

Always Beyond

*The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami
Abhishiktananda* by Shirley du Boulay

Tony Pannett

For those who have never heard of Swami Abhishiktananda, this book is a wonderful opportunity to share a deep and penetrating insight into the life of this remarkable man. Shirley du Boulay has written a beautiful and sensitive biography of a man who was one of the forerunners of a phenomenon we are now seeing more frequently: that is, people who find themselves drawn irresistibly to two spiritual traditions. The story makes compelling reading and, by the extensive use of diaries and letters and his conversations with relatives and close friends, the author weaves a narrative that is at once revealing, puzzling and stimulating. We share in this man's spiritual pilgrimage, and wonder at his ongoing quest to find inner peace, the reconciliation of opposites, as he experiences the pull of the Spirit leading him into the unknown and, ultimately, the great Silence of the Unknowable.

Abhishiktananda was born as Henri Le Saux into a large and loving Catholic family in St. Briac, Brittany in 1910. Two of the family of six children joined a religious order. Henri entered the Benedictine order at l'Abbaye Sainte Anne de Kergonan in 1929 and made his solemn profession in 1935. Even before his final profession, he was possessed by a desire to live the contemplative life in India. This was undoubtedly due to his "great ambition

in seeking God" (Stuart 1989, p.12) characterised by the frequently used phrase in his diaries, "Beyond, always beyond." (Stuart 1989, p.12) that marks his whole pilgrimage.

Whilst preparing this review I was fortunate to be able to talk with Fr. Murray Rogers, a close friend of Abhishiktananda and a recipient of many of his letters whilst they were both in India. He told me during a long conversation about Abhishiktananda: "When Swamiji had something in his mind that he knew was true, he went straight to it, not waiting for reasons." Fr. Murray added: "We felt that if you believe God is 'reasonable', you can't do much." Abhishiktananda agonised repeatedly in his letters and diaries over just what this entailed for him: He was drawn to solitude but loved human companionship; he frequently travelled (he was an expert on the Indian Railways timetables!) but loved being in one place for a long period of time - especially near to his 'Beloved Ganges'; He was drawn to silence but always loved to talk. Arriving one time at Jyotiniketan ashram, where Fr. Murray's community lived, Abhishiktananda was asked if he would like to remain quiet, and replied: "I've come to talk!" He wrote many books and articles but subsequently often thought that they no longer expressed what he really felt and knew, preferring

the immediacy of his lived experience. Always, behind everything, lay the tension between his beloved Catholic faith and the pull of the *advaita* (non-duality) experience of Hinduism.

The greatest influence on Abhishiktananda, and one who without a doubt steered his course inexorably towards Hinduism, was the renowned Indian sage, Sri Ramana Maharshi. Abhishiktananda visited his ashram twice, the second time being the most important to him. Within sight of the ashram was the sacred mountain, Arunachala, where the sage had himself lived for some time before moving into the ashram built to provide a place for his many visiting devotees. It was here that Le Saux spent some time living in a cave just before taking formally the name of Swami Abhishiktananda and wearing the renunciant's saffron robe, discarding for ever western dress. This profound experience of Arunachala and of meeting with Ramana Maharshi is fully detailed in his book *The Secret of Arunachala*.

There remained a tension: Miss Ethel, a European devotee of Ramana who had been introduced to Abhishiktananda after his first visit, responded to his initial sense of disappointment, replying:

You have come here with far too much 'baggage'... you are insisting that what is intended for you should necessarily come to you by the path which *you* have determined. Instead you should make yourself empty..." This highlights

again the tension he felt between his Catholic faith and his deep experience of Hinduism. (*The Secret of Arunachala*, p.8)

"It was as if there were two men in the depth of me," he writes to his family, "one a Hindu, who finds his happiness in the *Rig-Veda* and the *Bhagavad Gita* and delights in the recitation of Sanskrit and in Tamil music, and then another 'being', another 'self', who bears in himself a whole experience, literary and social, from a western country"(p.62). Shirley du Boulay comments:

The truth was as he himself recognised, that he had 'two loves'. He quickly came to feel completely at home in Indian dress... nevertheless, he could never forget the country of his birth" (p.62).

