



“The Yoga of ‘You Go’”: Meher Baba’s “Ascendant Path” to Nonduality

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Accepted: 17 January 2024
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Abstract

This comparative theological article explores Meher Baba’s written Vedāntic teaching he once called “the yoga of ‘you go’” within a cosmological scheme he named “The Divine Theme,” which features in his books *God Speaks* and *The Nothing and the Everything*. Following his Vedāntic master, Upasni Maharaj and Sri Rāmakṛṣṇa, Meher Baba innovated on what scholars call the Yoga Advaita traditions. The important features of these lineages that impact his version are mental annihilation or *manonāśa* and the destruction of impressions or *vāsanākṣaya* (what he called “unwinding *saṃskāras*”) in order to liberate the soul while living in a body or *jīvanmukti*. Further, I map the total arc of Meher Baba’s work and how it fits historically within the Yoga Advaita lineages as they developed from the tenth century CE to the present. There are two basic sides to his work: his written teaching, which consolidates what one commentator calls “the ascendant path of return” to the nondual Self, and his active ministry, which I can only introduce here, which charts new territory for the future in what this commentator calls “the descendant path” of God-realization. I also constructively explore the ways that in *The Nothing and the Everything* the story of Gaṇeśa’s decapitation and recapitation is used to express, in narrative form, the philosophical treatment in *God Speaks*. In terms of salvation, Meher Baba’s teaching yields a theology of religious diversity I call “exhaustivism.” This refers to an “exhaustive” scope of learning literally all there is to learn in creation *as* each form in creation, including every kind of religious possibility in the human phase of reincarnation, a use of energy in each stage of the cosmic growth process that is “exhausting,” and finally, it refers to a difficult final stage of return to the divine that is marked by safely disposing of the *saṃskāric* “exhaust” generated in this evolution. Lastly, I offer some topics for further study in his Divine Theme that include the nature of human life and death, as well as the role of religions, God-realized masters or “Man-Gods,” and Meher Baba himself as the “God-Man” or *Avatāra*.

A version of this paper was delivered at a Theology Without Walls panel at the American Academy of Religion, Denver, CO November 18, 2022. I am grateful to the anonymous peer-review readers, Walter Slaje, and James Madaio for comments on earlier drafts.

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Keywords Meher Baba · God-Man · *Avatāra* · Yoga Advaita · *Manonāśa* · *Śaṃskāras* · *Vāsanākṣaya* · *Jīvanmukti* · Gaṇeśa · “Exhaustivism,” the “ascendant and descendant spiritual paths,” Sri Rāmakṛṣṇa · Man-God · *Vijñānī*

I'd gladly lose me to find you.
 I'd gladly give up all I had.
 To find you I'd suffer anything and be glad.
 ...I call that a bargain.
 The best I ever had. The best I ever had!
 ~ Pete Townshend
 “Bargain”¹

Mind stopped, is God.
 Mind working, is man.
 Mind slowed down, is *mast*.
 Mind working fast, is mad.²
 ~ Meher Baba
Wayfarers

Introduction

If one is of a certain age, Meher Baba (1894–1969, né Merwan Sheriar Irani) may be remembered in the USA for making the cover of the fall 1970 issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine, which contains Pete Townshend’s confession of “falling in love” with this silent master who inspired The Who’s rock opera *Tommy* (Townshend, 1970) or for being the inspiration of Bobby McFerrin’s 1988 single “Don’t Worry Be Happy.” In terms of what Meher Baba claimed about himself, about past and contemporary spiritual figures in comparison to him, and what he declared he did for creation and how he did it, he is arguably the most controversial spiritual figure of the twentieth century. It seems this collection of declarations, which I will begin to address here, so far prevents him from being a subject of study for scholars and scholar-practitioners of other traditions who might be justifiably put off, and scholar-practitioners of Meher Baba like me who are fairly sheepish about knowing where to start without alienating readers. Bobby McFerrin’s song is not the full quotation from Meher Baba’s writings, which distills his teaching in a certain way: “Do your best. Then don’t worry, be happy! I will help you” (Kalchuri, 2024, p. 5414). Into the breach.

¹ Listen to Townshend’s explanation and performance of this lyric to his song “Bargain,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1mPcvYZqfl>. Accessed 25 January 2024.

² Donkin 1988, p. 19. *Mast* is a Persian word for a “God intoxicated” person, an advanced pilgrim on the spiritual path who is unconscious of the physical plane but “completely absorbed and overpowered by the impressions of Illusion of the [subtle or causal] plane which consistently impregnate his consciousness” (Meher Baba, 1997, p. 136). In this spectrum of mental activity, typical human beings have more in common with the mentally ill than with God, while *masts* have more in common with God than with typical humans.

Meher Baba was born an Irani Zoroastrian but had five spiritual masters who were either Hindu or Muslim or both. One was the Muslim-Hindu Sai Baba of Shirdi (1838?–1918), through whom he became part of the Chishti order (*tariqa*) of Sufism, and in 1952 chartered a nonsectarian American Sufi lineage (*silsila*) of *murshids* or teachers in this order called Sufism Reoriented.³ Since 2000 I have been a *murīd* or novice of this school living in our Murshid’s home and intentional community in Washington, DC. Meher Baba’s written teaching primarily draws upon his own experience yet utilizes the life and teachings of medieval Sufi, Vedāntic, and Christian figures he identified as God-realized masters. One could study his teaching from either a Sufi or Christian vantage point but this article is a constructive theological project of the Meher Baba tradition that focuses on his Non-dual or Advaita Vedāntic lineage (*paramparā*). Meher Baba was radically non-sectarian and did not identify with any specific institutional tradition or Vedāntic *saṃpradāya*. He seems to have used the word “Vedānta” in a broad way in *God Speaks*, his main sacred text, which is comparable to Sri Aurobindo’s use in *The Life Divine* and other works, who built upon Sri Rāmākṛṣṇa and Svāmī Vivekānanda’s Vedāntic innovations. Aurobindo said,

“The word Vedanta is usually identified with the strict Monism and the peculiar theory of Maya established by the lofty and ascetic intellect of Shankara. But it is the Upanishads themselves and not Shankara’s writings, the text and not the commentary, that are the authoritative Scripture of the Vedantin. Shankara’s, great and temporarily satisfying as it was, is still only one synthesis and interpretation of the Upanishads. There have been others in the past which have powerfully influenced the national mind and there is no reason why there should not be a yet more perfect synthesis in the future. It is such a synthesis, embracing all life and action in its scope, that the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda have been preparing.” (Sri Aurobindo, CWSA 13, 1998, p. 10).

Similarly, Vivekānanda wrote,

“We must interpret the Vedas in the light of the experience of Sri Ramakrishna. Shankaracharya and all other commentators made the tremendous mistake to think that the whole of the Vedas spoke the same truth. Therefore they were guilty of torturing those of the apparently conflicting Vedic texts which go against their own doctrines, into the meaning of their particular schools.” (Svāmī Vivekānanda, CWSV 7, 1979, p. 411).

³ The Chishtiyya order originated in Afghanistan in the tenth century in the city of Chisht with Abu Ishaq Shami (died tenth century) and then flowered in India in the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries under the guidance of what are believed to be a *silsila* of *Qutubs* or God-realized murshids in the “Valley of the Saints” near Khuldabad, India. Chishtī Muʿīn al-Dīn Ḥasan Sijzī (1143–1236) is the originator of this Indian lineage. See Ernst 1992 and Ernst and Lawrence 2002. Sai Baba’s connection to this tradition is disputed, but Meher Baba said that it is through the 14th century Chishtiyya master Zar Zari Zar Baksh. “According to Meher Baba, Zarzari Zar Baksh was the Master of Sai Baba in a previous lifetime. It is said that Sai had done something that so pleased Zarzari Zar Baksh that he had given Sai Realization, though Sai was not destined to realize God in that incarnation” (Khalchuri 2024, p. 49).

Meher Baba received his teaching from Upasni Maharaj (1870–1941), himself the successor of Sai Baba of Shirdi (See Irani & Desai, 2020). I will limit my theological analysis of this written teaching to three questions. What tradition of Vedānta does this teaching belong, how does Meher Baba both honor and transform it, and what kind of theology of religion, or better, “theology of religious diversity” might it support (Thatamanil, 2020)? As I will show, his written teaching belongs to what Andrew Fort (2015) calls the “Yoga Advaita” traditions, consolidating various currents into a coherent systematic understanding that Meher Baba called “The Divine Theme”. This written consolidation includes Meher Baba’s own Vedāntic lineage and is comparable to that of Sri Rāmākṛṣṇa, whom he called a God-realized “Man-God” or *Sadguru*, and further, “the Herald of the Avatāric age,” while understanding himself as this long-awaited *Avatāra* or “God-Man,” who comes every 700 to 1400 years (Kalchuri 2024, p. 3229).⁴ As a brief introduction, in my reading of Meher Baba’s work as “God become man,” Rāmākṛṣṇa as “man become God” and “*Avatāric* Herald” anticipated Meher Baba in the following five ways. Firstly, Rāmākṛṣṇa is known for mastering multiple spiritual paths to God in his milieu that valued *bhakti* and *saguṇa* Brahman (the path of love and the soul’s differentiated union with the personal divine “with qualities”) and, alternatively, those that valued *jñāna* and *nirguṇa* Brahman (the path of knowledge and the soul’s undifferentiated unity with the impersonal divine “without qualities”). Secondly, he placed equal value on these past opposing means and goals, synthesizing them into a single teaching, practice, and experience, which is their *simultaneous* realization he called *vijñāna* or “intimate knowledge of Brahman” (Medhānanda, 2018). More work is needed in this area, but I suggest Rāmākṛṣṇa’s descriptions of the *Vijñānī* (also called *Īśvarakoṭī*), the rare being he claimed to have been, is Meher Baba’s Man-God (also called “Perfect Master” or *Qutub*). Meher Baba’s description of the Man-God is intricate, but take the following as a salient example:

When a person is crossing the inner planes towards God-realisation, he becomes successively unconscious of the gross, subtle and mental worlds as well as his own gross, subtle and mental bodies. But after God-realisation, some souls again descend or come down and become conscious of the whole creation as well as their gross, subtle and mental bodies, without in any way jeopardizing their God-consciousness. They are known as Perfect Masters. *God as God alone is not consciously man, and man as man alone is not consciously God; the Man-God is consciously God as well as man* (Meher Baba, 2007b, pp. 22–23, emphasis in original).

