

Impacts and Exponents of Advaita-vedānta in the Western World – An Interactional Perspective

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This contribution tackles the subject matter from the perspective of a scholar of religious studies and cultural and historical anthropology. The paper has been allotted to session 6 *Exponents of Advaita and their Contribution in East and West* and I was requested to discuss three vast areas: (1) Pre- and Post-Śaṅkara Period: Influence of Advaita-vedānta beyond the shores of India, (2) A global perspective of Advaita-vedānta: Western and Continental Models, and (3) Saints of Advaita (19th century onwards).

This is a challenge indeed. The topics are actually too complex to be discussed in one paper, and concerning the pre-Śaṅkara period we enter historically uncertain grounds. My presentation will therefore only briefly go into this period, and concentrate on the impact of Advaita-vedānta since the 19th century. This was, indubitably, a time of contact and immense influence of Advaita-vedānta and its sources, the Upaniṣads and *Bhagavad-gītā*, in the Western world and in India. Here, we meet with the new challenge that by the end of the 19th century topic 2, the 'global perspective' of 'Western and continental models,' can strictly speaking not neatly be separated from topic 3 'Indian saints', and vice versa.

The prime example for the highly entangled history of that time is the Indian saint² Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) who enjoyed not only tremendous success in America and his motherland, but was also keen to meet the German professor Paul Deussen (1845-1919) in Kiel, who had delivered a memorable speech at the Royal Academy in Mumbai which soon was circulating among Indian intellectuals. I speak therefore of '*An interactional perspective*' in my subtitle. It was interactional exchange and mutual influences and transfers that accounted for a global consensus arising at the time, that Advaita-vedānta was 'the' Indian philosophy and 'the' Vedānta par excellence (despite other existing schools) and 'the' defining factor of 'Hinduism', a term which itself had evolved only in the 19th century.

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² I use the term in the sense of social acknowledgement; the attribution of others is decisive in a religious study scholar's determining who is a saintly person.

A short first chapter will take up topic 1; thereafter I draft a broader outline of what I just observed. Many voices had their share in this great impact: British orientalists/philologists, Indian intellectuals and reformers, theosophists of different nations, American transcendentalists, and also German philosophers, writers and scholars, right from the Romantic period (end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century). Each segment would be a huge subject of its own. Within the framework of this conference paper there is need to tighten the focus. I am going to discuss in more detail some very important German and Indian exponents of truly global reach in spreading Advaita-vedāntic knowledge: Swami Vivekananda, A. Schopenhauer, P. Deussen, R. Otto, H. Hesse and Swami Chinmayananda.

1. Difficulties and Challenges Concerning the Influence of Advaita-vedānta beyond the Shores of India in the pre- and post-Śaṅkara Period

The influence of Advaita-vedānta beyond the shores of India in the pre- and post-Śaṅkara period is a very difficult, uncertain and little researched area. It would need deeper historical studies than those presently available. This being so, my discussion is restricted to three observations:

(a) If there is a pre-Śaṅkara European tradition which comes very close to Advaita-vedānta, it is the Neo-platonic non-dual vision of the world: of the One Being transcending name and form and being the divine core in men. There have been suggestions to trace Indian influences, but there seems to be too little data to prove this contention.

(b) While Indian impact on this pre-Christian tradition remains speculative, we know of Neoplatonism's profound effects in the European history of ideas. It was very strong in late antiquity – cutting across religious creeds ('pagan' Hellenism, Christianity, Judaism and later also Islam) – and remained a powerful undercurrent. It profoundly shaped the Christian Middle Ages; for instance, the mysticism of Master Eckhart and some of the finest thinkers of the renaissance.

(c) While India's influence on Neoplatonism remains debatable, there was certainly no direct influence on the great German mystic Master Eckhart (13 CE). Yet, he was often compared to Eastern thought in modern times, because he was felt to be very close and saying amazingly similar things. In the early 20th century, for instance, Rudolf Otto undertook an influential (unfortunately biased) comparison between Eckhart and Ādi Śaṅkara. In the

mid-20th century, Swami Nikhilananda called Eckhart's sermons 'Eckhart Upaniṣads.' This leads to the question, how wide or narrow should the topic of global perspectives and Western models of Advaita-vedānta be conceptualised.

2. A Global Perspective: Western Models and Interactional Transfers

2.1 Western and Continental models

With the German romantic and idealist philosophers of the late 18th and 19th century, we enter a period when undoubtedly interaction with India took place – although mostly intellectual via books and rarely first hand. It was the time of colonial British India when the first translations of the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the Upaniṣads appeared and this knowledge expanded tremendously the religious universe of Europe. Here we find full grounds for the second topic – a global perspective of Advaita-vedānta: Western and continental models. It is precisely these more recent times where I put my emphasis with a particular focus on the German-speaking area of continental Europe.

Not only the British had interest in India's sacred lore, most prominently the *Bhagavad-gītā* and Upaniṣads – a wonderful example (out of many) is Max Mueller's translation project 'Sacred Books of the East,' in which a new translation of the Upaniṣads constitutes the first and the *Bhagavad-gītā* the third volume. Nor were the American transcendentalists the only philosophers who enthusiastically received Indian thought. It was also a very intensive period when German (romantic) philosophers took keen interest in the textual tradition of Advaita-vedānta and its non-dual world-view. Among the best heads of their time were Herder, Humboldt, the brothers Schlegel, Schelling and other romantic philosophers, some of whom became the first Sanskrit scholars and Indologists in Germany.

The image of India of these thinkers (and the romantic epoch in general) was very idealistic: India was seen as the cradle of mankind, a land of harmony and mystical oneness. Furthermore, it is of interest that in this very same epoch, when Indian texts became known in Europe for the first time, the so-called German mysticism (starting with master Eckhart as the spearhead) was also rediscovered – both with great enthusiasm and loaded with cultural criticism. The German philosophers of romanticism criticised the European development of 'cold rationality' in the Age of Enlightenment,

the secularised tendencies and the loss of spirituality and religion in the beginning of the industrial age.

For instance, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), summarised the centre of Indian thought much in an Advaita-vedāntic fashion as pure existence in and behind all beings, and as oneness of all beings in God, the absolute Reality.³ Typically, this served the function of criticising contemporary Europe. Herder praised the unique sources of wisdom found in India, but not in 'our own philosophical cold European world.'⁴

Besides such affirmative and enthusiastic reception, we find also a history of devaluation right from the Romantic period. This becomes obvious in the controversy which issued from August Wilhelm Schlegel's translation of the *Bhagavad-gītā* into Latin (1823) and involved almost all German philosophers of the time. Whereas Herder praised the *Gītā* enthusiastically, the famous philosopher Hegel brought forth a harsh and disparaging critique against Advaita-vedāntic philosophy – and against his German colleagues infatuated with India. For Hegel, the Advaitic vision of oneness was too abstract and lacking logic and conceptual clarity. He held Indian philosophy to be inferior to the philosophy in Europe, as, according to him, unlike the latter, it was not based on the laws of logic. Moreover, he postulated that the non-dual vision and Brahmanvidyā would automatically lead to indifference towards the world.⁵

These two ambivalent lines of reception remained in the 20th century major tropes: On the one hand, we find romantic love for India and enthusiastic reception of the Advaita-vedāntic vision of non-duality, often along with a cultural criticism of the present (spiritual) situation in Europe and the hope to make up a spiritual loss in modern society. On the other hand, we find devaluating and debasing Advaita-vedānta by accusing it to be no real philosophy and lacking ethics. In particular, it was attributed a world-denying religiosity that lacked moral zeal and active ('prophetic') engagement to improve society and the world.

With respect to these two opposing patterns of receiving Advaita-vedānta – as either cultural criticism of modern Western society or as defective rationality and ethics – one may not only speak of positive and negative

³ Wilhelm, Halbfass, *Indien und Europa. Perspektiven ihrer geistigen Begegnung*, 1981, 88.

⁴ Quoted in *Usarski* 1991, 35.

⁵ Michael Bergunder, "Die *Bhagavadgita* im 19. Jahrhundert" in M. Bergunder (ed) *Westliche Formen des Hinduismus*, 2006, p.191.

orientalism or exotic idealising and imperialist degrading, but also of two typical Western and particularly continental European models.

