

THREE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN MYSTICS: ĀNANDAMAYĪ, KRISHNABAI AND RAJNEESH

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Introduction

In this paper I shall attempt to give a general and reasonably representative view of the several paths followed by contemporary Indian mystics. Any selection of a single or a few present-day mystical thinkers of India will inevitably contain a considerable degree of subjective preference: and the present selection is no exception. My choice of these three individuals rests partly with the fact that they each exemplify a different mystical path: Ānandamayī* is predominantly an *advaitin*, who emphasises above all the pursuit of *jñāna* or spiritual knowledge for the realisation of *brahman*; Krishnabai tends more towards the pursuit of *bhakti* or loving devotion, directed in her case towards her *guru* Rāmdās as the personification of *brahman*; while Rajneesh adopts a highly syncretic approach — relying strongly upon active forms of meditation — which does not easily fit into any one of the traditional categories of Indian mysticism. My choice was also influenced by my having met each of these individuals, and having been able to hear and observe them at first hand: primarily between April and July 1978, and in the case of Rajneesh on several further occasions. If it be accepted that mysticism centres primarily upon experience — and that the words in which the experiencer expresses that experience are secondary to the experience itself — it then becomes significant to learn not just what the experiencer says about his experience, but also how he says it, and how differently he expresses it to different audiences or on different occasions, and useful insights in this connection can therefore be gained by studying not just the written teachings but also the sayings and activities of mystics at first hand. In this paper I shall give firstly an outline account of the lives as well as the teachings of these three individuals — which will hopefully be in any case of interest to those who may be unacquainted with any of them — before discussing certain more general points raised by this account.

Finally by way of introductory remarks, I must briefly explain my use of the term “mystic” in this paper. Rather than enter upon a detailed

* Note: Technical terms are transliterated conventionally, but names of people and places are transliterated according to common usage — thus for example Ānandamayī, but Rajneesh instead of Rajniś.

discussion of objective criteria (if such exist) which might validate the claim to be a mystic, I shall here accept the claims of these three individuals to have experienced — or to live in awareness of — some form of union or identity with what they see as being the One ultimate reality of existence: whether this be called God, *brahman*, *nirvāṇa* or whatever. I shall accordingly not be concerned to attempt any evaluation of such claims, but simply to describe the teachings and experiences of these individuals, wherever possible in their own words.

Ānandmayī

Ānandamayī Mā — the Blissful Mother — was born on the 30th April 1896 in the small village of Kheora in what is now the Tripura district of Bangladesh. She was the second of eight children: and was given the name Nirmalā Sundarī Bhāṭṭācharya. Her parents were devout Vaiṣṇava Brahmins, and strict followers of caste regulations: they were also poor, since her father had no regular employment, and for that reason the only formal education which Nirmalā received amounted to less than two years in the local primary school — to the present day she writes little, and never sees fit to read books. On the other hand, she was greatly influenced and affected as a child by the music of *kīrtana* and by *japa* or the chanting of the names of God, which — as she later claimed — used to induce trances and visions. In 1909, just before her thirteenth birthday, Nirmalā was married to Ramani Mohan Chakravartī — later called Bholānāth — who came from the district of Dacca: but for the first five years of their marriage her husband travelled throughout Bangladesh in search of work, while Nirmalā lived with her husband's sister-in-law Pramodā Devī. Even after she finally went to live with her husband in 1914, the marriage was apparently never physically consummated, right up to her husband's death in 1938. From 1914 onwards — and especially after 1918 — Nirmalā devoted herself increasingly to *sādhanā* or spiritual disciplines of various sorts — which included the disciplines of fasting and of a three-year silence; there was no sudden event or single occurrence which marked a turning-point in her spiritual career, but merely a steady development from her childhood onwards. Her husband was understandably at first somewhat alarmed by her increasing concentration on spiritual pursuits, and being at one stage convinced that she must be mentally unbalanced, he summoned first exorcists and then a doctor: but when both were unable to treat her and instead assured him that she was not mad but 'God-intoxicated', he acquiesced and let matters take their course — and in time became one of her chief disciples. Eventually, in 1922 at the age of 26, Nirmalā initiated herself — proclaiming that *guru*, *śiṣya* and *mantra* (teacher-

initiator, pupil-initiand, and sacred words of initiation) were to her one and the same; and a few months later she also initiated her husband Bholānāth. Two years later they moved to Dacca: and as news about Nirmalā spread, disciples began to gather and sit at her feet, and to attend her regular performance of *kīrtana* and *pājā*. From 1926 onwards, Ānandamayī started to travel, first in Bengal and then throughout northern India: in 1932 she abandoned Dacca as her home, and ever since then she has led a life of travel and wandering — stopping only a few days or at most a few weeks in any one place before moving on again as the mood takes her. She maintains this wandering life to the present day, despite now suffering somewhat from ill-health: her movements are quite unpredictable, and even her closest disciples can never know at which of her many Ashrams she is to be found — whether at the main Ashram at the Asi Ghat in Banaras, or at such others as those in Vrindavan, Hardwar and Dehra Dun.

