

## A Great Soul: An Interview with Ravi Ravindra

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Ravi Ravindra is a familiar figure in Theosophical circles. He is a regular lecturer at Olcott, the Krotona School of Theosophy, and other venues. Professor emeritus at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, he is the author of a number of books, including *The Pilgrim Soul: A Path to Transcending World Religions*; *The Gospel of John in the Light of Indian Mysticism (originally published as The Yoga of the Christ)*; and, most recently, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Guide to Navigating the Battle of Life (reviewed in Quest, fall 2017), a new translation and commentary on the classic sacred text of India. (For a profile of him, see Quest, winter 2013).*

Ravi was at the Olcott headquarters in November 2017, when I had the opportunity to interview him. Although we had never met before, and I had only read a couple of his books, I was amazed at our agreement about subtle issues concerning consciousness and self. It was one of the most moving interviews that I have ever done.

**Richard:** Let's begin by talking about your latest book, which is a new translation of the Bhagavad Gita (reviewed in Quest, fall 2017). There are a lot of translations of the Gita out there. What inspired you to make another one?

**Ravi:** First of all, the translation was secondary from my point of view. I was more interested in the commentary. In India there is a very large stream of spirituality that is very otherworldly—as if this world is all *maya* and one doesn't really need to take it seriously. Shankara, the great Indian philosopher, emphasized this especially. He himself was not quite so attached to this perspective, but his followers saw it as central. Later, the Ramakrishna Mission continued with this position. To me it seems rather strange. Why would Krishna bother to take incarnation if he has no interest in the world? Why would he ask Arjuna to fight?

From my point of view, the Bhagavad Gita is very much a teaching for this life and is concerned with this world. It is not suggesting that this is the ultimate reality, but there is no suggestion that Arjuna should leave everything and go to a cave or to the Himalayas and meditate.

**Richard:** Shankara is associated with the Advaita Vedanta, and that, as you suggest, seems to be the dominant philosophical school in India since his time, although there are, of course, many others. Do you see any problem with this almost exclusive focus on Advaita Vedanta, either in India or in the West?

**Ravi:** The difficulty is that Advaita Vedanta is speaking about the oneness of the source from which everything comes, but without uniqueness there can be no manifestation. Every blade of grass is unique. From a purely scientific point of view, there are  $10^{3,480,000,000}$  possibilities of uniqueness. That is more than the number of atoms in the universe.

No human being can ever be the clone of another human being. No blade of grass can be a complete clone of another blade of grass. There is so much variation, so much possibility for uniqueness. Advaita Vedanta agrees with this point of view, for it regards everything in the manifested universe as coming from the same divine energy—that is where the oneness actually is. But at the same time, nothing can be manifested in the universe without uniqueness. Nothing would exist—at least nothing that we could see—without this uniqueness. One need not put them at the same level, as if they're contradictory. This is part of the difficulty: one does not realize that different things are at different levels of expression.

You and I are absolutely unique, but one could also say that if I ever succeeded in discovering the very source from which I originate, I would also discover that that is the very source from which you originate.

**Richard:** That makes a great deal of sense. So the source from which we all originate is taken to be the sole truth, and the uniqueness aspect—

**Ravi:** Can be neglected.

**Richard:** Well, it's not only neglected, but it's discarded as somehow illusory or unreal. How would you respond to that attitude?

**Ravi:** This is really why I felt obliged to write a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. Krishna takes a unique incarnation for a unique situation; there have already been nine incarnations of Vishnu and there is a tenth yet to be. Each one of those nine incarnations is completely unique. Rama is one of them, Krishna is another, Buddha is another. They look different, and they also emphasize different things. As well, they have different perspectives and different attitudes.

In fact, celebrating the uniqueness is almost the fundamental emphasis of the arts. Nothing in nature would have been so beautifully expressed by Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo if they simply said, "All this is unreal."

