Alone and All One

Reflections on Solitude and its Beatitude

Introduction: Thin lines and the differences they make

"Alone" and "all one" are separated by only one letter—"l"—the space of a thin line. To a lay eye, these words seem to depict two quite separate phenomena—one, a lonely and even desolate reality; the other, its diametric and fulfilled opposite. To leave it at that is to let surface "proofs" stand. But these seeming proofs' probings are the stuff of which the saints' lives are forged. To follow the great ones and to take our place among them, we, too, must probe.

A careful look at these words' composition lets us into the shared mystery at their heart: The veil-thin "l" between these two storied words and worlds bespeaks not just a linguistic curiosity of happenstance, but a symbolism of the deepest sense. It shows us that the veiled space between aloneness and oneness is as thin as can be, as vulnerable as it is provisional. Sometimes, the veil between them disappears so sufficiently that one bleeds into the other, *becomes* the other, until there simply is no "other", but only the experience of being "alone-at-one"...The experience of *"being"* itself. In these liminal moments and momentous spaces, it is not so much that we know not whether we are utterly alone or in an accompanied throng, but that there is no essential difference between them. At the lifting of the veil, aloneness and all-one-ness are discovered to be a simultaneous revelation of "*advaita*" (non-two) and "*kaivalya*" (absence of otherness) in the most keenly felt sense.

Another letter, the thinnest of its grade, proves a missing link in the exploration of this probing, and in the discovery of the fascinating existential character of the insights which converge and emerge—the letter "I". This is, by many revelatory accounts, God's own name. And by the account of undeniable experience, it is also ours—our experiential name before we were temporally named. "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you..." spake God through Jeremiah (1:5), the same "you"—now, from a first-person perspective, the same "*I*"— of our yet-formless face before our parents were born.[1] The golden thread of existence itself, divine and human, begins and is uncontainably contained in this word without which no experience could be had or spoken of: The undeniable and unnegateable "I". This first-person measure of aloneness and oneness—of alone-at-oneness—is our key to understanding the beckoning call toward the mysterious and mystiqued desert in which the dual-thronged phenomenon of "alone" and "all one" is most clearly beheld.

[1] This is derived from a koan-saying attributed to Huineng, the 6th Chan (Zen) Patriarch.

Solitude and the monastic archetype

In the oscillation between "alone" and "all one", with the introduction of the irretractable ontology of "I", we arrive at a word which perhaps better than any other holds all of this in a serene tension of quiet knowing: *solitude*. The word conjures desert-like and deserted territory of the earth and of the mind, and as such, stimulates and intimidates. It has been the unwieldly stable bedrock of spiritual aspirants across every solid tradition, and a haunting note of both invitation and warning for those who have decided to "brave it alone", be it for a night, a fortnight, or the duration of one's days unto life's twilight. What *is* this fascinatingly intimidating barriered welcome, this jeweled, triggered portal to a nameless and placeless place? Why do some find solitude so foreboding—a condition to be avoided at all costs—while others are willing to chase it with the avidity of an insatiable thrill-seeker? And what of the fact that the avoider and the welcomer of solitude are quite often the *same person* at different seasons of life, or simply different times of the day, a spirit of "Yes" *and* "No" battling ardently for leverage? The very embattled nature of solitude—that is, the battle that it provokes in each who would see and struggle with its triumph, taming, or torching—is a testament to its greatness and its formidability among spiritual themes.

Archetypes are helpful in the exploration of themes which touch us all. Solitude is one such theme, and the archetype of the monk becomes for all of us an invitation to explore solitude as a lived and constitutive reality of the human experience rather than an odd eccentricity or exotic curiosity. "Monk" comes from the Greek "*monos*", meaning "alone": *Alone*, the monk enters into the unknown to seek and to discover that which ultimately cannot *not* be known: oneself, God, and the world which is the birthing and setting of their encounter.[2] That solitude which many will tenaciously spend a lifetime avoiding becomes for the monk the most sought-after container to pursue, *not* for the sake of the container itself, but for the sake of what it contains: Truth, meaning, belonging, and a communion with the many as revealed through intimate encounter with the One. Paraphrasing the words of St. Peter Damien, an 11th century hermit and reformer, when the monk prays alone in his cell, the macrocosmic hallowed world and *all souls therein* pray *with* him. That is, the veil between "alone" and "all one" becomes so invisibly thin that only God can reconcile the non-existent space between them.