Comparatively, Rāmākṛṣṇa’s said, “The case is different with the *Ishvarakotis*. For them it is like involution and evolution. Saying, ‘Not this, not this,’ they get to the roof top and find that the staircase is made of the same material—bricks, lime and brick dust—as the roof itself. So, they walk up and down the staircase

⁴ See Meher Baba, 2007b, pp. 1–7, 20–36 for his descriptions of the *Avatāra* or “God-Man” and the *Sadguru* or “Man-God.” In a nutshell, both are God in human form with different yet complementary scopes of work.

and sometimes rest on the roof” (Gupta, 1992, p. 604). Rāmakṛṣṇa’s “roof” is Meher Baba’s “God-consciousness.” Rāmakṛṣṇa’s “staircase” is Meher Baba’s consciousness “of the whole creation as well as their gross, subtle and mental bodies.” Rāmakṛṣṇa’s *Īśvarakoṭi* is Meher Baba’s “Man-God” who “is consciously God as well as man.” Meher Baba clarified Rāmakṛṣṇa’s view that an *Īśvarakoṭi* is rare, saying there are always five and only five such beings on earth who collaboratively govern creation. There are fifty-one other God-realized souls on earth as well, but they do not have a role in creation as the Man-God (Meher Baba, 1997, pp. 150–151). He also claimed that his five masters were the five Man-Gods of his day that “brought him down,” which is another crucial scope of their work when it is time for the *Avatāra* to incarnate.

The third way that Rāmakṛṣṇa’s teaching of *vijñāna* anticipated Meher Baba is in the practical ways he united previously separate cultures to create a global human unity. These occurred especially through Rāmakṛṣṇa’s wife Śārāda Devī who attracted and personally initiated devotees from all castes and creeds from India, Europe, and America, as well as through his unique pupil Svāmī Vivekānanda who institutionalized his “Practical Vedānta” in the Ramakrishna Mission in India and Vedanta Societies all over the world (Sen 2022, Long 2024, Medhānanda, 2022; Harris, 2022). This began the great work of what Meher Baba called “a new world culture,” one that “will not deny the value of diverse traditions, nor will it merely accord them patronizing tolerance. On the contrary, it will entail active appreciation of the diverse religions and cultures” (Meher Baba, 1985, pp. 143).

The fourth feature is Rāmakṛṣṇa’s worship of the universal divine Mother in the Śakta form of *Kālī* who he equated with the personal Brahman with qualities. His wife Śārāda Devī was his spiritual consort and he and his devotees saw her as the incarnation of the universal Mother. Analogously, Mehera Irani (1907–1989) was Meher Baba’s spiritual consort and chief female disciple, though not his wife. He also claimed to have done a special work for creation through her, claiming that “Mehera is My Beloved. She is like my Radha...She is My very breath, without which I cannot live” (Judson, 1989, p. 109). With an understanding of Meher Baba’s ministry that I will summarize below, Rāmakṛṣṇa’s worship of *Kālī* and the physical world as her body can be seen as a crucial preparation for Meher Baba’s scope of work to birth what he called “The New Humanity” that will live a new life on a transformed earth now and in the coming centuries (Meher Baba 2007a, pp. 3–12).

Lastly, following in the footsteps of Thakur (“Master” as used by devotees of Rāmakṛṣṇa) who joined the *jñāna* teachings (broadly conceived) of Advaita Vedānta and the Brāhmo Samāj with the *bhakti* teachings (broadly conceived) in Śaktism, Vaiṣṇavism, Tantra, Christianity, and Islam, Meher Baba allied Yoga Advaita’s nondual knowledge or *jñāna* with the devotional teachings and practices of medieval Sufi and Christian masters. Attar, Hafiz, Rumi, Kabir, and Francis of Assisi figure prominently in his writing and discourses, all of whom Meher Baba identified as Man-Gods, or in these religious contexts, *Quutubs* and a Perfect Master. I suggest that an important consequence of this synthesis is that Yoga Advaita’s difficult processes of spiritual growth, infinite benefits, and responsibilities are not just the province of the rare *Īśvarakoṭi* or Man-God of any one particular caste or creed

but are the destiny of all human beings, reached through four stages of growth in the Divine Theme described below.

From the standpoint of salvation, what theology of religious diversity describes Meher Baba's written teaching? As will become clear, an "exhaustivist" option emerges beyond the familiar exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist options (Race, 1982). Catherine Cornille's more refined typology includes particularism, closed and open inclusivism, and postcolonialism is also not applicable, though Meher Baba's teaching about the spiritual path of return to God has something in common with postcolonialism's deconstruction of reified religious boundaries (Cornille, 2020, pp. 43–78). I use "exhaust" in terms of "scope, labor, and waste" in Meher Baba's teaching. Exhaustivism is a completely "exhaustive" mastery of every religion in the first phase of human growth that he simply called "reincarnation." This growth is also "exhausting," drawing out every ounce of energy to master this curriculum and storing its total experience and energy within inner nets or "sheaths" (*kośas*) of consciousness made of *samskāras* or "impressions." In a second process of human growth he called "involution," which is the soul's return to God in his scheme, this teaching also accounts for the *samskāric* waste or "exhaust" generated in this use of energy that is safely reprocessed and ultimately destroyed.

Two Sides of Meher Baba's Work

Before I unpack exhaustivism in Meher Baba's Divine Theme, it is helpful to understand that his written teaching and his active ministry are two distinct but coordinated sides of his work. To reckon the throughline, I suggest one understand the differences between them, interpret each on its own terms and finally interpret the written work in light of the ministry, not vice versa. In summary, his written teaching honors the truth of the past, while his ministry charts new territory for the future. Meher Baba said his written teaching was fully placed in what is now called his "secret book" that he wrote from July 13, 1925 (3 days after he began a 44-year silence on July 10th) to October 1926. This hand-written manuscript has since been lost. He called it his "big book" that "will be the future Bible, Koran, Avesta, and Veda, as it will be universally accepted by all castes and creeds" (Kalchuri 2024, p. 954). No one ever read this document, though he showed a part of it to Gandhi in 1931 on their way to England on the S.S. Rajputana as well as another part to one of his *mandali* (close disciples), which signals his unusual regard for Gandhi.⁵ Meher Baba later said that "90%" of this lost text is now in *God Speaks*, first published in 1955, and the other "10%" is found in *The Nothing and the Everything*, which his *mandali* member Bhau Kalchuri posthumously compiled and expanded in 1981 from notes he took from dictations Meher Baba gave him in the late 1960s (See Deitrick, 2005, pp. 4–13, Deitrick, 2015, pp. 5–17, Parks, 2019, pp. 3–11).

⁵ This friendship is significant and requires more critical study, but it began in 1924 and continued until Gandhi's assassination in 1948. I gave a presentation on this topic at the 2019 AAR entitled "Manifesting Truth and Non-Violence in the Friendship of Gandhi and Meher Baba."

The first question we might ask of this written material is what nondual goal did Meher Baba claim is the purpose of creation and how is it achieved? I suggest he confirms and builds on earlier Yoga Advaita traditions in their medieval formulations in India from the tenth to the fourteenth century CE that his master Upasni Maharaj embodied for him (See Irani & Desai, 2020 and Beldio, 2023). “Yoga Advaita” is a heuristic designation since none of the teachers I group within it used this label. These medieval lineages are not identical and according to Walter Slaje, the original written teaching that began in north India and made its way south became simplified or distorted in later texts (Slaje, 1998). More specifically, when referring these Yoga Advaita traditions there are a few key concepts prevalent in this milieu that are important for understanding Meher Baba’s written teaching: “liberation while living” or *jīvanmukti*, “mental annihilation” or *manonāśa*, and latent “impressions” called either *vāsanās* or *saṃskāras* that are the constituents of the mind that are also transformed, refined, or even annihilated in spiritual advancement (*vāsanākṣaya*). Among different traditions or *sampradāyas*, *jīvanmukti* is a contested and evolving telos vis-à-vis social justice and is in tension with *videhamukti* or “liberation without the body” (Fort, 1998). Contemporaries of Meher Baba, like the advaitins Svāmī Śivānanda and Ramana Maharshi, who drew inspiration from the Yoga Advaita stream, caution that the body is involuntarily transcended in this *manonāśa/vāsanākṣaya* process so that the ultimate freedom/release (*mukti*) the soul achieves is actually *videhamukti*, or bodiless liberation.

Dr. Carol Weyland Conner (1942–2023), the late Murshida of Sufism Reoriented, called this experience and process of liberation the “ascendant path” of return to God since the soul had to go beyond the physical plane and ascend the spiritual planes of consciousness in this period of history to be liberated from the impressions that constitute the mind. In writing about Upasni Maharaj, she says, “In the age now closing, represented by Maharaj, the most refined spiritual principles counsel an ascendant path of spiritual return. This is the traditional path of renunciation, austerities, and ritualized worship of various sorts, including veneration of divine effigies, recitation of *japas* and mantras, ascetic practices, pilgrimages, and prescribed acts of charity” (Weyland Conner in Irani & Desai, 2020, p. xxvi). As Weyland Conner understood it, in this cross-spiritual ascendant path, the body and the earth were recalcitrant in their refusal to accept higher divine force, unable to be transformed. Svāmī Vivekānanda thought the same: “This world is like a dog’s curly tail, and people have been striving to straighten it out for hundreds of years; but when they let it go, it has curled up again. How could it be otherwise?” (CWSV 1 2003, p. 79. See Long, 2016). Therefore, liberation meant an “ascension,” leaving matter and the body behind in *videhamukti*.

