

A Course in Miracles and Advaita Vedanta

by Russell Smith

As a long time student of A Course in Miracles, I often find myself drawing parallels between the Course and the mystical traditions of other ages and cultures. This lovely passage from the Manual for Teachers encourages me: "Are other teachers possible, to lead the way to those who speak in different tongues and appeal to different symbols? Certainly there are. Would God leave anyone without a very present help in time of trouble...?" At no other time in history have the teachings of the world's spiritual traditions been so widely translated and available. When I come to these teachings with an open heart and mind, a conversation takes place, illuminating both the Course and the words of the mystics and sages.

The Vedanta School of Hindu philosophy shares some common ideas with the Course. "Advaita" which translates as "non-dual" is a sect within that school. Advaita Vedanta dates back to Shankara-charya in the 7th century A.D., whose principal work is *The Crest Jewel of Discrimination*. The core teaching of Advaita Vedanta is "God, Guru and Self are one." The Advaita tradition further maintains that the phenomenal world is maya, illusion, and there is only one reality: Brahman, God. Compare this passage from the ACIM text, page 384, "There is nothing outside you. That is what you must ultimately learn, for it is the realization that the kingdom of Heaven is restored to you... Heaven is not a place but a condition. It is merely an awareness of perfect oneness, and the knowledge that there is nothing else; nothing outside this oneness, and nothing else within."

As you might imagine, many scholarly texts have been written about Shankara-charya and Advaita Vedanta. To give you a feeling for this teaching, and how it connects with the Course, let's take a brief look at the life and teachings of a much loved, contemporary Advaita sage, Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950).

Ramana Maharshi is probably the most famous Indian mystic of the 20th century. He was born in a small village in Southern India to middle class parents and attended an American mission school. At the age of 16, for no apparent reason, "a sudden violent fear of death" overtook him. In his own words, here is the description of what happened next: I just felt "I am going to die" and began thinking what to do about it... The shock of the fear of death drove my mind inwards and I said to myself mentally without actually framing the words "Now death has come; what does it mean? What is dying? The body dies." And I at once dramatized the occurrence of death. I lay with my limbs stretched out stiff as though rigor mortis had set in and imitated a corpse... I held my breath and kept my lips tightly closed so no sound could escape... "Well then," I said to myself, "this body is dead. It will be carried stiff to the burning ground and there burnt and reduced to ashes. But with the death of the body am I dead? Is the body I? It is silent and inert but I feel the full force of my personality and even the voice of the 'I' within me, apart from it. So I am Spirit transcending the body. The body dies but the Spirit that transcends it cannot be touched by death. That means I am the deathless Spirit." All this was not dull thought; it flashed through me vividly as living truth which I perceived directly, almost without thought-process... From that moment onwards the "I" or Self focused attention on itself by a powerful fascination. Fear of death vanished once and for all. Absorption in the Self continued unbroken." (*The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi*, ed Arthur Osborne)

The "I" or "Self" the sage speaks of is the "I" the Course refers to in the Workbook when it says, "I am not a body, I am free. I am still as God created me." The following passages from the 27th chapter of the Manual echo the story of Ramana Maharshi's realization: "Death is the central dream from which all illusions stem... The 'reality' of death is firmly rooted in the belief that God's Son is a body... Be steadfast but in this; be not deceived by the 'reality' of any changing form. Truth neither moves nor wavers nor sinks down to death and dissolution."

Ramana Maharshi left home soon afterwards, drawn irresistibly to the holy mountain of Arunachala in South India where he spent the rest of his life. After his sudden, overwhelming awakening, he spent several years in complete silence, subsisting on food brought to him by villagers who were attracted to the palpable sense of peace that was said to radiate from him. Devotees brought him books -- the Bible and Indian scriptures -- and eventually he found words to describe his realization. The sage of Arunachala taught the classic Advaita Vedanta practice of "self-inquiry." The student is encouraged to focus on the "I" feeling within and trace it to its source. Is the "I" the body? It cannot be since the "I" is aware of the body. Is it the thoughts of emotions? The "I" witnesses these as well, so they cannot be what "I" is. Over a period of time, with intense, uninterrupted focus on the sense of "I," the meditator may come to a realization of the birthless, deathless Self. "Reality is simply the loss of the ego," Ramana Maharshi insisted. "Destroy the ego by seeking its identity. It will automatically vanish and reality will shine forth by itself. This is the direct method." Compare this passage from the Course Workbook, lesson 332: "The ego makes illusions. Truth undoes its evil dreams by shining them away. Truth never makes attack. It merely is. And by its presence is the mind recalled from fantasies, awakening to the real."

Advaita Vedanta teaching is strictly non-dualistic; prayer and devotion are not central to Advaita practice. The focus is on the limitless Self. ACIM is non-dualistic at its core, stating in Workbook lesson 169, "Oneness is simply the idea God is. And in His Being, He encompasses all things. No mind holds anything but Him... The world has never been at all."

Ramana Maharshi acknowledged the need many seekers have for the dualistic forms of prayer and devotion, saying, "There are two ways, one is looking into the source of 'I' and merging into that source; the other is feeling 'I am helpless by myself, God alone is all-powerful and except for throwing myself on Him there is no other means of safety for me' and thus gradually developing the conviction that God alone exists and the ego does not count."

The Course, being practical, employs both means. There is the silent, non-dualistic meditation of the "I am as God created me" lessons: "Nothing is required of you... except to lay all idols and self-images aside; go past the list of attributes, both good and bad, you have ascribed to yourself; and wait in silent expectancy for the truth." But there is also the recognition that most of us do not live exclusively in the realm of the non-dual, which the Course calls Knowledge (text, pg 40), like Ramana Maharshi. We live in the realm of perception where the healing metaphors of guidance are welcome. We are encouraged to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, cherish the companionship of Jesus, and to begin our day stating, "Today I will make no decisions by myself."

Actually, with all its insistence of pure non-dualism, Advaita tradition does suggest "Of myself I can do nothing," teaching that realization of the Self is rare, almost impossible, without the presence of an enlightened master. Spending time in the company of the enlightened one is called satsang in India. The Course could perhaps be understood as a sustained, personal satsang with Jesus.

Ramana Maharshi is unique among most Indian sages in having no living Guru or teacher, he often said that Arunachala, the holy mountain, was his Guru. Seekers from all over India, and eventually the world, flocked to Arunachala, drawn not so much by his words -- although the extensive records of his conversations are clear and wise -- but by his "indescribably beautiful" presence and the atmosphere of peace that surrounded him. "When I have forgiven myself and remembered who I am, I will bless everyone and everything I see." (Workbook, lesson 52).

When Ramana was dying of throat cancer at the age of 70, his devotees begged him not to leave them. He is said to have smiled and said "You say I am going away, but where could I go? I am always

here." Jesus, speaking in the Course, says "The Prince of Peace was born to reestablish the condition of love by teaching that communication remains unbroken even if the body is destroyed..." (Text, page 328).

If you want to learn more about Ramana Maharshi and Advaita Vedanta, you can start by checking out www.realization.org ; for some interesting links to contemporary, western-style Advaita try www.nonduality.com.