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A Small Word of Homage and Celebration

by

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When I was asked whether I would like to contribute to this volume, my first reaction was one of my own unworthiness. I said this to a friend, who responded that surely I *must* write; I must bear testimony, bear witness to a truly great man to whom I felt I owed so much, over so many years, in my inner life. I am no metaphysician, merely a religious man; a *sadhaka*, a seeker. As Schuon says, religion can reach all, the greatest, the most spiritual, and the coarsest. To be fully conscious and self aware, and have the totality of perception is a special gift. This is given only to a few; and even then, like Ramana Maharshi, the *siddha* might choose to do no more than to look straight into your eyes and awaken your heart, to bring you to your true self, he might tell you stories; he might sing you a song. To a few, it is given also to bring together our several inherited insights, and embody the great tradition, make it alive. Schuon was one such great synthesizer; what Sankara would call a *sampradayakrt*: a maker of tradition. He enunciated the *philosophia perennis* for our times.

There is a rare mutuality about great encounters. When, late in life Schuon was asked in an interview where the primal wisdom could still be found, his answer included two or three sources. The first was, “among the Hindus, in India, in Banaras, of course, and in Kanchipuram. In *advaita*, where ‘*brahmasatya*’, the reality of brahman is paramount.” When his books were first translated into English, young seekers in India, thirsty for their roots, greeted *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1953) and *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (1954) with excitement.

Reading Schuon helped them as modern post-Enlightenment Indians, Kashmiri or South Indian, men or women, to find access to the living truth that underlay the static orthodoxy they rebelled against in their youth.

To have gathered from the air a live tradition,
From a fine old eye the flame unconquered,
This is not vanity, there error is all in the not done.
In the diffidence that faltered.

Schuon had an unerring eye for the common truth that underlies religious traditions. In doing so, he mirrored back to the person born into the tradition the One Light that radiates through different traditions and cultures.

While my bookloving friends read his books and were excited, I had a unique privilege. Friends I made in Bangalore in the early sixties took me to Lausanne to meet Schuon in 1964. These Swiss friends were like me, *sadhakas*, fellow seekers. Our mutual recognition was immediate.¹ When they took me to Schuon, as I watched him stroke his chin and say the Holy Name, I knew that this man lived in spaces, breathed the air, where I longed to abide. As a thrill of recognition passed through me, I also knew that he was one of the truly great; like others I had sought out repeatedly—Swami Chandrasekara Bharathi of the Sankaramatha in Sringeri, Ramana Maharshi, Mata Anandamayi, the Kanchiparamacharya, Swami Ramadas, Swami Thyagishananda, Swami Yatiswarananda of the Ramakrishna Order and Sri Ranga Maha Guru. There is no discontinuity.

In a mysterious way, he too performed for me, just by *being*, by being himself, what is perhaps to the initiate, the most important function of a guru. He was the living, breathing touchstone of my *sadhana*. He confirmed my commitment by his very presence. He was also the

¹ My friend, J.C. Petitpierre, wishes to add the following : “As one of the Swiss friends mentioned above (my wife being the other), I wish to add the following. Meeting Sri Ramachandran in India in 1962 was a providential occurrence in several ways. Firstly, because it gave us access to authentic representatives of the Hindu *Dharma* whom we might not have met otherwise. I am not referring here to the great souls (*Mahatmas*) to whom we went to pay our respects together in various parts of *Bharat Varsha* but to scholars and *sadhakas* who preserve traditions of orthodoxy and intellectuality of the highest order. During many conversations with Sri Ramachandran, we tried to describe to him what the perennialist school of thought in the West was, its tenets, such as its rejection of modern errors, and its approach to religions. In fact we did not do it only with him, but also in Hindu initiatic circles where I was asked to explain our views on *sadhana*, our method and our perspective. It was in a sense a way for us of paying tribute to our *Guru* since what we did was simply to convey the priceless truths and ways of thinking which had been his gift to us, his unworthy *shishyas*. At one point, seeing that we had received so much through Sri Ramachandran during our years in India, we wished to offer him to meet him, our Master, regarding whom he had heard so much from us and knew we owed so much to. Hence the meeting with Schuon which took place in Lausanne in 1964: a memorable meeting indeed, where the Master asked Sri Ramachandran to chant a portion of the sacred Scriptures of Vedanta. That was the beginning of the close relationship which began on that day in 1964 and which our Hindu friend of thirty-six years describes here with such deep understanding and intensity.”

true catalyst, who could renew and deepen and perpetuate in the *here and now* the timeless reality of the experience, which at that stage I could taste only at moments. The long intervals between these moments were dreary wastes. I was young, and in many ways conflicted, bearing the burdens of my existential journey. Again and again, when I went back to him, he could make me see how simple and direct and straightforward the experience of plenitude indeed is. He reinforced for me Sankara's hastamalaka metaphor. Reality is always there, as plain as the amla (a small wild country fruit found all over India) in the palm of your hand. He too said to me like Ramana Maharshi, "*Be as you always were*" (*irundappadiye iru*). Schuon had studied Sankara; he asked me to chant Upanishads for him. He would say, "I cannot understand Sanskrit but I can grasp the spirit." His conscious understanding confirmed my intuitions. But it was his presence that helped me to grow into my sadhana.