The monk, then, holds the key to a rare paradox: There *is* an answer for the great question of loneliness—understood here as *both* a *psychological state* with hues of desolation, sadness, and felt emptiness for which a

[2] Though this triad—*jiva* (soul), *jagat* (world), *Ishvara* (God)—is named explicitly in the Vedantic tradition as the exploratory thematic space for the seeker of *moksha* (liberation), as constitutive of the themes of virtually all philosophic inquiry into the nature of reality as such (the domain of metaphysics), it is not at all specific or unique to Vedanta or to "The East".

remedy is sought, *and* an *existential trait* for which there is no remedy, because there is no problem. In both its psychological and existential iterations, the answer for loneliness is not crowded company in the lauded wares and wheres of the world, but *solitude*, in which all that is sacred and essential can be encountered and revealed. In this revelatory search, the psychological state of loneliness is gentled and honed by a holy burrowing, a turning *within* to find the sources of consolatory joy rather than the disappointing dissipation of energy that inevitably ensues when seeking joy from without. Similarly, loneliness as an existential trait is seen as a kind of wombed fauna which absolutely *teems* with enlivened possibility *if* we have the courage to peer into the dark where faith's greatest lights are found. In that braved aloneness, solitude as the condition for true knowledge and true love is deepened, and its fruits are potentially legion, not in the foreboding sense of the word, but in its most promising and plethora'd sense: countless blessings, infinite insights, plentiful renewal.[3]

Throughout cultures in both cultured and uncultured days, and throughout time in the most timeless of ways, the monastic vocation has existed for this very search for those who could not *but* make it their life, their love, their all. "Vocation" comes from the Latin *vocare*—to "call". When the monk perceives the vocation of his life, he perceives a call: firstly, a call *from* the depths of the heart, an abyss so profound that the welled bottom is as if non-existent; but as importantly, he perceives a call *from*—in the sense of being called *away* from something in place and time—to a myth-promise of "something *more*" beyond any definable dimension. In this sense a vocation is a call *to* something greater, something higher, something more sublime than what even our finest and subtlest of perceptions can uncover. The monk gives and stakes his life upon a search which devours him even as it delivers him. To speak of the monastic "vocation" in this way is also to say what it is *not:* It is not a curious retreat, a passing interest, an athletic or aesthetic pursual. In other words, this vocation is *not* an *a*vocation, a pursuit alongside of other pursuits which can be taken, left, or marginalized. The monk finds himself to be made of longing, consecrated by the fire within. No longer must The One "fit" his worldview, but his worldview must now make way for The One Which knows nor abides any second, *and yet,* in which all seeming "seconds" and "others" are perfectly held.

As with any great pursuit, the solemnization of a vow strengthens an aspirant—be it that of a chivalrous knight, a betrothed couple, or in the case of our current exploration, the pursuit of nothing less than the Infinite. It is thus that the vows of the Western mendicant and the Eastern *sannyasin* are forged from

[3] As to the allusions of "legion", for the foreboding sense of the word, see Mark 5:9 and Luke 8:30, where demons announce their name/presence as "legion". For Jesus' use of the word—which can be seen symbolically as a quiet correction and repurposing of the word for divine affinity—see Matthew 26:53, where the power to summon the Father for "more than twelve legions of angels" is confidently claimed.

solitude's ore. They depend upon solitude for their sustenance and strength, and they *fill* solitude with its meaning. The mendicant's promises of poverty, chastity, and obedience are not deprivations, nor are they negative statements cloaked in piety justifying a zero-sum game. They are avowals of a secreted power, outwardly clothed in the kind of unseemly non-attraction which diverts the eyes of the casual onlooker that their treasures may be more safely mined in solitude's protective clime. The *sannyin's* singular promise of *abhaya*—to have no fear, nor to ever be a cause of fear to others—is the condition of fierce gentleness which becomes the point of entry into solitude's recondite center. *Stripped* is the mendicant. *Freed* is the *sannyasin.* And truly *accessed* is thus the solitude which holds them. It is only the heart willing to be alone with the Aloneness of God that can see the vowed life as a protection of and a condition for that life, a life which is meant to point beyond itself and beyond the one living it so that the Life of *Deus Solus* (God Alone) presides.

Who is the monk?

