

## F O R E W O R D

by Jeffrey J. Kripal, Ph.D.

*When the incarnation comes, the common people are  
unable to recognize him. He comes in secret.*

—Sri Ramakrishna

in *Sri-Sri-Ramakrishna-Kathamrita* 2.16

From the day I first encountered the writings of Adi Da (as Da Free John) in the mid-80s, I knew that I was reading a contemporary religious genius. Here was someone who had succeeded in making the nondual spirituality cherished in the traditions of Asia relevant to the Western mind—that specific historical form of consciousness which is defined by, among many other factors, radical individualism, a constitutional stress on freedom in most all of its forms, a specifically psychological view of the human being, a deep appreciation of human sexuality and eroticism, a history of passionate religious experimentation and expression, and a generally scientific or materialistic worldview. The multiple texts that followed those first readings have done nothing to dissuade me from this initial impression. Quite the contrary.

Some years after my first reading of Adi Da, at a time when I had completed my dissertation on the Sakta Tantra of Sri Ramakrishna and was teaching in a small liberal arts college, I had the opportunity to “meet” Adi Da himself, in a traditional formal setting. In the 1990s, Adi Da had been presented with a copy of my dissertation, which quickly became the focus of a number of animated discussions between him and a group of his devotees, initiated by Adi Da and his own reading of the text. Later, he would put *Kali's Child* (the book that grew out of the dissertation)\* in his *Basket Of Tolerance*, an immense bibliography of primary and secondary texts on the

\*Jeffrey Kripal, *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teaching of Ramakrishna*, 2d ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

history of spirituality, accompanied by an eloquent appreciative-critical essay on its content, “The ‘Secret’ Biography of Ramakrishna and the Universally Necessary Foundation Struggle with the Emotional-Sexual Character”—no doubt the most insightful and fascinating essay I have seen yet on the book written from a specifically metaphysical or religious perspective (and I have seen quite a few). All this, then, was the context of my first visit to Adi Da’s northern California ashram, the Mountain Of Attention, in 1998.

My “meeting” with Adi Da took the form of *darsana* (a traditional Hindu term for the formal “seeing” of a guru or deity, in which the essence of the guru or deity is understood to be communicated to the seer through the act of seeing itself—a kind of ocular communion or visionary sacrament, if you will). The *darsana* took place in a formal hall of Adi Da’s residence on the grounds of the Mountain Of Attention ashram. The room was filled with devotees chanting and sitting in contemplation. Adi Da himself was sitting in a large chair, directly in the center. He was clearly in a state of ecstasy: his eyes were rolled up, his fingers were forming some sort of *mudra* (a posture of the fingers and hands traditionally said to convey a particular state of mind or religious state), and he was sweating profusely. I had the distinct sense that he was intending to communicate his state of consciousness directly to all present, and particularly to those who approached him one by one (including me), by the sheer force of his presence, which indeed was quite palpable.

I knelt down, offered a flower in the traditional manner, sat in *darsana* for a few minutes, and was then ushered out by my hosts. It was over as quickly as it had begun. As it turned out, however, it was hardly over, for whatever was communicated that night did not leave me easily or soon. For days, I felt as if my consciousness had somehow “shifted”, that it had been affected on levels of which I was only vaguely aware. This sense of a “shift” lasted for an entire week, before I returned to my more usual mode of functioning.

That occasion of *darsana* was an encounter, in person, with the same force of being which informs Adi Da’s books, and which

you are about to “meet” in *The Knee Of Listening*. The present edition of *The Knee Of Listening* is a particularly rich document that extends and deepens Adi Da’s spiritual effort of cultural translation and transformation into the present—that is, up to 2004, and into you and me. This edition of *The Knee Of Listening* does not actually constitute a single narrative written at a single point in time, like, say, its previous incarnation, which was simply the running narrative of the present Part One, composed more or less at once in the early 70s. This greatly expanded edition is different, with “later” strata layered upon “earlier” strata, to form a kind of dramatic historical witness to the evolution of Adi Da’s embodiment of radical nonduality.

Adi Da has gone to great lengths to relate his Teaching—philosophically (via textual interpretation and rational argument), metaphysically (via reincarnation theory), and personally (via autobiographical narrative)—to earlier paradigmatic gurus, particularly Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi, Swami Nityananda, and Swami Muktananda. The overall result is what we might call an “esoteric history” of the siddha-guru in the present age. In this history, Adi Da manages to balance an obvious appreciation for and devotion to those who have come before him with a keen critical sense of where their teachings are inadequate or limited. It is obvious that even his most penetrating questions about traditional Asian forms of spirituality and their teachers are animated by a spirit of deep concern, existential commitment, and profound love.