The question of Meher Baba’s ministry that I can only introduce here might be: what did Meher Baba claim to do to fulfill this nondual purpose for this “curly tail” of a creation? His ministry moves in the opposite direction of what Weyland Conner calls the “descendant path” of God-realization. She writes that “It is by this descendant path that mankind will increasingly join with divinity and so fulfill Creation’s destined purpose: to realize the divine life here on this earth” (Weyland Conner in Irani & Desai, 2020, p. xxvii). This might be understood as finding liberation in matter, and universalizing the experience of *jīvanmukti* as a new normal. It is

important to understand that Weyland Conner's descendant path is not merely an individual or communal aspiration to balance devotion, action, and contemplation in order to transform the world. These are integral methods that center social justice nourished by prayer and meditation, as opposed to ones that focus on prayer and meditation alone while possibly ignoring social justice concerns. Such synthesized spiritualities have been extant, at least in seed form, across cultures for millennia, and are crucial foundations for the descendant path (See Miller et al., 2020 for an excellent study of these in the Dharma traditions). Her definition of the descendant path includes a completely new historical context in which the spiritual planes of consciousness themselves (called the "subtle" or *sūkṣma* planes and the "mental" or *kāraṇa* planes in Yoga, Tantra, Śaivism, and Vedānta) are now "descending" to integrate and transform basic or gross matter (*sthūla*) in an unprecedented and explicit way. This allows any spiritual aspirant to find liberation from the binding impressions of the mind while simultaneously aiding the transformation of matter instead of ignoring it or merely bringing a provisional reprieve from suffering. A permanent reprieve is now possible with this divinized *sthūla*; or in Vivekānanda's image, it is possible now to straighten the dog's tail and then let it go, for it wants to remain uncurled. According to Weyland Conner, this is due to Meher Baba's promise to "break his silence" (Weyland Conner, 2020).

Meher Baba was silent for about 44 years, from 1925 until his death in 1969 in which he stopped talking and communicated first in writing (1925–1927), then (anticipating smartphones) "texting" on an English alphabet board (1927–1954), then with his own sign language (1954–1969), and in the final years, severely limiting his communication while he went into a series of seclusions to do his "universal work" to finish "breaking his silence" (1958–1968). These phases are a demonstration, one might notice, of a gradual distancing from the mind and its "talk" as the means to express and enact consciousness. As his written teaching is called "God Speaks," his ministry might be called "God Falls Silent." Even though Meher Baba promised to "break his silence," it seemed he just kept breaking his promises to do so.

What does this "breaking" actually mean? Was it his speaking again or something more? Weyland Conner helpfully links this work to that of the Mother (née Mirra Alfassa, 1878–1973) and Sri Aurobindo (né Aurobindo Ghose, 1872–1950), writing, "The realm of Perfection, the still, shoreless Ocean of Divinity, is the realm of Silence. To dissolve or 'break' its barrier in order to release the energy of Perfection into the lower worlds could be described as 'breaking' the Silence. From this perspective, one might see that Meher Baba could have 'broken his silence' not once, but many times, indeed whenever historically he publicly said he would, (and probably on many other occasions as well)" (Weyland Conner 2020, p. 18). Aurobindo used another metaphor in his epic poem *Savitri* (CWSA 33 and 34 1997), which narrates the breaking of a supramental dawn into creation, or what he called "The Supramental Manifestation Upon Earth" in his last prose essays in 1949 to 1950 (Sri Aurobindo, CWSA 13, pp. 517–592). With a study of the chronology, the Mother and Aurobindo followed and aided this universal process in the same period as Meher Baba's silence and promises to break it. For them it began in 1926 when the Sri Aurobindo Ashram commenced with what they called the descent of

the “Overmind,” continued in 1956 when the Mother experienced the descent of the “Supermind” proper, deepened in 1968 when she experienced an awakening of the “mind of the cells,” and finished in 1973 when the Mother passed away. From the late 1950s to 1968 Meher Baba worked in seclusion to finish breaking the silence, and July 30, 1968 he said he completed this “universal work” “100 percent to my satisfaction” on July 30, 1968 (Kalchuri 2024, p. 5340).

As Weyland Conner understood it, the descendant path was made possible because this series of breakings of the Eternal Silence/Supramental Dawn led (and is currently leading) to a fundamental restructuring of the cosmos. In a previous age of untransformed *sthūla*, the descendant path was impossible. I suggest that if this cosmic restructuring project is true, the descendant path becomes a new formulation of the Yoga Advaita traditions by universalizing the process of *manonāśa*, which had been an individual and rare matter in the ascendant path. Meher Baba seemed to do this in a 4-month phase that he called his “Manonash” work (October 6, 1951, to February 16, 1952) that culminated a crucial milestone of his ministry he called “the New Life” begun in 1949 (Kalchuri, 2024, p. 3147). This relates to the Mother’s experience especially after Aurobindo passed away in 1950 and in 1956 when she claimed to break the supramental golden door that stands between the gross plane and the perfection of *nirguṇa* Brahman (MA 1, February 29, 1956 and CWM 15, p. 94). The Mother found that this supramental break occasioned a universal process of dissolution for the mind and vital levels of humanity, but through her own body. She claimed the mental and vital sheaths “took a hike” (*envoyés en promenade*) after a certain period of intense supramental “penetration” and her body was “truly left to its own devices” (*vraiment laissé à ses propres moyens*) to become something new (MA 9, August 28, 1968, my translation). Mirra never used the word *manonāśa* but I call this universal mental and vital dissolution “descendant *manonāśa*,” instead of “ascendant *manonāśa*,” the latter being an individual mental dissolution that we find in medieval forms of the Yoga Advaita (Beldio, Forthcoming and 2023). Further, the Mother said this new process automatically began transforming her body (*sthūla deha*) into the nature of supermind (*vijñānamaya*) at the cellular level instead of leaving it imperfect like the dog’s curly tail (see MA 1979–1983 for her meticulous description of this fraught process).⁶

Meher Baba claimed he was able to do this “universal work” of “breaking his silence” as the return of the “God-Man” or “Ancient One.” He defined this spiritual status as the very first soul ever to enter creation, pass through all the stages of its cosmic growth of the mind in organic evolution, then all human experience of the mind in reincarnation, and finally the first soul ever to become God realized after a long process of mental dissolution. The God-Man in this understanding is actually the first Man-God whose unique role is to return ever afterwards as the spiritual authority or *Avatāra* of the age to universally set creation on a new course of growth towards that same realization he first achieved (See Meher Baba, 2007b, pp. 1–7). As mentioned, his written teaching is what he named “The Divine Theme,” which is

⁶ Medhānanda has done the most work on relating Aurobindo with Rāmākṛṣṇa’s notion of *vijñāna*, which Aurobindo translated as “supermind” (for example, see Medhānanda 2015). I am building on this work to include the Mother in my research (Beldio, Forthcoming and 2023).

a description of these stages of growth that he first accomplished as the first soul. He subtitled it “The Theme of Creation and Its Purpose” in *God Speaks*, which signals the nondual relationship between the two themes of the divine and creation in his thought. “Theme” can mean an artificial setting given to a venue that evokes a particular culture, historical period, nation, fashion, and so forth. It might also mean the subject of a piece of writing, but in Meher Baba’s case it seems to mean a recurring feature in a work of art, performance, or musical composition. As mentioned above, Meher Baba simultaneously rooted his divine theme of creation in the “melodies” of Vedāntic, Sufi, and Christian Perfect Masters, integrating them into a single diapason. As we focus on the Vedāntic melody, I will also introduce its relationship to the harmony of Purāṇic narrative. Meher Baba made special reference to the popular Hindu god Gaṇeśa and his decapitation and recapitation in *The Nothing and the Everything* to symbolize his work as the *Avatāra* and the process of *manonāśa* that all souls will undergo in God-realization in the Divine Theme. First, I want to historically situate his written teaching a bit more.

Yoga Advaita

Three Historical Periods

As a theological interpretation from the point of view of Meher Baba’s teaching and Weyland Conner’s commentary about the ascendant path and the descendant path, three phases of growth in the written Yoga Advaita traditions emerge. The first phase we might call the “Ascendant *Manonāśa* Period,” which occurred during the medieval period and has reverberations into the 19th century. For our limited purposes here, key concepts of our concern in this textual archive include *jīvanmukti*, which was articulated not only in the Advaita Vedāntic context but in non-dual Śaiva traditions (wherein it likely had its origins as a term), as well as *tattvajñāna* (non-dual gnosis), *manonāśa*, and *vāsanākṣāya*. These were discussed in the text of the *Mokṣopāya* (10th c.) or “The Means to Release,” more popularly known through the later title, *Yogavāsiṣṭha* (11th–14th c.) which, in various versions, was influential across India, including within vernacular contexts. It was through the well-known redaction of the *Mokṣopāya*, known as the *Laghuyogavāsiṣṭha*, that Vidyāraṇya, a *mahant* (chief priest or head of a monastery) at the Śaṅkarite monastic-institution at Śṛṅgeri, extensively developed these notions within an Advaita Vedāntic context, particularly in conversation with Patañjali Yoga.⁷

While there are a variety of developments and nuances that cannot be exhaustively accounted for in any heuristic periodization, in my own constructive reading of this material, which is designed to bring out the internal logic of the Meher Baba

⁷ In Vidyāraṇya’s account, *manonāśa* entails the cessation of mental events and, ultimately, *nirvikalpa samādhi*, not, it would seem, a literal “annihilation.” See Madaio 2018 and 2021. The influence of Vidyāraṇya’s *Jīvanmuktiviveka* is clear in how later Advaita Vedāntins, such as Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (1540–1640), reproduce his definitions of *manonāśa* and *vāsanākṣāya* verbatim (see Madaio 2021). Within the Vedāntic context, these yogic oriented teachings flourished within the renunciate stream of Advaita Vedānta, which was generally limited to ‘twice born’ male mendicants, but they also had currency in certain yogic contexts that space does not permit discussion of here

tradition, after the Yoga Advaita phase that I designate the “Ascendant Manonāśa Period,” I demarcate what I call the “Devotional *Manonāśa* Period” in the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. This is a blending, we might say, of the medieval *bhakti* traditions and their emphasis on a loving devotion to the personal divine across caste and sect with the nondual realization or *jñāna* emphasized in Yoga Advaita. In this context of British Colonialism and its dissolution, we see a transition from an ascendant to a descendant orientation as well as a movement away from a rare or elite spiritual practice for high-caste men to one that includes women and those on the margins and combines other religious traditions and cultures as well. Further we see a global reach. While there were comparable (though not exact) examples of this combination say in Sikhi beginning in the 15th century and particularly among Indian vernacular traditions, we see a kind of culmination in Rāmakṛṣṇa, particularly given that his life and teaching reaches a global audience, which Meher Baba also emphasized.

