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OUR FOUNDERS

...BEDE CRIFTHS,

Shantivanam was founded in 1950 by two French fathers, Jules Monchanin and Henri le Saux, who took the names Paramarubiananda - the bliss of the Supreme Spirit - and Abhishiktananda - the Bliss of Christ. This was the pioneer movement in the Catholic church in India to live a Christian life according to the customs and traditions of a Hindu Ashram. Father Monchanin expressed their aim as to be "totally Indian and totally Christian".

Father Monchanin himself was a very holy man of wide learning and broad vision, a friend of Pere de Lubac, the great French Theologian, who wrote a book on him, *Images de l'abbé Monchanin*. He was also in touch with Teilhard de Chardin and other intellectual leaders in France. But from an early age he felt an attraction to India and after an attack of asthma in which he feared for his life, he made a vow to give his life for India, if he recovered. In due course he obtained permission to come to India and offered his services to the bishop of Trichinopoly, as it was then called, and arrived in India in May 1939. For ten years he served as a priest in different parishes in Tamil Nadu, but his hope had always been to found an ashram in which he could identify himself with the Indian culture, which he loved, and 1948 he was joined by Father le Saux, a Benedictine monk of Kergonan in Brittany, and together they inaugurated the ashram on the feast of St. Benedict, March 21st, 1950.

Father Monchanin had once written to a friend in China, "Will I some day know the same joy that in India too - from its soil and spirit - there will come a monastic life dedicated to contemplation". This was his dream but in

actual fact the growth of Shantivanam was a difficult and painful process. In the first place the idea of living in Indian style, instead of the Western style adopted by most missionaries, was new and many were slow to accept it. The bishop of Tiruchi stood by him in all his trials and together he and Father le Saux wrote an exposition of their aim in a booklet called *An Indian Benedictine Ashram*, which was well received. But from an early date a conflict arose between the two fathers, who were of very different characters. They both shared the same ideal of a contemplative life lived in the context of Indian culture. But Father Monchanin was a philosopher and a theologian, a man of deep piety, open to all the values of Hinduism but with a clear, critical, logical mind. Abhishiktananda accused him of being a 'Greek', a man set in the thought forms of ancient Greece which had moulded the teachings of the church. Swami Abhishiktananda, as he was always known, was a Breton with an enthusiastic temperament and from his first encounter with Hinduism in the ashram of Ramana Maharshi at Tiruvannamalai, he fell in love with the ideal of Hindu Sannyasa and was overwhelmed by the experience of 'advaita', the doctrine of 'non-duality' as interpreted by Sankara and his followers. His experience of this oneness with God, while living in a cave on the mountain of Arunachala in Tiruvannamalai, was so profound that it shook his faith in the traditional form of Christianity. In the experience of advaita it seemed that all differences disappeared and what was left was a sense of absolute oneness in which any differences between God and man was no longer felt. For the rest of his life Abhishiktananda had to wrestle with this problem that his deep personal experience seemed to involve a denial of any rational difference between God and creation, whereas his Christian faith called for the recognition of distinctions in the Godhead and the Incarnation and the church.

To the end Abishiktananda never gave up his faith in the church and continued to celebrate the mass, but he also felt that he could not give up the conviction born of personal experience of the truth of advaita. In his diaries he expressed the agony which this conflict brought to him, and he was never able to reconcile his faith with his experience. It seems that particularly towards the end under the influence of his French disciple Mark he came more and more to trust to his personal experience and even to repudiate the attempts which he had made before to reconcile it with Christian faith.

His problem seems to have been that he always tended to look on Christianity as a doctrinal system organised by the rational mind and in spite of the fact that he knew their writings, he does seem to have understood the mystical tradition of the church as it is found in the Greek fathers and the mediæval mystics. On the other hand in his interpretation of Hinduism, he seems to have been too much influenced by the extreme non-dualism of the school of Senkara and to have ignored the modified non-dualism of other schools. There is an understanding of advaita today which avoids any kind of monism, (which rejects all differences) and recognises that while the supreme reality is 'not two', it is also 'non-one'. Thus there are distinctions in the unity of the Godhead which allow for the mystery of the Trinity, and distinctions between God and creation which allow for the reality of the Incarnation, while they do not annul the unity of the whole. This concept of advaita was developed in the later traditions both of Hinduism and Buddhism and leaves it open to a genuine christian understanding.