It is of interest how vastly different from Hegel and Christian critics Hindu reformers, saints and freedom fighters such as Swami Chinmayananda viewed their *Bhagavad-gītā*. For them it was such an important text, because it offered a traditional script to combine seamlessly spirituality and action in the world. It was about one's own struggle and confusion about the real values in life. At the same time, in the struggle for independence and the era of nation building the *Gītā* was a very powerful and important source for the search of national identity and collective values.⁶ It taught self-less service and dedication to a higher ideal, and spoke of a universal godhead and the integration of religious pluralism and different religious paths.

It is important to keep in mind that by the end of the 19th and the early 20th centuries Advaita-vedānta, Upaniṣads and *Bhagavad-gītā* were hardly known to anybody except for the brahmanical elites of monks and Veda scholars and contemplative renunciates. Even Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1949) who already called the *Gītā* 'Bible of Hinduism,' which should be studied by each Hindu every day, came to know it only through two theosophists in London (1889) and not his own family in India.⁷ But immediately, he was deeply impressed.

2.2 Interactional transfers and transformative effects

Gandhiji is one of many examples of the fact that the reception of Advaita-vedānta was not a one-way street in this period, but a highly interactive process. Although functions in receiving and using it differed often greatly among Western and Indian actors, and although each of them made a unique contribution, as we are going to see in more detail, there was already at beginning of the 19th century something like a global discourse on the Advaita-vedānta as the very basis and peak of Hinduism (at that time still called 'Brahmanism'). Besides the Upaniṣads, it was the *Bhagavad-gītā* as Vedāntic source text in Śaṅkara's non-dualist interpretation and not the *Bhagavad-gītā* as a Vaiṣṇava source that entered the German romantic knowledge of India. This understanding was preceded already by the very first *Gītā* translation of the British scholar Wilkins, who in turn, relied on the information of brahmanical scholars.

⁶ For this claim see also Michael Bergunder, *Ibid.*

⁷ Bergunder, *Ibid.* p.187.

Moreover, it will be seen that what I have called (a bit too simplistically) 'positive orientalism' is not only found among Western recipients, but also in the Hindu saint Swami Vivekananda. This shows that it would be wrong to conceptualise a 'global perspective' solely based on Western and continental models. This global perspective was shaped by many voices, among them also the theosophists who were very instrumental in spreading knowledge and images of eastern wisdom at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

My selection of exponents is limited, but focused solely on Advaita-vedānta, which was not the case, for instance in Gandhi and the theosophists. I want to continue the argument that reception history is not just a one-way street with Western exponents here and Indian saints and sages there. This will become clear, for instance, when discussing the exchange and mutual influence of Deussen and Swami Vivekananda who personally met. The German scholars to be discussed have each been outstanding in spreading Advaita-vedāntic thought and were very powerful opinion makers. Except for Schopenhauer, all the authors visited South Asia, and there was also a mutual dependence among them. The Schopenhauer disciple Deussen, for instance, translated 60 Upaniṣads and Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtra* commentary, which in turn were the basis for Otto and Hesse to develop their views of Advaita-vedānta.

Among the Indian masters – Swami Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi, Swami Chinmayananda, Swami Tejomayananda, and one should also add Swami Dayananda who recently passed away and belonged to the Chinmaya Mission before he founded his own Arsha Vidya institution – all are well-known sages and approved saints of Advaita-vedānta in India and only Ramana Maharshi never left India. His radiance and silent teaching, however, was made known widely in the Western world by books and biographies, such as the one of the Swiss novelist Romain Rolland. Also books have been important contact zones, but doubtlessly more powerful than such indirect mediations have been direct mediations, such as Swami Vivekananda's famous speech in Chicago and his succeeding missionary tour in the US, or Swami Chinmayananda's first world-tour in 1965 and continuing camps and lecture series in the US, Australia, Europe, Africa and East Asia, which were continued by Swami Tejomayananda, the present head of the Chinmaya Mission. Amongst these masters also there exist many mutual relationships. Ramana Maharshi's writings, for instance, are part of the teaching program

in the Chinmaya Mission. Swami Chinmayananda himself has been called a second Vivekananda for good reasons. However, it was Swami Chinmayananda's great achievement to bring not only the general ideas of Advaita-vedānta but also the original sources – the Upaniṣads and *Bhagavad-gītā* and other Advaita-vedāntic texts – 'to the market place' as he called it. He made them known to a wider public in India and beyond by his orations and comments. Thereby he provided powerful keys to make meaning out of them, as the texts by themselves are not easily understood and always needed a competent teacher to unlock the deep sense hidden in them. This bringing into very direct contact with the original sources distinguished Swami Chinmayananda also from other Indian gurus who came in the 1960 and 1970s to the West.

For want of time, I will restrict my more detailed discussion of Indian thinkers to Swami Vivekananda and Swami Chinmayananda. My objective is to reconstruct the lines and channels of a cognitive globalisation of Advaita-vedāntic ideas. Within this process certain mental maps developed, such as India as a land of high spirituality, mysticism, non-violence and religious tolerance. This image remained powerful in Western minds up to the present day. These mental maps were shaped by the Indian as well as German intellectuals, writers and reformers selected here, and it was not only a history of ideas, but also of a history of real encounters, substantial religious transformations and socio-political relevance.

Before discussing the selected authors and their distinct contributions, I would like to point out at a more general level some major elements of religious transformation. In the Western world, even the purely literal contact zones of books opened up new horizons to understand oneself, God, and the world. European thought was infused with fresh ideas or new ways to look at one's own tradition. I want to mention only four startling products of this interaction with India (constantly increasing since the late 19th century) and the new knowledge brought about by the Advaita-Vedāntic world-view:

- i. It was not only central in defining 'Hinduism,' but also substantial in conceptualising 'mysticism' as a universal category. The concept of mysticism received expansion and new meaning and significance. From now it was no more bound to Europe and Christianity, but seen as a transcultural category, which at the same time was deeply informed by the "*tat tvam asi*" vision of non-dual oneness.

- ii. Also the terms 'illumination' and 'enlightenment' were filled with Indian convictions – the idea of *Jīvanmukti*, 'liberation while living,' a state of ultimate perfection within this very lifetime.
- iii. Probably the greatest and most popular impact must be seen in the field of modern alternative, not institutionally bound spirituality in Western countries, known as New Age spirituality. This religious style is widely spread today (e.g. in Germany followed by 9% of the population) and even entered the Catholic and Protestant churches. India had to offer individual soteriologies, practices of meditation, many choices in worshipping and picturing the divine, models to see all religions as ultimately one, and not least the vision of non-dual oneness with God and the world, the search for true self-knowledge and religious styles based on one's own experience and spiritual growth. These are important ingredients in modern spirituality, which otherwise is far removed from Hindu religious life as practised in India. It is not Hinduism or traditional Advaita-vedānta which practitioners of modern spirituality follow, but rather a very free and personal choice and mixture of different traditions.
- iv. A forth impact of Advaita-vedānta in the Western world can be seen in adding further fuel to dynamic religious developments in Europe and North America. The three effects, shortly described above, likely could take place only because the vision of the Self revealed by Advaita-vedānta resonated with the dynamics in European religious history: On the one hand, critical attitudes had developed since the age of enlightenment towards doctrinal and church religion, and the Christian belief-system, for example, seeing in Jesus Christ the only saviour of mankind. On the other hand, the Indian tradition, and again particularly Advaita-vedānta, was not only found to be different, but also sounded familiar. It resonated with certain European traditions which had been there all along since antiquity, but not developed into mainstreams, such as Neoplatonism, the mysticism of Master Eckhart, and European esoteric thought which has a long history since antiquity and found itself revitalised since the renaissance. India's spiritual lore provided a new grid to enhance the rediscovery and revitalisation of these traditions and help them move from the periphery to the centre.