In that, I am a kritajna—a man who is grateful. The word for gratitude in Sanskrit, means "one who knows what has been done." People complain about the ingratitude in the world. He who truly gives does not do it for the recognition; he who receives is very often unaware of the gift. To be aware of what one has received reinforces the qualities Schuon prized—courage, dignity, generosity, and piety which constitute the beauty of everyday living. Beauty was for him a way to truth.

In the ultimate sense, he did not give, and I did not receive. What happened was a work of the spirit, an act of recognition. But for me, as a pilgrim, to acknowledge that recognition is itself an act of piety. It is that sense of gratitude which makes me feel the need to bear witness, and gives me the courage to write. It is a necessary act of natural piety. I can do it only from my humility and reverence—not just for Schuon, but through him, for the well springs from which he drank.

Once I realized that there was a moral imperative to write, it still remained a daunting prospect. I am primarily a *bhakta*—a lover of God, one who adores and worships God. My main sadhana is nama-japa: repeating the Name of the Lord. Schuon had said to me that this was the way forward in our times.

Further, what had impressed me most, on reflection, was that the one thing that these great spirits I had met had in common was that they set no rules for the sadhaka to follow. They had been there to affirm and confirm my sense of reality; they had been there at necessary moments, to reassure, and sometimes, indeed to warn me when they felt a disturbance in me. Usually, the turbulence was stilled just by being in their presence. I had visited Schuon regularly over a period of over thirty years. What could I say in words about the strength he gave me, of how he helped me through the necessarily difficult and painful periods that sadhakas experience?

A friend then suggested that I might give an account of this particular encounter and communion between a man of South Indian origin, and the master of the *philosophia perennis*. She drew my attention to Wordsworth's belief that the true transition was not from the particular

to the general, which belongs to empirical science, which can be quantified, but the transition from the specific to the universal—a living embodiment of maitri, friendship, stretching across oceans and cultures, to keep traditions alive by renewal.

Schuon always indicated that it was best for people to worship within their own traditions. There was a living body of symbols in a tradition, which would strengthen and vivify the individual. Yet traditions need to meet new challenges, have to assimilate history. Every creative individual within a tradition, T.S. Eliot has said, modifies the tradition—some only a nuance. But the great masters of the tradition add a whole word to its sentence, sometimes even change the meaning. My teachers in India had given me the revealed scriptures; they had given me advaita; Schuon has shown me that there is a tradition of traditions, a meta-theory, and more importantly, a meta-practice, that could transform my way of belonging to my own tradition. He also taught me through apprenticeship, not through discourse, the skills of assimilating the heterogeneous sub-traditions within my own Hindu tradition. Perhaps, I thought, it could be worthwhile to communicate to the outside world what could be communicated—of this experience—the historical existential reality of the not-very-articulate, not-very-learned, but still totally committed *sadhaka* in his communion with Schuon, one of the most learned and articulate practitioners of inherited wisdom in our time.

It is difficult for me to write about my personal history. I do so, hoping that this will help the sadhakas from different parts of the world who have encountered Schuon. My hope is that by showing the details in one specific instance, that of a man of Brahmin birth, and how he learned to be in touch with his origin and his goal with his help. Schuon showed me how this process connected me with the origins and goal of all mankind. It is in this sense that all religions are one.

One version of the perennial philosophy is to put together similar statements from different traditions—in effect, to make a nosegay. Indeed, such activity might help to awaken interest. What it does not give is the living body. Above all, it fails to see that there are generations of disciplines and experience in each tradition. It can excite, but cannot sustain.

My growing up, though naturally unique in its particulars, was paradigmatic in its structures in late colonial and newly independent India. In many societies until recently, there was a clear demarcation of men's and women's worlds. The structures that prevailed in the world were different from those of the home.