Is it only the monk, though, who pursues such a call? Yes and no, but not in the conventional senses in which these reductive one-word answers would normally be understood. A conventional connotation of the "Yes" answer would sound something like, "Yes, solitude is only for people who are unmarried, formally vowed, and given to a particular religious path". This answer, given as it likely may be by a representative of the very state of life itself, carries an aura of authority that often goes unchallenged and thus unchecked. But its counterpart is no better: A conventional "No" would sound something like, "No, *no*, not at *all*! Solitude is for everyone, come one, come all!" Its protest bespeaks its weakness. After all, one is welcome to try such a blithe and undiscerned experiment with solitude. The results are usually quite systematic: Rejection, and running back to the relief of the warm bodies and the machines that placate us, keeping the fire for "more" sufficiently buried if not entirely snuffed. So, neither canned answer will do, for solitude and the donning or doffing of the monk's life is not so easy as either of these rather pat and placid responses would render it.

Who, then, is fit for the experiment of solitude, if it is to be an experiment which bears results with the staying power of integrity, which is to say of real, dynamic, and lasting transformation in a human life? *Is* it only the monk? Yes and no, only now, understood with the nuance which renders the answers meaningful enough to honor the dignity of the human pursuit of God, Self, and the world which couches them. "No", solitude is not only for the monk, in the sense that solitude—the place of encounter between "alone" and "all one" *as* one—is a refuged place in every human heart. If you breathe, if you live, if you ask questions that will not brook or even mildly tolerate condescension and pre-made responses, then solitude *is* a constitutive part of what it is to be *you*, because it is a constitutive part of what it is to be *human*, which is to say, an embodied immortal soul seeking *truth, meaning,* and *freedom*. *However*, that solitude that is yours is under lock and

key: *Your heart* is the lock and *your will* is the key. Entry or barred access is determined not by a supernatural or celestial gatekeeper, but rests with you alone. Your daring is your calling card.

Next—and perhaps requiring even more nuanced interpretation— "Yes". This is to say, "Yes, only the monk pursues the call to, in, and through solitude". Like the nuanced "no", there are implications here, the first being that while the *state of life* of monasticism is not and clearly *cannot* be the *sine qua non* of solitude's pursuit of means and ends to meaning, the *way of life* of monasticism quite certainly is. What does this mean? It means what Jesus implies when he unequivocally directs (i.e. he does not suggest), "When you pray, go into your inner room, and pray to your Father in secret, and your Father who sees you in secret will reward you" (Mat.6:6). This is not a command to monasticism as a permanent *state*, but rather an urging toward monasticism as an adopted and protracted *way*. The "secret" of the prayer which moves mountains, moves the heart of the seeker, and moves the heart of God is indeed a monastic secret. And we all—no matter who we are or what state of life we call our own—must assume the spiritual habit of the monk before entering into that "inner room", even if—as is the case for most—the habit will be exchanged for other transactional garb upon this depth of prayer's conclusion. This "assuming and exchanging" of course is not a reference to an actual change of clothes (this would be absurd), but rather, to a spiritual and attitudinal shift which itself establishes us on a different plane. To "clothe the heart in the habit" (in every connotation of the word *habit*) is an interior reality which becomes a kind of password to the great questioner's realm, the solitude of prayer and contemplation where "alone" and "all one" are explored, and their dimensions found to be not two, but *one*.

Across apparent borders and boundaries

Where might we turn to see these spiritual facts demonstrated? Perhaps a better question would be, where might we *not* turn? For a survey across spiritual traditions turns up examples that are multiform even as they remain remarkable for their homogeneity: determination, grit, commitment, sacrifice, heroism, and other-worldliness are just some of the many descriptive words that could be chosen to name our fathers and mothers who have gone before us into the crucible which bears the answer of the ultimate unity between "alone" and "all one". They are young and they are old. They are monastic and they are lay. They are men and they are women. They are fair and they are dark. They are then, they are now, and they will forever be. In their unique stand in time for the Timeless, they represent each person who has ever dared to the ask the questions that change lives, and who has braved the answers which reform those lives. The following are just a few examples which represent a veritable sea of witnesses who have been and done very much the same.