As her name indicates, Ānandamayī is considered by her followers to be an embodiment of bliss — a bliss which springs from her union with *brahman*, and which is undisturbed by any physical or mental discomfort — which she regards as *līlā* or passing phases in the divine play of life. The twin themes of *līlā* and *māyā* play an important part in her outlook and teachings: the changing physical world, with all its events and phenomena, is relatively unreal and false in the sense of being a changing mask which hides the underlying unitary reality or Oneness of existence — it is at the same time the manifestation and play of the Divine, where the Divine hides itself under a veil of change in order that it can again seek and find itself as the changeless. In her teaching — which is always verbal or practical and never written, being towards the particular needs of particular individuals — she lays greatest emphasis not only upon correct knowledge but also upon the performance of *sādhana* of various forms — especially upon *japa* or repetition of the names of God, and upon *kīrtana* or singing the praises of God: these being in her view the most effective ways by which the Divine in man can realise its true nature as the Divine, as well as being the two forms of *sādhana* which she herself pursued most vigorously. Man's goal, in her view, is the realisation of *brahman* — or rather, the realisation of himself as *brahman*: there exists no ultimate difference between God and man, only apparent differences which man in his ignorance believes to be real — all divine qualities already exist in man, and he has only to dispel his own ignorance and illusion in order to realise his true nature as *brahman*. This realisation does not, therefore, entail the transformation of the human into the Divine, since the human has in essence been the Divine all along and does not change: divinity lies hidden in man by the

veil of ignorance which, when drawn, enables man to realise his identity with and as the Divine — just as the waves of the sea are essentially identical with it, rising from it and going back to it. As she said to Paramahansa Yogananda when he visited her in Calcutta in 1936,

“Before I came on this earth, Father, ‘I was the same’. As a little girl, ‘I was the same’. I grew into womanhood, but still ‘I was the same’. . . . even afterwards, though the dance of creation changes around me in the hall of eternity, ‘I shall be the same’.”¹

Ānandamayī’s vision of man’s ultimate goal is thoroughly non-dualistic: man *is* God, and there is no essential distinction or separation between them:

“All is THAT, and where THAT is, there is no contradiction. The false as such must vanish. How can one speak of *advaita* and include individuals, the world? Where exclusively Oneness is, how can there be room left for two? Just consider: the Infinite is contained in the finite, and the finite in the Infinite: the Whole in the part and the part in the Whole. . . . He who attains and that which is attained are one and the same. . . . The One who is the Eternal, the *ātman*, He Himself is the traveller on the path of immortality. He is all in all, He alone is.”²

Everything beyond this statement is merely elaboration and commentary: it is the One who in *līlā* multiplies Himself and, as it were, plays hide-and-seek with Himself through the veil of *māyā* — and it is man’s task to raise this veil of *māyā* and to thereby find his true self as the One.

Ānandamayī is a firm believer in *karma* and in the power of destiny. She is also in several respects a traditionalist when it comes to matters of religious practice. She gives qualified approval to *satī* or the self-immolation of widows on the part of a widow who is completely steadfast in mind and body; and she encourages the performance of daily *pūjā* as being of great help for a *sādhaka*. She lays little stress on the performance of good deeds or on giving physical and material aid or service to others: emphasising instead the need to destroy the ego as the root cause of all suffering, and teaching that physical suffering and poverty can be aids for purifying the self and realising the One. She advocates *brahmacarya* and sexual continence for the young, as a cure for what she sees as the moral and spiritual decay of the present age; she strongly sanctions arranged marriages and family life, but only for those who feel irresistibly compelled to that path — and even then she advocates the renunciation of sexual activity as early as possible, holding up as her ideal the lives of the Rishis in withdrawing from worldly activity and devoting themselves entirely to a life of renunciation, asceticism and

spiritual practice. Perhaps most surprising of all, Ānandamayī is a staunch upholder of caste regulations. All foreigners at her Ashrams are treated as casteless, and must eat and sleep separately from those in the Ashram for fear of ritual contamination — a restriction which applies even to the Austrian-born devotee Ātmānanda, who has now been with Ānandamayī for forty-four years. When questioned about this, Ānandamayī related that she herself — by behaving unconventionally during her own *sādhana* — had thereby alienated many orthodox Hindus: and so now, while she personally treats everyone alike irrespective of caste differences, she nonetheless abides by caste regulations in order not to alienate her orthodox devotees who are still living on a level of consciousness where they have not yet transcended caste feelings. One may subjectively question the satisfactoriness of this reply: what is undeniable is that many in the close circle of Ānandamayī's devotees are clearly considered to be — and in some cases all too clearly regard themselves as being — in a uniquely privileged position, despite her attempts to inculcate humility and the destruction of ego; while Ānandamayī herself has enjoyed and continues to enjoy the patronage and respect of many high-caste and socially prominent individuals — not least that of Kamala and Jawaharlal Nehru, and of Indira Gandhi.