The trouble is that the Oneness is wholly unmanifest; therefore no work of art, no philosophy, no theology could capture it, which is not in itself a bad thing. It is a recommendation that unless my mind can be completely free of its own movements, I cannot actually experience the Oneness.

Nobody needs to be against Oneness, but the whole manifest universe is where our activity is. The activity needed to allow our spirit to come to this subtle understanding of Oneness remains in the manifested universe.

These days in the West, there is a whole movement called Science and Nonduality [www.scienceandnonduality.com]. They have annual conferences where they have invited me to speak. They have given me—I suppose they give it to everybody—a water bottle on which it says  $OM = mc^2$ . My own impression is that only people who don't know very much about OM or about  $mc^2$  can assert this kind of equality.

**Richard:** I myself think that nonduality has become an almost mindless slogan. If you think about it, the word *nonduality* is self-contradictory because it's implying that there is this thing called duality and then there's this other thing that is nonduality, so you have two things—you still have duality. I don't know what they do with that, but I don't call myself a nondualist, so I don't feel obliged to solve this problem.

**Ravi:** Actually, the classical expression in Sanskrit is *ekam evadvitiam* (one only, without a second). It is actually in one of the oldest upanishads, Chândogya Upanishad (6:2.1).

**Richard:** I see. Sometimes the term *Advaita* seems to be applied to the distinction between Atman and Brahman: they're saying there's no difference between Atman and Brahman. In Indian terms there is also a dualistic perspective that posits kind of a personal God, Ishvara, in between the two. Is that more or less correct?

**Ravi:** More or less, but even in Vedanta, there are several variations on the theme, if you don't mind stepping back a little bit here. Strictly speaking, in the Indian tradition there is really no myth of creation. There is what we might actually call a myth of emanation.

Brahman, which is the label for the highest reality, literally means *vastness*, but contemporary English usage of *vastness* doesn't convey *vastness* in time. It simply conveys *vastness* in space. Thus Annie Besant, translating the Bhagavad Gita from Sanskrit into English, uses *The Eternal* for Brahman, to indicate the time aspect.

In any case, it is *vastness* or *endlessness* in both time and space. Brahman does not create the world, it *became* the world. Brahman is not only in everything, it is everything. Although there is manifestation at different levels of materiality, even what we would ordinarily call completely dead matter has Brahman or some level of consciousness in it.

Incidentally, I have recently been trying to ask our physicists why they are so convinced that matter has no consciousness. If we have a magnet and some iron filings here and a piece of paper there, only the iron filings know to be drawn to the magnet. We could say it is a law of nature. The paper doesn't do it. Why do the iron filings do it? Do they have no awareness, no consciousness, that there is a magnet here and they should come to it?

Another point to be made is also emphasized by Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita. He says everything that exists is a combination of the field and the knower of the field: "I am the knower of the field in all fields." It is practically a definition of yoga that a wise person at the end of many births realizes that all there is is Krishna. Here is Oneness. However, he goes on to add, such a person is a great soul but very rare. In Sanskrit:

*bahūnām janamanam ante jñānavān mām prapadyate*

*vāsudevah sarvam iti sa mahātmā sudurlabhāh*

At the end of many births, a wise person comes to me realizing that all there is is Krishna.

Such a person is a great soul, a mahatma, and very rare.

**Richard:** One problem is that the definition of consciousness is so muddled at this point. You see this with the question about how consciousness arises out of matter. Usually what they're trying to say is how does our human introspective, subjective consciousness arise as a unique and almost aberrant thing out of everything else, which is dead? That is not a very sustainable position.

**Ravi:** These days, at least in some academic circles, there is some interest in consciousness. But the contemporary understanding of the transformation of consciousness seems to be about a change of the contents of consciousness: from bad thoughts, you go to good thoughts. For example, if you are feeling hatred for somebody and then you begin to love them—that kind of transformation.