About 2,500 years ago, a noble sage of the warrior caste set out against the religious opinion and orthodoxy of his day to find and determine for himself and from his depths the truth without a name. When Siddhartha sat down, and the Buddha arose in his place, a vortex of invisible wisdom-light was opened and channeled into the world from a perfectly selfless and solitudinous place. Alone, and all one. About half a millennium later a man whose birth marked time was giving his life for the good of many, and he was tired. He went to a desert to begin his mission, and retired periodically to deserted mountain tops to commune with his Father in secret, a temporal transport to the eternity where together they began. Alone, and all one. Many followed him across time and place, including Catherine, born into a family of more than twenty children in Sienna in the 14th century. Before she became a haranguer of popes, a mystic bride, and a receiver of one of the finest and most erudite transmissions of Western Theology, she stole away to a solitary place for long stretches of time in her own backyard to utterly *be* with the Beloved. Alone, and all one. One hundred thirty years ago, a 16-year old boy had an insatiable desire to know the answer to the burning question, "Who am I?" He courted death as his asking place and lived even while dying. Eleven years of silence deep in the Hill of Arunachala in Virupaksha Cave and Mamara Guhai followed, ushering in for Ramana a ministry of wisdom to the masses who would seek him and benefit from his wordless presence even more than from his words. Alone, and all one.

The greatest of moments and missions have often happened in dark and in secret, not as from some ominous womb, but as from a veiledly bright birthing place of what is beautiful, insightful, and real. We, pilgrims on the way, want answers; but like any trade, we need to know that there are others—masters and artisans which in this case are sages and saints, some known to all, others known to none at all—who have gone before us, and who by their example have shown us a way. They are cross-cultural, cross-traditional, and cross-epochal. Their diversity in a thousand ways is a curious thing. But that diversity is seen as a hub of life when couched in the fact that binds them: *Solitude* as discovery's locus of emanation…Discovery of Self, of God, of world, of what matters most, of what matters not at all, and how to share and teach that to others who carry their own solitude like an albatross of lonely sorrow rather than an eagle of promised and purposed flight. The all-encompassing and comprising word that strikes the seeker here is that of "compassion"—to *lovingly suffer with the beloved*—lifting up the other out of perceived loneliness unto a restoration of what was never truly lost: The wholeness which bespeaks fulfilled aloneness and all-oneness all at once.

The highest life: A life "in between"

The examples given above are only quantitative smatterings of the qualitative greatness that has blessed our world through the courageous march into solitude and silence of men and women willing to think the unthinkable, search the unsearchable, and pray the unprayable. There have been a great many souls from

many walks of life who have shown by their willingness to persevere through the darkness that light abounds in places considered by all reasonable accounts to have been the most unlikely of sanctuaries: charnel grounds, caves, deserts, one's own backyard, one's own desolation. They are founders like the Buddha and Jesus, saints like Catherine of Siena, sages like Ramana Maharshi. They are unique, brave, trailblazing, deeply provocative, and a great many things more. But whatever appellatives and opinions they may draw from the curious or the curated, *none* of these exemplary souls can be considered "mild". Is there no room, then, for those whose wills are not so sharply honed, whose spirits are of a more moderate grade? There is. And interestingly enough, it is not so much the mild who show us the way to what is mild, but an unimagined that shows us the unimaginable, a precious "in between", a "both-and" which points us to possibilities we may never have dreamed could be ours.

To illustrate this, we will consider two figures who are paradigmatic for the fullness of what their respective spiritual traditions can be, and which—*alive* in them—their traditions *are*. One, representing a certain apex of life and thought in the Christian West, is St. Thomas Aquinas (13th c). The other, representing an unmatched breadth of mystical experience in the dharmic East is Sri Ramakrishna (19th c). Utilizing them as examples of the "in between" and the "both-and" is not to make a claim for an unparalleled *greatness* (as many of their admirers persuasively do), but for a rather unprecedented *brilliance of approach* which highlights an extraordinarily "out of the box" manifestation of the divine life in each of them. St. Thomas Aquinas left a legacy of teaching which had opportunity to showcase itself through his example. Sri Ramakrishna left a legacy of example which had occasion to shine through his teaching. Their differences are here highlighted so that their alignment can be better appreciated: One was "lettered" to the brim. The other flirted with illiteracy. One was respectable. The other, often thought mad. One left the promise of endowment and riches to choose a poorer life. The other was born into poverty and never left it. One's written *corpus* fills the space of a modest library. The other left not a written word of his own behind. One lived in medieval Europe. The other lived at the crest-beginning of the Bengali renaissance. They spoke no common language, shared no common time, nor a common land. What, then, *did* they share?

