *samādhi* is ruled out as implying erroneous identification with mind and its acting according to a quotation from Śaṅkara<sup>2</sup>. This is useful for a remainder that, even in *Yogasūtra*-s, such technique is considered to be no end in itself. The experience of *samādhi*, bereft as it is in its higher stages of objectual contents as well as of the feeling of being there as a subject, is certainly important as a proof that the world of subject and object needs not always to be present when we are in a state of limpid awareness (since deep sleep is already freely available for the same purpose in a state of dimmed awareness) and it helps to weaken and eventually destroy the habit of identification with empirical individuality's vicissitudes. Hence its place in the composite buildings of several Indian soteriologies; but nowhere shall we find it at the top of such a building.

The « ultimate experience », unlike *samādhi*, is eternal and always present, once attained or discovered, as the case would be. In many instances of doctrinal elaboration, it is envisaged as

---

2. *Upadeśasāhasrī*, Metrical Part, XIII, 17, somewhat enlarged.

being already there, unnoticed, even before our actually realizing its presence. Our passage points out as much: there is no content of experience that one could be able to identify with Supreme Consciousness (*paracaitanya*) in a preferential way, such Consciousness indeed underlying each and every experience.

When, with the death of the last body of the Liberated One and the reabsorption of his mind-stuff in the objectual first principle whence it was formed (be it an existing *pradhāna* or an illusive *māyā*), no single experience is any more possible, Consciousness is still to be found, either *samādhi*-like, or de-conscientialized, if the neologism could be passed, as in *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* theorization, or God-pervaded, or even totally out from the pale of thought, as the different schools of *Vedānta* would have it, or again transformed into universal experience without any more bonds, like in the ancient *Jaina* construction, or purely and simply reduced to God Himself before any giving off (*śṛṣṭi*) of the world on His part, according to Śaiva Advaitic Kāśmīri schools.

In any case, the presence of body and mind before such a liberating death actually takes place does not add anything to Ultimate Consciousness itself. The Living Liberated One (*jīvanmukta*) (where such a figure is admitted) is, as it were, already dead. This is strongly emphasized in several traditions. Dharmic codes imply as much. The symbolic burning of his sacrificial thread-token of his social position and of the related duties — at the moment of his leaving worldly commitments, shows that every renunciant (*sannyāsin*) is, at least in principle, a living dead. As such, he is no more concerned with the amenities of life, as well as with its burdens: sex, money, sacrifice, daily routine, violence, domestic loyalties and solaces are behind him. Even if they be not actually Living Liberated Ones, *sannyāsin*-s are generally expected to behave as it would become such rare beings.

In a way, this means to lack any behaviour understood as such. The key-word, which is to be found in our passage too, is « actionlessness » (*akriyatva*). This sounds like Taoist *Wu wei*, and it is possible that both traditions are indebted to some ancient set of prescriptions relating to non-commitment as characteristic of a holy man (or man of pover...) in Asiatic preliterate society. Nonetheless, as things are seen when literary monuments

afford us a better look in to the matter, Chinese position is a bit less radical than Indian one.

The actionslessness of Taoist texts, albeit dressed in paradoxical garments, is more like a following the line of less resistance in social and natural environment, in order to avoid unnecessary tension and backstroke effects, than like a *complete* inactivity. It implies the possibility of refraining from some unnatural way of dealing with people (and things in general!) as contrasted with the possibility of actually perpetrating such a mistake. This is so much true, that it can be adopted as a rule for rulers, as particularly *Tao tê ching* shows.

The Indian notion stands on a different ground. Here it is not question of one's taking to action or not. As *Bhagavadgītā* puts it, we are encouraged to find « actionlessness in activity, and activity in actionlessness » (IV, 18). Even one's refraining from a given model of conduct is consistent with a model of conduct: adopting it, one feels himself to be the *protagonist* of his choice, and binds himself therewith. Now, such « protagonistic » attitude is precisely what — according to Indian standards — the man of wisdom and insight definitely abandons. He acknowledges himself to be only the impassible witness of events, intrinsically unconnected with even bodily and mental phenomena, none of which can actually be imputed to him. He cannot but be inactive, and in reality has always been so.