In the case of Ānandamayī, we can perhaps see the applicability of Aghananda Bharati's contention that mystical experience does not necessarily change the personality or behaviour of the mystic.³ Ānandamayī claims to have had — and to live in awareness of — a mystical experience of the essential unity and oneness of all existence: she tries to encourage others to realise and experience this awareness, seeking to share it not just through verbal teachings but also through silence — which she deems the most effective expression of her experience, as a result of which her daily hour-long *darśans* are frequently totally silent events. On the other hand, Ānandamayī still accepts and retains the basic ritual and social values which were taught to her as a child by her Brahmin parents: these, for her, are but manifestations of the *līlā* — and of the veil of *māyā* — which man must penetrate in order to perceive the Truth of himself — they are secondary to the mystical experience itself, and as such it is of little ultimate importance whether one rejects or accepts them. The fact that Ānandamayī accepts them tells us more about the psychology and social background of Nirmalā Sundarī than about the mystical experience of Ānandamayī: yet by accepting them and encouraging their pursuit, one may say that Ānandamayī is implicitly tending to say that in order to gain the experience one must follow the path of Nirmalā Sundarī. It is true that she does admit to there being many paths which lead to the same goal, and that it matters little whether one

calls the One God, Krishna, Christ, *brahman* or whatever. Yet she does not claim to teach all of these paths: and if one follows the point to its logical conclusion, Ānandamayī is essentially teaching a path not for mankind but for those who would mould themselves — or who are already moulded — in the stamp of Nirmalā Sundarī, and who are most attuned to attain mystical experience through following the path already trodden by Ānandamayī herself. The point may be self-evident, but is I think nonetheless worth stating here: namely that the mystical teacher — at least in Ānandamayī's case — is limited in his outlook and teaching by the nature of the path which he himself has followed in order to gain his experience. I shall again be referring to this point at a later stage in the paper.

Krishnabai

The life of Ānandamayī is in many respects similar to that of Krishnabai, the mystic to whom I next turn. Mātājī Krishnabai was born on the 20th September 1903 in the village of Haliyal near Hubli in Karnataka, the second of six children. Her father died when she was eight years old, leaving the family in abject poverty: Krishnabai received schooling only from the ages of four to eight, and thereafter devoted herself to helping her mother with household work. At the age of twelve she was married to Lakshman Rao, whose father was a moderately wealthy schoolmaster and whose mother was an avid devotee of numerous deities and Swamis: and the next few years of Krishnabai's married life — which were spent largely in Bombay — were by all accounts a happy period, which saw the births of two children — Ganesh and Nārāyan — in her sixteenth and eighteenth years. During this period also, her childhood religious devotion increased: and when she was eighteen, Krishnabai was initiated by the Vaiṣṇava teacher Tamanna Shāstrī of Hubli. When she was pregnant for the third time in 1923, she went to visit her own family, promising to return to her husband in Bombay within a month: but she postponed her return, and meanwhile her husband died after a brief illness. Krishnabai was distraught with grief, not only at his death but also for not having been at his side when he died: she sought a premature delivery of her child, which died within a month of its birth; and she thereafter became increasingly detached from her relatives and from life around her. On the anniversary of her husband's death she resolved to put an end to her own life, and took a massive overdose of opium — and she was only just saved from death by the speedy actions of her brother-in-law. Krishnabai's suicide attempt formed, as it were, the turning-point in her life: from then onwards she devoted herself increasingly to religious