In service of my broader exegesis of Meher Baba’s teaching, I discern four significant lineages that begin with the master of this blend: Rāmakṛṣṇa and his collaborators Śārāda Devī and Vivekānanda. The second begins with Meher Baba’s “five Perfect Masters,” Sai Baba of Shirdi, Upasni Maharaj (who founded an ashram for women of all castes to recite the Vedas), Hasrat Babajan (a female Sufi *Qutub*), Tajuddin Baba and Narayan Maharaj. Meher Baba continued their work with women and the marginalized in both India and the West. The third is Svāmī Śivānanda (who was initiated into the Daśanāmi lineage linked to Śaṅkara) whose Divine Life Society has developed a global reach and whose disciples went on to influence the Counterculture movements in the West through the Beatles and the 1969 Woodstock rock festival. The last begins with Ramana Maharshi and continued later with Nisargadatta Maharaj and Papaji whose teachings attracted women and men from all castes and creeds as well as Western women and men.

These four lineages share an emphasis on mental annihilation to achieve God realization which requires a destruction of its constituents that are called impressions. This may be a clarification or a change to the classic medieval texts of the Yoga Advaitins that some scholars do not see as clearly describing an “annihilation” of the mind but its abeyance. It is not clear in which camp Thakur would fall, but Rāmakṛṣṇa used *moner nāś* in Bangla, which is essentially the equivalent of the Sanskrit *manonāśa*.⁸ For example, he said, “Is it an easy thing to obtain the Knowledge of Brahman? It is not possible unless the mind is annihilated” (Gupta, 1992, p. 776). Thakur did not use *vāsanā* or *saṃskāra* to further explain this annihilation, but seemed to use in their place the interaction of the Sanskrit idea of *prārabdha* karma and the Bangla word *pāp*.⁹ *Prārabdha* karma is the operative portion of one’s sum total past karma, or *sañcita* karma, which is already fructifying in one’s current life. *Pāpa* in Sanskrit is generally translated as ‘demerit’; Thakur’s use of *pāp* has the connotation of an unwanted accretion from one’s karma that obscures one’s true nature, which also has certain resonances with the Jain use of the word karma. As an example he said,

⁸ I am grateful to Jeffery Long and Svāmī Medhānanda for their help in this Bengali translation of Sri Rāmakṛṣṇa’s words.

⁹ Vivekānanda, on the other hand, used *saṃskāra* in his teaching. For a significant example, see his commentary on Patañjali’s *Yogasūtras* in Vivekānanda, CWSV 1 2003, pp. 235ff.

The truth is that one must reap the result of the *prarabdha* karma. The body remains as long as the results of past actions do not completely wear away. Once a blind man bathed in the Ganges and as a result was freed from his sins [*pāp*], but his blindness remained all the same. (*All laugh*). It was because of his evil deeds in his past birth that he had to undergo that affliction (Gupta, 1992, p. 276).

Meher Baba also spoke of *prārabdha sanskaras* as “the momentum of impressions which constitute the destiny of the soul” (Meher Baba 2007b, p. 38), and used “*manonash*” for *manonāśa* but preferred the word “*sanskara*” or *saṃskāra* for *vāsanā*.

The third phase of the Yoga Advaita traditions I would call the “Descendant *Manonāśa* Period” that began in the early twentieth century and continues to the present. I cannot investigate this period here, but it includes the Mother and Aurobindo as mentioned above, as well as Meher Baba’s ministry to “break his silence,” which includes (among other important events and projects) his work with Mehera, God-intoxicated *masts*, and his creation of an American lineage of *murshids* in Sufism Reoriented (see Beldio, 2022). What is important to understand here is that Meher Baba—building on Rāmākṛṣṇa’s spiritually ground-breaking work and then collaborating with the Mother’s and Aurobindo’s supramental work—belongs in both the Devotional and Descendant *Manonāśa* Periods.

The Centrality of “Impressions”

It should be first noted that as I read the Yoga Advaita literature across the first two historical periods, the “mind” that is stilled or annihilated in *manonāśa* happens at an individual level and it is what Vedāntic traditions call the *mānasa buddhi* complex. This includes the “sense mind” or *manas* that integrates the knowledge of the five senses plus the *buddhi* or rational intellect and will. The *buddhi* integrates its right and left “hands,” which Aurobindo described as the “vision” and “judgment,” respectively, of any limited truth given by the *manas* that motivates action (See Sri Aurobindo, CWSA 1, pp. 386–409). Operating within the horizon of the gross plane, *mānasa buddhi* blindfolds the soul, ensuring it identifies with a limited and false ego, maintaining awareness only of itself and its specific mind, life, and body. It is closed off from the subtle and causal (mental) planes with their bodies, senses, and worlds, and even more unconscious of both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* Brahman, or the supreme divine with and without qualities. In light of this constructive modeling, ascendant *manonāśa* is more aptly named *mānasa buddhināśa* or annihilation of one’s sense mind and rational intellect. If we were to study the Descendant *Manonāśa* Period, I suggest that we would be speaking of the destruction of the entire mental “sheath” or *manahkośa* that envelops humanity as a species, which may be compared to the “noosphere” theorized by Vladimir Vernadsky and Teilhard de Chardin (Teilhard, 1999). Descendant *manonāśa* is really *manahkośanāśa* or annihilation of the noosphere that separates the perfect realm of Silence from the gross plane.¹⁰

¹⁰ This would require another examination to parse but for Teilhard, the noosphere is not an obstacle but the very development, finally in the planetary evolution of a real means to reach its destiny. He writes that with this new membrane or sheath, “The Earth ‘makes a new skin.’ Better still, it finds its soul” (Teilhard, 1999, p. 124)

Many in the Ascendant and Devotional *Manonāśa* Periods of Yoga Advaita used the word *vāsanā* which means “the impression of anything remaining unconsciously in the mind, the present consciousness of past perceptions” (Monier-Williams, s.v. *vāsanā*). These are latent tendencies or habits that establish one’s disposition and, in a way, constitute the mind. They perpetuate identification with a limited ego. The effacement or counteracting of such tendencies is part of three interrelated spiritual goals; namely, extinguishing latent impressions (*vāsanākṣāya*), ‘destroying’ the mind (*manonāśa*), sometimes understood as the cessation of mental events, and realizing nondual reality (*tattvajñāna*) and thus realizing Brahman. If one’s body does not ‘drop off’ after this rigorous process, which is often understood as culminating in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, one achieves *jīvanmukti* or liberation while living. Ramana Maharshi, who is regarded as a *jīvanmukta* by his devotees, understood the process as follows: “If the mind becomes introverted through inquiry into the source of *aham-vritti* [the sense of one’s limited ego-self], the *vasanas* become extinct. The light of the Self falls on the *vasanas* and produces the phenomenon of reflection we call the mind. Thus, when the *vasanas* become extinct the mind also disappears, being absorbed into the light of the one reality, the Heart. This is the sum and substance of all that an aspirant needs to know” (Godman, 2017, pp. 58–59). On this view, the mind is an epiphenomenon of the interaction of the light of the divine Self and one’s *vāsanās*.

Understood within the Meher Baba tradition, when the *vāsanās* are taken away, the mind is automatically destroyed yet the ego remains; rather, the ego (*ahaṃkāra* or “I-maker”) is transformed and repositioned, moving away from a false identification with one’s individual body, life, and mind to the home of the “Heart” or the divine Self. Rāmākṛṣṇa seems to have pointed in this same direction when he described this process as it happens in either *jñānayoga* or *bhaktiyoga*: “A man attains Brahmajñana as soon as his mind is annihilated. With the annihilation of the mind dies the ego, which says ‘I’, ‘I’. One also attains the Knowledge of Brahman by following the path of devotion [*bhakti mārga*]. One also attains It by following the path of knowledge [*jñāna mārga*], that is to say, discrimination. The jñanis discriminate, saying, ‘Neti, neti’, that is, ‘All this is illusory, like a dream.’ They analyze the world through the process of ‘Not this, not this’; it is maya. When the world vanishes, only the jivas, that is to say, so many egos, remain.” (Gupta, 1992, p. 776). Meher Baba said it more bluntly, “Mind is never transformed. Ego is transformed once only” (Kalchuri, 2024, p. 2992). For him,

The real goal of life is not death of the ego, but of the mind! Therefore when Muhammad or Zoroaster or Jesus talked of being born once or dying once, they meant the death of the mind. Mind is born from the very beginning, even before the stone state. This birth is once, and also the death of the mind takes place only once. When the mind dies, the false ego is transformed into Reality. Real Ego is never born and never dies. Ego is always real but due to the mind, it feels and acts as limited and false I. (Kalchuri, 2024, p. 2992).