As far as the consequences of such a position for his actual behaviour are concerned, such behaviour, which he does not acknowledge any more as his own, shall obviously lack the usual egocentric human motivations and, because of this all-important feature, will be *toto caelo* different from normal human endeavours. In theistic schools, it is stated that God's own activity now takes over, while human one subsides. Perfect efficiency, effortlessness, even miracles characterize henceforward what body and mind of the detached one accomplish. It is — at the same time — an instance of absolute spontaneity, which in Indian terms is presented as « connaturate » (*sahaja, saha-jāta, sahabhū*) behaviour or experience. Such notion became particularly important in Tantric schools of many a persuasion, but it reflects a more general outlook.

The outcome is very much like the one we find in Taoist reflection: actionlessness brings about wonderful results, impossible to ego — centered effort. But characteristically here, in India, it is not praised as a device to obtain such results: they are more or less byproducts of the boundless power which actionlessness is. Like the Neo-platonic *Arrheton*, be it considered as the One or, with Damaskios, as the None, brings about the whole hierarchy of beings, down to the hylic quasi-reality, by simply being there, the Supreme Consciousness which — in Indian perspective — the man of wisdom and insight *jñānin* has at last discovered as his own intimate Self (or as the Self of his self, if we take into account perspectives subtly different from the *Advaitin's* clear-out one), does not need any effort to bring about his whole daily life and — within it — harmoniously flowing words, thoughts, actions, any more than to bring about the — much more complicated! — show of world's display (*prapañca*). Even in those āgamic systems that admit of a specific power of action (*kriyāśakti*) in God, such effortlessness is emphatically proclaimed.

The well-known representation of Kālī, the Black Lady copulating with the dead body of Śiva, is in this connection specially apt to convey the picture of Divine Consciousness in Its relationship with the world and the activities thereof. God Himself is here in the position of Death-in-Life that we have been pointing out, as precisely the archetypal embodiment of it, one could say. He simultaneously enacts: the *Puruṣa* of Vedic sacrificial cosmogony (to wit, the Macranthropos or Primordial Male stretched as sacrifice<sup>3</sup> from whose dead body universe will be made<sup>4</sup>; the Perfect Oblation (*havis*) through which everything is accomplished and that becomes the Lord Himself<sup>5</sup>); the *puruṣa* of *Sāṃkhya* metaphysics (to wit, the conscious and actionless witness of *pradhāna's* blind antics and mimicry performances); and the

3. Cfr. *Rgveda* X, 90, 6.

4. Of course, Śiva is not to be dismembered in this particular iconographical setting.

5. Cfr. *Satapaṭhabrāhmaṇa* VI, 1,1 ff.; X, 2, 2,1. The relation to Śiva of this sacrificial self-deifying process can be guessed by the passes in *Mahābhārata*, XII, 8 and XII, 20 noted by J. SCHEUER, *Śiva dans le Mahābhārata*, Bibl. École H. Ét., Sciences Religieuses, vol. LXXXIV, Paris, 1982, p. 354.

Light (*prakāśa*) which, omnipresent in objectual and meta-objectual levels of reality, is nonetheless infinitely transcendent in respect of each and every one of them, aloof in Its majestic solitude and immobility.

The Goddess, impersonating the active principle in their strange and terrible intercourse, is an adequate icon of, *inter alia*, divine activity: intimately connected with God, yet somehow apart from Him, giving Him His life, and yet taking it for Herself, allowing Him to enjoy despite His being dead, and yet in reality enjoying alone, through His presence, She stands equally well for *pradhāna* and *Māyā*. In Her beautiful and — at the same time — awful vision, the appearance taken by world and by our being-in-the-world, as soon as Supreme Consciousness radiates forth, is quite vividly portrayed, nay, even the new and different relation with world and activity, that this changed perspective involves, finds here a limpid cipher.

The posture of Kālī being contrarywise (*viparīta*) in respect of normal sexual intercourse, due to Her topping the male corpse of Her spouse, it conveys — undoubtedly! — the notion of an inversion of roles: the Liberated One is henceforward, *perinde ac cadaver*, « passive » in his dealing with body and mind, exactly on the reverse side in regard of the worldly-minded, who feels his handling objectual world as quite « active » and, as a consequence, deeply involving.

To come back to our passage, The last lines of it seem, in a certain way, to come back again to the old perspective: after having been induced to refuse to be considered connected at all with any ritualized behaviour and particularly with the one characteristic of a *sannyāsin* (with ignorant people persist in ascribing to him instead of his body), the disciple is presently invited to identify anew, in a measure, with the subject of that very same behaviour.