pursuits, particularly to the chanting of *mantras* which she would repeat many thousands of times daily; and her devotions were particularly encouraged by her mother-in-law Anasūyākkā, who persuaded and accompanied her to meet a number of religious teachers. Krishnabai was further initiated by the Śaiva Śrī Siddhāruddha Swami at Hubli, and then by the Vaiṣṇava Śrī Chandekar Mahārāj at Nevas: yet neither fully satisfied her needs, and she came increasingly to believe that all *gurus* — and all words of *mantras* — were essentially one and the same irrespective of overt sectarian differences, and that they were merely different manifestations and plays of a single true reality. In 1928, at the age of twenty-five, she visited the Ashram of Swami Rāmdās near Kasaragod in northern Kerala: here her search ended, and after one year spent in his company Rāmdās initiated her, giving her the Vaiṣṇava “Rām” *mantra* ‘*om śrī Rām jai Rām jai jai Rām*’, and instructing her to look upon all beings and creatures in the world — including her own relatives — as manifestations of Rām. Krishnabai was by this time deeply devoted to Rāmdās as her *guru*, and now an interesting development occurred: she found that whenever she thought of God as Rām, she felt that He was far away from her — but that whenever she thought of God as Rāmdās, she felt His nearness; and after some time she came to look upon everyone and everything as none other than Rāmdās himself, whom she affectionately called “Papa” or father. In this way, within three years of her first meeting with Rāmdās, Krishnabai attained the realisation — as she later expressed it — of oneness with her Papa and with the unitary transcendent truth underlying the universe. From that time onwards she remained with Rāmdās until his death in 1963: helping with the setting up and running of Ānandāshram at Kanhangad in northern Kerala, notably through the establishment of a school, a hospital, and services for the poor; and above all propounding the goal of God-realisation by the path of devotion and by practising universal love and service.

Unlike in the case of Ānandamayī — who has a large and influential following, and on whom there is a growing bibliography⁴ — little has been written about Krishnabai. Her devotees come mainly from southern India, although there is also a small following of devotees from outside India: she does not travel a great deal, nor go out of her way to proselytise followers. Krishnabai has, however, dictated an autobiography in her native Konkani, which was rendered into Kannadā and then translated into English by Rāmdās just before his death.⁵ It is a somewhat unusual autobiography, set out rather in the style of the *Confessions* of St. Augustine: it is addressed entirely to her Papa Rāmdās, and all the characters of her past life who appear in it are considered as merely manifestations of Papa as the supreme and universal Spirit,

the changeless and infinite Soul of all. Her approach is predominantly devotional throughout — as for example when she talks about the path which brought her to her ultimate realisation:

“O infinite Papa! Verily, I am your own embodiment. . . . O all-pervading Papa! In 1928 you awakened in me a strong urge to become one with your eternal Being, and I came to you. . . . O Papa, the Divine Mother! The moment I saw you, my heart was flooded with joy. The rare delight I then enjoyed was similar to that of a child when it meets its mother after a long separation. Papa, you are indeed compassion personified. Within only three years of this child’s entry into your divine presence, you enabled her to realise your static, changeless and infinite Being. Just as the feeling of ‘I-ness in me pervades all parts of my physical being from head to foot, and yet this ‘I’ is distinct from the body, so also I came to know that I am at once the universal consciousness and the transcendent truth.”⁶

There is thus a very personal element in Krishnabai’s outlook, even though it is otherwise closely similar in many further respects to that of Ānandamayī. The Supreme is manifested in creation as her Papa Rāmdās, who is at once her *guru* and the supreme transcendent Creator and Sustainer of the universe: her past life is seen as the play of her Papa’s *līlā*, drawing her ever closer to himself and to the truth of herself which is himself; and while she experiences herself to be the entire universe while also transcending it, she nonetheless maintains an attitude of awed respect and loving worship towards her infinite Papa — the One who pervades and transcends all creation, her own origin, nature and goal:

“O compassionate Papa! In the worlds you reside in entirety in all beings — even in the smallest particle. Likewise you dwell in me in all your perfection. Now grant me power to describe your magnificent glory manifest in me.”⁷

Her Papa thus dwells within her, just as he also manifests himself outside her in her parents, her children, in all that she sees and does: and she is at the same time one with him, which is her way of expressing the goal of God-realisation. Papa is for her the symbol of God or *brahman*: yet Krishnabai’s vision is one not merely of identity and unity with her Papa, but also of wonderment and loving subservience — she is one who has gained her realisation of Oneness primarily, as she expresses it, through the grace of her *guru*: one who, while sharing in his Being and Essence, can yet offer praise and homage to his universal compassion and transcendence.

Rajneesh

Turning now to the third of these mystics, Rajneesh is probably the most enigmatic — and certainly the most controversial and self-contradictory — of the three; yet he is also in many ways the most stimulating, and the most forceful in terms of personality and persuasiveness.

Rajneesh Chandra Mohan was born at Kucchwada in Madhya Pradesh on the 11th December 1931. His father, struggling to maintain a dwindling family business, moved the family around various parts of Madhya Pradesh during the boy's childhood; Rajneesh attended school in Gadarwara from 1944 to 1951, then graduated in Philosophy from Jabalpur University in 1955, and gained a Master's degree from Sagar University in 1957. He reputedly became enlightened in 1952 at the age of twenty-one: and during the subsequent period, in addition to his academic studies, he also took a job for one year as Assistant Editor of the *Navabhārat*, a local newspaper, besides developing a reputation as a voracious reader and a powerful debater. From 1957 to 1966 he taught Philosophy at the Sanskrit College in Raipur, Madhya Pradesh, and additionally found time to travel to various parts of India delivering lectures and gaining followers to his views: his teachings became increasingly pragmatic and experientially-based, and in 1966 he left the academic sphere to found an Ashram and to devote himself to teaching and to devising a variety of meditational practices — which since 1974 he has been propounding from his Ashram in Poona.

