

## S. Ramaswamy

### ***The One Life: Coleridge and Hinduism.***

**Antonella Riem Natale. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2005. Pages 410. Rs. 795**

Antonella Riem has chosen Coleridge and his poetry for revealing the fundamental truth of Hinduism: “Ekam Sat vipra bahundha vadanti” (Rig Veda I, 164, 46) [The One existence is called by different names by the wise]. Again, “Ekam santam bahudha kalpayanti” (Rig Veda I, 114, 5) [The One Reality is conceived differently]. This is the essence of Hinduism and this is the spirit that has been captured authentically and creatively in her seminal work *The One Life*. Right at the beginning of her work she takes note of this when she says – “Hinduists believe the central axis of metaphysical and philosophical analysis is the ‘One’, Brahman, in ‘his’ relation with manifestation or multiplicity” (p. 4) *Taittiriya Upanishad* says “Sa yaschayam purushe | Yashcha yamaditye | Sa Ekah” which means, this Being that is in the human personality, and the Being that is in the Sun are One. She further points out, “Coleridge agrees, the ‘One’ is the metaphysical unconditioned Being which the mind cannot tell” (“yato vacho nivartante aprapya manasasaha” is the *Sruti Vakya* in Sanskrit) and convincingly observes that “thought cannot avoid the idea of ‘Oneness’ even if reason and logic cannot know it; (na tatra vak gacchhati” and “naisha tarkena matirapaneya” in Sanskrit) only in a mystic vision, as in poetry, will it be possible to reach it” (p. 5).

From the *Sruti* level to the *Smriti* level (*The Bhagavadgita* is a *Smriti*) Riem makes thirty six references to the *Gita* in her study as she concludes it is the fundamental text of Hinduism. Historically, it is significant that “in 1785, when Coleridge was only thirteen, Charles Wilkins’ translation of *The Bhagavadgita* was first published in England” (p. 1). This must be immediately referred to item 83 of the “Notes” to the First Chapter (Charles Wilkins, ed., *The Bhagavadgita*, 1785), translated, with Notes, by Charles Wilkins, a Facsimile Reproduction with an introduction by George Hendrick (Delmar, New York: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1959, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1972, book VI, pp. 63-64). All quotations will be from this edition, if not otherwise specified. My own favourite rendering in English poetry of the above text is by Sir Edwin Arnold (New Delhi: *Interprint*, 1978) and in a combination of poetry and prose by my own teacher, Christopher Isherwood (with Swami Prabhavananda, Mentor Religious Classic, 1944) whom I used to meet both at the University of California at Los Angeles and at the Vedanta Place, Hollywood, California, four decades ago. However, my cursory remarks on Riem’s references to and translations from the *Gita* are based on the original Sanskrit text. The author says in her Foreword: “This study owes a great debt to my previous book in Italian on Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Hinduism *L’intima visione* [...] Therefore this can be considered a trans-position or trans-lation into English” (p. ix). It is indeed fortunate for English speaking countries that she has

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decided to do this trans-position as she establishes beyond a shadow of a doubt "Coleridge's long standing interest in and frequentation of India and Hinduism" (p. x). Riem has rightly entitled her book *The One Life* as the expression comes directly from Coleridge:

O! The One Life within us and abroad,  
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,  
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,  
Rhythm in all thought and joyance every where –  
Methinks, it should have been impossible  
Not to love all things in a world so fill'd;  
Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air  
Is Music slumbering on her instrument. (p. 36)

The quintessential words here are "One", "all motion" "soul", "light", "sound", "Rhythm", "everywhere", "all things," "breeze warbles," "still air" and "Music." Reading the famous lines from Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* is quite interesting in this context:

A Presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

The relevant expressions here are "A presence", "a sense sublime", "the light of setting suns", "the round ocean", "the living air", "the blue sky" and "in the mind of man", "A motion", "A spirit". This is Wordsworth's concept of the One behind the many. The *many* are only the means of attaining the knowledge of the one. The *many* are the illusion, the one is the Reality – the Ultimate, Absolute Reality, call it "A Presence", "A Sense Sublime", "A Motion" or a "Spirit" – it is only *One*. It is this *One* that Shelley has in mind when he says: "The *One* remains, *the many* change and pass/ Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass stains the white radiance of eternity until death tramples it into fragments". Riem draws our attention to this aspect in the Romantics, both in England and in Germany. She mentions the influence of Jones's works on Robert Southey, Coleridge's "friend and brother-in-law," on Byron, Shelley and Moore (pp. 18-19).