But classically in the Indian tradition, for example in the Bhagavad Gita or in the Yoga Sutras of Patañjali, the transformation of consciousness refers to going beyond thought altogether. It is a structural change. It is not that bad thoughts are changed to good thoughts. It is not a change of content, it is a change of structure. This has been difficult for me to convey to people in the academic world.

**Richard:** Or I suppose you could look at it another way: illusion is, arguably, the confusion of consciousness with its own contents; that is, the identification of consciousness with its own contents. Liberation would involve the ability to detach oneself and see all of this from a kind of distance: the cognizing Self on the one hand and all these thoughts, all these physical experiences, on the other. Is that something like what you mean?

**Ravi:** Actually, you can take a very specific example of this. The very last *shloka* [verse] in the Bhagavad Gita says wherever there is the skillful warrior, Arjuna, and the lord of yoga, Krishna, there is victory and prosperity.

The point is that both of these need to be understood within oneself. All the sages in India have interpreted the Bhagavad Gita as an internal dialogue and an internal struggle. Can I be like Arjuna, engaged in the battle, or in any activity, and at the same time be like Krishna, remaining above the battle? I think this very much speaks to what you're saying.

**Richard:** In practical terms, does this mean that while you're engaged in the battle, you're simultaneously standing back from it? Or is it a sequential thing, where for a while you're immersed in it and then you stand back?

**Ravi:** Simultaneously. That is my understanding. My teacher, Madame Jeanne de Salzmann, had a slightly different way of putting it, although she also used these expressions—to be engaged in the battle and to remain above the battle. On one occasion, she said that it is important to be a warrior and a monk simultaneously. Only a monk knows when to lay down the weapons and to pray and when to pick the weapons up and to fight for the essential.

To be a warrior and a monk at the same time—this is one way of saying to be engaged in the battle and to remain above the battle. This is a different imagery, which is useful because all of our expressions limit something in a way. Therefore if we can have more than one expression of truth, it can free us from mistaking the expression of truth for the Truth. Then one searches behind the expressions. What are they pointing to?

**Richard:** Maybe the enormous mixture and confrontation of religions is making it possible to do this. At least some people see this and are willing to say that these are different facets of perspective on truth, rather than any one perspective being absolute.

**Ravi:** These days I'm promoting interpilgrim dialogues. A pilgrim is on a journey, but periodically one meets at the base camp. Other pilgrims come in from other directions, and one can learn a great deal from them—about the location of a chasm or an iceberg, or about which parts are dangerous, which are easier.

But it also involves a willingness to change the journey. I'm a Hindu because I was born in India of a Hindu family. Somebody is a Christian because they were born a Christian in a Christian family. There is nothing wrong with that to start, but as far as I'm concerned, I would actually regard it to be a failure in my life if I died merely a Hindu. In fact, I'm happy to say that precisely because I'm a Hindu, I can be a Christian and a Buddhist simultaneously. These are just labels. Why can't I learn from the great sages other than Hindu sages?

Who are my sages these days? Are they only Indian? Why is Christ not my sage, or Socrates? In the sciences, we have no difficulty with this. Newton proposed the law of gravitation, but if it applies only in England, it can't be true. And if only English people can understand it and no one else can, it can't be true either.

In these days, one can travel, one can get information about anything. So my sages are the sages of the world. Of course I have only a limited amount of energy, so I'm not really able to reflect on all of the sages, but to limit oneself intentionally—saying it's going to be only the Christian sages or only the Hindu ones—to me this is a sin against the Holy Spirit.

**Richard:** Perhaps we could move on to Christianity, because you've made quite an effort to connect yoga with the Gospel of John. Maybe you could say a little bit about the relation between them.

**Ravi:** First of all, as far as I am aware, if there is one common lesson from any of the great scriptures or sages, it is simply that a radical transformation of my whole being is required before I can come to truth or God or the Absolute. Within the Christian tradition, John's Gospel has for centuries been regarded as the most spiritual of all the gospels. Like yoga, it is an invitation to a science of transformation.