Weyland Conner comments, “Baba defined manonash as the annihilation of the limited mind. Manonash dissolves the soul’s illusory identification with the personality or ego, that is, with limited individuality.”¹¹

Meher Baba preferred the word *saṃskāra* when describing the process of *manonāśa*. According to Monier-Williams *saṃskāra* is the “impression on the mind of acts done in a former state of existence” (Monier-Williams, s.v. *saṃskāra*). Meher Baba defined them similarly as “impressions of previous experience” “stored in the mind” that determine “the course of present and future experience” (Meher Baba 2007a, pp. 45–46). He also distinguished three kinds that conform to traditional Vedāntic anthropology: gross, subtle, and mental (causal) *saṃskāras*. These in turn are of two types: natural and non-natural *saṃskāras*. Natural *saṃskāras* are the impressions that “the soul gathers during the period of organic evolution” while non-natural *saṃskāras* “get attached to the soul during the human stage,” which are “cultivated under the moral freedom of consciousness with its accumulated responsibility of choice between good and bad, virtue and vice” (Meher Baba, 2007a, pp. 46–47). Meher Baba’s Divine Theme makes the gathering and removal of all these *saṃskāras* the linchpin of his metaphysics, spiritual practice, vision of social and political growth, and cultural expression.¹²

Meher Baba’s Cosmology: “The Divine Theme”

Besides his written work, Meher Baba also used visual media to communicate the Divine Theme and the ascendant path.¹³ A helpful example is a painted diagram that his mandali member Rano Gayley created under his direction (see Fig. 1). It depicts an *exidus et reditus* scheme that has stages he called “evolution and reincarnation,” which comprise the *exitus* phase, and “involution and realization,” which are the *reditus* phase. These are four of the ten states of God that he described in *God Speaks* (see graphic chart Meher Baba, 1997, p. 159). The Divine Theme begins with a radically infinite state that is neither conscious nor unconscious called “God in the Beyond Beyond State.” It is reminiscent of the R̥g Veda hymn 10.129 that begins, “The nonexistent did not exist, nor did the existent exist at that time” (Jamison et al., 2014, p. 1608). As Meher Baba framed it, the other nine states of God manifest because of an unfathomable “whim” or *lahar* in Hindi (*lahari* in

¹¹ <https://www.sufismreoriented.org/copy-of-the-big-picture-part-1-1>; accessed March 8, 2023.

¹² I cannot address this here, but Meher Baba said that for souls who are destined to become liberated while remaining in a body (like the Man-God or the God-Man for example), they are given what he called “*yogayoga sanskaras*.” He wrote, “If the God-realised soul returns to normal consciousness of the world of duality, it gets a universal mind. In the universal mind with which it is endowed, it also gets superfluous and unbinding *sanskaras* which are known as *Yogayoga Sanskaras*. In the Beyond state the Master is eternally free from all *sanskaras*, and even when he is conscious of creation and is working in creation, he remains unbound by the *Yogayoga Sanskaras*, which sit loosely upon his universal mind. The *Yogayoga Sanskaras* merely serve as channels for his universal work. They do not form a restricting chain to his consciousness.” (Meher Baba 2007b, p. 38).

¹³ Sufism Reoriented has installed large original murals of The Divine Theme in its Sanctuary in Walnut Creek, CA and at the Meher Baba Universal Spiritual Centre in Byramangala, India, near Bengaluru. See <https://www.mbusc.org/mbusc-today>; accessed April 15, 2023.

Sanskrit) that originated with the Beyond Beyond State to ask, “Who am I?” This immediately yielded the correct answer “I am God,” which manifested the second “Beyond State of God” or “Infinite Consciousness” (Meher Baba, 1997, p. 8, 78–94, Meher Baba, 1968, pp. 7–11). Simultaneously, this yielded an “incorrect” answer in the form of an evolutionary process of “Infinite Unconsciousness” becoming the correct answer over eons of time. Each *jīvātma* or “drop-soul” first separates from the ocean of divinity because of this “whim” and then undergoes a long evolutionary journey of imaginary and false individuations like “I am gas,” “I am stone,” “I am plant,” “I am animal,” and so forth that ends in finally identifying with the real divine ego, rejoining the infinite ocean of Infinite non-dual Consciousness that secretly it always was. Meher Baba wrote that this is a non-regressive process from beginning to end.¹⁴ For the purposes of this article, I will limit our focus to the curling black line in Gayley’s diagram that follows this process of “Divine Becoming” that begins in light gray, darkens to black, and then in a new phase of *manonāśa*, returns to gray, finally disappearing altogether in a final *manonāśa* in the last part of the diagram. This coiling line symbolizes the nature of *saṃskāras* as they are first gathered and then in a second phase removed. Meher Baba called this the “winding” and “unwinding” of *saṃskāras* like threads around a pole. Winding *saṃskāras* is the means by which Infinite Unconsciousness becomes Infinite Consciousness, but because the *saṃskāras* remain tied to the soul even after full consciousness is achieved, they prevent it from expressing itself infinitely. Unwinding all *saṃskāras* liberates the Infinite Consciousness of the soul.

First Phase of Growth: Winding *Saṃskāras*

The *exitus* or *saṃskāric* “winding” phase has two subphases of organic evolution and reincarnation. Meher Baba was specific about the number of forms and lives the soul passes through. Firstly, each soul winds the *saṃskāras* of 50.4 million forms of organic evolution (six kingdoms of 8.4 million forms of evolution from gas to animal, divided differently on Gale’s chart). I do not have the space to explore this in more detail, but Meher Baba’s use of “evolution” is comparable to that of Vivekānanda and Aurobindo, whose teachings are examples of what C. Mackenzie Brown calls “Vedic Evolutionism” (Brown 2020, pp. 121–130). Brown lists four features in Vivekānanda’s and Aurobindo’s teaching that Meher Baba’s also shares: (1) ultimate reality first undergoes a process of what Vivekānanda and Aurobindo call “involution” to manifest planes of Divine Becoming before undergoing organic

¹⁴ He described one and only one exception that rarely happens on the fourth plane when the soul makes the treacherous transition from the subtle conscious to the mental conscious worlds. He called this the true “Dark Night of the Soul” when the soul has infinite creative and destructive power but its desires are not yet mastered. If not guided by a more advanced soul on the fifth plane, this precarious situation can tempt the soul to abuse this infinite power causing a shock so radical that it disintegrates its consciousness, returning the soul to identify with the stone state of God. Meher Baba wrote, “[i]t is a fact normally that when consciousness is once gained it can never be lost, but the case of fourth plane consciousness is the one exception” (Meher Baba, 1997, p. 47).

and spiritual evolution within/as them,¹⁵ (2) only faculties of consciousness beyond the mind can see this divine cosmic structure and process, (3) they all reject Darwinian chance and the absence of a telos in cosmic growth, and (4) they all “see karma not so much as a theory of moral compensation but rather as a spur to further spiritual effort and growth” (Brown 2020, p. 125).

Meher Baba’s teaching and ministry straddle some important differences between Vivekānanda and Aurobindo. Brown writes that unlike Vivekānanda, “Aurobindo rejects the idea that the involution-evolution cycle is without real progress, merely a return to the unconditioned state of Brahman. Thus, the progressive cycle of involution/evolution [or evolution/involution for Meher Baba] is not illusory, but leads towards a real divinization of the world involving a radical integration of Matter and Spirit” (Brown 2020, p. 126). Meher Baba’s written teaching of the ascendant path is more like Vivekānanda in that for him all creation is an illusion, an imagination of the lower mind and cannot be fundamentally changed or “straightened” like the curl of a dog’s tail; however, like Aurobindo, he says that there is no going backwards for the soul except in one instance on the fourth plane of unwinding *saṃskāras* mentioned above. In Meher Baba’s *ministry* to create the conditions for the descendant path; however, he is exactly like Aurobindo, that even though this world is not real, it is in fact progressing and becoming capable of hosting Reality on the outside of its nature. His Divine Theme, however, does not teach this, being as I suggest, a consolidation of the past Ascendant *Manonāśa* Period and the ascendant path, not the new Descendant *Manonāśa* Period and the descendant path. Lastly, for all three, advancement to the human form in biological evolution and the exploration of the human mind in reincarnation are based on the collection and use of energy that comes from *both* virtuous and vicious lives rather than any shared standard of ethical excellence given by the mind. Meher Baba’s teaching may be more explicit on this point, that wicked lives and their non-natural *saṃskāras* are as needed as virtuous ones and their non-natural *saṃskāras* to exhaust the reincarnation phase and to supply the needed energy for the next phase of God-realization (See Meher Baba, 2007a, pp. 89–97).

Like many Hindu cosmogonies and those in Vedic Evolutionism in particular, Meher Baba taught that the human form is central, intended from the beginning. The sole purpose of organic evolution in Meher Baba’s scheme, with the aid of *saṃskāras*, is to produce the human body since it is the only chrysalis that can hold the “natural” *saṃskāras* of all other forms of the universes as preparation for God-realization. The human being equals 50.4 million forms of evolution. This view prefigured Julian Huxley and Teilhard de Chardin when Teilhard said the human being “is nothing else than evolution become conscious of itself” (Teilhard de Chardin 1999, p. 154). Even further, according to Meher Baba, locked within all these *saṃskāras* of 50.4 million forms is Infinite Consciousness, or what he also called

¹⁵ As the reader will notice, Vivekānanda and Aurobindo conceived evolution and involution in the opposite way as Meher Baba with no substantive difference in meaning it would seem, though more critical study is needed. Meher Baba seemed to go against the tide of not just these two but most Indian thinkers of his day in his use of “evolution and involution”. In any case, all three taught that firstly spirit descends and manifests as matter and then spirit ascends and re-emerges out of the state of matter. See Brown 2012, pp.155-172 and Heehs 2020.

