

Chapter Fourteen

LIGHT FROM THE EAST

Thursday 13th April

University of Queensland, St Lucia

James finished his lunch and quickly read what Julie had written noting especially the section: ‘The Mystics of Personality don’t claim to have had complete unity or identification with God. They talk about differentiated unity. Some of them speak of a total absorption in God but still argue for some differentiation, in which the soul retains its individuality and full personality.’

Thanks to Kevin not being free for their usual chat, James was unusually early for his weekly lecture on Concepts of Ultimate Reality. As he used the time to peruse the timetable and the syllabus for the subject, he noticed that he had only another couple of weeks to hand in his essay on Western Mystical Theology. As usual that realisation caused him a pang of anxiety until he realised that he had gathered all the facts he needed about Western mystics except for the Christian Mysticism of Personality and Julie’s information would give him a head start on that research. Yes, he should be able to get that essay in on time if he disciplined himself.

As Dr Phillip Gill entered the room he remembered that his supervisor was on again today to finish off his section on Buddhism. Last week’s lecture had been completely taken up with tutorial presentations. This one was to be on the original branch known as the Theravada. At first James had not understood why Phillip had dealt with the breakaway Mahayana before this original branch until Phillip explained that he was trying to observe the educational principle of working from the ‘known to

the unknown'. To western ears, the Mahayana with its concept of the Bodhisattva or personal saviour would be more understandable. This had certainly been the case for him at the time but now he felt he was ready for the purely mystical strand.

As soon as the coordinator handed over to him, Dr Gill commenced his lecture. James admired the way he involved the students with an open invitation to interrupt with questions at any time. He began by explaining the original teachings of Gautama the Buddha that have continued relatively unchanged since the beginning of Buddhism in the strand known today as Theravada, which means 'The Teaching of the Elders'.

'I read somewhere that it was called Hinayana,' said one of the students, taking advantage of the lecturer's offer and raising one hand tentatively.

Phillip turned towards the student and put his hands in his pockets. 'Quite right Morris, but that is the name given to it by the other branch - the Mahayana - which we dealt with a couple of weeks ago. It means the 'lesser raft or vehicle' because in the Theravada only the monks can attain enlightenment in their lifetime. On the other hand, as I explained in that lecture, 'Mahayana' means the 'greater raft or vehicle' because there is opportunity for many more to find enlightenment.'

'Why is that name not used by the Theravada Buddhists?' asked another student whose name was Anita.

Phillip answered patiently, 'Because, Anita, it is rather negative and demeaning. Only the Mahayana call them Hinayana.'

The student nodded in understanding and the lecturer continued. 'The aim of the Buddhist is to achieve enlightenment and attain Nirvana. Nirvana means literally 'to blow out' or 'extinguish' like the flame of a candle. A Monk may receive enlightenment and attain Nirvana and when he dies he does not get reborn or reincarnated but enters immediately into Pari-nirvana, Nirvana after death.'

Another student at the front interjected, 'Does the person who attains Nirvana continue to exist after death?'

'Very good question Richard. In a sense the answer is no, because there is no 'self' in Buddhism. It is not a total annihilation of the self but, as in some Western Mysticism, the 'I' does disappear out of the 'I-Thou' relationship.'

James felt compelled to seek for clarification immediately even though he could ask Phillip questions privately. 'So are we talking about undifferentiated unity - complete absorption?'

'Yes James. That's one way of describing it, but it's not their way.'

'So what is Nirvana really like?' asked another student.

Phillip paced up and down as he answered. 'The Buddha always refused to answer questions like that because, he said, they are 'undetermined' and not conducive to instruction. It is a bit like asking where does a flame go when it goes out. The question is absurd and wrongly put. However, he did use the word 'bliss' and it does seem that it is a transformed mode of human consciousness. It is also elusive and ineffable. It can not be expressed.'

'Aha', thought James to himself. *'Another parallel with the Western Mysticism of the Negative way'*

Phillip Gill continued almost as if he had heard James' thoughts, 'and another familiar characteristic is the use of negatives like 'nothingness' to describe Nirvana.'