They shared a penchant for piercing through glass ceilings in the spiritual life, and for inspiring others to do the same. One's legacy is summed up for our purposes in a poignant teaching that comes from his *crème de la crème* work. The other's legacy is summed up for the same purposes in a pitch of lived and sustained God-realization which some may sardonically say not even God Himself had heard of. Remember our context: Solitude, and what is born from it—a paradoxical comingling of deep aloneness and broad at-one-ness as *one life well-lived. And,* just *who* can live and benefit from its singular proving ground. St. Thomas—who was slated to be a mitered abbot of the famed Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino before braving it *alone*

and *away* from this jeweled and casted prison through his resistance of familial, social, and ecclesial naysaying and remonstrance of the highest degree—"birthed" some of his greatest insights into life both human and divine through silences and solitudes crafted for just such wisdom to emerge. Sri Ramakrishna—thought at the *very least* to be a "mystic" of the highest rank, if not a veritable *avatara*—would by example and word ardently encourage his devotees to seek God Alone, *alone*, away from the covetous distractions of worldly life, that they may taste for themselves in an indelible way the sweetness of the Sought.

What was Aquinas' jewel of bequeathal? What did he have to offer to those whose basic mentality was that of a striated hierarchy of goods wherein monks and clerics (spiritual "haves") held places of honor, whereas in many ways the laity needed to content themselves as spiritual "have nots", feeding from the contemplative crumbs of the well-endowed tables of those who grazed on perceivedly higher ground?[4] What could Thomas say to the overburdened lay person, and to the overfed cleric, of his day? Simply put, that it is not the state of life which is the measure of a man, but the *way* in which that state is lived. What Thomas offered was the holding out of the unique goodness of a life that is *equally full* of *both* contemplation *and* action, a fullness which bespeaks the entirety of the human longing for God, and which neither unduly privileges nor punishes any of its godly expressions.[5] He pinned the prize on sincerity, not appearance or platitude. And he himself lived the consequential fullness of that teaching as it burst forth from his life in innumerable ways—academic, literary, poetic, laborious, and utterly self-given. In other words, he did not only *say* "It can be done". He *lived* the assertion.

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[4] It is to be noted that this perceived prejudicial stratification is *not* a distinctly Christian phenomenon, either in previous ages, nor in our own. It is true that both "then" and now, one need not strain to see greater honor and spiritual prestige being given in larger measure to clergy and religious than to laity in the Christian West, quite apart from the question of whether it is actually merited. However, in the Vedantic East, as amply demonstrated in his *bhashya* (commentaries), Shankara was no kinder to non-monastics in his treatment of who is more preferentially primed for *moksha* (liberation), and his spiritual descendants are very often indiscriminately accorded pride of place as the pinnacled subject of society's obeisance. When this is deserved—in "both" camps—it is a beautiful and fitting sign of tribute, and a reminder to all of us that a greater life is available beyond the proverbial veil of this world and its wiles.

[5] A caveat by way of clarification is offered here: It is true that Thomas taught the *objective superiority* of the consecrated vocation over that of the lay. However, this is *not* the assertion of an objective superiority of the consecrated *person* over that of the lay *person*. It is a testament to the means of the life chosen, and to its professed ends. Insofar as what is "heavenly" is higher, the consecrated person chooses a "superior" state with reference to the *direct path* of its avowed goal and pursual. However, *subjectively*, the "higher" vocation is the one that is lived in an embodied way by the person whose spiritual and soteriological attainments only God can know. For this nuanced treatment of the consideration of the superiority of contemplation over action, see S. THOMAS AQUINATIS, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, q. 182, a. 1 – 3, and as it pertains to states of life, 184 - 189, (especially q. 184, a.4 – 8) in *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Opera Omnia, Tomus III*, Tipis Petri Fiaccadori, Parmae 1853.