In the home, the women, the mothers, held sway. This was where primarily, orthodoxy was transmitted—in the daily round of prayer and discipline; in the structure of symbol and ritual; the myriad ways in which the orthodoxy of a culture holds together in our daily lives the many filaments that weave together to form an integral whole of structures of feeling, structures of primal thought, structures and disciplines of the psyche. It is here, in the home, that the total

belief system, the orthodoxy of the religion, is transmitted imperceptibly from generation to generation.

My mother died seventy years ago when I was seven. From that time it was my father's sister and their mother who looked after our upbringing. They were both very orthodox ladies of the Ramanuja tradition. Between the ages of ten to twelve they saw to it that I was invested with a sacred thread and taught the Gayatri Mantra as enjoined upon all Brahmins. I was introduced to the revealed scriptures of Hinduism by learning to chant selected portions from the Vedas and Upanishads. Furthermore I was initiated into the Ramanujaite mantra, the name of Lord Narayana. Sri Ramanuja's central teaching is Saranagati or Prapatti—complete surrender to Lord Narayana. His very name means the essence, the receptacle, the goal of our humanness. In this lies our only and ultimate good. Schuon later said to me that nama-japa, the recitation of the Name of God, was the best way for our times.

This particular mantra goes back to Ramanuja. There is a marvellous story in the life of Ramanuja which indicates the way Hinduism functions.² Ramanuja himself was a Brahmin. A great saint and savant Matha had opened out my Indian Hinduism. Schuon gave me live experience of its universality. He gave me a language for my intuitions, a way of catching and holding my fleeting experiences.

What I personally prized most, because of my own history, was his respect for each individual tradition and its inner structure. He brought home to me the delicate interweaving of the smallest ritual gesture, the many living symbols, the varied practices, of a tradition. It gave me eyes to see and a heart to honor this in the religions of the world. The other side of the same coin was that I saw more clearly that one had to commit oneself to one's own tradition; that this would be my safeguard in my quest. He was sensitive to the different paths that each individual would have to travel, all starting from the same place in our origins, and all reaching the same place in our endings, a place beyond name and form, where the many becomes the one.

What had been conflict for me—admonition to celibacy and monasticism as against other people's insistence that I should lead a 'normal life' ceased to be a problem. Such was my inclination; therefore it was so.

² There is another story connected with Sri Ramanuja, which it would not be out of place to cite in this context. Sri Ramanuja had a dream in which he saw a beautiful image of Cheluvarya Swami. He went in search of this image, and found it in the keep of the daughter of the Muslim nawab of Delhi; she used to toy with this image. He asked the little princess if she could part with the image and give it to him. At first she refused, but then agreed, on condition that he call it to him: if it came to him, it would be his. It is said that no sooner had Sri Ramanuja prayed than the image rose and walked to him, followed by the princess. To this day, worship is offered up to the princess as a consort of Lord Cheluvarya Swami in Melkote; the consort is named Bibi Nachiyar.

Here I must mention a few words about my father. I was an enigma to him for he had a doubt about my `other worldliness'. I was unnatural and had not fallen into the normal pattern of a youth of my age. But towards the end of his life he changed his views as I did of him. He was a shy *sadhaka* and grew like a fruit behind a leaf as a *sadhaka* should. Profound thoughts on St. Francis of Assisi, Sri Ramana and Sri Ramakrishna were floating in his mind the night before he passed away. A spiritual friend who came to pay respects to him said of him that he was a *gupta yogi* (hidden yogi). He showed great respects to Schuonites who came to stay with me as did my orthodox aunt.

The other area of conflict, more real throughout my life, was that between action and contemplation. *Nama-japa* teaches one that prayer is constant; that it is everywhere, and one only has to plug in. Schuon linked this for me with the action/contemplation opposition that had been set up by my cultural ambience. Schuon says that there is no opposition. They go on at different levels. While the intellectual solutions elude me still, the practice of prayer has made it possible for me to hold this dialectical tension within me through my life. Periodical meetings with him have resolved the conflict in actuality. This is the most important part of what I called the inner process when I embarked on this autobiographical section.

Knowing Schuon created for so many of us all over the world a fraternity. We often met for the first time in his name and became fast friends. Humanly he created a cosmopolitan international fraternity, which reaches far beyond the circles that any one of us individually knows. In a very important sense, he has been a presence as well as a felt absence at our encounters with one another. For this enrichment of our lives at so many levels, from the practical to the social, the intellectual and above all, the spiritual, thousands of people all over the world will remain truly grateful.

Perhaps it was His will and blessing that brought my friend of nearly fifty years and fellow seeker to me on a visit when I was contemplating with awe the prospect of writing this piece. I wish to thank Sita for encouraging and goading me, and further helping me to find words to express my innermost thoughts.