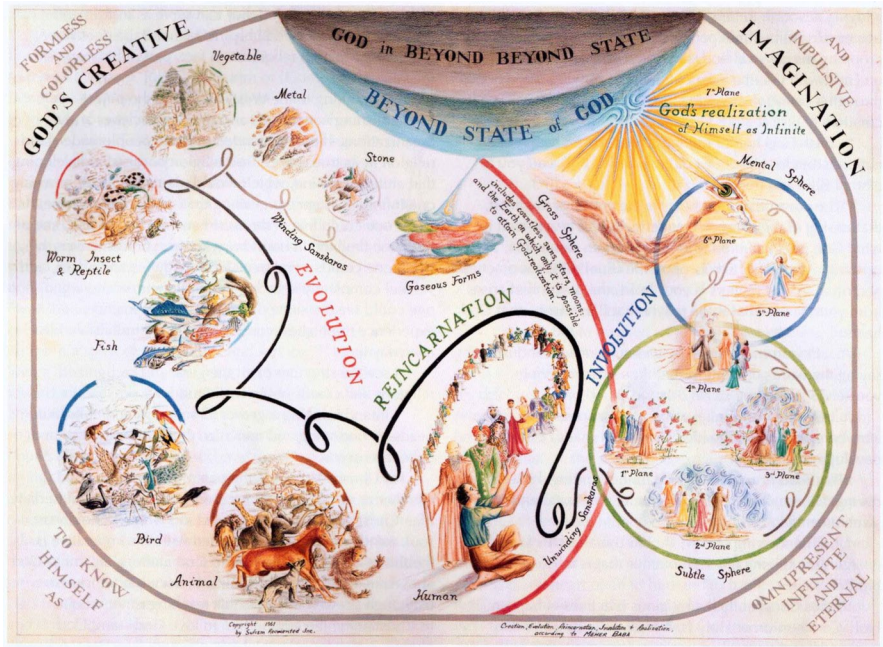


Fig. 1 “Creation, Evolution, Reincarnation, Involution and Realization, according to Meher Baba,” Meher Baba, 1997, chart insert facing p. 190. 30”×22”, watercolor and colored pencil on paper; used with permission, Sufism Reoriented

“the Universal Mind.” However, the very *saṃskāric* means by which this Infinite Consciousness was gathered prevents it from being liberated. This requires another stage of balancing and loosening all natural *saṃskāras* in smaller groupings of *prārabdha* karma over a series of 8.4 million lives of human reincarnation. However, since this means giving human awareness to what it is like to be as elegant as a phalaenopsis, as violent as a tiger, or both, reincarnation adds the further moral challenge of creating “non-natural” *saṃskāras* to the natural ones, adding new impressions as soon as the old ones are exhausted.

Reincarnation: Learning the Whole, Part by Part

The mount of the Vedic god Indra in Hindu iconography is a white elephant named *Airāvata* or “the One Produced from the Ocean,” which might be understood as the infinite ocean of the divine in Meher Baba’s point of view (Monier Williams, s.v. *airāvata*). Queen *Māyā Devī* dreamt of a white elephant entering her right side to be born as her son, *Siddhārtha*, who later became the Buddha, “The Awakened One.” An elephant is sometimes depicted in Jain iconography with the twenty-third Jina, *Pārśvanātha*. In the oft-used Jain and Buddhist story of the blind men and the elephant, the pachyderm is used as a symbol for the whole, for reality, or for the divine depending on the Dharmic tradition (Long, 2007, p.

viii). The popular Pūranic story of Gaṇeśa involves the replacement of his human child head for an adult elephant head, and even in one version, he acquires the head of Indra's elephant Airāvata (Thapan, 1997, p. 127). In this therianthrope state, Gaṇeśa became infinitely auspicious, capable of preventing or blessing all beginnings and giving or taking away all obstacles. Why the insistence on the elephant across these images of wholeness? Greg Bailey writes, "Though Gaṇeśa is ubiquitous with his elephant head in iconography, it is not known why he is given the head of an elephant, rather than something else, and there are no other instances of him being given the head of any other animal" (Bailey, 2020, see also Thapan, 1997, pp. 42–83). Meher Baba's interpretation of the story of Gaṇeśa, which I will describe below, leaves the issue unsettled, though it is clear that for him as it is for other Dharma traditions, the elephant is a symbol of ultimate reality's "whole."

We have more interpretive success if we examine other elements of these powerful myths, symbols, and allegories. For example, John Thatamanil examines the elephant and the blindmen in his book *Circling the Elephant* to "make theological sense of the reality and meaning of religious diversity," what he calls a "theology of religious diversity" (Thatamanil, 2020, p. 12). He argues that the allegory works better if they are blindfolded men since no blind person would pick out a part of an object and make the foolish conclusion that it was the whole, as this allegory describes. A blind person, tempered into patience by chronic darkness, uses all the other senses to probe the entire object and then make a judgment about what it is. By comparison, we might imagine a blindfold urging a sighted person into a rash judgment because of anxiety and fear. Thatamanil's insight works well in describing Meher Baba's notion that gathering and "winding" natural *samskāras* in organic evolution and non-natural ones in human reincarnation do not blind but actually blindfold, and even more, sense fold the soul. The soul, qua soul, remains perfectly sensitive and knowing of all in all. This winding phase is how the mind and its dualistic nature is developed in his view. The mind *is* the sense fold that covers the soul's sensitivity minus the part that is karmically connected to a specific part of the elephant in each incarnation. In other words, the mind is a provisional faculty that is adept at focusing on a part of reality and only that part of reality. In Meher Baba's view, this is purposeful. Mistaking the part for the whole, or mistaking any one limited ego for the unlimited Ego is an inevitable and divine part of the mind's development and God's growing from Infinite Unconsciousness to Infinite Consciousness.

Thatamanil mentions other problems with the allegory that have to be addressed before using it, but I will focus on only one more. If each man represents a different religion sense folded by the mind, taking a part for the whole elephant, then the elephant's silence is a problem. Thatamanil writes, "at the heart of the various religious traditions are claims of revelation: ultimate reality discloses itself to human beings" so the "elephant *must* communicate if it is to be known" (Thatamanil, 2020, p. 9, emphasis in original). For Meher Baba, this is true of the elephant in the reincarnational phase when the mind is the authority, but not necessarily so in the involutory phase when the mind is being dissolved, as I will show below. If we correlate reincarnation in Meher Baba's Divine Theme with the allegory of the elephant we could say that the 8.4 million reincarnating human lives—each differently sense

folded by different sets of *saṃskāras*—are matched with 8.4 million separate parts of the elephant revealing a real aspect of that whole. This is Meher Baba’s way of describing an exhaustive and exhausting mastery of every human experience for the soul, including every religious and non-religious possibility, one life at a time. Learning the whole happens in stages, not consuming and digesting it all at once. When the eight million, four hundred thousandth life is finished, Meher Baba said there is what he called a “Turning Point.” The soul has learned every individual part and is ready to stop winding *saṃskāras*. It automatically begins a new process of unwinding them. As one can see in Gayley’s diagram, this is symbolized by the turn of direction in the black *saṃskāra* line from clockwise to counterclockwise. In Thatamanil’s image, one circles the elephant clockwise in reincarnation and after a profound *metanoia*, counterclockwise in involution.

According to Meher Baba, consciousness was complete with the first human life after organic evolution and then the exploration of its separate dimensions was finished with the last human life in reincarnation, but consciousness now needs to be freed from the lower mind that made all that separative exploration possible. In Jacques Derrida’s terms, the mind is a *pharmakon*. What was remedial *techne* for limited self-making and world-making is now poison for unlimited Self-discovery.

Second Phase of Growth: Unwinding *Saṃskāras*.

After all the natural *saṃskāras* are gathered in evolution and the non-natural *saṃskāras* in reincarnation, a new stage begins characterized by *vāsanākṣaya* or removal of impressions and many *manonāśas* that he called “involution.” Meher Baba said there are many provisional *manonāśas* that occur over many human lifetimes in the unwinding stage that exhaust the natural and non-natural gross, subtle, and mental *saṃskāras* in a series of thousands of lifetimes. In the “final *manonāśa*” when the last *saṃskāras* are finally removed, “the mind is finally completely annihilated and vanishes once and for all time together with all impressions” (Meher Baba 1997, p. 126). Dr. James MacKie (1932–2001), a Murshid of Sufism Reoriented commented about the issue of energy in this process, which is evocative of the exhaustion involved. He said,

The winding process is to build articulated boundaries of experience, and knowing, and love and that the unwinding process is gradually to melt those boundaries so that the energy is released from that earlier limited knowing and raised to a higher level. ...The first knowing [gathered in the winding phase] you don’t have words for...because that knowing now accomplishes its purpose [in the unwinding phase]. The only purpose in knowing is to hold more energy for understanding divine processes. All processes are divine (MacKie, 1979).

In MacKie’s understanding of Meher Baba, divine processes of organic evolution and reincarnation gather the needed energy and consciousness a soul will later draw on to propel it back to conscious God. In other words, after the soul learns all the separate parts of the elephant, *integrating* all parts follows, eventually forming a

whole that is infinitely more than the sum of the parts. Meher Baba taught that this involutory stage of integration lasts 1.4 million years (Kalchuri 1981, p. 41). As the purpose of evolution is to wind *saṃskāras* to produce the human mind and its body as the vehicle to explore and hold separate dimensions of Infinite Consciousness, the purpose of involution is to destroy the mind so that Infinite Consciousness may be freed in a body. In other words, this stage is meant to unwind all *saṃskāric* exhaust in a process that ends in a final *manonāśa* so that consciousness of the soul is free to know itself without a medium. The body, even if it is dropped soon after this process is achieved is viewed as infinitely sacred for its ability and destiny to host both phases of winding and unwinding. Bhau wrote, “The human form is equal to all of evolution and the meaning of evolution is to develop the human form; the meaning of involution is to develop human consciousness infinitely” in a body (Kalchuri 1981, p. 302).

Meher Baba wrote that the “final *manonāśa*” has two stages: firstly, a temporary “blowing out” of the mind or *nirvāṇa* and secondly, a permanent trance state or *nirvikalpa samādhi*. Integrating both Buddhist and Sufi teaching, he elaborated on these states saying,

Nirvana is that state where apparently “God Is Not.” This is the only state where “God Is Not’ and ‘Consciousness Is.” This experience of the first stage of fana [“extinction” in Persian which means the final *manonāśa* in this context] is what Buddha emphasized, but later on it was misinterpreted as Buddha having emphasized that there was no God. The reality, however, is that God Is; but in the absolute vacuum state of the first stage of fana only consciousness remains, experiencing absolute vacuum (Meher Baba, 1997, p. 127).