Consider now a different world, a different time: six hundred years later, a context, a culture, a creed, a clime so seemingly disparate from that of medieval Europe. We take our place with Sri Ramakrishna in the Panchavati, the Kali Temple, and the sanctuary of his small dwelling which brimmed with only Godspeak and Godsight. Largely unlearned yet keenly adept, Ramakrishna's God-intoxicated ecstasies were so pronounced (some might say "severe") that he could hardly function or even live without a constancy of caretaking for the sake of his person and his most basic needs. He was the perfect *bhakta* (lover of God) and the perfect *jñāni* (knower of God), but in the case of others it was said—should the pundits be believed—that ne'er the twain should meet. The lover, after all, is *keenly conscious* of this world as the real domain of the good, the true, and the beautiful. It is God's world, the world of the many, and it is wonderful for this fact. But the knower sees through it all. He sees only the One as the Real; and no "other," no evidence, could change his now-clear mind, free at last, and forever. And in fact, the lives of lovers and knowers and what they have left behind *do* give credence to each of these provincial claims. What is the aspiring seeker to do in such an ocean of dispersions cast and ultimacies proclaimed? How to "choose" knowledge over love, love over knowledge? The absolute over the relative, the relative over the absolute? The one over the many, the many over the one? A reconciliation of opposites does not exist in a book, a treatise, a proclamation, a dissertation, a polemic, an *apologia*, a play of words, nor even in the best of minds. It exists *only* in a lived truth, in a *life* of pure grace. It existed in Sri Ramakrishna.

Ramakrishna enjoyed a more or less constant vision of God with name and form, pivoting and oscillating with pure non-dual realization where *any* sense of name and form—any sense of an "other", human or divine—was completely eclipsed. This pivoting oscillation—a state which seems quite literally impossible for those of us whose points of reference even on our best days simply does not reach *so high*—put demands so physically and psychically taxing on Ramakrishna that it would have without exaggeration killed most anyone else who had tasted it...but *who* had tasted it? There is no known precedent. And its sustenance was equally remarkable for its uniqueness: Ramakrishna received a divine command which sanctioned his liminal existence between this world and the next and which bled well into no world at all: "Remain in

bhavamukha".[6] This state—a live holding place between the relative perception of God, world, and souls on one hand, and the absolute experience of The One which defies all names and forms on the other—was a

[6] For biographical accounts of Ramakrishna's reception of the command to "Remain in *bhavamuka*" and its implications, see S. SARADANANDA, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play,* trans. S. Chetanananda, Vedanta Society of St. Louis, St. Louis 2003, chapter "Sri Ramakrishna in *Bhavamuka*" (387 – 409), and S. TAPASYANANDA, *Bhakti Schools of Vedanta*, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore 1990, Appendix II "*Bhāva-mukha*", 472 – 478.

state in which *all* of the claims of *all* of the great ones could be confirmed and reconciled at last.[7] It affirmed the many and the one resting together like the lion and the lamb, the sheathing of the sword of disputation which divides. But perhaps most importantly, it holds out the possibility for all of us that from a place of solitude burgeons the most unlikely yet fulfilling scenarios of the spiritual life and of we humans who pursue it: Not the triumph of a position, a perspective, or a personal point of view, but the blessedly honed harmony of all of them.

The figures chosen here as examples are not the *only* figures to choose, but they do uniquely illustrate something precious: Solitude is a condition that transcends temporal limitations and qualifications, and there is a degree of it "fit" for all. It is not an unequivocal "yes" or "no" dichotomy, nor a quantitative measure of more or less being somehow "better" (as demonstrated in the quandary that Thomas deftly reconciles between vocational states of life, and in the "both-and" option that Sri Ramakrishna daringly took in his vocational state[8]), but a welcoming invitation for each to consider as to *which degree* of solitude is best *for me*, given the exigencies and conditions which are uniquely my own. Solitude is in the end not a question. It is a given. Which implies a Giver. And His Mercy will only place into my hands and my heart that which can be handled for my greatest good. The real and only question is, will I dare to brave this gift?

Conclusion: The Heart is the desert of our day

It is true, incontestably so, that the ideals presented by these almost mythic figures are incredibly high: Who can aspire to the enlightened mind of an Aquinas or to the fullness of realization of a Ramakrishna? Perhaps the question needs to change, given the stakes of our day. Perhaps the question is better phrased, "Who *cannot* aspire to these heights"? Heights which are so mountainously peaked, so almost flagrantly high that they alone escape the doldrumed suffering that so punctuatingly eviscerates the human experience this side of the veil? This is not to say that the human experience itself was substantially different in any of the lives and times herein considered. But it is to say that ours is uniquely precipiced upon a ledge of such fierce banality that only the most radical of means, measures, and hopes can take us to the Height and Depth that is the place of our true heart and our true home. A dared and daring solitude—the place of utter aloneness and utter all-one-ness—is the entry point that promises and presages a visceral deliverance from what ails our seeking