However different these developments may be from those in India, the two worlds are not completely apart. Indian and European thought have been in intensive interaction since the late 19th century and nowhere was the entangled history, including friction, as obvious as in British India. Religious change and transformation happened also in the Indian context and was here a direct product of the colonial situation. The outstanding importance that Advaita-vedānta gained in defining Hinduism cannot be explained only by western interests, but also anti-colonial protest. The Advaita-vedāntic all-in-one discourse served not only as a conceptual map that gave major impulses to modern western spirituality. It was also seminal for conceptualising unity in plurality in India. It gave a philosophical foundation and deep spiritual meaning to everyday religiosity and image worship and released it from the British stigma of primitive idolatry. This is most clearly detectable in Swami Vivekananda who became a national hero because he raised pride in the Indians of their own heritage. A spiritual master, powerful orator and passionate patriot, Vivekananda's portrayal of Hinduism was a proud protest against the imperialist European project of civilising India. He turned the stigma of belonging to an inferior, underdeveloped culture upside down. His legacy makes clear that by means of Advaita-vedānta, Hinduism was presented as an equal and even as superior to Christianity. He was, however, not a lonely hero, as the ground had been already prepared by positive western reception of the Advaita-vedānta, such as the one of Arthur Schopenhauer.

3. Reception of Hindu Concepts in the West and Western concepts in Hinduism

What I call entangled history means to be aware of the fact that the giving and receiving side cannot be neatly set apart. In what follows, I outline an interactive field of mutual relations and effects in the reception of Indian concepts in the West and western concepts in Hinduism. My protagonists to be discussed are outstanding personalities who were not only products of interactional transfers, but also mediators and producers of transfers: the Indian monk and first Hindu missionary Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), the philosopher and Indologist Paul Deussen (1845-1919), the theologian and religious studies scholar Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), the novelist and life-reformer Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) and Swami Chinmayananda (1916-1993) who was termed

a second Vivekananda, but went in important respects beyond his famous predecessor.

What makes all of my protagonists – the Indian and the German ones – particularly interesting is their great historical success and effectiveness. They were extremely powerful opinion makers of global reach. Each was unique in his own way, and at the same time each mirrored wider discourses, hopes and views of a larger public. It was both their uniqueness and their contribution to questions and quests of their time which made them powerful voices in and beyond their own time and culture.

If we shift our attention from these exponents of Advaita-vedānta to the recipients, we witness ever new waves of India fascination in different historical and geographical contexts: in America by the end of the 19th century, in Germany in the Weimar republic of the 1920s, and in Europe, America and Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. This was the time when the India-boom shortly became a mass movement among young people. By the 1980s and 1990s it had already been completely assimilated and transformed in New Age and esotericism. Traces of the subjective syncretism of these contemporary movements are found, however, already in the Weimar era. Within all the phases of India enthusiasm and among all my protagonists and their effects we can acknowledge new experiential worlds and visions that are neither purely ‘western’ nor purely ‘eastern’ anymore.

Swami Vivekananda (1862–1902)

Swami Vivekananda belonged to Kolkata’s western educated classes and his revered Gurū was the ecstatic saint and Kali worshipper Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Vivekananda was most seminal in defining Hinduism through Advaita-vedānta and in popularising this great tradition. His famous speeches at the World Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1893 – to which he travelled uninvited – have been judged as the birth of Hinduism by western scholars. What they mean is a unified, essentialised and spiritualised universal Hinduism, beyond caste, creed, age, gender and regional varieties – a Hinduism made akin to the great world religions and which was anything but inferior to Christianity. Vivekananda already used the recently introduced term ‘Hinduism’⁸ very naturally and saw in it the religion of the Vedas and Vedānta philosophy.⁹

⁸ The term was probably coined by Ram Mohan Roy, see Lorenzen, *Who invented Hinduism?*, 2006

⁹ Vivekananda, *Chicago Addresses*, 2007, 25-27ff.

The Vedas contain, according to Vivekananda, the accumulated knowledge of spiritual laws envisioned by the Ṛṣis, and lead to universal Consciousness and immortal Bliss. As in all religions, says Vivekananda, their aim is self-perfection, the Realisation of the Divine in one's own self and becoming true children of God. This search was, according to him, the very core of Hinduism and not dogmas, polytheism or idolatry. The many gods and goddesses are merely external symbols and necessary aids in the search of ultimate perfection. Hinduism (Vedic religion) had realised that unity in plurality was a universal law of nature and therefore was able to accommodate all religions, for instance, also Jews and Parsis who were persecuted in other countries.

Swami Vivekananda spoke of his pride to belong to a religion which can teach the world tolerance and universal acceptance. The *Gītā*, for instance, stated: "Whosoever comes to me, through whatsoever form, I reach him, all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to Me; I am in every religion as the thread through a string of pearls."¹⁰ If there was one universal religion spanning the whole globe, it should be one, said Vivekananda, that is independent of time and place and infinite like God himself, not Brahmanical, Buddhist, Muslim or Christian, but in true catholicism encompassing all religions from fetishism to highest morality and modern natural science. It should be one that knew no intolerance and no persecution, but respected the divinity in each man and woman as their true nature.

Vivekananda's speech was received with overwhelming applause. The American press (*New York Herald*, *Boston Evening Transcript*, etc.) lauded him as the actual hero of the whole event. Two statements impressed the public most of all, namely the acceptance of all religions which could learn from each other instead of fighting with each other and the observations regarding a universal religion. This met the nerve of the time. Romain Rolland wrote enthusiastically that here was a young man who had not only spoken, like the others, about his own god, but rather about a wonderful synthesis of religion and modern science, in which there was no dogma, but only the inherent godliness in all human beings and spiritual evolution. This made, according to Rolland, immense impression on the audience.

Equally successful was Vivekananda's succeeding America tour. We find him here more and more boldly engaging in cultural criticism of Western

¹⁰ Vivekananda, *Ibid*, 20-21, 70. See also *Ibid*. 47.

civilisation, which was as frenetically welcomed as his message of Hindu spirituality, because it echoed some of the Americans' own hopes and critiques. Vedānta taught, according to Vivekananda, spiritual harmony of the whole universe and godliness as the birthright of all human beings.¹¹ The West may have conquered India, but now it too needed India, as the West had only developed in materialism, technology and war, whereas every Indian farmer owned more spirituality and morality than any Western philosopher.

Vivekananda's great success was surely due to the authenticity and charisma of his personality, but also due to the multifunctionality of his message. He established Hinduism as an equal and even superior world religion to Christianity and at the same time as a very global, transreligious spirituality. For Indian ears he voiced proud, polemical anti-colonial protest which made him a hero of a new national consciousness in his motherland, whereas Western ears heard in his speech their own uneasiness with modern Western civilisation and their search for self-religion and mystical experience.

Concerning interactional transfers it is of particular interest how fast and creatively Vivekananda adopted Christian values, European enlightenment and romantic criticism and idealism, and how ingenuously he 'Indianised' them and made them contain a new semantics. For instance, the central Advaita-vedāntic formula *tat tvam asi* contained, according to him, quite naturally not only non-violence, but also the Christian love of one's neighbor, that is, one's fellow beings: "You are one with the universal Being, and this is why every soul is your soul and each body is your body. If you hurt somebody, you hurt yourself..."¹²

This connection of Vedāntic metaphysics with Christian love ethics in which the Upaniṣadic idea of non-dual oneness becomes the very foundation of the highest Christian commandment (resulting in acts of 'caritas' and self-less service towards one's fellow beings) was not Vivekananda's 'invention'. It was Schopenhauer (1788-1860) who voiced it for the first time. In all probability Vivekananda learned it from the Schopenhauer-heir and Indologist Paul Deussen,¹³ who had 1893 travelled to Mumbai (while Vivekananda was in Chicago!) to deliver a memorable talk at the Royal Asiatic

¹¹ Swami Vivekananda, "Vedanta: Der Ozean der Weisheit," in Malinar, *Hinduismus Reader*, 2009, 101-104.

¹² Vivekananda, *Ibid.* 102.

¹³ Paul Hacker, "Schopenhauer und die Ethik des Hinduismus," in: Hacker, *Kleine Schriften*, 1978, 531-564. See also Wilhelm Halbfass, *Indien und Europa*, 1981, 244-274, and Christoph Gellner, *Hermann Hesse und die Spiritualität des Ostens*, Düsseldorf: Patmos 2005, 149-151.

