

Teaching Tradition of Advaita Vedanta Archive

Generated with anthropological investigation, theoretical analysis, and tireless listening (sravana), the archive provides the first step towards a broader project to problematize the discourse of Vedanta and the disciplinary procedures whereby it is trafficking through America.¹ Now, clearly, we do not document the truism "sie können sich nicht vertreten, sie müssen vertreten werden," as Karl Marx wrote, but our methodological tasks are important as sustained confessions of Vedanta in America since 1893.²

¹ The archive is a reflection of ethnographic activities surrounding an early phase of research led by Travis Webster. Emerging during the summer of Swami Dayananda's first visit to America, Travis initially encountered the swami in 1999 during his explication of the Brahma Sutras at AVG in the Pocono Mountains of Northeast Pennsylvania. Upon completing his undergraduate studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (1999), Travis underwent a course of Advaita Vedanta with Radha (Carol Whitfield, Ph.D.) in San Francisco at the California Institute of Integral Studies which led to his M.A. in Hindu Studies (2001). While at CIIS Travis completed an independent study entitled *Arsha Vidya: Swami Dayananda and the Teaching Tradition of Advaita Vedanta in America*, as well as study of Advaita Vedanta with Radha at Arsha Kulam. He incorporated Vedanta Shala as a non-profit organization in 2002. In 2003 Travis relocated to Sydney, Australia to further his study of Sanskrit, the Upanisads, and Badarayana-Vyasa's Brahma Sutra's with Shankara's bhasya thereon under Sri Vasudevacharya (Michael Comans, Ph.D.) at the acharya's Vedanta Kutir overlooking the Pacific and Brahma Vidya-Centre For Vedanta Studies. Travis compiled the archive in 2004-2005 during his first year in pursuit of a Ph.D. in Indian Studies through the Department of Indian Subcontinental Studies at the University of Sydney.

² During a course of research in California, for instance, Travis was transported to Colorado courtesy of the influential American novelist and folk psychologist Ken Wilber in order to participate in a discourse of affirmative Orientalism ranging from dream analysis surrounding the South Indian ascetic Ramana Maharshi to characterizations of the Indian nationalist and New Age practitioner of yoga Aurobindo Ghose as a 'guru', or teacher of Vedanta. Indeed, besides 'purna-yoga', the yogi's teaching is often described as 'purna-vedanta'! It does not take an Orientalist as 'uncommon' as Paul Hacker to know that Aurobindo was "depreciative" of Shankara and "monistic Vedanta", but at the center of his apologetics it appears the yogi wanted to prove his all-India culture was just as scientific as the modern West. Aurobindo, excited about theories of evolution, had a peculiar understanding of Shankara and 'maya-vada' which led him to believe he had 'integrated' various facets of the acharyas instruction. As Vasudevacharya has already emphasized "Shankara relegates Yoga to the sphere of ignorance (avidya)" and yogins are, "therefore, in Shankara's eyes, not yet knowers of the truth". Obviously, to depreciate a tradition having never understood it is worse than to have never spoke at all. It is interesting to note, moreover, none other than the ghost of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), himself an Indian nationalist who left 'Hindus' with a "flawed legacy" while preaching throughout the world, is the fantastic source of Aurobindo's imagined 'Supermind.' Of course, as Aghananda Bharati long ago explained in a widely cited complaint lodged in the Journal of Asian Studies, "Modern Hindus derive their knowledge of Hinduism from Vivekananda, directly or indirectly." Bharati, A.

The archive reflects a desire to record the transmission of brahmavidya, but additional factors have also limited our focus. For instance, in early 2003 before the groundwork of our archive had scarcely been established, our efforts were interrupted by an alarming discovery that licensed teachers at Arsha Vidya Gurukulam were oblivious of Shiva's pedagogy, particularly Dakshinamurti's silent exposition (*mauna-vyakhya*).³ Discourse analysis of

(Feb., 1970) "The Hindu Renaissance and Its Apologetic Patterns," in *Journal of Asian Studies*. 29/2: 267-287. p. 278. If one doubts the influence of Vivekananda upon Aurobindo they need only recall the series of auditory and visual hallucinations which overtook the yogi while he was imprisoned at Alipore jail (1908-1909). There is no dearth of these accounts, for the yogi took great delight in recounting these hallucinations to his devotees. See, for instance: K.R. Srinavasa Iyengar's *Sri Aurobindo - A Biography and a History*. p. 372. and A.B. Purani's *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*. p. 209. In reference to neo-colonial Indians who proudly locate themselves in an ecumenical sphere of Hindus, however, it should be emphasized that the spirit of this saint is not restricted to the epistemic violence thereby self-inflicted. In addition to the trans-national influence of his propaganda, the ideological significance of which is perhaps most clearly observed in psychologized affirmations of American xenophiles, Vivekananda continues to haunt (even incarnate) multiple characters, such as Adi Da, Da Free John, Bubba, etc. Bharati is no doubt correct to remind us that "Modern Indians neither challenge nor criticize the diction of the Indian apologetic. They tend to feel that such criticism would entail contempt of the Indian spirit; for however "secular" an English-speaking Indian hopes to be, he does not seriously challenge the words and the works of Sivananda etc., nor the forensic of the living gurus" (268), but it is important to understand the ramifications of this naivety in relation to the structure of traditional discourses of authority. That is, the transmission of knowledge within segmentary ancestral lineages subverts the proposition that any xenophile could dare challenge the words of the masters with whom they are fascinated and to whom they are more importantly devoted. The problem with this pious Hindu dilemma is that it demands theoretical and methodological critique of a single phenomenon of hybridization: the role of the English-speaking Hindu guru.