[7] For an astute treatment of how Ramakrishna's realizations do not override the principal of non-contradiction, see A. MAHARAJ (S. MEDHANANDA), *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality*, part one ("The Infinitude of God") and part two ("Religious Pluralism"), particularly the section in the latter entitled "Sri Ramakrishna's Response to the Problem of Conflicting Religious Truth-Claims", Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, 13 – 116, esp, 101 – 109. See also ATMAPRIYANANDA's "Rāmakṛṣṇa and Relativity", Appendix I in *Bhakti Schools of Vedanta*, *cit.,* 451 – 471.

[8] Both a *sannyasin* and a householder, Sri Ramakrishna lived with his wife, Sri Sarada Devi, in unbroken chastity. In the Christian tradition this is termed a "Josephite marriage", named after the father of Jesus, St. Joseph, who lived the same with his wife, Mary.

spirits, built for the Infinite, but often settling for much less. This solitude is holy, of our very nature, of the very nature of God, the great Alone and the great I Am.

When we consider that the great Alone and the great I Am are not somewhere "out there" as philosophical constructs, but the constituting factors of the *"within"* that is the very substance of the Self, we are permitted to couch it in the language of love which holds all tensions and paradoxes in a perfect and powerful congruence. The space between "alone" and "all one"—at first glance divided, but seen upon deeper abidance to be completely whole—is the space of Love Absolute which we call *the heart.* But let not the romantic overtones fool or pacify. The heart is love's place, yes, but true love and the heart which holds it is a place of no escape. The heart as loving's holding place is a spacious desert and a chambered paradise all at once, a place of inescapable evasionless encounter. It is the "inner room" into which Jesus bids the seeker of God that he may pray in the silent moaned tones of deep and intimate secrecies which only that inner room can hold. The heart for this person at prayer becomes a place of reconciliation, clarification, transfiguration.

The heart is a cell—not a prison, but a precious holding place. "Sit in your cell *as in paradise*", said the reforming hermit St. Romuald one thousand years ago;[9] and similarly, its correlate, "Sit in your cell, and *it will teach you everything*", said the desert father Abba Moses nearly seven hundred years before.[10] Rephrased and revisioned, we can see that these great seekers and survivors of solitude's gamut were not necessarily speaking of a room with four walls, but of the four-chambered heart. It is this heart—the one you and I were born with, the one which can never be taken away, and *yet* which transcends ultimately all bodily bounds—that is the cell with which our human birth endows us, and to which our life increasingly and insistently invites us in each of its successive seasons.

The mythic desert of the heart, where sacred seclusion bespeaks intimacy over desolation, is the very space itself of "alone" and "all one", of "alone" *as* "all one", the place where we discover the precious meeting of opposites in solitude's beatitude, and the blessing of what it actually is to *be* and to *live* the gift of our life. The spiritual life is, as the saying has it, *caught,* not taught. It is an apprenticed art where we can learn through the wisdom of the masters to embody the grit and grace of *being*, teaching us without mediation to rely on inner reserves rather than outer settings. If it is true as the ancients declared that solitude is the seeker's true beatitude, then this calls us to an experiential exploration of and as the first person whose name is always and

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[9] Cf. St. Romuald's *Brief Rule*, a one-page yet powerful *magna carta* for the hermit-monks under his guidance. St. Romuald, founder of the Camaldolese order of hermit-monks, was a spiritual father of St. Peter Damien, cited earlier in this essay.

[10] ABBA MOSES, Saying number six, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. B. Ward, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo 1975, 139.

ever “I”, for which there is no substitute. For no matter how much inspiration we derive from another’s attainments, we cannot rest on the laurels of another’s purports and proclamations, no matter how persuasive, and no matter the proclaimer’s statured name. In solitude, we discover the winged merit of the human pursuit which intuits and insists that there is more than the thin promises of the world which daily meets the eye—glimpsed through visioned spaces opened through thin letters like “l” which ultimately reveals the identity between “alone” and “all one”, and “I” in which the revelation of God-Self and oneself is found. In this place, we learn our own true name beyond all names. And from this heart, Infinitude’s abyss, the desert itself gives rise to the life divine.

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सहज बोधः
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