Society which was immediately printed and distributed in India. Deussen maintained: "Love your neighbour like you love yourself ... Why should I do that? The answer is not found in the Bible ..., but in the Veda, namely in the great formula "*tat tvam asi*" which in three words communicates the underlying metaphysics ...: You should love your neighbor like yourself, because you yourself are your neighbour, whereas to see him as different is mere illusion."¹⁴

This idea must have filled Vivekananda's heart with joy and satisfaction that his debased religion to which was attributed moral indifference was all of the sudden the foundation of the highest Christian ethical commandment. During his tour to Europe in 1896 he visited Deussen in Kiel, who in turn followed him to London. One can conclude that the interest and impact on each other was mutual.¹⁵

Vivekananda got inspiration for his practical or applied Vedānta, but he was not a mere passive recipient of European thought, but also inventive. He could as well rely on genuine Indian sources, such as the *Īśavāśya-upaniṣad*, rediscover his own tradition and see and interpret it in a new light and accordingly present it as containing everything already. Clearly, Vivekananda's Advaita-vedānta was not only a religion for world-renouncing monks. It had also a practical moral appeal which western critics of Advaita-vedānta had repeatedly denied. The universal religion Vivekananda had spoken of in Chicago was not a distant utopian ideal for him, but already realised in the Vedānta. For him the Advaita-vedāntic vision of one without a second was not only an inner process and world-view, but the Realisation of the brotherhood of men: "If a human being reaches the highest, if s/he sees neither men nor women, neither sect or confession, neither colour of skin nor birth, nor any such difference, but if s/he goes beyond and finds the Divine which is the true being behind each human being – then and only then s/he has reached universal brotherhood, and only then s/he is a Vedāntin."¹⁶ This is a nice example for the way Vivekananda interpreted his own tradition in a new light. "Neither man nor woman" and so on could be extracted from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-upaniṣad*, but 'freedom, equality and brotherhood' were the

¹⁴ Quoted by Gellner, *Hermann Hesse und die Spiritualität des Ostens*, 2005, 150.

¹⁵ See also Michael Bergunder, "Indischer Swami und deutscher Professor: 'Religion' jenseits des Eurozentrismus," in: M. Stausberg (ed.), *Religionswissenschaft* 2010, 95-107-

¹⁶ Vivekananda, see note 11, 104.

motto of European enlightenment and the aim of 'universal brotherhood' was the objective of the theosophists of his time.

A teaching that remained very central in Vivekananda was that Vedānta implied all-encompassing religious tolerance – 'tolerance' was another important term of European enlightenment. Vivekananda uses it in his own way and sometimes with obvious critique of Christian missionary endeavour. The special thing about the Vedānta is, he says, that we can accept endless plurality in religious thought and do not try to convert others to our own opinion, because the ultimate aim is one, just as all rivers flow into the one and the same ocean.¹⁷

It is interesting that he described his guru Ramakrishna as a human embodiment of the ultimate oneness of all paths by narrating that his Guru practised and had mystical visionary experiences in all. Ramakrishna's undoubtable tantric Kali worship would have been abhorred by the western public of that time and definitely less acceptable than the Vedāntic all-in-one discourse which was also transferred into religious practice. The first American temple of the newly founded Ramakrishna Mission or Vedānta Society in San Francisco has Ramakrishna flanked by Sharada Devi, Vivekananda, Jesus Christ and Buddha as divine images on major altar, but crowning all there is the syllable OM as all-encompassing sacred symbol.

This new universal cosmopolitan religion and spirituality appealed to Americans as well as Indians. The Ramakrishna Mission was the first Hindu missionary society in the West and it helped to spread Vedānta as urban middle class religion in India. But as important in the homeland was also Vivekananda's political role in inciting pride to belong to an age-old highly spiritual tradition. The religious imperialism of Christian faith and the colonial imperialism of the British were symbolically won over by Vivekananda's victorious spiritual imperialism. There is maybe no better symbolic embodiment of this than the Vivekananda museum in Chennai, established in the former 'ice-house' where the British kept the ice brought by ships into the hot Madras to cool the gentlemen's beer and whisky.

The Weimar period – Advaita-vedānta in Germany between the Two World Wars
An amazing statement of the Veda and Buddhism scholar Hermann Oldenberg in the year 1922 captures our attention. He remarked that 'today'

¹⁷ Vivekananda, *Ibid.* 103. In the wider context of this argumentation he makes implicit use of the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the *Chāndogya-upaniṣad*.

– meaning the 1920s – nobody must be told anymore what the Upaniṣads are, as their wonderful teachings of the Brahman as source and life-force of everything and “*tat tvam asi*” teaching have become part of the Germans’ own intellectual and spiritual life-world.¹⁸ Oldenberg may have been a bit too overenthusiastic, but as a matter of fact, indeed a veritable Asia boom had risen for the period of ten years between the two wars. It may have been a romantic heritage that Eastern ideas found in no other country of Europe as much resonance as in Germany from the 1920s to 1933 when the second world-war broke out. Many experienced the time after the disaster of first world war as a time of crisis and of search for new values, meaning and significance. In various milieus, starting with a veritable Schopenhauer-fashion, Asia and mysticism became a powerful alternative to the weaning influence of traditional Christian faith. They fulfilled an urge to find solutions and deeper sense within oneself.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) and Paul Deussen (1845–1919)

Arthur Schopenhauer is attributed to have opened ‘the treasure-house of Indian philosophy.’¹⁹ Indeed, his influence as mediator of Eastern philosophy cannot be overestimated, and it exceeded by far his own time. Schopenhauer was widely read in Germany before the second world-war and discussed in public newspapers and magazines. He inspired many intellectuals and artists (such as Wagner, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and others). In his ‘religion of intellectuals’ (Max Weber, Kurt Flasche) Advaita-vedānta and Theravada-Buddhism were hardly separated and seen as the same message – as in many early Western receptions. Schopenhauer praised the high spirituality of eastern thought. He saw in the Upaniṣads the ‘fruit of the highest human knowledge and wisdom’ and in their introduction into the western world ‘the greatest gift of the century.’²⁰ Indeed, Antequil Duperron’s Latin translation of the Persian version of *108 Upaniṣads*, on which Schopenhauer relied²¹ and which was the first introduction of eastern wisdom in the West,

¹⁸ See the introduction of Hermann Oldenberg’s German translation of Buddha’s sermons (*Die Reden Buddhas*, 38).

¹⁹ L. Alsdorf, *Deutsch-Indische Geistesbeziehungen*, Heidelberg 1942, 73, cited by Usarsky, 1991, 36. See also Wilhelm Halbfass, *Indien und Europa. Geschichte einer geistigen Begegnung*.

²⁰ Quoted by Usarsky, 1991, and others.

²¹ Despite this defective source material, Schopenhauer had, as Max Müller remarked, an amazingly good grasp of Upaniṣadic thought. Müller’s own Upaniṣad translation into English (based on Sanskrit manuscripts), which constituted the first volume of the *Sacred Books of the East*, set new scholarly standards. In Germany, Paul Deussen was the fountainhead of more reliable translations.

brought about a sort of revolution in the religious universe of Europe, making aware that outside of Europe existed unimagined rich sources of religious knowledge, human culture and wisdom. Not only Schopenhauer, but many others, such as C.G. Jung, noticed as well the sea-change and deep impact which the introduction of the Upaniṣads left in the Western world. Schopenhauer confessed that reading the Upaniṣads has been the joy of his life and would be his consolation at the hour of death.

Schopenhauer's veritable infatuation with and mediation of Indian thought inspired nearly all early research of Buddhism in Germany, and also Paul Deussen's translation of sixty Upaniṣads and Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtra* commentary into German – which remains a pioneering landmark of scholarship and knowledge about Advaita-vedānta in the German-speaking regions up to the present day. In Weimar's time, Deussen was widely read – from Rudolf Otto to Hermann Hesse and many others. Without Deussen, neither Otto's *West-Eastern Mysticism* (*West-östliche Mystik*, first edition 1926), nor Hesse's *Siddharta* (first edition 1922) could have been written – books that found even greater distribution than Deussen's translations.

Before turning to these two very different, almost opposing exponents of Advaita-vedānta, Otto and Hesse, a word of caution must be added on the ambivalences of Schopenhauer's and Deussen's Advaita-vedānta enthusiasm. Besides common reproaches often heard in recent studies that they were romanticising and spiritualising India too much and were propounding a 'religion for intellectuals' that had little to do with daily religious practice and lived religion, also some more specific touchy points were noticed.

