



René Guénon and Sri Ramana Maharshi

Two Remarkable Sages in Modern Times

Part Three

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Cecil Bethell (b. 1934) assisted in the English translation of numerous of Guénon's books.⁴² He learned about Guénon's work through Swami Narikutti or Barry Owen Windsor (1930-1994), who he had

⁴² Paul Chacornac, *The Simple Life of René Guénon*, trans. Cecil Bethell (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), René Guénon, *Miscellanea*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, Cecil Bethell, Patrick Moore and Hubert Schiff (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), René Guénon, *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion*, trans. Alvin Moore, Jr., Cecil Bethell, Hubert and Rohini Schiff (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), René Guénon, *Studies in Freemasonry and the Compagnonnage*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, Cecil Bethell and Michael Allen (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), René Guénon, *The Esoterism of Dante*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, Cecil Bethell,

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met in 1980 when visiting Arunachala.⁴³ This unfolds an interesting story regarding Swami Narikutti, an Australian by birth and architectural student who met a fellow architectural student named Adrian Snodgrass (b. 1931), known also as Swami Punaikutti, who was well versed in the wisdom of the East, Advaita Vedanta and the traditionalists' works. Both of them became disillusioned with the architectural programme which they were attending at Sydney Technical College (now University of Technology, Sydney), leading them to take a leave of absence.

They left for India on 18th of April, 1957; however, an interesting change of fate awaited them when the boat docked in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). They were approached by a mysterious monk who asked them to accompany him to the sacred city of Katirkama (Kataragama). In Ceylon they both met Swami Gauribala Giri (Peter Joachim Schoenfeldt, 1907-1984), named 'German Swami' who was known to be an eccentric figure.

Swami Gauribala was highly influenced by the Traditionalist school and had regular correspondence with Schuon for nearly three decades and went to Lausanne, Switzerland to meet him.⁴⁴ It is reported that upon Swami Gauribala's meeting with Schuon, Swami Gauribala said he wanted to pitch a tent in his yard and spend the rest of his life there. While it is likely that several of Schuon's disciples had met Swami Gauribala, we might mention in particular Donald Macleod Matheson (1896-1979) and William Stoddart (b. 1925). One of Gauribala's students, Manik Sandrasagra (1947-2008), well-known Sri Lankan village folklorist and film producer, who while travelling in the United States in 1981 went to meet Schuon in Bloomington, Indiana where Schuon had made his permanent home the year before.

ed. Samuel D. Fohr (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001). Bethell also assisted with the proofreading and index for at least fifteen other René Guénon books. He has done so with quiet industry and humility which is an example to us all of a dedicated scholar and lover of tradition. He was a crucial link in translating Guénon's works into English.

⁴³ Cecil Bethell, "René Guénon (1886-1951)," *The Mountain Path* (January 2005), pp. 95-102.

⁴⁴ Jean-Baptiste Aymard, "A Biographical Approach," in *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 37.

An interesting note on Swami Gauribala is that he was initially called to the Buddhist tradition, and sailed to Ceylon in 1936 where he was ordained into Theravada Buddhism by the Venerable Nyanatiloka Thera (Anton Gueth, 1878-1957),⁴⁵ taking the name Nyanakhetto. Swami Gauribala had contact with many figures that have aided the modern West in understanding Eastern thought. For example, he knew an expositor of Tibetan Buddhism, Lama Anagarika Govinda (Ernst Lothar Hoffman, 1898-1985) and Nyanaponika Thera (Siegmond Feniger, 1901-1994), cofounder of the Buddhist Publication Society and author of numerous books on the Buddhist tradition.

Swami Narikutti met and became a disciple of Sri Yogaswami (1872-1964), a renowned mystic of Jaffna, who had spent time in the company of the Maharshi. It was after Yogaswami's death that Swami Narikutti went on an extended yatra to India walking the length of the country in the mid-1960s. He later visited Arunachala in 1968 and eventually settled there in 1970, where he resided on the sacred Arunachala until his ill-health forced him down the mountain in the last years of his life.

Snodgrass incidentally was a friend of Australian poet Harold Stewart (1916-1995), who for some time worked at the avant-garde bookshop, the Norman Robb Bookshop in Melbourne, Australia. Stewart was highly influenced by the Perennialist or Traditionalist works; notably the articles found in the French journal *Etudes Traditionnelles* (1936-1992), which he first encountered in the 1940s. Stewart was also influenced by his father who had lived in India for thirty years and read books on the Maharshi as a young man. Stewart organized a small Traditionalist study group that met weekly at the bookshop.

We could also mention here that Swami Narikutti had stopped in Melbourne en route to India in order to meet Stewart and the others associated with the works of Guénon, Coomaraswamy and Schuon.