It is difficult to either categorise or give any brief outline of Rajneesh's teachings: it is also somewhat unnecessary to do so, for he makes it clear that he is merely expounding what he sees as the single mystical truth realised by his predecessors — be they Lao Tzu, Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, or al-Hallāj. His uniqueness lies not so much in what he teaches, but rather in the way he expounds, and in the synthesis he attempts to bring to diverse teachings: Rajneesh does not concentrate, like Ānandamayī, on teaching a single path, but claims to be able to guide people on all paths to the underlying unity towards which all paths lead. Thus each month, at his Ashram in Poona, he discourses on different paths: switching from the Sūfīs of Islām to Zen Buddhism, from the teachings of Pythagoras and Jesus to Hindu Tantra; each month proclaiming the virtues of the path which he is expounding. Rajneesh emphasises throughout the need to go beyond all teachings — including his own words — in order to perceive and be aware of the true reality of oneself: such an awareness is by definition not something that can be taught, but something which must arise from within oneself — and since the mental and psychic pattern of each individual is different, so each must accor-

dingly follow a different path in order to achieve this self-awareness, this liberation and awakening to the reality of life. The central feature of the Rajneesh phenomenon is thus not so much the teachings as the man himself, who emphasises that what he says — the words which he uses — is not as important as the experience which lies behind them:

“I am not saying any new thing every day. The truth is very simple, and it can be said in a few lines. But if you don’t hear it, I have to tell it again and again. I go on talking to you so that one day I will be able to persuade you to listen to the silence that has happened to me. And those who have started understanding me, they are no more listening to my words — they are listening to my presence.”⁸

Rajneesh is unconcerned with organised or institutionalised religion of any sort: his main concern is not to put forward a set of teachings or to preach a particular path to follow — it is rather to destroy all dogmatic teachings, and to induce others to realise themselves through experience of the present moment of reality. For this reason, far from being concerned about any seeming contradictions in the various teachings which he puts forward, he actively seeks to retain such contradictions:

“I am not giving you dogmas. I give you only momentary flowers: whatsoever I say at the moment belongs to the moment. If I was creating a dogma here, then I would never contradict myself. You would be happy with that, because you would have something to cling to. My effort is not to impart knowledge to you: my effort is to awaken you. I can’t allow you to cling to *any* statement — hence I contradict.”⁹

His point being that while many teachers have expressed the reality of their experience in different ways, no experience can be realised or assessed through relying on their words and expressions, but only by experiencing for oneself.

Although Rajneesh does not teach any particular single path for his followers to pursue, he has devised a number of meditational practices, involving especially group-psychotherapy and free sexual self-expression — but not the use of drugs, to which he is opposed;¹⁰ the underlying aim being to break down the narrow barriers of self-hood, and to make the individual more aware and perceptive of both himself and others. There are numerous dynamic meditations and Sūfī dances, where the participants may sing, dance, shake, scream, whirl, or do whatever comes naturally: the main aims being to release pent-up tensions, to lose awareness of the self through movement, and thereby to penetrate to the stillness deep within oneself. There are meditations involving hum-

ming, and concentrating the attention on flashing psychedelic lights: there are more traditional meditations, such as Vipassanā; and a large number of therapy groups, which range from massage and hypnotherapy to encounter — the latter being a week-long group activity designed to explore the personality, to release subconscious fears and repressions which may be brought to light by other members of the group, and thence to drop all masks and defences, leaving behind the narrow consciousness of self-hood and growing into an awareness of the shared life-force of the present moment. Much of the intention underlying these meditations is to free oneself of the past and future: to concentrate upon the reality of the present instant of experience: and thence, by coming fully to terms with oneself, to go beyond oneself; the growth of love, and of a loving attitude towards others, is consequently of central importance to many of these practices, and physical or sexual expression of this love is not only encouraged but frequently insisted upon within the meditational groups. In many respects, Rajneesh's overall emphasis is upon a religion of love and compassion — love in the sense of dying to the ego, in order to share in the greater Reality beyond selfhood:

“Love is a deep communion of two beings who are ready to be together, this moment, not tomorrow: who are ready to forget all past and future. Love is a forgetfulness of the past and future and a remembrance of this moment, this throbbing moment, this alive moment. Love is the truth of the moment.”¹¹

Yet Rajneesh also emphasises that love itself is not the goal, but merely a stage which must itself be ultimately superseded in order to reach the goal; like all of his meditations, love is a game to be played but not taken too seriously. He adopts a similar attitude towards life in general, and towards money in particular — seeing these, one might say, as a form of *māyā* without any lasting value. Yet his attitude is one of acceptance, rather than of rejection: all is a game, of little ultimate importance, so why not play the game — if you have money, enjoy it: if you do not have money, laugh, and still enjoy it.