Like many authors after him, Schopenhauer's bias for the Upaniṣads was not least inspired by his critical attitude towards the Judeo-Christian tradition (and anti-Semitic feelings). The Upaniṣads were such a great gift, according to him, because they "purify the mind" from earlier "superstition"²² (meaning the Jewish and Christian god). Moreover, Schopenhauer may be accused to have ultimately only shown interest in Indian philosophy and wisdom to find his own system of philosophy confirmed. Similar reproaches have been raised against Deussen.²³ Schopenhauer saw in fact his own philosophy of pure will as the very crown and final fulfillment of Advaita-vedānta (Upaniṣadic

²² Quoted by Usarsky.

²³ See, for instance, Bergunder, see note 15.

wisdom) and Buddha's sermons. According to Wilhelm Halbfass, who was one of the best knowers of Advaita-vedānta among more contemporary scholars, neither Schopenhauer nor Deussen had really understood the pure Consciousness which Advaita-vedānta speaks of. Halbfass cites a footnote in Deussen's *Brahmasūtra* commentary translation, in which Deussen calls objectless awareness a monstrous 'belief'!

Moreover, Halbfass judges Schopenhauer's and Deussen's identification of Christian love towards one's fellow beings with the *tat tvam asi* teaching as a misunderstanding – and strictly speaking he is right, as the very core of the Christian love ethics is seen in the original context as manifesting in acts of service for the poor and weak. This connotation was neither there in the traditional "*tat tvam asi*" teaching, nor in Vivekananda's adoption (relating to universal brotherhood of mankind). Neither the 'Advaita-vedānta of Schopenhauer and Deussen nor that of Vivekananda was anymore what it had been primarily for many centuries: a teaching tradition of (mostly) world-renouncing monks in which liberating knowledge alone counted. But nevertheless, even given it was a misunderstanding to connect Christian love ethics and "*tat tvam asi*" mysticism, it was a creative one (stimulating among other things Vivekananda's concept of practical or applied Vedānta, i.e. educative and social projects of the Ramakrishna Mission). The connection proved to be tremendously successful in the reception history from Vivekananda to Hermann Hesse up to the contemporary protestant theologian Dorothee Sölle.²⁴

Rudolf Otto (1869-1937)

Whereas Deussen still belongs to the late 19th and the turn of the centuries, the Protestant theologian and religious studies scholar Otto and the famous novelist Hesse published two of their major works – both having to do 'eastern mysticism' – at a time when a first wave of interest in Asia was in full bloom. This happened in the period of the Weimar Republic between the two world-wars (from the 1920s to 1933) where a deep feeling of crisis and spiritual impoverishment existed, a product of both the destruction of former securities and ideals experienced in the first world war and the materialism and quantification of life which had been brought about by the industrial revolution and a modern bureaucracy. Many felt that the Christian world-view had been part of the disaster and was no satisfying resource anymore.

²⁴ See her book on mysticism *Mystik und Widerstand*, Hamburg 1997, p34, 76.

A strong interest in mysticism and turning inward was the result. It had already developed at the turn of the centuries and was now intensified, because many felt that a real solution of the crisis could only be expected from turning inward and from finding healing resources and new spiritual depth in one's own interior. In addition to the new popularity of mysticism, a veritable Indian wave swept the 1920s. One expected spiritual renewal from 'the light of the East' and from syntheses of East and West. It was in this historical context that Otto wrote his famous book *West-östliche Mystik*, dedicated to a comparison of western mysticism represented by master Eckhart as its prototype, and eastern mysticism represented by Ācārya Ādi Śaṅkara as its prototype in Otto's assessment.

Compared with other comparisons of the two thinkers, which sought to prove that mysticism of all times and places was in its kernel that same and the ultimate peak of every religion, a sort of metareligion spanning humankind, Otto's early comparison was amazingly differentiated. In the first part of his book he acknowledges indeed a lot of structural similarities and a commonness of basic ideas. In the second part he seeks to disprove the argument that mysticism was always and everywhere the same (which was in his time already widely spread) by working out the (subtle) differences and particularities of Eckhart and Śaṅkara. This academically sound endeavour was unfortunately spoiled by a heavy bias which resulted in Christian apology and a disparaging image of the brahmanical Indian master – the judgement of a clear superiority of the Christian thinker and inferiority of Śaṅkara. Eckhart's mysticism was warm, full of emotional colour, dynamism, spiritual strive and moral strength, whereas Śaṅkara's mysticism was ice-cold, abstract, static and inherently amoral, that is without any ethical impulse.

This judgement, repeatedly heard also by other authors – from Hegel to R. C. Zaehner's *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (which was much discussed along with Otto in the heated debate of the 1970s and 80s about the pros and cons of the universality of mysticism) was undoubtedly heavily biased and unfair. Nevertheless it may be excused when taking into consideration that all the authors were dependent on written and selected texts. Śaṅkara's learned, highly scholastic commentaries, and the *Brahmasūtra* commentary in particular, likely appear dry, emotionless and abstract without the living teaching context which always accompanied their study in India. The teacher

brings life into the letters and is an object of highest respect and emotional bond, as he is expected to be not only a śrotrya, a well-versed learned Vedānta scholar, but also a brahmaniṣṭa, firmly rooted in the supreme non-dual knowledge he speaks of, that is, having deep personal experience of what he says. As important as the face-to-face communication of the Upaniṣad word and approved teaching methods that unravel the great sayings like “*tat tvam asi*”, is the teacher’s presence which embodies experiential knowledge behind and beyond the words.

So one problem was that Schopenhauer and Deussen, and even Otto and Hesse who were more experientially oriented, viewed Advaita-vedānta as a system of philosophy in the manner it was available in books and not as what it actually was, namely, a living teaching tradition based on śabda-pramāṇa and Guru-śiṣya-paramparā. Like practically all Western receptions – even more recent ones – the authors were not aware that Advaita-vedānta constitutes a profound teaching tradition in which the Guru plays a very essential role to unlock and validate the meaning of the great sayings of the Upaniṣads. So, typically, Deussen went directly into Śaṅkara’s *Brahmasūtra* commentary, the end and peak of scholarly Advaita-vedānta and not the preliminary texts of the spiritual seeker. In particular, these texts would have illustrated the highly moral values and exacting ethics which the teacher as well as the student (i.e. the qualified seekers) must embody in their lives – starting with the sādhana-catuṣṭaya: śama (undisturbed mind), dama (control of the senses) and so on, and viveka (discrimination), vairāgya (dispassion) and mumukṣutva, a burning desire for Liberation.

Possibly, Otto’s judgement would have differed if he had been aware of these contexts, but maybe not. Despite his sympathy for Eastern spirituality, his actual agenda was a renewal program of his own tradition, Protestant theology, which he saw had shrunk into a merely moral institution. By advertising Christian mysticism he wanted to bring back new spiritual depth into theology and the Protestant faith – Indian mysticism would have been too far off the track. Moreover, one must suppose that the Protestant theologian Otto reacted with his book to the India boom of his time, which was often paired with more or less heavy critique of Christendom and a religiosity which crossed religious boundaries.

In contrast to the opinion in earlier research that the early interest in eastern religions was a mere religion of intellectuals (‘Intellektuellenreligion’),

today's perspective has widened to more popular and practice-oriented forms of adopting Asian ideas, like the life-reform ('Lebensreform') and alternative youth culture in the Weimar period.

This is the milieu to which the novelist Hermann Hesse belongs. Among the life-reformers, the East was present in many ways and many of its ideas were also put into practice, from vegetarianism and pacifism to meditative techniques and yoga. Besides Advaita-vedānta and Theravāda-buddhism, Daoism became very popular in the Weimar youth culture. New religious movements inspired by India – such as theosophy, the new thought movement and the school of wisdom in Darmstadt – found substantial numbers of followers. Many books on mysticism appeared, wherein the term was expanded to all 'world religions' and even non-religious contexts (e.g. novels and poems of the early 20th century). No doubt, the 'East' and mysticism were 'in vogue'; besides, among the intellectuals Jung's psychotherapy was regarded to be a Western yoga. Clearly, Asia was at that time rarely sought for itself or as a means of escapism: it was a means of opposition to and of coping with the present, and an impulse for spiritual renewal. All of this is mirrored in Hesse.