No reader professionally or personally invested in Asian forms of spirituality and concerned about their effective (as opposed to dysfunctional) translation into Western culture can afford to ignore *The Knee Of Listening* or the larger textual corpus in which it is now placed, that is, Adi Da’s twenty-three Source-Texts. In my opinion, this latter total corpus constitutes the most doctrinally thorough, the most philosophically sophisticated, the most culturally challenging, and the most creatively original literature currently available in the English language. Certainly there are even larger canons in Asia, but these are written and expressed in languages (primarily Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese) and interpreted in cultural frames

that must remain permanently foreign to the contemporary English speaker and reader. What sets the twenty-three Source-Texts apart is the fact that they were written in English, and that this English idiom has been enriched by a kind of hybridized English-Sanskrit, and that a new type of mystical grammar has been created, embodied most dramatically (and, to the ego, jarringly) in Adi Da’s anti-ego capitalization practice, in which just about every grammatical move is nondualistically endowed with the status once imperially preserved in English for the non-existent “I”. Such a reading experience constantly calls upon one’s ability to think and feel beyond the socially constructed ego.

I thus will not even begin to pretend that the literary result is easy reading, or that this corpus will not present its own personal challenges and philosophical problems to many of its future readers (including this one). What I can reasonably claim is that *The Knee Of Listening*, now placed within this total corpus, deserves our closest attention, and that it stands in a long modern Western textual transmission that begins with Charles Wilkins’ translation of *The Bhagvat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon* (1785), develops and deepens through Max Mueller’s *Sacred Books of the East* series (1875), and extends into the previous century primarily through such spiritual classics as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (1942), *The Collected Works of Swami Vivekananda* (1907), the collected works of Sri Aurobindo, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* (1955), Swami Muktananda’s *Play of Consciousness* (1978), which Adi Da (as Franklin Jones) helped to edit, and the numerous writings of Krishnamurti, Yogananda, Alan Watts, and Chogyam Trungpa.

I am perfectly aware that Adi Da and his community do not identify with any of these traditions, and that both his real and symbolic presence in Fiji on the international dateline locates Adidam both physically and spiritually neither in the West nor the East. But the historical fact remains that the Teaching of Adi Da finds its closest, if never full, analogue in Asian forms of nondual gnosis and this specific textual lineage. As recounted in the present text, moreover, it was many of these same texts—from the *Gita* to Ramana Maharshi—that were significant in Franklin’s own initial search and then gave him some external guide with which to

measure and better appreciate his own radical understanding of the “Bright” as “always already the case”. Even if the tradition of Adidam, then, cannot be reduced to such a textual lineage, it certainly can, and must, be understood in relationship to it. That anyway is precisely what Adi Da does in his “Lineage Essay”, “I (Alone) Am The Adidam Revelation”, and, indeed, throughout the present text, and this is one of the many features of *The Knee Of Listening* that make it such a remarkable document.

Finally, let me close as a professor with another professor. The German Indologist Heinrich Zimmer gave a series of historic lectures at Columbia University in the late 40s, a decade or so before Franklin Jones studied there in 1957. One of Zimmer’s more well-known books is *The Philosophies of India*, a poetic tour-de-force through Indian thought and spirituality from the Upanishads to the Tantra. At the very beginning of this rather large tome, in a section entitled “The Meeting of East and West”, Zimmer writes the following:

*We of the Occident are about to arrive at a crossroads that was reached by the thinkers of India some seven hundred years before Christ. This is the real reason why we become both vexed and stimulated, uneasy yet interested, when confronted with the concepts and images of Oriental wisdom. . . . But we cannot take over the Indian solutions. We must enter the new period our own way and solve its questions for ourselves. . . . We cannot borrow God. We must effect His new incarnation from within ourselves. Divinity must descend, somehow, into the matter of our own existence and participate in this peculiar life process.\**

I do not know if Adi Da has ever read Prof. Zimmer or *The Philosophies of India*, but it seems to me that *The Knee Of Listening* can be read today in precisely this same spirit, that is, as an esoteric history of the embodiment, in the West, of a remarkable type of nondual consciousness that was first discovered and cultivated in different forms and tongues in Asia. Whether that consciousness is to “descend” again into our individual lives and our (post)modern,

postcolonial cultures (in which categories like “East” and “West” are growing increasingly meaningless, if not actually destructive) will depend at least partly on how we read texts like this one, and whether or not we can find the courage to speak our own readings and enact our own embodied meanings.

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\*Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, ed. by Joseph Campbell (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1964), 1, 2.