Meher Baba’s second stage of *nirvikalpa samādhi* is the “I am God” state or *aham brahmāsmi*, quoting the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.4.10. This is the “state of the Perfect One. Divinity in expression,” also called *fanā’-fillah* or “extinction of the self in Allah” according to the Sufis (Meher Baba, 1997, p. 296). When souls reach this final state of the divine (and all souls eventually will do so in his view), most will drop the body after a brief time, while only a very few come back as Man-God, that is, regain consciousness of the gross, subtle, and mental worlds and bodies (using *yogayoga saṃskāras*) while maintaining Infinite Consciousness in order to govern the world with four other Man-Gods.

In light of Meher Baba’s silence, we might view the elephant’s silence in the allegory as a credit and not a debit in the unwinding phase of involution. The work is not so much for the divine or ultimate reality to communicate itself to a creation that is necessarily believed to be other (because one is winding *saṃskāras* and identifying with a limited, separate self), but for God in the state of human beings in involution to gradually wake up to their own “elephantine” nature. In 1958 Meher Baba gave what he called his “Universal Message” that spoke specifically about his silence and its relationship to revelation, as well as his desire to universalize the involutory process for all humanity. It begins:

I have come not to teach but to awaken. Understand therefore that I lay down no precepts. Throughout eternity I have laid down principles and precepts,

but mankind has ignored them. Man's inability to live God's words makes the Avatar's teaching a mockery. Instead of practicing the compassion he taught, man has waged crusades in his name. Instead of living the humility, purity and truth of his words, man has given way to hatred, greed and violence. Because man has been deaf to the principles and precepts laid down by God in the past, in this present Avatic form I observe silence. You have asked for and been given enough words—it is now time to live them (Kalchuri, 2024, p. 4447).

Deafness, not blindness is the obstacle in this image. Paradoxically, silence is his solution to this loss of hearing, a new *pharmakon*, we might say, to replace the old *pharmakon* of the mind. For Meher Baba in *The Nothing and the Everything* (at least as his disciple Bhau Kalchuri wrote it under his guidance) the form of the elephant is tied to the process of *manonāśa* and his new *pharmakon* of silence.

Gaṇeśa as Avatāra

In terms of the process of *manonāśa* (and leaving to the side his solution of silence for another article), the main thing that Bhau said about the elephant in his description of the story of the Purāṇic god Gaṇeśa in *The Nothing and the Everything* is that the size, weight, and strength of this animal were significant in symbolizing “the whole.” This seems like a natural association since in the Indian subcontinent, “By the mid-first millennium BC, the elephant had also become the mount for kings. It was associated with royalty because of its size and majestic appearance. It symbolised nobility of character, grandeur and strength” (Thapan, 1997, p. 246). The elephant image was not part of the Vedic tradition, but later forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism adapted it “to suit the needs of each. In Buddhism and Jainism it became the symbol of the divine conception of the Buddha and Mahavira, respectively” (Thapan, 1997, p. 247).

In Bhau's telling, the story of Gaṇeśa and his parents Śiva and Sati-Pārvatī combines Hindu mythologies with Hebrew, Christian, and Muslim mythologies, universalizing the symbol of the elephant beyond Dharma traditions. It begins:

In the beginning were Adam and Eve;
 thus speak the Hebrews, Christians, and Muslims.
 In the beginning were Shiva and Sati-Parvati;
 thus speak the Hindus.
 Though different names for the same One
 the meaning is identical, for Adam and Eve
 are Shiva and Sati-Parvati (Kalchuri, 1981, p. 143).

Bhau continued, “The First Soul, Adam, and all other souls journey in illusion through all the stages of evolution and involution. In India the story of Ganesh portrays each character representing some aspects of Adam's story” (Kalchuri, 1981, p. 143).

We cannot explore here how Bhau combined this Hindu cosmogony with the Jahwist creation myth of Genesis and the comparable one told throughout the

Qur'an. I will focus on the traditional Purāṇic characters and how he relates them to Meher Baba's Divine Theme. As Bhau described it, Śiva and his first wife Satī are symbols of gross conscious, reincarnational humanity bound to the principle of illusion or Māyā by the mind. Satī tried to deceive Śiva by disguising herself as Sītā to test Rāma's omniscience. Rāma was not fooled and this angered Śiva who then rejected Satī. For Bhau this symbolizes Śiva's entering the spiritual path of involution. Satī's later self-immolation on her father's sacrificial fire ritual and her rebirth as Pārvatī is a symbol of Śiva's entering the subtle planes. Their moving to Mt. Kailash and Pārvatī's taking up residence in her palace is his growth of consciousness into the mental planes.

The story of their son, Gaṇeśa, represents the full development of the mind, its final annihilation, the subsequent liberation of the soul to identify with the Oversoul, and then his return as God-Man. Pārvatī created Gaṇeśa out of saffron paste to be a trusted guard against any threat, which was too successful as he was even able to block his adopted father, Śiva. In this immature state, Gaṇeśa represents a pure and innocent mind, very strong and capable of defeating any foe. However, he became extremely arrogant. There are a few different Purāṇic versions of this, but in Bhau's telling, Gaṇeśa is finally undone when Śiva catches him viewing Pārvatī's naked body while she is bathing. Bhau interpreted this trespass as an advance in consciousness, that "he saw into the illusion that the mind creates" (Kalchuri, 1981, p. 147). Enraged at this "disrespect" of his own mother, Śiva killed Gaṇeśa by cutting off his head. To placate Pārvatī's anger and grief, Śiva asks Viṣṇu and Brahmā to find any animal and use its head as a replacement. Of course, it was not just *any* animal, but the same elephant that has meant the whole in other Dharmic myths and allegories. With this new head, Gaṇeśa became "the consciousness of all Jeevatmas through Universal Mind, the One who came back from the Real Death, Nirvan" (Kalchuri, 1981, p. 147). This coming back after the final *nirvāṇa* (and *nirvikalpa samādhi*) is what defines Meher Baba's notion of the Man-God, but the first Man-God, the *Avatāra*. Bhau wrote,

Once the individual mind is annihilated, it is replaced by the Universal Mind—the elephant's head. The drop, represented by the boy's body, becomes the Ocean of Mind, represented by a child wearing a giant head of an elephant. As Shiva represents the First Soul to realize God Himself, Ganesh represents that same First Soul when He returned into creation as Avatar. Ganesh is none other but the Ancient One—*Adi-Purush*; (Kalchuri, 1981, p. 148).

This would require more commentary, but this seems to be a linkage to the hymn of the cosmic "Person" or *Puruṣa* in the Ṛg Veda 10.90.

Bhau linked Gaṇeśa's new state not only to *manonāśa* but also to the Christian notion of salvific suffering of the Christ. Bhau wrote,

This arrogant and curious boy Ganesh must bear the weight of creation on his own shoulders represented by the elephant's head found by Brahma and Vishnu. The elephant's head represents Universal Mind; it is a huge head placed on the fragile shoulders of a boy. Wearing an elephant's head sym-

bolizes that illusion is distorted with the impressions existent in human consciousness, the combination of natural and unnatural sanskaras. Living with an elephant's head resting on his torso symbolizes Ganesh's infinite burden, the suffering and agony of man's unnatural sanskaras which it is his work to wipe out (Kalchuri, 1981, p. 149).

Gaṇeśa's youth is also significant in this passible feature of the *Avatāra* since "the child's body symbolizes purity of creation despite the load of mankind's natural and unnatural sanskaras symbolized by the elephant head he must wear. He is the favorite one, the One never forgotten, for he bears infinite suffering" (Kalchuri, 1981, p. 149). In Bhau's telling, though all souls will one day "grow old" and finish the work of exhausting all organic forms and human lives, the *Avatāra* is alone in remaining "ever young" by having to always return to bear the burden of creation's *saṃskāras*, remaining "distorted" as the elephant-headed child out of his inexhaustible love.

Preliminary Implications of "Exhaustivism"

This introduction to Meher Baba's written teaching of the Divine Theme demands more critical and constructive analysis, but I will end here with five important implications that may guide further study. The first has to do with the experience of death. The *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.20 teaches that the soul "is unborn, ancient, sempiternal; it is not slain with the slaying of the body" (Roy 1995, p. 32). Likewise, Meher Baba taught that the birth and death of the body are unreal, that in fact, only the mind has these experiences: "Mind is born from the very beginning, even before the stone state. This birth is once, and also the death of the mind takes place only once" (Kalchuri, 2024, p. 2992). We might ask, is there a difference in how physical life and death are experienced in the winding of *saṃskāras* in the reincarnation phase versus the unwinding phase of involution? In the winding phase, it seems straightforward that the soul passes through one illusory life and one illusory death in one illusory physical body at a time. For the unwinding phase, Murshid MacKie did some math:

If one wants to do a little rough calculation, and we conceive that we lead 8,400,000 lives as gross conscious human beings and then we begin the process of unwinding; and if we conceive that we live 700,000 years of apprenticeship of unwinding lives on the subtle planes and 700,000 years of apprenticeship of unwinding on the mental planes, then it is possible to think, well, perhaps the whole thing is dependent on the divine force of God. The mathematics of it suggest that there are the possibility of 600 full lives to be processed in a *single* incarnation [in the unwinding phase]. I think that's a dizzying idea. That in a single incarnation one might process the learning, review it again, of 600 lives. But I tell you that is the real reason reincarnation bores me.¹⁶

¹⁶ MacKie, 1982, starting at minute 31:24

To follow MacKie's calculation, we must convert the years to lives in Meher Baba's unwinding description so that we are dealing with apples to apples, and we must assume (generously) that one life lasts 100 years on average in the unwinding phase. Lastly, one must also recognize that this is only a heuristic calculation that actually is an individual matter for each soul. Therefore, we could say that 1,400,000 unwinding years on the subtle and mental planes divided by 100 years is 14,000 total unwinding lives. 8,400,000 winding lives divided by 14,000 unwinding lives is 600. This would mean that the *saṃskāras* of 600 winding lives in reincarnation are "unwound" on average by a single unwinding life in involution. Therefore, on average in the unwinding phase, one "has the opportunity" (and who would want it) to reexperience at some level of the body's awareness 600 previous lives and their 600 deaths and then live through them all in *one* body. Arguably, the romance is taken out of the spiritual path characterized by *manonāśa* and unwinding *saṃskāras* in this view.