Still sticking to his role of witness, and thereby uninvolved in the perfect orthopraxis which is now proposed to his undertaking, he is to follow the prescriptions of authoritative texts (*śāstra*-s) in such matters. Correspondingly, instead of the utter lack of motivation stressed in former verses, an impersonal motivation now comes in: *lokānugraha*, « favouring the world »,

protecting, helping, supporting people and living beings in general.

Such notion is to be found everywhere in Indian « mystical » texts: already in *Bhagavadgītā* Kṛṣṇa states that « holding the world together » (*lokasaṅgraha*) is the only motivation left to the detached one. He must set an example for singles and society: « You are to act only taking into account your holding the world together: whatever the better one does, right that other people imitates, to what standard he sets up, world conforms. There is, o son of Pṛthā, nothing at all for Me to do in the three worlds, neither anything unattained that should be attained, and yet I indulge in activity! For if I did not indulge always in activity, full of care, My behaviour would men follow, o son of Pṛthā, everywhere. These worlds would be destroyed, if I did not accomplish action [...] As the ignoramuses, attached as they are, perform actions, o descendant of Bharata, even so let the wise one, detached, perform them, with the intention of holding the world together: let him not make separation of understanding arise in those ignoramuses, attached to action... »<sup>6</sup>.

This position is not so far from Pauline preoccupation with respecting dietetic tabus in *Romans XIV*. It is always question of approved models of behaviour that keep social community within the pale of decent and respectable, if self-righteous, demeanour: even he who feels free, in his insight, to pass over such models, is entitled to allow them smoothly to work for those they are meant to guide.

Of course, we find in Indian soteriological schools' literature also teachings to the effect of antinomianistic transgression of such social standards of *morality* and *property* — the latter more than the first! Yet, the ideal of « helping the world » is not wholly compromised thereby. *Lokānugraha* in this case, admittedly no more with its dimension of social conservatism, is still being stressed, the only serious motivation left for the conduct of God-man, who sets at naught decorousness and its trappings as well as the dharmic codes on which normal people depend for peace and self-respect, here felt as but hindrances to actual insight. Let us consider, for instance, how a famous Tantric text

---

6. III, 20-26.



illustrates such deliberately scandalous letting down social conventions — and hypocrisies — in order to guide people to Supreme Consciousness: «The forbidden behaviour is right behaviour, and what should not be done is what specially should be done, even untruth and unrighteousness are truth and righteousness, for those of the [esoteric] family, o Lady of the family. What is forbidden to drink is what must be drunken, what is forbidden to eat is what must be eaten, what is forbidden to go to is where one must go, for those of the [esoteric] family, o Lady of the family. Neither command nor prohibition is there, neither merit nor sin, neither heaven nor hell, for those of the [esoteric] family, o Lady of the family. [...] Howsoever clothed, or even without any garb, in whatever social condition, can the *yogin* of the [esoteric] family be found, o Lady of the family. *Yogin*-s wander about this wide earth in many disguises, making what is of avail to men, their real nature unknown. Neither do they pass to others the knowledge of Self at once, o Lady of the family: a *yogin* could stay in the middle of the world like a possessed, a miserable, an idiot. Like in this world the gait of stars and planets goes unnoticed, due to the presence of moon or sun, so the gait of *yogin*-s. As the path of birds in sky, o Goddess, or of fishes in water is not perceived, so the gait of *yogin*-s. They speak as evil ones, they go around as ignoramuses, o Beloved, they are seen as lowly ones, knowers as they are of the *yoga* of the family! [...] In such way that these people laugh at him, are disgusted, and abuse him, or, having seem him, go at a distance, so *yogin* behaves. Now a respectable person, now a deviant one, now like a dead or a ghou, *yogin* wanders around the face of earth wearing many a disguise. *Yogin* enjoys objects of enjoyment for the sake of helping the world, not for any desire of his, and he plays on the face of wide earth favouring people »<sup>7</sup>.