'Which seems to me to be another name for impersonal Ultimate Reality' thought James. So he made a mental note to ask Phillip later, whether enlightenment or Nirvana - the state of bliss – could be described as a content-less experience.

Then Phillip almost answered the unspoken question. 'Listen to the classic words of the Buddha in the Buddhist Scriptures called the Pali Canon'. He picked up a book and opened it to a page that had been marked.

‘There is, brethren, an unborn, a not become, a not compounded. If there were not, brethren, this that is unborn, not become, not made, not compounded, there could be no escape from what is born, become, made, compounded.’

Some of the students screwed up their faces in bewilderment at the strange contradictory language but James was starting to get a feel for the negative language of mysticism. The lecturer continued with his lecture and James took notes but his imagination had been fired by the similarities of the mystical experience of the negative way across so many religions. He decided to look again at his lecture notes on Hinduism because there was something about Theravada Buddhism that reminded him of a strand within Hinduism that he had thought too complicated and passed over too quickly at the time.

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‘I think I must be starting to catch on to the concept of mysticism. I found your lecture very helpful.’

Phillip Gill was enjoying his coffee as he always did after giving a lecture. ‘Good. Where are you up to in your assignment?’

James took a sip of his hot, black coffee and put it down. ‘I now realise there are definitely two distinct types of mysticism in the world in Christianity.’

‘At least.’ Phillip corrected him. ‘And you’ll find the same in other traditions. Anything else?’

James thought for a moment. ‘Yes. These Mystics of Personality. It seems to me that some of them speak of a total absorption in God but still argue for some differentiation, with the soul retaining its individuality and full personality.’

Phillip raised an eyebrow. ‘So?’

James shrugged. ‘Well, some of them consciously and deliberately meditate on symbols and personal images.’

Phillip looked directly at James. 'And is that a problem?'

James sat back and folded his arms defensively. 'Well, I was thinking of those mystics of the negative way who say that all mysticism of personality is regarded as mystical just out of courtesy. Is their brand of mysticism really mysticism or is it just using contemplation as an aid to worship?'

Phillip put his mug down before answering. 'That is a very good question. It may just be a matter of definition of the word 'mysticism'. Why don't you look at Evelyn Underhill's book 'Mysticism'. She has an in depth comparison of the two types. It could help you with that question.'¹

'OK I will.' James took a note of the author and title. 'During your lecture today I kept comparing what you said with a part of Dr Rossiter's lecture on Hinduism - a philosophy called Advaita something?'

'Advaita Vedanta?'

'Yes. That's the one.' James pointed a finger. 'I thought I saw some similarities with that philosophy.'

Phillip Gill looked calmly at James with a knowing smile without replying. James felt that his supervisor was declining to answer because he, James, had not done his homework on the subject. 'You could be on to something there, but I suggest you have another read of Conrad's lecture notes, do some extra reading and see what you come up with. Oh, and then make an appointment with Conrad about that. OK?'

James nodded in agreement. He would take it up with Dr Rossiter. He didn't want to start a demarcation dispute. 'Now, another question.' James looked at a list of questions he had prepared. 'What about the Jewish mystics who say they commune with the impersonal God before the creation of the world? Is that purely an immanent experience or is it also transcendent?'

Judaism was not Phillip's area of expertise but he was familiar with Jewish mysticism. 'I would say their experience is mainly immanent like most mystics.'

James frowned in concentration. 'In that case, do you think they are just trying to keep separate their impersonal mystical experience and the transcendent God of their orthodox worship?'

'Could be.' Phillip agreed. 'Identifying their Impersonal Absolute with God before creation may only be a convenient theory. That concept of 'God before Creation' would certainly be transcendent in our sense of being above and beyond all time and space, but their actual mystical experience is extremely immanent. The sacred book of the Cabbalists, the Zohar, talks about the aspect of God that is 'immanent and mysteriously present in every one of us.'

James felt that Phillip had raised more questions than he had answered but, as always, he expected James to find out the answers himself. James looked at his watch and stood up. 'Thank you Phillip. Now I must go and look into that Hindu mystical strand.'

'Strands, James. Strands.' Phillip lifted three fingers as he stood. 'There are at least three of them.'

'Oh dear.' James grimaced. 'Well then, the sooner I start the better. See you next week.'