⁴⁵ See Bhikkhu Nyanatusita and Hellmuth Hecker, *The Life of Nyanatiloka Thera: The Biography of a Western Buddhist Pioneer* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 2008).



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Snodgrass was a member of this Traditionalist study group, which concentrated more or less on the theoretical ideas of Perennialism for some time until Schuon instructed the study group to belong to a particular religion. As several of this groups members were attracted to Buddhism, Schuon suggested that Pure Land Buddhism, especially in its Jodo-Shinshu form, was most accessible to Westerners given that it was “the decadent age of the Dharma,” known as *mappo*. In 1963, Snodgrass accompanied Stewart to Japan in order to enter into Buddhism and had extensive introductions and recommendations by Pallis. When they arrived in Kyoto they had intensive training with Bando Shojun (1932-2004), Japanese scholar and priest who additionally had correspondence with Schuon and went to personally meet him on one occasion.⁴⁶

Another interesting encounter took place in Pallis’s home in London, in October 1954, when Swami Ramdas met Frithjof Schuon. It was an important meeting in which many of Ramdas’s reflections on Schuon were included in his book *World is God* (1955). In a similar connection, we can note that Swami Ramdas was in the presence of the Maharshi for only five minutes in 1923 but it was enough to provide an illumination which directed the rest of his life: “The few minutes that Ramdas spent in his [Ramana Maharshi] holy company meant a momentous impetus in his spiritual career.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ See Michael Ackland, *Damaged Men: The Precarious Lives of James McAuley and Harold Stewart* (Allen & Unwin, 2001); Alex Minchinton, “The Exiled Immortal: Reconsidering Harold Stewart,” in Harry Oldmeadow (ed.), *Crossing Religious Frontiers: Studies in Comparative Religion* (World Wisdom, 2010), pp. 183-93; Peter Kelly, *Buddha in a Bookshop* (Australia: Ulysses Press, 2007); Harry Oldmeadow, “Book Review: Buddha in a Bookshop,” *Sophia*, Vol. 46, No. 43 (December 2007), pp. 315-16; Harry Oldmeadow, “R.H. Blyth, Harold Stewart and Adrian Snodgrass,” in *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (World Wisdom, 2004), pp. 178-80.

⁴⁷ Susunaga Weeraperuma (ed.), ‘Ramana Maharshi was a Saviour of Souls’, in *The Essential Swami Ramdas: Commemorative Edition* (World Wisdom, 2005), p. 129. See also Swami Ramdas, ‘My Beloved Bhagavan’, *The Mountain Path*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (January 1979), p. 22; Swami Ramdas, ‘Bhagavan’s Grace and Name’, *The Mountain Path*, Vol. 32, Nos. 3 & 4 (December 1995), pp. 106-107.

Taking a slight digression, we recall Arnaud Desjardins (1925-2011), the French writer and filmmaker, who first had darshan with Sri Anandamayi Ma in 1959, and also had notable contact with Swami Ramdas, including a host of other eminent spiritual figures such as Kalu Rimpoché (1905-1989) and H.H. the 16th Karmapa (1924-1981). Although he was too late to meet the Maharshi, he did visit Sri Ramanasramam and was influenced early on by the work of Guénon. Desjardins recalls an interesting account during his travels in the East in the 1960s, while guided by the personal interpreter of H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso (b. 1935), to interview numerous spiritual authorities confirming Pallis's authentic understanding of the Buddhist tradition:

"I remember a conversation, one evening in Sikkim, when the question which arose was of Westerners who had really come near enough to tantrayana to understand something more than words and formulas. One such person, of whom those present spoke with the greatest regard and deference, was repeatedly referred to in this conversation by the English word 'Tradition.' 'Tradition' had spent some time with such-and-such a guru; 'Tradition' has visited such-and-such a monastery. And all of a sudden it became apparent to me that this Mr 'Tradition' was Marco Pallis, (under his Tibetan name of Thudben Tenzin). . ."⁴⁸

Doyen of the world's religions Huston Smith (b. 1919), makes this assessment on Pallis's work, "I find no writer on Buddhism surpassing him."⁴⁹ Furthermore, it would be worthwhile for readers to know that H.H. the Dalai Lama paid the following homage to the Maharshi on the 5th November 1965, "The heritage of India is enriched with numberless saints and yogis. Ramana Maharshi

⁴⁸ Arnaud Desjardins, "The Mystery of the Tibetans," in *The Message of the Tibetans*, trans. R.H. Ward and Vega Stewart (London: Stuart & Watkins, 1969), p. 20. See also Joseph Fitzgerald, "From Marco Pallis to Thudben Tenzin: A Son of Tibet Returns," *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, Vol. 22 (Winter 2008), pp. 39-61.

⁴⁹ Huston Smith, "Book Review: A Buddhist Spectrum: Contributions to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue," *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Autumn 1982), p. 145.