³ Not merely an historical triviality, however, the implications of this ignorance shall bear fruit for the Hindu banyan. As Swami Dayananda has correctly explained, "We hear that Lord Dakshinamurti revealed through silence, the truth of oneself being Brahman, the limitless, to the four disciples, Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatkumara and Sanatsujata. This story is often cited to prove that silence is the means of communicating the ultimate truth, not words. This notion has turned many a person away from the sastra. It is important, therefore, to understand the truth of this concept". If officials of Swami Dayananda's institution are unaware of the 'whole' significance of Dakshinamurti's silent transmission, fragments of their ignorance are nevertheless codified with ideological narratives of 'words', 'tradition', 'teaching tradition', 'traditional teacher', 'traditional teaching methodologies', etc. In light of the American context for Vedanta, however, it is certainly true that scripture has been understood to possess a mere provisional authority. As Anantanand Rambachan notes, Vivekananda dismissed scriptural exegesis "as activities at a theoretical and intellectual level, and Vivekananda even classifies scripture as belonging among the nonessentials of religion." Rambachan, Anantanand. (1994) *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Vedas*. Honolulu: U. of Hawaii Press. p. 133. Of course, when *sruti* is even acknowledged by Neo-Vedantins, and those under their influence, it is viewed as a mere "secondary and poor substitute for those who are incapable of the firsthand experience and self-certifying confirmation of *anubhava* (experience)." See: Anantanand Rambachan's *Sankara's Rationale for Sruti as a Definitive Source of Knowledge of Brahmajñana: A Refutation of Some Contemporary Views*. In fact, the dominant 'mystical' perception of the

Vedanta makes explicit that bourgeois Indians (and their disciples) short-circuit the epistemic power of the Upanisads, but it is important to analyze the taxonomic variants their narratives serve to silence.

In terms of truth and communication, cognizing this matter is again confounded in the scope of Swami Dayananda's traditional classification: "The tradition has always been the same. It has not undergone any change; it cannot undergo a change because it deals with the whole". The archive suggests alliance with our concerns but, still, contributors do not necessarily endorse our activities and, keen to the 'politics of nostalgia,' vice versa.

© 2007 Vedanta Shala-Center For Traditional Vedanta

guru in the United States seems to remove any necessity for words, provisional or otherwise. For example, one writer discussing the '*guru* and *sisya* in Indian tradition' in a quasi-academic journal even thought that, "the best amongst gurus teach in silence". In order to prove his point, Purusottama Bilimoria refers to two popular mystics: "Ramana Maharshi taught his disciples through silence, while Meher Baba, the Sufi mystic, kept a vow of silence for forty years; and yet both were excellent teachers in that they conveyed perfectly the essence of their teachings." Billimoria, Purusottama. (1980) "The Spiritual Guide (*guru*) and the Disciple (*sisya*) in Indian Tradition," in *Journal of Dharma*. 5:270-278. pg. 271. Though in service of the privatization of 'religious experience', however, Bilimoria is incapable of appreciating the use of words in 'Indian tradition'. He has not even taken note from Agehananda Bharati who had already pointed out what happened when Meher Baba decided to speak! See Bharati, A. (Feb., 1970) "The Hindu Renaissance and Its Apologetic Patterns," in *Journal of Asian Studies*. 29/2: 267-287. "Quite obviously, there are "saints" who are very much in the center of the Renaissance, though they themselves may not phatically contribute to it; see for instance Meher Baba, the late, Parsee born saint who had undertaken a vow of silence until the day when he would tell the Truth to the world. It appears the day had come. Meher Baba spoke and, he spoke in terms of the Hindu Renaissance and its apologetic." Billimoria spent the next eight years preparing his graduate work for publication as Volume 10 of 'Studies in Classical India,' a series edited by Bimal K. Matilal. Billimoria completed his graduate work on Sabda Pramana! In the forward to the volume, published as *Sabdapramana: Word and Knowledge*, the esteemed J.N. Mohanty admitted that his own interests were gradually "turning towards the thesis of *sabdapramana* as the basis of Hindu religious and philosophical tradition." Sure enough, the center of Mohanty's later contributions reflects this turn. On the other hand, one can't even begin to perceive the depth of confusion surrounding Advaita Vedanta and 'gurus' in the American Public. One need only recall the variety of students who have claimed the lineage of Ramana Maharshi, the other figure to whom Bilimoria refers.