Phillip nodded and smiled as he opened the door for James.

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Friday 14th April

University of Queensland, St Lucia

Dr Conrad Rossiter had been a Clergyman before he moved into university lecturing. His specialty was Indian and Chinese religions as well as being coordinator

of the Concepts course. James had done his homework the previous night and this morning and had been fortunate to obtain an interview with him in the early afternoon.

After the usual introductions, Dr Rossiter looked over his glasses and leaned forward slightly, 'How can I help you?'

James looked at his notes and said, 'Dr Rossiter,' he had not been asked to call him Conrad, 'I have a particular interest in the relationship of the personal and the impersonal in world religions.'

'The assignment from your boss.' Rossiter said softly as if it were a big secret.

James felt a twinge of annoyance again at the way his private quest had become public knowledge among the staff. His annoyance must have shown on his face because the lecturer hastened to add, 'James, the staff are all behind you on this. We are all excited at the possibility of someone solving this problem. It has never been solved before.'

'So I've been told Dr Rossiter.' James forced himself to relax a little. 'I realise that it's a challenge although I feel a bit embarrassed by all this support. And I don't want to disappoint anyone.'

'You won't.' He leant forward again eagerly. 'Now, what do you need to know?'

James decided to start with a few general questions. 'I understand from your lecture and the notes that Hindus accept both understandings of Ultimate Reality?'

Conrad nodded. 'That's true and they make many different attempts to synthesise the theistic and mystical understandings. It is good that you didn't use the word 'God'. The word 'God' is problematic in the Hindu religious climate.'

'Yes, I know. Because of the impersonal aspect.' James thought he knew that one.

The lecturer waved a hand dismissively. 'Not only that, but also because in Hinduism the word is often used to refer to divine beings who are on a lower scale than Ultimate Reality.'

His facial expression showed that this was news to James. 'I thought that the ordinary man in the street worshipped either Vishnu or Shiva or one of the others as a supreme God?'

Conrad smiled at James' confusion. 'True, but in one of the philosophical and mystical strands, the gods like Vishnu or Shiva are seen as an inferior step on the road to Brahman which is the ultimate reality.'

James shook his head in confusion and vowed to check his lecture notes yet again but moved on. 'Now this word Brahman has got me really confused.'

'In Hinduism, Ultimate Reality is often known as 'Brahman'.'

James frowned. 'But isn't that the name of the Indian caste that has the spot on their foreheads?'

'No.' Conrad smiled. 'That is usually spelt Brahmin with an 'I' though there is probably some connection because it used to be the priestly caste.'

James was still puzzled. 'So is Brahman with an 'a' personal or impersonal?'

Conrad spread his hands. 'It can be either personal or impersonal.'

'Oh dear.' This was getting worse by the minute. 'By the same people?'

'No. Not by the same mystical strand.' Conrad corrected him. 'By two mutually tolerant, different strands.'

'That would be the Advaita Vedanta and the other strand founded by Ramanuja, right?' James wasn't going to get caught out this time.

'Quite right. I see you've done some homework.' Conrad took a deep breath.

'The Advaita Vedanta strand founded by Shankara call their supreme Brahman

‘Nirguna’ Brahman - Brahman without attributes. Ramanuja’s strand call their Brahman ‘Saguna’ Brahman - Brahman with attributes.’

James wrote those names down before continuing. ‘Would you say that Shankara’s mystical strand corresponds to the western mysticism of infinity - of the Negative Way?’

Conrad shook his head. ‘Western mysticism’s not my field. You’d have to ask Phillip about that.’

So James asked the question in a different way. ‘Well, do Shankara’s mystics contemplate, look inward to the depths of their souls or have a unity experience.’

‘All of the above,’ agreed Dr Rossiter warming to his favourite subject. ‘They discover that the true inner self, or Atman, is identical with the transcendent reality of the universe, or Brahman, summed up in the ancient formula from the Upanishads, ‘Atman is Brahman’.’

James sat up suddenly in surprise. ‘Then surely their Brahman is personal because the Atman is personal?’