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represents that tradition and his spiritual greatness is guiding millions of people. Such masters light the path and bring solace to suffering humanity.”⁵⁰ Desjardins was a disciple of Swami Prajnanpad (1891-1974) and has become a highly renowned spiritual teacher in the French-speaking world.

Swami Ramdas regarded Frithjof Schuon as: “a very prince among saints.”⁵¹ Another central point is the unique relationship that Schuon had with H.H. the 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi (1894-1994), one of Indian’s most revered spiritual teachers that was facilitated by Mudumbai Ramachandran (d. 2006), a Hindu devotee who had associated for more than forty years with Schuon and also met the Maharshi.⁵² It would also be relevant to mention the 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi’s acceptance of Schuon’s dedication of his book *Language of the Self* (1959) that was mediated by Matheson when he visited the 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi in February of 1959. The following underscores the importance of this gesture:

Nothing is perhaps more significant or has climaxed this effort [of publishing Schuon’s writings for the first time by an Indian publisher specifically for Indian audiences] in a more befitting manner than the fact that His Holiness Sri Sankaracarya, Jagadguru of the Kanci Kamakoti Pitha, has been pleased to accept the dedication of this book [*Language of the Self* (1959)] to him; the orthodoxy and authenticity of Schuon’s exposition stand in need of no further testimony.⁵³

⁵⁰ H.H. the Dalai Lama, ‘A Tribute’, *The Mountain Path*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 1966), p. 67.

⁵¹ See Swami Ramdas, ‘Visit to Sufi Saint’ and ‘Hindus at Heart’, in *World is God* (Kanhagad, Kerala: Anandashram, 1955), pp. 103-105.

⁵² See Mudumbai Ramachandran, ‘Frithjof Schuon: A Small Word of Homage and Celebration’, *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 47-55.

⁵³ Venkataraman Raghavan, ‘Forward’, to Frithjof Schuon, *Language of the Self*, trans. Marco Pallis and Macleod Matheson (Madras: Ganesh, 1959), p. x; See also William Stoddart, ‘Spirituality in Hinduism: A Visit to the Jagadguru’, in *Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism*, eds. Mateus Soares de Azevedo and Alberto Vasconcellos Queiroz (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008), pp. 115-120.

An additional facet in this interweaving narrative is that it was Schuon who sent Joseph Epes Brown (1920-2000) to find Hehaka Sapa or Black Elk (1863-1950), an extraordinary sage of the Lakota Sioux to learn about the traditional ways of the Lakota.⁵⁴ Both Schuon and his brother, Father Gall (Erich Schuon, 1906-1991), a Trappist monk, corresponded with Black Elk through Brown. After the Jagadguru read the chapter 'The Sacred Pipe of the Red Indians' in the *Language of the Self*, he expressed the striking commonalities shared between the shamanic traditions of the First Peoples and Hinduism.⁵⁵ From this metaphysical position, it has been expressed, "Black Elk and the Jagadguru may be considered to represent symbolically two poles of the primordial religion."⁵⁶

In addition, there was a noteworthy relationship that existed between Schuon and medicine man Sun Dance chief Thomas Yellowtail (1903-1993), which lasted from 1953 when they met in Paris until Yellowtail's death.⁵⁷ Upon Schuon's first visit to meet various Native American Indians, he describes a spiritual encounter that took place between — a sage of the shamanic traditions of the First Peoples and a sage within Hinduism — two poles of the sanatana dharma:

"I showed him some pictures I had with me; one was the image of His Holiness the Jagadguru of Kanchipuram. I spoke to the old Cheyenne priest about Hinduism and explained to him who His Holiness was. He took the picture in one hand and raised the other hand towards the sky; this is the Red Indian's gesture of prayer. He prayed a long time, always looking at the picture; and after a while he

⁵⁴ See Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1953).

⁵⁵ See William Stoddart, op. cit., 'Spirituality in Hinduism: A Visit to the Jagadguru', in *Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism*, pp. 115-120.

⁵⁶ Jean-Baptiste Aymard, "Notes," in *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 147.

⁵⁷ Thomas Yellowtail, "Introduction," to *Indian Spirit: Revised and Enlarged*, eds. Michael Oren Fitzgerald and Judith Fitzgerald (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006), pp. XIII-XVI.

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put his hand on it and then rubbed his face and his breast with the hand, in the Indian way, to impregnate himself with the Jagadguru's blessing. At last he kissed the picture with fervor."⁵⁸

Another influential figure that functioned as a bridge between East and West was T.M.P. Mahadevan (1911-1983), the Director of the Centre for the Advanced Study in Philosophy at the University of Madras. He was a long time devotee of Sri Ramana Maharshi, and was also closely associated with the Jagadguru of Kanchi. It was Swami Rajeswarananda (d.1964), a disciple of Sri Ramana Maharshi, who introduced Professor Mahadevan to the Sage of Arunachala, in 1929, at the age of eighteen.