For example—although this precise expression is in the Gospel of Matthew—Christ said that unless you leave your self behind, you cannot be a follower of mine. There is always the suggestion that spiritual discipline is not, as it were, freedom *for* myself but freedom *from* myself, myself being the end product of my entire past conditioning. If I am not free of that, I am naturally bound to react in a certain way, because I happen to have been born in India rather than in the U.S., or in the twentieth century rather than in the second century. All this influences me, so to be able to actually see the situation totally, freely, and impartially requires being free of myself.

The same idea is expressed in Buddhism. To be free, this is sometimes called *abhinchana*, almost "self-naughting." Similarly, another Gospel says unless you die to your old self, you cannot be born as a new person. There is very much the same emphasis in the Yoga Sutras.

In yoga and throughout Indian literature, the source of all our difficulties or problems, what stands in the way, is regarded as *avidyā*, ignorance. The Yoga Sutras even describe what *avidyā* is: to take the non-Self for the Self and to take the transient for the eternal. This raises the question of what is myself. What am I? This becomes a very central question because anything that one knows or sees doesn't seem to be satisfactory. One is then drawn to subtler and subtler levels.

On the other hand, the Abrahamic tradition sees the main source of all our difficulties and problems as disobedience to the will of God. It began with Adam in the Garden of Eden. Particularly in the Christian tradition, even from its very first breath a baby participates in sin, just because he or she is the progeny of Adam and Eve. This becomes the doctrine of original sin.

But the New Testament was written in Greek, so it's helpful to go back to some of the Greek origins of these words. *Sin* in Greek is *hamartia*, which literally means to *miss the mark*. Now that has a very different feeling. What is my mark, which, if I miss it I am committing sin? Did Adam miss the mark?

From my understanding of the story in the Garden of Eden, Adam is actually being graduated by God. He's not being punished. Otherwise, what is he going to do—just hang around in the Garden of Eden? He's actually being sent to do something in the world.

In any case, any transformational teaching strongly recommends self-inquiry, because that is the self that needs to be transformed. Unless I am becoming aware of this, how am I going to be transforming anything? I have difficulty with the idea of believing in religions, because the churches are not interested in encouraging self-inquiry. You look in the concordance of the Bible. There are hundreds of entries under faith, and a few entries under knowledge, but not a single entry under self-knowledge.

On the other hand, the Gnostic gospels very strongly emphasize this; so do all the Christian mystics, Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross among others. For example, in the Gospel of Thomas: "The kingdom of God is within you and without you. If you would, you are God, you must know yourself. When you know yourself, you will realize that you are the son of the Living Father. If you do not, if you seek, you are in poverty. In fact, you are poverty." I personally do not know a stronger statement encouraging self-knowledge or self-inquiry.

The word for *self-knowledge* is not always exactly the same. It can be *self-observation*, *self-inquiry*, *self-study*. It is very strongly emphasized by Parmenides and by Plotinus that knowing and becoming are *not* two different things. The only kind of knowledge that is worthwhile is that which changes the one who studies. It transforms you, so—as Plotinus remarked—knowing and becoming are one thing.

In the thirteenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna asks Krishna what true knowledge is. Krishna then, interestingly, describes the characteristics of the knower. Again, here is the idea that no knowledge is really worthwhile unless it transforms the knower. Therefore self-inquiry and self-transformation are not two different things.

**Richard:** Very striking. I've been tempted to relate what Christianity called the Son of God to what Hinduism calls *Atman*. *I AM* in the Gospel of John seems to refer to this Atman.

**Ravi:** Let me take the saying of Christ in John 10:30: "I and the Father are one." In India, one would say, "I am Brahman," or "Atman is Brahman."

There is another remark to be made here, which has been written about by serious scholars. All the great statements of Christ, such as "I am the way, the truth, and the life," should in fact be translated, "*I AM* is the way, the truth, and the life." In English that expression doesn't make sense, so it gets changed in a way that tends to make it seem almost egotistical coming from Christ. But he repeatedly says, "I am not the author of the words I say. I simply say what my father in heaven tells me to say."