There are a number of prominent contradictions and inconsistencies about Rajneesh which particularly strike the observer. He claims on the one hand to be no more than a guide — one who points the way to the goal, helping others to select the path which is most appropriate for them to follow: yet he has also adopted the traditional Hindu role of the *guru* as the incarnation of the goal, who is consequently himself worthy of worship. He instructs that one must die to oneself, thereby growing into the divine: yet he also encourages his followers to lose themselves in

him, and to merge in loving union with him — an idea which bears close similarity to the Sūfī concept of *fanā'* or self-obliteration in the teacher. He claims that he possesses no self or ego — that what is called “Rajneesh” is but a shell encasing an embodiment of Reality or God: yet surrounding him is a high-powered personality-cult, wherein all his followers who have accepted *sannyās* or renunciant initiation are obliged to carry a prominently-displayed photograph of himself. He claims to be a master who is unaffected by his physical surroundings: yet in order to gain admission to his discourses — let alone to a personal audience — it is necessary (in addition to paying a handsome fee) to pass the test of the “sniffers”, who turn away anyone with the slightest scent or smell. He proclaims that all religions are ultimately the same, and that one may as well follow one as another: yet he insists that his followers should adopt a new (usually Sanskrit) name, together with orange clothes and *mālā* or beads — the traditional garb of Hindu ascetics. He emphasises the need to replace knowledge by personal experience: yet he has established his own University, where it is possible to take a Ph.D. in such diverse subjects as meditation, acupuncture, and commune management. At times he treats all of these teachings and practices as but another type of game, not to be taken to heart: yet it does make one question whether there is not still some very powerful element of ego involved somewhere in the Rajneesh phenomenon.

What Rajneesh says is voluminous, and sells in very expensive books — which one may see as a further illustration of his point about playing with money. His is basically a call for a revolution in oneself and in ones way of life, a call to love and to find Reality or God not by rejecting life but by penetrating to its depth:

“I have given you Sannyās to live in the world as totally as possible. Just by living totally in the world, you will transcend it. Suddenly you will come to know that you are in the world, but not of it. The old Sannyās said, escape, renounce: but I will tell you that those who escape are not total, not whole — it is not for you. You must live life in its totality, live it as wholly as possible.”¹²

It is also a call to reject dogma, ritual and tradition: and Rajneesh has not surprisingly been strongly opposed by traditionally-minded Hindus, as well as by the political establishment in the form of State and Central Governments who are current opposing his applications to set up a further Ashram. In recent months he has consequently started to make strong criticisms of Indian politicians in general, and of Morarji Desai in particular:¹³ and he seems to be casting himself in the role of a prophet crying in the wilderness, proclaiming himself as another Christ or

Buddha, and proclaiming the path of destruction of the ego and of man's realisation and enjoyment of his own divinity. If one searches through Rajneesh's sayings trying to find a definition of mystical experience or of the nature of ultimate reality, little is forthcoming: for he is somewhat Buddhistic on this point — he is concerned to set men on the path, to take them to the cliff's edge: but it is for each individual to take the plunge into the unknown, to discover himself and his true identity, and to express this discovery in his own way. Rajneesh affirms in a general sense that Reality is One, unitary, non-dual: yet beyond such generalised affirmations he leaves it for each individual to experience, through self-surrender and the destruction of the ego, through falling into an abyss of nothingness and finding — whatever he finds. Above all, he emphasises that he does not seek to communicate through words, but through a shared experience, which allows the Divine to take the place of the human:

“What I am trying to say to you is a kind of music that I have heard. It has not been heard verbally. It is in the sound of the running water. It is in the wind passing through the pine-trees. It is in the songs of the birds. It is in the silence of darkness. It is in the dancing rays of the sun. It is all over the place! But it is music. And unless you are capable of understanding this music, you will not be able to understand me. . . . When words start disappearing, something far deeper, more powerful, takes place — communion. The meeting of the master and the disciple, not as two minds but as two presences, merging into each other, melting into each other, being lost in each other.¹⁴ . . . Don't come here to be supported in your ego and your expectations. Come here to die! If you love me, I am going to kill you. And when you are killed, one day you will have the opportunity to kill me. And that day is the greatest day: when the master and disciple are both killed. Then only that which is, is left. God is in the master, God is in the disciple. When the disciple and the master both have disappeared, only God is left.”¹⁵

Discussion

Having looked at certain aspects of the teachings and personalities of these three mystics, I shall now seek to isolate and highlight those points on which all three are agreed, and consider the question of where experience ends and interpretation begins.