But in Shantivanam the opposition between these two points of view led to a conflict between the two

fathers. Abhishiktananda began to go more frequently to Tiruvannamalai and to love his faith in any development, such as he desired, in Shantivanam. Father Monchanin was thus left alone and though some came to join him, including Father Francis Mahieu who later founded Kurisumala ashram and Father Dharmanadan, a Tamil priest, none remained in the end Father Monchanin was left alone. It seemed that all his dreams had been frustrated and when Abhishiktananda finally decided to leave Shantivanam for north India, where he settled as a hermit, he was left without hope of any further development. But Father Monchanin was a man of deep faith. He knew that suffering is a condition of Christian life and that death is the way to life. He had written years before "I must be buried in this land of India, somewhat like de Foucauld in the land of the Sahara, to be sanctified by it and to make it fertile". He gave his life for the ashram without seeking any immediate hope for the future, but it is from his sacrifice that the ashram has continued to live. The ideals for which he stood have now come to be recognised by the church in India and the community for which he hoped and prayed has come into being. When the ashram was received into the congregation of Camaldoli in 1982, it became in fact what he had hoped and prayed for, a Benedictine ashram dedicated to a life of contemplation but embodying also the traditions of Indian sannyasa and the model of simplicity and poverty which had been his ideal.

Abhishiktananda explored the depths of the Hindu experiences of God as no Christian had ever done before and the church in India has been immensely enriched by the writings he has left behind. Father Monchanin left very little in writing, but his life of sacrifice is the inheritance which he has left us as a guide and inspiration for the life of the ashram.

Presence of God.

Fr. Christodad.

"I know my own and my own knows me as the Father knows me and I know the Father as thou, Father art in me and I in thee, that they may be one in us that they may be one even as we are one... I in thee and thou in me."

The life of prayer and contemplation is simply to realise God's presence in the depth of our being. In the depth of every being and at the same time beyond all being and at the same time beyond all that is within and without. Contemplation and prayer are the very breath of life for every one who has recognised his calling to be human. To experience this presence we have to come down to the level of the spiritual realm. All of us are having a body consciousness and psychological consciousness. Beyond body and soul we are having spirit consciousness where we touch God directly. This spiritual awareness always attunes with God's presence. Many people imagine that in order to pray they first have to stop their minds from thinking about any material things and instead form mental pictures or ideas about God or so called spiritual things and then struggle valiantly to, fix their attention on these new objects i.e. the pure spirit consciousness.

To attain this kind of presence one has to detach from all the external form of thinking. Stop the thinking, become calm and quite. Quiet the mind and desires. All the mental images and imagination must stop. We have to reach out towards the Real with our whole being using thoughts as signs which only exist to point beyond ourselves/ God's essential and infinite aloneness keeps us beyond the reach of all our thoughts or imagination.

This is a personal experience to a person as Christ experienced God as his Father. He always felt the presence of his Father inspite of all his active ministry. Like the air we breathe willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously, we breathe and continue to draw the air into our lungs, so that we may remain alive. So it is with the divine Presence, which is still more essential to our life to our very being than is the air to our bodies. To realise this divine presence in its infinite fullness is to realise it as at once within us and outside us, that is it is totally immanent to our innermost being, and at the same time infinitely transcends.

The mystery of God is first of all the eternal call of the Father to the son - the call in which Father and son essentially are - 'You are my son.' It is also the response of this call the eternal cry of the son, Abba Father.

The ceaseless prayer of Jesus both on earth and in heaven is a prayer which expresses both the source and fullness of his love his sacrifice and his unending intercession. The mystery of the divine life is also the universal and all prevailing presence of the Holy Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is in us as he is in God, the mystery of unity of non-duality. He is in us as coming from the Father as sent to us from the Father as pouring out in us the eternal love of the Father and the son. He dwells in us in the innermost recesses of our hearts More intimate to us even than we are intimate to ourselves.

Such kind of experience is the climax of the spiritual life which the saints and sage experience. At the same time God is ever present and hidden in our