Hermann Hesse (1877-1962)

Hesse was quite different from Otto. We find in him criticism of Christianity, a greater personal interest in Advaita-vedāntic spirituality and a transreligious religiosity which consciously wanted to cross religious boundaries. The German magazine *Spiegel* (32/2012) calls him 'Störenfried', which means something like 'trouble-maker', and indeed Hesse was in opposition to many things (similar to the young counter-culture of the 1960s and 70s that loved his *Siddharta*): traditional authorities, bourgeois society, imperialist colonialism, his strictly pietistic Protestant parents' home and its narrow morals, Christian dogmatism and Christian missionary work in India (also embodied in his parents and ancestors). At the same time his grandfather, the famous missionary Hermann Gundert, inspired in young Hermann a love and fascination for India. As a young chap Hesse was an adherent of Schopenhauer; he distanced himself from church religiosity and sought a meditative-mystical experience of oneness. His confession becomes more and more a transreligious, crosscultural spirituality and his bestseller *Siddharta*, which was written between 1919 and 1922, is the first great literary

manifestation of Hesse's transreligious conviction. The book was already at its time a great success and was to become one of the most often read and translated works of German literature. In the 1960s-70s it attained again the status of a 'cult book.'

The many Buddha images on the book's covers are somewhat misleading, although Siddharta's life journey resembles in some aspects the Buddha legend. Hesse's *Siddharta* is the fictional life-story of a Brahmin youth, named Siddharta, who lives at the time of the Buddha and strongly identifies with the nondual world-view and the Brahman-Ātman teaching of the Upaniṣads, or better, who is in search of the Self, of Brahmanvidyā and non-dual experience of the whole. However, similar to Schopenhauer, Hesse does not strictly distinguish Buddhist and Advaita-vedāntic thought. At the centre of all Indian teachings he sees, inspired by Advaita-vedānta, divine all-in-oneness which encompasses all plurality, and which is identical with the higher, transcendental Self as the divine kernel in each human being,²⁵ or in *Siddharta's* words: "Your soul is the whole world" (German original, Suhrkamp 1970, 10). This idea remained central for Hesse throughout his lifetime and it finds literary expression in two great visions of universal oneness at the end of the *Siddharta*. Nonetheless, India is not the major thing, despite the subtitle *An Indian Narrative*. The major thing is a cross-cultural confession. As Hesse remarked himself, it is a very European book and partially also a criticism of Buddhism and Brahmanism, 'a liberation from Indian thought,' as Hesse puts it.²⁶ The protagonist Siddharta postulates that he had never seen a Brahmin realise the wonderful vision of the Upaniṣads. And despite that Buddha is presented as a radiant man of perfection, Siddharta does not want to follow him. He wants to find Enlightenment within himself and by himself beyond all traditional authorities, dogmas and teachings. A river and his own inner voice will be his ultimate teacher.

In a key scene of the book, Siddharta meets the Buddha personally and tells him:

Nobody attains salvation by teaching! To nobody, O Venerable, will you be able to communicate in words or by teaching what happened to you in the hour of your Enlightenment. [...] This is why I go wandering around – not for searching another, better

²⁵ Gellner, see note 14, 134.

²⁶ Ibid 126, 135.

teaching, because I know there is none. I wish to forsake all teaching and teachers and to reach my goal alone – or else to die.’

(transl. AW, German original, Ed. Suhrkamp, 35)

Siddharta is a very European Brahmin, a spiritual wanderer in radical search of himself (his own identity) and the ultimate Truth. The book tells the story of an individuation in which the Advaita-vedāntic world-view of oneness, Chinese Daoist ying-yang philosophy, C.G. Jung’s psychology (Hesse was Jung’s client while writing the *Siddharta* and going through a phase of deep depression) and Christian love ethics are mixed and synthesised.²⁷

Hesse mentions in a letter: “My saint is dressed like an Indian, but his wisdom is closer to Lao Tse than to Buddha.”²⁸ Daoist ying- and yang-thought was important to him, because it could accommodate good and evil, joy and sorrow as a bipolar unity, and was more down to earth in Hesse’s assessment than Indian spirituality. Nonetheless, he writes to his cousin, the Sinologist Fritz Gundert,²⁹ that the Indian-brahmanical frame is not the major thing – only a ‘garment’ (as Siddharta represented a human being as such) but it was yet more than a costume. He (Hesse) had learned through the ‘Indian way’ and ‘Indian forms’ what his own religion was meant to be, but never was. For a scholar of Religious Studies it is fascinating how much Hesse’s *Siddharta* is already the type of radical self-searcher, spiritual wanderer and religious composer who became prominent in modern New Age-type spirituality, which has made its way into Western religious mainstream since the 1960s. It is a type that accepts no dogmas, but wants to decide individually what is good and helpful to him and his spiritual growth and, most of all, seeks own experience.

However, it remains an interesting phenomena how much Hesse and his *Siddharta*, despite his transreligious style, heroic self-religion and denial of all authorities and teachings, are still deeply impressed and influenced by the Upaniṣads and the Advaita-vedāntic non-dual vision. Hesse’s symbol of ultimate perfection is the holy syllable Om. Meditation and the sound of Om keep reappearing in the book at the most important turning points and the Om is synthesised with the voice of the river, the voice of constantly changing life and Siddharta’s own inner voice. After a long journey from

²⁷ Ibid 138.

²⁸ Ibid 139.

²⁹ Ibid 133-134.

asceticism to worldly life, none of which leads to ultimate perfection, and there are several instances when Siddharta wants to commit suicide, he finally reaches Enlightenment on the banks of his beloved river in a grand vision of unity. Here again, it is no more the river that teaches him, but the syllable Om which contains everything – all the possible voices in the stream of life, joy and sorrow, good and bad are melted into one in a higher unity:

“But the longing voice [of the river] had changed now. It still sounded full of pain and searching, but other voices mingled with it, voices of pleasure and pain, good and bad voices. [...] Soon he could not even distinguish the many voices anymore, [...] all was one, all was woven into each other, entangled in thousandfold ways. [...] And as Siddharta attentively [...] listened to this thousand-voiced song, when his hearing no more focused pain nor laughter, when he did not anymore bind his soul to any one of the voices and no more entered into them with his I-consciousness, but heard them all, the whole, their oneness, then the great song of thousand voices was but a single word and that was om: the ultimate perfection.” (transl. AW, German original Ed. Suhrkamp 1970, 122f.)

While this vision of Siddharta reminds us of the image in the *Rg-veda* of the one syllable of life which is thousand at the same time (later identified with the Om), the second great vision in the *Siddharta* which closes the book reminds of the Viśvarūpa vision of the *Bhagavad-gītā* Chapter 11. It is Siddharta’s old friend Govinda who has this second vision of all-in-one unity and ultimate perfection – after having been taught by Siddharta:

“Love, Govinda, is the main thing – to love the world and not despise it, neither hating the world nor myself, but to regard all fellow beings with love, admiration and awe. [...] This is what makes [the world and all beings] so dear and worshipful for me: they are the same as me. This is why I can love them.”

This confession of the Realised Siddharta is undoubtedly inspired by Christian ethics of love for all fellow beings, but it is no more Christian. This becomes clear from the reason given why to love – here again we find the same figure of thought as in Schopenhauer, Deussen and Vivekananda. Hesse writes in his ‘Kurgast’ – diary of 1923 more explicitly: “Love your neighbour, because he is yourself! It is a Christian translation of ‘*tat tvam asi*’.”³⁰ From

³⁰ Ibid 147.

the 1920s to the 70-year-old Hesse, we repeatedly find such statements like: "In Indian terms my fellow being is not only a human like me, but he is me. What separates us is maya, delusion. The ethical sense of loving one's neighbour is completely explained by this. Once one has realised that the world is a unity, it follows automatically that it makes no sense that the parts of the whole hurt each other."³¹

In a letter Hesse writes that the identity of loving one's fellow beings and "*tat tvam asi*" is most essential to him and that this identity is grounded in the idea that the innermost core of each soul, the Ātman, which is divine and eternal, is in all human beings exactly the same.³² Whosoever finds this 'norm of all life,' Hesse continues, irrelevant whether he follows the path of the Buddha, the Vedas, of Lao Tse or of Christ, will in his innermost self be directly connected with the cosmos, with God, and acts with their sanction. The greatest perfection of this idea, he goes on to say, was developed in India, but if Jesus said: "The Heaven is within you," he expressed the same thing.