Conrad shook his head firmly. ‘Not necessarily. They also use another formula, ‘Thou art That’, and ‘that’ is definitely impersonal. Also they use negatives to describe it, like the phrase, ‘neti, neti’, ‘not this, not that’.’

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James continued his questioning to find comparisons with the Western mystics of the negative way. ‘Do they achieve total identification with Brahman?’

Conrad smiled in approval of the question. ‘They believe so. For the ‘true’ Hindu mystic this whole universe is Brahman. His Atman or Self within is greater than the earth, greater than the atmosphere. Therefore his Self within is also that Brahman. As it says in the Upanishads, ‘whoso thus knows that he is Brahman becomes this whole universe’.

James looked doubtful. 'That sounds a bit pantheistic.'

Conrad pointed a finger at James. 'Actually the more accurate term is monistic - 'all is one' not 'all is God.'

James narrowed his eyes. 'That seems a bit abstract.'

'It doesn't appeal so much to the masses,' Conrad admitted, 'but it's a favourite in the more intellectual circles.'

James finished taking notes. 'What does Advaita Vedanta mean, any way?' He thought it was about time he asked.

Conrad wrote the name in sections on his pad and explained that 'A' means 'not', 'dvaita' means 'dualistic' and Vedanta means an interpretation of the Vedas. 'So you see, 'A-dvaita Vedanta' means a non-dualistic - or monistic - interpretation of the Vedas which are the early Hindu Scriptures.'

James was starting to understand. 'Now, you said that monistic means that all is one, so what does dualistic mean, all is two?'

'Yes. Most of us are dualists. We believe in a separation between spirit and matter, between God and human. Christians worship a God who is 'wholly other'.'

James was familiar with that terminology. 'So Theists are dualists?'

Conrad inclined his head. 'Correct, and the Advaita Vedantan mystics are monistic. They believe there is no separation between them and Ultimate Reality.'

Ah! James thought to himself, *that is what Christian mystics mean by Undifferentiated Unity.* 'No place for a personal God?'

Conrad raised one hand in 'stop' mode. 'Wait. As I hinted before, Shankara does have a place for personal gods like Vishnu or Shiva but he sees them as only an inferior step on the road to Nirguna Brahman.'

James saw the light. 'Ah! So this is what you meant by gods being on a lower scale than Ultimate Reality?'

‘Exactly.’ Conrad smiled in a self-satisfied manner. ‘In fact, Brahman is not only Ultimate Reality but eventually, for him and his followers, the only true reality. This is because in the end the personal gods, along with the rest of this world, are finally seen to be illusory or ‘Maya’.’

James frowned. ‘I find that concept of Maya a bit hard to follow.’

Conrad laughed. ‘Most westerners do, but Shankara’s writings are not always logically consistent. Bede Griffiths has found a different view of ‘Maya’ in one of his comments where he says that the world is not actually unreal but just a ‘reflection’ of reality. ‘Illusion’ is when you make the mistake of regarding the reflection as the reality.’

James smiled at the use of his favourite word. ‘I can relate to that.’

Conrad raised a cautionary finger. ‘But remember Bede Griffiths is a Westerner - and a Catholic Priest.’

‘So I have to allow for his bias?’

‘Right.’

James nodded and decided that it was time to follow Philip’s suggestion and try out his new theory on Dr Rossiter. ‘One last thing Doctor. This Advaita Vedanta mystical strand seems to have many similarities to Theravada Buddhism. Back when Buddhism was officially driven out of India, is it possible that it actually survived -in the Advaita Vedanta mystical strand?’

Dr Rossiter looked at James in surprise. ‘Very good. Very few students ever come to that realisation.’ James felt quite elated by that word of praise. The older man went on. ‘You are quite correct. This impersonal Brahman of Hindu mystical philosophy does correspond in many ways to the Buddhist Nirvana.’

‘Thank you, Dr Rossiter.’ James stood up and offered his hand. ‘You’ve really cleared up a few things for me.’

'Call me Conrad.' He said as he shook the proffered hand.

'OK, Conrad. See you in class next Thursday.' As he left, James felt he had taken a significant step along the way in his quest, and also that he had been accepted by Conrad Rossiter.

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1. E. Underhill, *Op. Cit.*, Methuen, London, 1960.