Not commonly known is Professor Mahadevan's involvement with the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy (Anjuman-i Shahanshahi-yi Falsafa-yi Iran) established in the Spring of 1974 in Tehran by Professor Nasr. The Academy was based on the principles of Traditionalist or Perennialist thought involving leading 20th century scholars such as Henry Corbin (1903-1978), Toshihiko Izutsu (1914-1993), Raymundo Panikkar (1918-2010), A.K. Saran (1922-2003), Elémire Zolla (1926-2002), Huston Smith, William Chittick (b. 1943), Sachiko Murata (b. 1943), James Morris (b. 1949) among others.⁵⁹ Readers will appreciate the description of the Academy's honourable objectives. Although penned over forty years ago, the Academy's objectives are still exceptionally timely given our urgent need for religious pluralism:

“The goals of the Academy are the revival of the traditional intellectual life of Islamic Persia; the publication of texts and studies pertaining to both Islamic and pre-Islamic Persia; making the intellectual treasures of Persia in the fields of philosophy, mysticism and the like known to the outside world; making possible extensive

⁵⁸ Frithjof Schuon, 'His Holiness and the Medicine Man', in *The Feathered Sun* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1990), p.110.

⁵⁹ See T.M.P. Mahadevan, 'Vedantic Meditation and Its Relation to Action', in *Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action: A Colloquium held at Rothko Chapel, Houston Texas*, eds. Yusuf Ibish and Peter Lamborn Wilson (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977), pp.349-359.

research in comparative philosophy; making Persians aware of the intellectual traditions of other civilizations in both East and West; encouraging intellectual confrontations with the modern world; and finally, discussing from the point of view of tradition various problems facing modern man.”⁶⁰

Professor Mahadevan introduced the Queen Mother Frederica of Greece (1917-1981) and her daughter Princess Irene (b. 1942), who traveled to India in order to be in the sagely presence of the Jagadguru of Kanchi.⁶¹ The Jagadguru also had interesting exchanges with the Maharshi through their respective disciples, including the Perennialist writers, and while we cannot explore all of these interconnections within this text, it will suffice to mention their existence.⁶²

A striking example of how one can be true to one’s own religious form and also recognize that same Divine Reality in the other traditions without disavowing the legitimacy of one’s own religion, is clear in Professor Nasr’s own meeting with the Sage of Kanchi arranged in 1970 through Mahadevan:

“To behold the presence of His Holiness the Jagadguru, and to be blessed by the privilege of receiving the refreshing breeze which flows from Him and which extinguishes the very fire of existence separating man from God is to realize that the Divine Freedom manifests itself where It wills. In Kanchipuram one feels the proximity of the light which as a Muslim I have experienced most in the holy sanctuaries of Islam and in the presence of Muslim saints. In the eyes of the Jagadguru, the silence of Eternity of India which is immutable and eternal like the peaks of the Himalayas shines and penetrates into the very centre of the heart where presides the ‘Throne of God.’ Through

⁶⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Preface,” *Sophia Perennis*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1975), p.7; See also Francis Clive-Ross, ‘Editorial’, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol.10, No. 1 (Winter 1976), p. 4.

⁶¹ T.M.P Mahadevan, ‘Meeting with Perfection’, available at: <http://www.kamakoti.org/souv/5-35.html>.

⁶² See Ra. Ganapati, ‘The Maha-Svami and The Maharishi’, available at: <http://www.kamakoti.org/souv/5-58.html>; Marco Pallis, ‘A Buddhist Garland for the Jagadguru’, available at: <http://www.kamakoti.org/souv/5-23.html>.



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his glance the heart becomes suddenly transmuted alchemically from a piece of flesh into a jewel that reflects the inner light and illuminates the whole from within.”⁶³ ▲

⁶³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, quoted in T.M.P. Mahadevan (ed.), *The Sage of Kanchi* (Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann Publishers, 1975), pp. 17-18.

(*To be continued*)

The Circumambulation

Ashok

We started off late in the evening
Just as the night was preparing to sing.
The sun had completed its daily stint
Of visiting the hill, the path, and the temple precinct.

The feet touched the earth below
In fond remembrance, not long ago.
Across this path, the holy place
Where saints and seers had felt HIS grace.

The walk went on, without any light
Save the moonless starry night,
The cool breeze too walked with us
As we made our way without a fuss.

The silhouette of the hill in the background
Changing shapes, kept us spellbound.
Encouraging us at every turn
Our tiring steps and aching feet.

We finished the circle before dawn
Refreshed mind, tiredness gone.
We went back to sleep, thoughts emptied
Wide awake within, filled with peace.