In the first place, I would select three basic statements about the nature of mystical experience which are agreed upon by all three mystics:

1. that the ultimate reality of existence is One — whether it be called

the cosmic absolute, God, *nirvāṇa*, *brahman*, or whatever; and that all that exists apart from this One is secondary to it;

2. that man's individualistic self, his ego, is of no real or lasting value, and must be destroyed and overcome in order for man to realise his true reality and identity;

3. that man's true reality and identity is identical with the One ultimate reality of existence, which is in some sense already present within him even before he realises it.

Our three mystics clearly differ slightly on the question of the precise nature of this identity: and still more on the question of the way in which man's ego is to be destroyed. How, then, should we satisfactorily harmonise or account for these differences — and do they in any sense influence the nature or validity of the experience itself?

In talking of the nature of mystical identity expressed by these mystics, we are again considering essentially R.C. Zaehner's supposed distinction between monistic and theistic approaches¹⁶ — here typified respectively by on the one hand Ānandamayī's and Rajneesh's total identity versus on the other hand Krishnabai's *bhaktī*-approach envisioning her Papa as the reality within her which she can yet praise and wonder at. Are, then, these approaches "distinct and mutually opposed": or is the latter approach, in Ninian Smart's terminology,¹⁷ a high auto-interpretation, as it were "read into" the experience itself? Smart's basic contention is that "phenomenologically, mysticism is everywhere the same: different flavours, however, accrue to the experiences of mystics because of their ways of life and modes of auto-interpretation".¹⁸ Reading between the lines, what Smart seems in effect to be saying is that all mysticism is basically monistic, but is theistically interpreted by some due to their background or dogmatic presuppositions. According to this line of thought, therefore, we must say that the unitary monistic vision of Ānandamayī and Rajneesh is somehow closer to the truth than Krishnabai's *bhaktī*-approach, and closer also than all experiences expressed in theistic terms. I am somewhat inclined to agree with Smart on this point: simply because the *bhaktī*-approach necessitates an emotional response and attitude, which is at root an individually-motivated response to a given situation by definition necessitating the presence of some form of individual identity or ego — while this is precisely what must be eradicated by the mystic in order to realise the fulness of his quest. We must, however, at the same time ask whether this attitude of wonderment and praise is itself an integral part of the experience, or a subsequent interpretation on the part of the experiencer: and I am inclined to suspect that the latter is most probably the case with Krishnabai, who in places speaks of her experience in

terms of total identity with her Papa — just as it is also the case with certain Christian and Sūfī mystics. With the latter, we can for example point to many instances wherein total unity and identity between man and God is spoken of; while apologists such as Ruysbroeck and al-Ghazālī argue hetero-interpretatively — in line with their dogmatic presuppositions — that such experiences of seeming unity with God are to be interpreted along the lines of only an apparent and non-absolute unity, like that experienced between lovers in a state of drunkenness.¹⁹ I would not go so far as Smart in drawing a clear distinction between mysticism and *bhakti*-religion: but would tend to suggest that the *bhakti*-approach is in some measure an emotional — and consequently an individual and non-absolute — response to mystical experience. I would here agree more with Rajneesh, who while laying very strong emphasis upon the path of love as a means for the dissolution of the ego, nonetheless also emphasises that ultimately love itself must be superseded by something higher — the path of love can bring one close to the goal, but one must ultimately go beyond even that; and so too the *bhakti*-approach can lead one to the heights, yet its inherent element of emotionalism must be surpassed in order to attain the supreme identity.

I now turn to the question of the precise way in which man's ego is to be destroyed, in order to realise the mystical goal. As I have attempted to indicate particularly in the case of Ānandamayī, the path adopted and taught by her is essentially that which she herself had earlier followed, dependent largely upon her own upbringing and psychology: and I would suggest that much the same is also the case with both Krishnabai and Rajneesh — namely that the particular paths and practices which they advocate for their followers are based in large measure upon those practices followed by and suited to themselves. All three mystics affirm that the paths do not lead automatically to the experience itself: and this in a sense confirms Smart's contention that the mystic's doctrines — as also his practices and methods — are determined at least partly by factors other than the mystical experience itself. Indeed, Rajneesh repeatedly proclaims that he teaches no doctrines or dogmas, and that his aim is to denounce and go beyond all static doctrines to experiential knowledge: and since Rajneesh is by most definitions a mystic — namely one who claims to have experience of union or identity with the One ultimate reality of existence — we may accordingly accept Smart's point that doctrine is extrinsic and non-essential to the mystical experience itself. The different individual practices and beliefs of these three mystics need not, therefore, deter us from believing that their experiences are not for that reason of the same order.