It is of interest that in *Siddharta*, Govinda, after having experienced oneness in a Bhagavadgita-like visionary fashion (seeing all coming and going, good and evil, death and rebirth happening in the godhead), prostrates before Siddharta who taught him in a nutshell the unity of love ethics and "*tat tvam asi*" – a message which is no more purely Christian nor purely Advaita-vedāntic, but Christian deeply informed and newly interpreted by the Advaita-vedāntic key. Siddharta, who rejected all teachings and teachers, has finally become a Guru himself.

Swami Chinmayananda (1916-1993)

My final chapter is dedicated to Swami Chinmayananda.³³ Now and again he was called a second Vivekananda. Indeed, like his famous predecessor, Swami Chinmayananda spread Advaita-vedānta as a universal message, irrelevant of caste, creed, gender, nationality, religion, and saw it as the peak of Hinduism. Both were very dynamic, vigorously active 'missionaries' in India and abroad, wanting to awaken all to a new and truly universal Consciousness, and zealous 'prophets' with a vision for a better future

³¹ This is a rough translation (by me AW) of Hesse's quote in Gellner, *Hesse*, 148.

³² See for this and the following Gellner, *Ibid* 147.

³³ I am presently conducting a research project on the Chinmaya Mission, *Global Hinduism – the Chinmaya Mission in India and Around the World*, which is part of the Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics" at the University of Muenster (Germany).

of the Indian nation. One may therefore with some justification say that Chinmayananda walked in Vivekananda's footsteps, but it should be added that really speaking he went beyond – in his unfolding of Advaita-vedānta as a universal knowledge as well as in his zeal to transform the Indian nation by appealing to transforming oneself.

He understood Advaita-vedānta as a 'science of self-perfection', an 'art of man-making', and a 'subjective science' which was beneficial to everybody, not just a selected few scholars, monks and contemplative seekers. The former freedom fighter and critical journalist Chinmayananda kept also as Swami his revolutionary spirit. He wanted to bring the source texts of the Advaita-vedānta, which had been so far known only to a few, to "the market place" where they were needed most, as he argued. The holy texts enshrined "the art of self-perfection" to rise above the ego, realise one's true self and act and live in the world from the loftier standpoint of pure Consciousness, inner peace, love and all-encompassing fullness.

He started his public lecture series in 1951 shortly after independence. To him both the new nation and the present state of the world were badly in need of the dedication to a higher ideal, the true values of life and the art of self-perfection for individual and collective well-being, freedom from suffering, and spiritual and social integrity. In this context, the *Bhagavad-gītā* was particularly important and dear to him, because it combined action in the world and the spirituality of the Upaniṣads right in the "battlefield" of day-to-day life:

"In the *Bhagavad Geeta*, the man-making science of the Upanishads is brought out of the forests to serve us where we are suffering – in the market-place, in the slum-huts, in the drawing rooms, in the commune and at the barricades! [...] These are times when religion must march out of the forests and temples, churches and mosques, gurudwaras and vihars into places where man is striving in despair and turning sour in his incorrigible cynicism and impossible disillusionments. The *Geeta* is a ready-made textbook which serves us where we are: whoever we may be, whatever may be our problem, irrespective of place and time, caste and creed, the *Geeta* serves us. This is the special charm of the scriptural textbook – the *Bhagavad Geeta*."³⁴

³⁴ Swami Chinmayananda, *The Art of Man-Making*, repr. 2007, 13.

I see the greatest contribution of Swami Chinmayananda in introducing (translating, teaching, commenting) the original sources of the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavad-gītā* and treatises like the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* to a larger public. This distinguished him not only from Vivekananda, but also from the increasing number of gurus that came to western countries since the 1960s. Chinmayananda made known the original sources and also 'translated' (in the widest sense) the ancient knowledge into aesthetically appealing English and a modern language which was better understood than ancient language and scholastic commentaries. In his own words, he wanted to propagate 'in modern language methods by which we can help man to move from his present state into an altered state of consciousness. That alone is the remedy for the growing madness of man's social living in our present age.'³⁵

Chinmayananda's public preaching, lecture series and spiritual camps were in newly independent India tremendously successful and the crowds of men and women, youngsters and whole families he attracted soon made the establishment of institutional structures necessary. Already in 1953 the Chinmaya Mission was founded which was to become one of the most influential and renowned Hindu reform movements. Today its 345 centres are spread across India and around the world. Since Swami Chinmayananda's first world-tour in 1965 he also attracted many Westerners and diaspora Hindus.

The 1960s and 1970s were the time of a new India wave in Western countries which was the largest so far. In the young generation of the counter-culture and flower-power movement and still in the 1980s Chinmayananda's teaching fell on fertile ground. The deep impact he made on Westerners can be inferred from the Preface of *Swami Chinmayananda. Master, Teacher Friend: Remembrances from Down Under* (2006) written by Australian devotees:

It often proved a great relief for many serious spiritual seekers in Western countries like Australia, when Swami Chinmayananda came to town to teach. Most of us had come from some sort of Christian background, but were in different ways exiled from it, or unable in good conscience to take up the theology and rituals offered by organised religion. The search had long been on for a greater, universal Truth, not just a moral prescription or belief system. So many questions remained unanswered after so many

³⁵ Quoted in Seth 2012, 6.

years of seeking, and any book, no matter how eloquent, could never seem to satisfy both our heads and hearts. [...]

Propagandists for 'Eastern' religion and 'yoga' had been around for some time and 'meditation' teachers were sprouting up everywhere. Feel-good prescriptions and yoga-for-health programs were not in short supply, but intellectual rigour, logic and clarity seemed to be. For many Australian seekers then, the relief was palpable when we not only found in Swami Chinmayananda an inspiring teacher with a powerful intellect, but an enchanting personality who seemed a living embodiment of the Truth he taught. And strangely enough – almost without exception – Western seekers drawn to Swamiji felt, that after hearing his discourses on Vedānta, they could never again read the Bible or see the teachings of Jesus Christ in the same way. Ironically, an outcome of hearing the great insights of Advaita-vedānta was to be that many of us began to understand the deeper, universal possibilities of the Christian teachings, perhaps for the first time. The personality and sayings of Jesus of Nazareth came alive and were imbued with new and subtle spiritual meaning. Outside the usual Christian theology, Christ's role as a God-realised spiritual master of that time and place – a 'son' of the Divine – now seemed self-evident. "I and the Father are one" became a declaration of pure Vedānta. Swamiji had opened our eyes to a universal vision of the Truth that included and then eclipsed all religious dogmas."³⁶

This preface is particular interesting as the collective voice of the book's authors and with reference to religious transformations and new avenues of understanding of the Christian religion which Chinmayananda triggered off in his Western audience. The preface speaks of a "universal truth" which was not bound to India and which suddenly led to a new and different – more profound – understanding and experiencing of Christian faith and the sayings of the Bible. Much reminds one of Hesse: the distance from church religion and the search for a religiosity beyond the narrow walls of the Christian churches, the spiritual quest and long search, the new understanding of biblical teachings, such as "heaven is within you" or "I

³⁶ Swami Chinmayananda – *Master, Teacher, Friend: Remembrances from Down Under*, 2006, Preface.

and the father are one,” for which Advaita-vedānta provided the key – an understanding characterised as “deeper” and “universal”.