This idea—*I AM* is the way—is what Jesus says in Exodus 3:14, it says, "Go tell the pharaoh that *I AM* has sent you." *I AM* is actually in fact referring to Yahweh, so when Christ says "*I AM* is the way, the truth, and the life," that reference is very high.

I often quote the seventeenth-century Dutch mystic Angelus Silesius: "Christ could be born a thousand times in Galilee—but all in vain until he's born in me." Christ represents a level of consciousness that could well have been present in the man called Jesus. You can read Meister Eckhart, who says that every Christian is called to be Mary and give birth to the Word. Or even Saint Paul: "I am crucified to the world. I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me."

**Richard:** That's the principle: the Son is the *I AM*?

**Ravi:** Yes.

**Richard:** I wouldn't be very good at debating these views with you, because I almost entirely agree.

**Ravi:** No, you don't need to. I think we can even disagree on things. Sometimes this sounds like a joke, but any serious conversation can take place only among consenting adults. If we both agree that scriptures are worthwhile, that the spirit world is not nonsensical, then we can actually have a different perspective. We can even disagree on many things in which we learn from each other, but if one does not consent about the major idea, I often don't talk about these things at all.

To put it slightly differently, as Socrates said, "Any real philosophy can be done only in a state of *eros*." What he meant by *eros* was love, not only what has now become known as erotic love. If you and I wish to have a philosophical conversation, we need to be in a state of a kind of love. Then we could even disagree. After all, lovers don't always like the same kind of food, or the same kind of theory, or the same works of art.

**Richard:** That's very beautiful. Let's explore what you could call the dual role of religion. On the one hand, religion is or ought to be about fostering this process of self-inquiry that you were talking about, but religion also seems to have a social function. It's used as a tool for advancing a more or less common level of morality. Religion in its exoteric form has to deal with a lot of people who really aren't interested in self-inquiry. In fact they have always been a small minority. It's this that most people want, so the ordinary form of religion is what most people get.

There seems to be a real tension between these two aspects of religion. One is, shall we say, very individualistic, with a matter of self-inquiry, discovering oneself, ultimately discovering that the Self is common to everyone. Then there are the social and moral and conventional roles that religion plays. These two roles often come into conflict.

**Ravi:** First of all, although they often wish to have believers rather than searchers, I don't feel that one needs to be against the religions. I'm always impressed that when there are earthquakes somewhere, or floods, churches will often gather funds to help people. Even otherwise, my impression is that without religions human beings would be even more barbarous than we are.

I also think the religions can be great museum keepers—wonderful icons, wonderful cathedrals, wonderful artists. They preserve them. But you know, nobody ever became a great artist just by visiting museums.

In Christianity, the spiritual search was more or less assigned to the monasteries. If you are serious about spiritual search, then you don't get entangled with the social life, you join a monastery where you can practice spiritual disciplines.

Then the monasteries are separated from the church organizations, which are not always necessarily in harmony with the monasteries. If you look at history, you see that very few popes have been canonized. This indicates that the whole ecclesiastical process is a little different from spiritual development. They don't have to be contradictory, because occasionally popes also have been canonized, but a person could also be like John of the Cross—canonized after he was given a lot of trouble by the church.

I am not against the churches. I don't need to waste any of my energy by being against something. I just need to ask repeatedly, what am I for? That is the usage of my energy that I am interested in.

**Richard:** That's a good place to stop. I think this has been a very profound conversation, certainly one of the most profound interviews I've ever done.

**Ravi:** What one can say also depends so much on who is asking. In fact, this might interest you. When I was with Krishnamurti, I was asking questions, and in every situation there were sidekicks who thought I was asking too many questions. One day, he said to me in their presence, "Please keep asking. That way you assist like a midwife at the delivery of something which is difficult to deliver."