The insistence on the positive role of these disconcerting personages, on their disinterestedness and beneficial effect on others, as it can be seen by this last passage, is indeed completely in harmony with the socially oriented motivation we were discus-

---

7. *Kulārṇavatantra*, II, 56-75.

sing just now, albeit the actual models of behaviour are pretty widely separated in respective theories. The introduction of the idea of « playing » (*krīdā* or *līlā*) is but a way of strenghtening the identification of the man of knowledge and insight with God. As a matter of fact, playing, as the human activity which is destitute of extrinsical ends *par excellence*, is frequently employed as a simile for divine « activity »<sup>8</sup>. This does not necessarily imply inconsiderateness or levity on the part of God (as indeed sometimes we find it thrown in His face by those who feel in the position of the Suffering Righteous One)<sup>9</sup>, but it *does* imply lack of responsibility and, once again, of effort. Meaningfully enough, instead of playing, breathing is found to be employed, as a simile to illustrate just this feature with sufficient clearness.

Such peculiar traits are perfectly compatible with working for others' benefit. As for the way of such working on the part of the Liberated One, actual teaching seems to be the only « activity » normally understood, apart from his setting up an example in general, even by his simply being himself. To quote a modern traditional authority, « If any amount of money is given or any number of cloths or any extent of land, the recipient may not be satisfied and may not say: « I have received enough ». But in the case of feeding, the recipient can eat only what he can and will of his own accord say: « Enough. I want no more ». He will decline to take even a single morsel more. Thus the gift of food is the only gift in which the giver can satisfy the recipient till the latter says: « Enough ». [...] If therefore we can conceive of a kind of gift in which the recipient will not only get temporary satisfaction but will no longer be in want [...] in which the recipient will not only have satisfaction but will also be freed at the same time of any desire whatsoever, can there be anything equal to such kind of gift which gives such supreme satisfaction? The

---

8. See *Brahmasūtra*, II, 1, 33 and the commentaries of the different teachers on that subject.

9. Cfr. for instance *Mahābhārata*, III, 31, 20-36, where the reproach to a cruel God playing with people as a boy with his toys is put in Draupadi's mouth.

knower say that such a gift [...] is the gift of knowledge »<sup>10</sup>. One is reminded here of the promise of the Christ in *John*, IV, 13 f.: « Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst ».

This is, of course, — in Indian outlook — the very test of the Definitive Experience, which is coincident with *mukti*: if something is still wanting, if a desire is left for any object or achievement, if one is still identifying himself with a subject of action who is called to reach or accomplish some end by his effort, then Liberation is not there. Imparting the insight who, alone, can transmute human beings into something more than human is, quite logically, the only task for which somebody who has already undergone that very same transmutation is both competent and indispensable: one cannot give what one has not got.

At the same time, such a task can be felt to be pervasively encroaching on other human interaction areas in the Liberated One's life. He shall tend, in a way, to look at every person, howsoever met, as a potential disciple, even if, in practice, only a few will actually ask his advise (*upadeśa*) and still less will put themselves without reserves in his care (*śaraṇāgati*). Such is after all even God's fate, in Indian perspective: from all eternity He is offering us His boundless grace and infallible help, and almost nobody takes advantage of the situation!

The bond that is established between *guru* and disciple, (*śiṣya*) when that rare occasion takes place, is the most intimate and the strongest. The Liberated One takes on himself his pupil's sins, shortcomings and karmic assets even to the cost of his own illness and death, as is popularly believed of modern teachers who have passed away due to cancer or other equally painful diseases. As a good mother, he will provide each and every kind of help and even condescend to produce miracles, normally despised by men of knowledge, when necessary for those in his care. If they are bound for hell after death, he will rescue them

---

10. *The Call of the Jagadguru. Teachings of H. H. Śrī Chandrasekhara Bhārati* by R. Krishnaswami Aiyar, Madras, 1957, p. 8.

from Yama's messengers and set their path for the best renaissance. For them, he *is* God. They are his responsibility.

Such a relationship can be regarded under many a different light, according to the persuasion of both teachers and disciples, but even theistic schools, preoccupied as they are with keeping God's centrality and transcendence intact, will agree on the *guru's* role and on its dignity. As a matter of fact, we find here the optimum of *social* intercourse (if, at least, to speak of « sociality » is still meaningful at this stage) that Indian « mystical » traditions can theorize — and put in to practice. It is not casual that in today's India social reformers of more or less traditional standing tend to advocate something quite akin to these ideals as a model of behaviour for illuminated social workers, as for everybody in general. The very term « service » (*sevā*), albeit more quickly employed for devotees' standing in regard of their chosen Divinity, is not unknown to be applied also as depicting the spirit of the Liberated One in his dealing with fellow beings, and disciples in particular, as embodying the very Deity that he knows to lay within his bosom.