His wrestling with the implications of these experiences continued to trouble him.

Shirley du Boulay goes on to write: 'In bringing Christ to India, so too, Henri was bringing the church'(p.65). Two quotes will help us to see the radical change that was taking place within him. In 1948, speaking of the Indians with whom he was sharing his life he said: "they are close to me in their loyal search for God, and far from me in their psychological inability to admit that Christianity is the only authentic means of coming to God" (p.65). In contrast to this, in a letter to one of his young disciples in 1969, he writes:

Without a contemplative 'sense', to come to India is absolutely useless. Come to receive, don't seek to give, any more than the rose or the lily. Your interiority will radiate of itself, whether the surroundings are Christian or Hindu. Be concerned to *be* and not to *do*...or even to understand intellectually...Give a sabbatical year at least to your mind. (p.218)

In reading this biography of Le Saux's awakening, it becomes clearer just how much he was 'giving a sabbatical to his mind'. I find parallels to the later writings of Thomas Merton which show how he had developed considerably over the years. In particular, a quote from his new introduction to the Japanese version of *Thoughts in Solitude*, published in 1966:

No writing on the solitary, meditative dimensions of life can say anything that has not already been said better by the wind in the pine trees. These pages seek nothing more than to echo the silence and peace that is 'heard' when the rain wanders freely among the hills and forests. But what can the wind say when there is no hearer? There is then a deeper silence; the silence in which the Hearer is No-Hearer...But who is this

No-Hearer? For such outrageous questions there are no intelligible answers. The only answer is the Hearing itself. (*Honorable Reader: Reflections on my Work*, New York, 1991, p. 111)

Abhishiktananda's journey towards the state that Merton here calls 'the hearing itself' is so well detailed that I can only urge readers to obtain this book and chart the journey for themselves. Shirley du Boulay says in her last paragraph:

Abhishiktananda was a pioneer who had the courage to break boundaries and to forge a path that inspires and illumines people today... This was a man who has joined the small group of people whose lives have changed our perception and reminded us that we are all capable of simply 'being' and that the Awakening is there for us all. (p.242)

Fr. Murray in his essay in the small book *Swami Abhishiktananda: The man and his teachings* pleads with us to:

let him go free, spare him from undue praise and reverence, from all tendencies to make of his way and teachings, anything exotic or esoteric, a figure for the

spiritual elite. He himself was infinitely greater, a human being whom we were privileged to know, who dared to answer in life and in death that most fundamental of all questions: 'Who am I?'

Abhishiktananda, after his heart attack on 14th July 1973 and before his death in December of the same year, wrote to his sister Marie-Therese of "The discovery that the AWAKENING has nothing to do with any situation, even so-called life or so-called death; one is awake and that is all." In his diary for September 12th 1973 he writes: "The Awakening at the level of anyone who has consciousness is precisely to lose oneself, to forget oneself. The Awakening is the shining out of the splendour - in splendour - of the non-awakening, of the eternal non-born.... a brilliance, a light, a glory that envelops everything. A sense of *beyond* of the Beyond". (p.242)

I am grateful to Shirley du Boulay for her time and hospitality and her sharing of insights into Swami Abhishiktananda, and to Fr. Murray Rogers for receiving me with such kindness and sharing his reminiscences of Abhishiktananda ('Dear Swamiji') - and indeed for first pointing out to me the book!

The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda, by Shirley du Boulay (Orbis Books, 2005), pp. 276 ISBN 9781570756108 (pbk) £12.99 (Page quotations are those in the biography unless otherwise stated.)

References

- Stuart, James: Swami Abhishiktananda, His life through his letters (Delhi, India, ISPCK 1989)
 Abhishiktananda: The Secret of Arunachala: (Delhi, India ISPCK 1979)
 Swami Abhishiktananda: The Man and his Teachings, ed. Vandana (Delhi, India 1986)