The second implication of this exhaustivist view has to do with this question: how many times does the soul experience each individual human life in the Divine Theme? The answer seems to be three times. Each soul experiences it the first time in the phase of reincarnation when the soul tries to balance and shake loose—we might say "eat" a small set of natural *saṃskāras* from animal evolution taken from the whole proverbial elephant. It experiences this life and its discrete fascicle of *saṃskāras* a second time, still in the phase of reincarnation, after physical death when the soul reviews—that is, "digests" that recent life in a temporary heaven or hell state, after which the soul receives a new bundle of *saṃskāras* for a new body to "eat" and "digest" in the next life. It experiences this limited life a third time much later in the stage of involution when the soul is ready to unwind—that is, "excrete" the *saṃskāras* of that body along with 599 others.

The third implication has to do with the way religions are practiced in each phase. It seems they are used in two very different ways that are at cross purposes, and so in practice they might need to be separated from one another. In the reincarnation phase, each religious possibility is used to balance and loosen *saṃskāras*, which aids the development and exploration of the mind. This includes a focus on religious and theological wall creation and/or maintenance through diverse methods like "right/wrong" devotion, "right/wrong" meditation, "right/wrong" service, "right/wrong" knowledge, and so forth. In the involutionary phase, religions are used (if used at all) to unwind *saṃskāras*, which aids the dissolution of the mind. This means a focus on religious and theological wall remodeling and demolition supported by a Perfect Master or an *Avatāra* who can help process the aspirant's *saṃskāras* and ultimately annihilate all of them (including religious *saṃskāras*) when one is ready. More scholarship is needed in this area, but to take one example, each soul will take many crucial lives to learn and master every dimension of Jainism in the reincarnation phase. Much later, one then becomes a Jain in involution and unwinds those Jain *saṃskāras*. How this practice manifests on the surface in either phase may or may not look very different from one another, but the motivations for the practice would be worlds and lifetimes apart since one is either learning separate dimensions

of Jainism in reincarnation or integrating them with themselves and other “non-Jain” parts of the elephant in involution.

This leads to a fourth implication about the role of religions and the Man-God or Perfect Master. For Meher Baba, all religions and their teachings and practices build the strength of the mind in the winding process. However, the unwinding phase dissolves the mind, which religions may or may not help. In this phase, he said that “There is only one true yoga and that is ‘you go.’ The meaning of yoga is as simple as that. I know of no other yoga than ‘you ... go.’ You are your own curtain, and only when you go, can You come. The problem is how will you go? The only solution is love. When you ‘go’ ... through love for God the Beloved, you ‘come’ ... as you really are,” which means that the lover becomes the Beloved in an undifferentiated non-dual unity (Kalchuri, 2024, p. 4537). The “you” that goes, as we have said above, is the mind and not the ego and in involution it happens through traversing three planes of the subtle world, a fourth plane that stands between the subtle and mental planes, and then two mental planes until one reaches the seventh plane of realization (see Fig. 1). Meher Baba said that any soul can use typical spiritual methodologies like Vivekānanda’s *karma*, *bhakti*, *rāja*, and *jñāna yoga* to traverse the first to the fifth planes, mastering them on one’s own and without the aid of a God-realized guru (Meher Baba, 2007a, pp. 58–88). He wrote that achievement of the sixth plane of the mental world usually requires the help of someone on the seventh plane, which would mean the aid of a Perfect Master or *Avatāra*. However, to move from the sixth to the seventh plane, he said, “the **grace** of a Perfect Master is absolutely essential to help the mental-conscious human soul to dissociate himself from the consciousness of mind and to make him realize his unity with the infinite state, to experience infinite bliss consciously and to realize that he (atma) was **eternally in bliss**” (Meher Baba, 1997, p. 52; the bold text is in the original). This is an innovation on the Yoga Advaita traditions that stress any number of methodologies and personal self-effort (*pauruṣa*) to do the final trick.

The last implication I would mention has to do with one’s religious confession or commitments. Is a commitment to Meher Baba needed to exhaust all *saṃskāras* in the yoga of “you go” and ascendant *manonāśa*? Not at all. No sincere practice in any confession or meta-confession, including one in Meher Baba, can accomplish this. For Meher Baba, only love, obedience, and surrender directly to an incarnate Perfect Master or *Avatāra* of any religion can aid this very rare, internal, and even physical process of the final *manonāśa*. Any kind of confessional wall as well as any theology of religious diversity have intermediate purposes vis-à-vis involution and the final *manonāśa*. The auspicious grace of a Perfect Master, on the other hand, is the final purpose of life. Having no lower mind, a Perfect Master represents conscious integration of the entire elephant—viz., Perfect Masters are not bound by any *saṃskāras* (even their *yogayoga saṃskāras*). Therefore, they are in a unique position to unbind others by working directly with an aspirant’s natural and non-natural *saṃskāras*, and as Gaṇeśa, to remove the only true obstacle of the mind.

Conclusion

This article has explored Meher Baba's written Vedāntic teaching that he called "The Divine Theme." Riding on the coattails of Rāmakṛṣṇa and especially his master Upasni Maharaj he joined devotional love of the divine with a consolidation of many Yoga Advaita traditions that value a spiritual process of mental annihilation in order to liberate the soul while living in a body. In terms of salvation, this teaching yields a theology of religious diversity that I call "exhaustivism." This refers to three features: (1) an exhaustive scope of learning literally all there is to learn in creation *as* each form in creation, including every kind of religious possibility in the reincarnation phase, (2) an exhausting use of energy in this extremely long process, and (3) it refers to a difficult final stage of dealing with the "impressional" exhaust generated in this cosmic growth project. To understand what this means, it is crucial to first appreciate the total arc of Meher Baba's work and how it fits historically within the Yoga Advaita lineages as developed from the tenth century CE to the present. In terms of Meher Baba's arc, there are two basic sides to his work, his written teaching and his active ministry. As I interpret these two, the written part honors the past achievements of spiritual masters in the Yoga Advaita traditions who taught and demonstrated the nondual goal of *jīvanmukti* through *manonāśa* and *vāsanāḥśaya*, or what Meher Baba called "unwinding *saṃskāras*." Murshida Weyland Conner calls this the "ascendant path" of God-realization because the body and the world were transcended in the process, left imperfected. Meher Baba's ministry, which I could only introduce here, is the second side that innovates on the Yoga Advaita traditions, charting new territory for the future. In what he called "breaking his silence" he claimed to have brought down the spiritual planes and more importantly, the realm of divine silence into the gross sphere to begin a wholly new stage of cosmic growth that perfects it. Weyland Conner views this as a new opportunity to liberate the soul from the mind and impressions while also transforming the body to become divine itself, what she calls the "descendant path" of God-realization.

In terms of his written teaching about the Divine Theme and the ascendant path, he made significant innovations on the Yoga Advaita traditions that came before him. The first has to do with his understanding of *saṃskāras* in the process of organic evolution and human growth. As far as I can tell, he is alone in describing a progressive "winding" phase of *saṃskāras* and then an "unwinding" phase that are each prescribed by a specific number of lifetimes. Meher Baba and Bhau Kalchuri in *The Nothing and the Everything* also encoded this unique teaching in a novel cross-confessional telling of the Gaṇeśa narrative. Gaṇeśa's decapitation and recapitation express in narrative-form the philosophical treatment Meher Baba gave in *God Speaks*.

Lastly, I offered some topics for further study that include the nature of death, human experience, religions, the Man-God, and Meher Baba himself as the God-Man in the winding and unwinding phases. I propose further study of this written teaching. Firstly, there needs to be a study of the life, teaching, and influence of Upasni Maharaj, which would include how this *Sadguru* from Sakori, Maharashtra trained Meher Baba and influenced his thought. Weyland Conner writes, "As the divinely appointed teacher of the World Teacher at this juncture of cycles, Upasni Maharaj represented the pinnacle of the cumulative spiritual understanding of the vast epoch

now concluding,” by which she meant the ascendant path (Irani & Desai, 2020, p. xxv). Weyland Conner recently headed a team that updated an English translation of *Sakorina Sadguru* (1923) that a disciple of Meher Baba wrote in Gujarati under the Master’s direction now entitled *Upasni Maharaj: A Perfect Master of India* (2020). This document was Meher Baba’s act of devotion to his own *Sadguru* and Weyland Conner calls it a concrete demonstration of the spiritual states and stages that Meher Baba described in *God Speaks*. Secondly, critical and constructive studies of the Sufi and Christian Man-Gods that shaped Meher Baba’s written teaching are needed. These would include his other Sufi master *Qutub* Hazrat Babajan (1790–1931), *Qutub* Hafiz of Shiraz (1325–1390) who he used often in his discourses, and Perfect Master Francis of Assisi, the only Man-God he named in the West.

An analysis of Meher Baba’s ministry and the descendant path is also greatly needed, which could be approached with an examination of his work with (among many other crucial projects and events) Mehera, his chief female disciple, his work with the God-intoxicated *masts*, his “universal spiritual center” in Myrtle Beach, SC, and his “reoriented” Sufism which belongs to the Chishti lineage through Shirdi Sai Baba that later joined with the Chishtiya lineage that Hazrat Inayat Khan brought to the USA in 1910. The last topic I will mention is how Meher Baba’s exhaustivist teaching and ministry might support meta-confessional comparative projects like Theology Without Walls (Martin 2020). In my reading of the cross-confessional development of Yoga Advaita in the Descendant Period, it provides essential support for the exciting possibilities of doing theology across or without confessional walls; even more importantly, to living one’s theology without the wall-maker or *bhittikāra* of all *bhittikāras*, the mind.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate This research involved no human participants and/or animals. There is no need for ethical approval or consent to participate. The author has a consent to publish one figure entitled “Creation, Evolution, Reincarnation, Involution and Realization, according to Meher Baba.”

Informed Consent There is no need for informed consent.

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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