Though some studies have been made on Shelley and Vedantic thought, the volume under review is the first systematic and exhaustive study of Coleridge and Hinduism. Coleridge's interest in and contact with India is presented by the

author in an unambiguous and assertive way when she establishes her thesis with incontrovertible evidence:

Together with other European Romantic poets, Coleridge had read some of the Sanskrit texts in translation published during his youth, which undoubtedly left a clear mark on his 'Imagination.' However, the very first contacts Coleridge had with India took place during his childhood through his brother John's letters, who was sent to Calcutta in 1771. (p. 22)

Riem's study is remarkably accurate and thorough as demonstrated by her "Notes" at the end of each chapter which display her scholarly approach: the "Notes" to her first chapter have 256 items contained in 20 pages (pp. 78-97), to the second chapter 109 items, running to 14 pages (pp. 159-173), chapter three 89 items (10 pages), chapter four 113 items (11 pages, pp. 276-286) and chapter five 98 items (pp. 340-349). I wish to point out here that her central argument and focus is indisputably and carefully established. Her "Notes" remind me of the "Notes" provided by Ananda Coomaraswamy in his works. It is noticeable that by the number of references she makes to him, especially to his work *Time and Eternity*, that she holds him in high esteem, as do I. There are, indeed, seven references to his work: the reference to the release of this book in 1989 is mentioned (p. 160) as a part of the "Notes". Her reference to the book (p. 230) further substantiates her scholarship: "Coomaraswamy, referring to the *Jaiminia Upanishad Brahmana* (I, 26, 8) and the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (II, 3,6) says that the person in the Lightning is the Breath, Harmony, (*saman*), *Brahman*, the Immortal; it is a sudden lightning (*sakrt*) that has the same splendour of the person understanding all this" (p. 230). It seems from this that Riem has taken Coomaraswamy as her model and mentor. The extent of her knowledge of both Hindu philosophy and literature is seen in her references to the concepts of *Ananda*, *Antar-yami*, *Avidya*, *Atman*, *Aum*, *Bhakti*, *Buddhi*, *Brahminism*, *Chakras* – *Manipura*, *Muladhara*, *Sahasrara*, *Dharna*, *Dhwani*, *Divya Chakshus*, *Ekagra*, *Yoga*, *Gunas*, *Karma*, *Kalpa*, *Kali*, *Lila*, *Lingam*, *Manas*, *Maya*, *Mandala*, *Mantra*, *Paramartha*, *Parvati*, *Patanjali*, *Purusha*, *Sakti*, *Siva*, *Siva-Nataraja*, *Sphota*, *Upanishad*, *Veda*, *Vedanta*, *Vishnu*, *Yama*, and many others. The exact parallels and correspondences she draws from the most seminal Hindu texts, literary and philosophical, is much in evidence. In her discussion of the major poems of Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*, her interpretations with reference to Hindu thought may briefly be illustrated. In the discussion of *The Rime*, she makes a reference to the *Upanishads*, and quotes from *Mandukya*:

As the *Mandukya Upanishad* says: "Get the bow of the *Upanishad*, powerful weapon, put on it the sharpened arrow of Adoration, tend the bow with a mental dive in the sentiment of unity and penetrate the Eternal as if you were aiming at a target... The syllable OM is the bow, the soul is the arrow, the Eternal is the target. (p. 184)

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The *Upanishads* are known for their poetry and allegorical style and Riem provides a Western, European parallel wherever relevant:

Arrow and Bow are Arjuna's weapons in *The Bhagavad Gita*; Apollo's arrow, which is a sunray, and as the same function as Indra's Vajra, the thunderbolt, recurring symbol of divine manifestation, revelation and illumination. In the myth Apollo kills the serpent *Python* with his arrows; in Vedic tradition, *Indra* kills *Ahi* or *Vritra*, corresponding to Python, with *Vajra*. The Mariner seems on the surface to reverse the symbolism, for he kills the Albatross with his cross-bow and will bless the sea-snakes. However, the bird and the serpent are two aspects of the divine, the two arms of the cross, the material and spiritual, joined at the centre of Being, at the heart. This is well exemplified in the double figure of the "plumed serpent. (pp. 184-185)

In her discussion of *Kubla Khan*, Riem draws attention to the *Gunathraya Vibhaga* in *The Bhagavadgita* and links it with the Yoga system of philosophy and refers to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*:

The three phases of the poem are also linked to the three different faculties of the intellect: rationality, Fancy and Imagination. Vyasa, in his commentary to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, clarifies that consciousness can manifest in three ways [...] These three 'steps' in the poem recall the *gunas*: Kubla's "pleasure dome," is *tamas*, weighed down by sensuous life; the "romantic chasm" and the "wailing woman" as *rajas*, in their "rebounding" energy; and the final vision of the damsel with a dulcimer and the ecstatic poet are *sattva*, pure illumination that can be reached after communion with the Self. (p. 241)

Riem's knowledge of Hindu symbolism is revealed when discussing Christabel's nudity:

The nude symbolises the return to a primordial state, to a central perspective, for it abolishes separation, represented by garments, between humanity and the world, soul and body; it indicates purity at all levels: physical, intellectual, moral, emotional and spiritual. (p. 306)

The author's deep understanding of Hinduism in all its complexity is further evidenced in many other examples. *The One Life* is rich in insights into Hindu thought in all its aspects and sheds new light on the understanding of Coleridge whose work is also highly regarded in India. Riem's accurate knowledge of Adi Shankaracharya and his Advaitic philosophy can be exemplarily seen in the following passage:

Sankara or Sankaracharya was an Indian philosopher, the greatest exponent of the Indian Vedantic school of non-dualism, or absolute monism, in India called *Advaita-Vedanta*. According to this monistic vision of the universe, the world is thought to have evolved out of and to be absorbed into the single Reality. This Reality is the Universal Spirit, Atma, and the Supreme Regulating Principle *Brahma*. Plotinus was influenced by *Vedanta* doctrine, also through the *Vedanta Sutras* or *Brahma Sutras* of Badarayana [...] this Reality is both the material and the instrumental cause of the world and is to be realised through intuitional knowledge. (pp. 37-38)

Here she succinctly expresses one of the highest truths of Hinduism as she concludes:

Coleridge himself attributed the utmost importance to “intuitional knowledge” as the only means of contemplating “the whole” and “the One” for seeing the Truth of the existence of God and for conceiving Reality as *Multeity* in Oneness. (p. 38)

Throughout *The One Life*, Riem single-mindedly pursues her journey into Vedantic texts with devotion and accuracy, noticeable in her rendering into English the concepts contained within, for example, in the above quotation. When she quotes the description of the “Reality” as both the “material” and “instrumental” cause of the world, it is technically accurate as in Sanskrit it is known as the *Upadana karana* and *Nimitta karana*. Her comment that the “intuitional knowledge as the only means for contemplating “the whole” and “the One” is made clear in the quintessential passage she quotes from the eleventh Chapter of *The Bhagavadgita* (p. 119) where Lord Krishna in concrete terms shows the *Viswarupa*. The apparently countless entities are but One. That One is real, comprehended intuitively, here through the “heavenly eye”. Antonella Riem has achieved a remarkable feat in “running subterranean from the far sides of the sacred Ganga river to the river Alph”, to use her own expression in her conclusion (p. 351). One entirely agrees with her when one reads that “certainly what has been proven is a persistent presence in the Coleridgean *mundus imaginalis* of figures of the Imaginations, archetypes and symbols very close, and often identical to the oriental tradition, Hindu in particular, with notable and special connections with *The Bhagavadgita*, the fundamental text of Hinduism” (p. 350) and concludes by saying: “It is easy to be infected by tension towards unity crossing Coleridge’s work and thus try to orient interpretation towards a sole series of meanings, linked to the influence of an oriental world view, according to *The Bhagavadgita* (p. 350). Indeed her citations from *The Gita* are strategically and meaningfully placed and so generously that they deserve a separate study (for example, pages 24, 25, 26, 67-68, 119, 120, 130, 144, 149, 153, 158-159, 227, 350, and others). These are key passages chosen from many chapters out of the eighteen in the original

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(*Samkhya Yoga, Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, etc.*). Thus, Renunciation through Knowledge, the field and its knower, the Three Gunas, Divine and Demonic Tendencies are all quoted and related to the thought of Coleridge in his most characteristic poems. As I began this review with *Rig Veda*, it is appropriate to end with *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (I, (iii) 28):

Asato ma sadgamaya,  
Tamaso ma jyothirgamaya  
Mrithyormamrutham gamaya.

From evil lead me to good.  
From darkness lead me to light.  
From death lead me to immortality.

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