I would like to raise here Agehananda Bharati's contention that

mysticism has no connection with morality, and that mystical experience in no way alters the personality or behaviour of the mystic.²⁰ This contention is to my mind untenable. It may well be the case with isolated mystical experiences, where the experiencer does not encourage or desire a repetition of the experience, or where he is content to treat the experience as an interesting, enjoyable, but not exceptionally significant part of his total human experience. Yet by all accounts mystical experience involves a sense of the loss of selfhood, and of the merging of "oneself" with some greater reality; and if any seriousness or value is attached to the experience, it follows that the mystic will thereafter strive for a greater loss of his own sense of selfhood — as is the central concern of these three Indian mystics, and indeed of mystics in all major traditions. The mystic will consequently strive to adopt an attitude throughout his everyday life in which his sense of selfhood and his egotistic or self-seeking tendencies are reduced to a minimum and ultimately destroyed: and that this attitude will inevitably be reflected in his behaviour — and will indeed influence the form of behaviour adopted. Clearly, if a mystic was already striving to destroy his ego before his experience, his behaviour after that experience will not show any marked change, merely an intensification of the previous pattern — as would seem to be the case with Ānandamayī in particular. A blatant egotist, on the other hand, can only remain an egotist after a mystical experience if he rejects the central import of his experience and refuses to take it seriously: but if he seriously accepts its basic implications, he will thereafter strive to curb his egotistic tendencies. It is perhaps the twin factors of the unitive experience itself *plus also* the attempt to mould oneself upon the basic dicta of that experience which constitutes a mystic: and it is questionable whether one who undergoes a mystical experience yet remains unconcerned to give serious consideration to its basic unitive implication should properly be called a mystic. This does not of course deny that mystical or unitive experience may be enjoyed by a large number of people: but it does imply that the mystic is one who seriously accepts the implications of that experience as influencing his entire outlook and way of life — as has certainly been the case with the three mystics presently under discussion.

I would simply add by way of conclusion that the three contemporary Indian mystics whom I have been considering in this paper, with their widely diverse approaches and outlooks, are indicative of the fact that the serious pursuit of mysticism — in both traditional and novel forms — remains a living and potent factor in present-day India: one which ultimately derives its strength not from any dogmatic or institutional basis, but — as always — from first-hand living experience.

Notes

1. Paramahansa Yogānanda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, New York, 1946, pp.457-458.
2. *Words of Śrī Ānandamayī Mā*, translated and compiled by Ātmānanda, 2nd edition, Varanasi, 1971, pp.113,125-126.
3. For example in *The Light at the Centre*, Santa Barbara, 1976, rep. Delhi, 1977, pp.53ff,87-111.
4. Among recent works, see for example Alexander Lipski, *Life and Teaching of Śrī Ānandamayī Mā*, Delhi, 1977, and the discussion in Sobharani Basu, *Modern Indian Mysticism*, Varanasi, 1974, vol. 2, pp.562-605.
5. Mother Krishnabai, *Guru's Grace*, trans. by Swami Rāmdās, Anandashram, 1964.
6. *Guru's Grace*, pp.1-4.
7. *ibid.*, p.2.
8. 'Awareness': *Rajneesh Foundation Newsletter*, vol. 5, no. 6, March 16th 1979.
9. 'Zorba the Buddha': *Rajneesh Foundation Newsletter*, vol. 4, no.16, August 16th 1978.
10. His attitude towards drugs is well illustrated in *LSD: A Shortcut to False Samādhi*, Bombay, 1971.
11. *Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh Diary 1977*, entry for 19th December, Poona, 1976.
12. *Rajneesh Foundation*, Poona, 1976, p.11; see also 'Neo-Sannyās: a Dehypnosis': *Rajneesh Foundation Newsletter*, vol.5, no.3, February 1st 1979; and *I am the Gate*, Poona, 1975, pp.37-62.
13. For example 'Dogs and Politicians not Allowed': *Rajneesh Foundation Newsletter*, vol. 4, no.19, October 1st 1978.
14. 'Zorba the Buddha': *Rajneesh Foundation Newsletter*, vol.4, no.16, August 16th 1978.
15. 'Trust in the Master': *Rajneesh Foundation Newsletter*, vol.5, no.2, January 16th 1979.
16. For example in R.C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, Oxford, 1957, pp.153-207.
17. See especially Ninian Smart, 'Interpretation and Mystical Experience', *Religious Studies*, vol.1, no.1, 1965, pp.75-87.
18. *ibid.*, p.87.
19. For example Jan van Ruysbroeck, *The Spiritual Espousals*, trans. Eric Colledge, London, 1952, pp.166-173; al-Ghazālī, *Mishkat al-Anwār*, transliterated text and trans. in Zaehner, *op.cit.*, pp.157-158 & 230-231.
20. *The Light at the Centre*, especially pp.94-111.