There is, however, one important difference to Hesse: The place of the texts is taken by a person. In contrast to Hesse’s Siddharta’s judgement that none of the Brahmins seemed to have experienced what the Upaniṣads were speaking of, the Australian seekers voice the impression that they have met with a realised Indian saint, “who seemed to be a living embodiment of the Truth he taught.” It was precisely this sensation of embodiment that made for them the Indian Swami a contemporary living example of Jesus of Nazareth. On the other hand, Chinmayananda is distinguished sharply from other Indian gurus because of the intellectual rigour, logic, clarity, and sharpness of his thought. Consider how little abstract, cold and grey the Advaita-vedānta is as experienced here, despite the strong stress on rationality. In fact, in Switzerland, where he had also attracted young people since the early 1970s, he received the nickname ‘the highly brilliant’.

The individual authors’ contributions show how much Chinmayananda’s constant, almost mantra-like appeal “think, find out yourself, don’t trust the Swami” was appreciated by his Western audiences (and his young Indian audience alike). Other features repeatedly mentioned besides Chinmayananda’s intellectual sharpness and his encouraging the listeners’ own inquisitiveness, validation and experience were his tremendous humor and wit, his deep humanness, the breathtaking awe and freedom he radiated, his powerful personality, incredible energy and his Guru qualities. He is attributed mind-blowing experiences by a mere look or a single sentence in which he took a person to the highest heights of contemplative absorption. Moreover, many relate that their problems were addressed and their question answered without having uttered them.³⁷ Such experiences and impressions are told by Westerners and Indians alike.

Furthermore, important particularly for Westerners and non-Hindus was that Chinmayananda never encouraged anyone to become a Hindu. On the contrary, he was shaking with laughter, if somebody asked about conversion, in his typical humorous way he replied: “Become a Hindu? – We have already enough of them.”³⁸ So, mission here has quite another connotation than the Christian mission.

Swami Chinmayananda understood the Advaita-vedāntic message as

³⁷ See Chris Grimmer in *Ibid.* 2006, and Anjali Singh in: *Speaking Tree*, Times of India, Spring 2015.

³⁸ Chris Grimmer, *Ibid.* 35f.

a universal, perennial truth that was always there for everybody and in everybody irrelevant of time and place, and similarly Westerners never felt there was something exclusively Indian or alien in it. In his explanations, for instance, of the beautiful passages of the *Kena-upaniṣad* – the Divine Reality being the mind of the mind, the ear of the ear, the eye of the eye – Swami Chinmayananda voiced a knowledge which was felt to be totally new, but at the same time to be also familiar, as though always known, but long searched for, as one devotee puts it.

Many Western devotees were not aware of, and if so, rarely interested in the fact that Swami Chinmayananda had always a double ‘mission’ – to spread Vedānta as a universal message and to actively participate in nation-building and improve social and national life. His national program was to implement and cultivate ethical values of love and mercy, self-less service, freedom from jealousy, hate and anger, and self-discipline. The “art of man-making” and the “science of self-perfection” also included a moral, disciplined life, equipoise and inner peace in success and failure and dedication to a higher altar and nobler goals – wherever one’s place in life – and cultivate such values in children.

He addressed first of all the individual, because, as he argued, the nation and society was constituted of individuals. Social change and national transformation started with transforming oneself. The individual and the social cannot be set apart, and betterment of the individual automatically brought about improvement of society. Action was needed, but not activism. It was essential for Swami Chinmayananda that a life of action included a life of contemplation which made the Advaita-vedāntic vision alive and firm, and brought forth actions whose ultimate source was inner fullness and peace.

In his spiritual teaching as well as in his national program Swami Chinmayananda thus went ahead of Vivekananda – which of course also has to do with the changed times and political situation. Vivekananda’s context was the time before independence; his speeches voiced anti-colonial protest, and pride to be a Hindu (at the same time he was well aware of several social problems and poverty). Chinmayananda’s public preaching started 1951, shortly after independence. He felt that India was free, but not the Indians, and wanted to bring about a spiritual renewal, “convert Hindus to Hinduism,” address particularly the educated and young, and invigorate

the new nation and civil life with higher ideals and nobler values by teaching the art of self-transformation, or, as he also put it, the “science of perfection.” The cover of Swami Chinmayananda’s book *Self-Unfoldment* (1975, revised ed. 1992, 2010) summarises the underlying idea:

“Each one of us is essentially perfect; the possibilities hiding within us are infinitely great. We have within ourselves all the resources, abilities, energy, and power for building up supremely happy and successful lives, not only for ourselves, but for others around us also.”

It is only the individual effort and personal transformation which brings about true social change and a healthy and prosperous nation. This includes the integration of body, mind and intellect, the alignment of the intellect to a higher altar of values and the cultivation of healthy emotions like selfless love, so that actions can take place without bias, hate, jealousy and desire. Such a mind can be channeled and attuned to the Higher, the absolute reality and godly nature of the true Self – which was symbolised in Chinmayananda’s famous Body–Mind–Intellect (BMI) chart in the syllable Om. Swami Chinmayananda gave also many methodical instructions for meditation and contemplation.

Meditation is, according to him, a technology of the self “to use the mind to rise beyond the mind” and “to create a new habit in the mind, the habit of seeing our identity in the pure Self, not in the body, mind, or intellect.”³⁹ Meditation is seen in this context as a reproducible (ideally daily practised) technique that leads into inner silence. This is the secret place where real transformation can take place, a shift of agency from individual to the cosmic and divine: “When we are still, then alone the infinite resources of the Total Mind flow down to flood our inner selves.”⁴⁰

These complex connections of the material, national, social, mental and spiritual show how much the universal message and the national program flowed seamlessly into each other in Swami Chinmayananda, as they were based on the same principle of self-cultivation and ultimately contemplation, Advaita-vedāntic self-perfection and Liberation. In contrast to a widespread opinion of a fundamental difference between so called ‘mystical’ Eastern traditions and ‘prophetic’ Judeo-Christian traditions – which in the 1970s

³⁹ Swami Chinmayananda, *Self-Unfoldment*, 2010, 197.

⁴⁰ Swami Chinmayananda, *Ibid.* 202.

was raised against Advaita-vedānta by the scholar R.C. Zaehner – there is no such cleft and bifurcation in Swami Chinmayananda. He united mystical contemplation and prophetic engagement in his own person and in his teaching.

He indeed brought Advaita-vedānta to the “market place” and the (English educated) “masses.” This was done in many formats – by public English discourses and spiritual camps in India and abroad, by intensive study of the texts and the Sanskrit language over two and a half or three years in the head-center and ashram of the Chinmaya Mission in Mumbai, where monks and lay persons are trained even today, but also by initiating local discussion groups, establishing home-study courses and children’s programs, giving out short slogans, producing many books, audios, and DVDs, and a number of other media – for every age group. Not least important was the training and initiation of new Acharyas and other devotees. Swami Chinmayananda also initiated educational and social institutions, and rural development programs to raise the living standards and spread ethical values. Both the schools and social engagements won several prizes. Here again it is seen how much individual growth and social responsibility, mysticism and prophecy are two sides of the same coin. They are institutionalised, reproduced and made dynamic by the activities of the Chinmaya Mission which continues Swami Chinmayananda’s legacy and vision.

Today, newcomers among Westerners have heavily decreased; most western adherents belong to the ‘older’, already age-long generation of devotees, who stayed in contact with the Mission for many decades. It is essential to see the time slots I have discussed above and the time-bound changes. Although many images and notions of the East created in the past are still very much there in the present, we find a constant change of ideas, practices and behaviours since the 1960s and 1970s when the largest India boom and more concern and interest in the East as East arose. The ‘India boom’ of those times was rather short, and looking at the mainstream today, interest has shifted from Advaita-vedānta to Tantra and (gymnastic) yoga, from Theravāda to Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, and from spirit to body. India is no more in the forefront: all religions of the world are mixed together.

It is amazing, on the other hand, how much Swami Chinmayananda even after his mahasamādhi (demise) attracts Indian youth in the motherland and in diaspora countries like America, Australia and England. Even in those

youngsters who never met him (and this is already the larger number), he is able to inspire great inspiration. An impressive example is the Jyoti-yātra in India and the US, organised and performed almost exclusively by the young, led by the young and dynamic Swami Mitrananda, and well-documented on Facebook – so that even those who cannot physically travel with the procession, are still invisible part of it. The Jyoti-yātra celebrates Swami Chinmayananda’s centenary by a procession (yātra) of a light (jyoti) – representing him and the “light of knowledge” he kindled and still kindles in many today.

