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PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



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*Monastic Disciples
of Sri Ramakrishna*

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THE ROAD TO WISDOM



SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ON *On His Work*

Die like Heroes!

WHEN death is inevitable, is it not better to die like heroes than as stocks and stones? And what is the use of living a day or two more in this transitory world? It is better to wear out than to rust out—specially for the sake of doing the least good to others. ... I don't feel tired even if I talk for two whole nights to an earnest inquirer; I can give up food and sleep and talk and talk. Well, if I have a mind, I can sit up in Samadhi in a Himalayan cave. And you see that nowadays through the Mother's grace I have not to think about food, it comes anyhow. Why then don't I do so? And why am I here? Only the sight of the country's misery and the thought of its future do not let me remain quiet any more!—even Samadhi and all that appear as futile—even the sphere of Brahma with its enjoyments becomes insipid! My vow of life is to think of your welfare. The day that vow will be fulfilled, I shall leave this body and make a straight run up!

Be Strong!

What we want is strength. We Indians, more than any other race, want strong and vigorous thought. We have enough of the superfine in all concerns. For centuries we have been stuffed with the mysterious; the result is that our intellectual and spiritual digestion is almost hopelessly impaired, and the race has

been dragged down to the depths of hopeless imbecility—never before or since experienced by any other civilised community. There must be freshness and vigour of thought behind to make a virile race. More than enough to strengthen the whole world exists in the Upanishads. The Advaita is the eternal mine of strength. But it requires to be applied. It must first be cleared of the incrustation of scholasticism, and then in all its simplicity, beauty and sublimity be taught over the length and breadth of the land, as applied even to the minutest detail of daily life. "This is a very large order"; but we must work towards it, nevertheless, as if it would be accomplished to morrow. Of one thing I am sure—that whoever wants to help his fellow beings through genuine love and unselfishness will work wonders.

Rise from sleep!

Now my one desire is to rouse the country—the sleeping leviathan that has lost all faith in his power and makes no response. If I can wake it up to a sense of the Eternal Religion then I shall know that Shri Ramakrishna's advent and our birth are fruitful. That is the one desire in my heart: Mukti and all else appear of no consequence to me.

From *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*,
7.176; 7.188; 9.76.

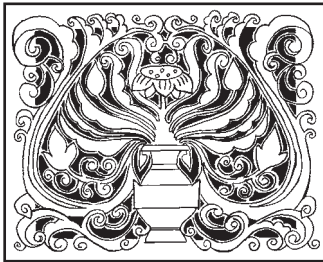


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8 Bosepara Lane, Calcutta, 1899
(from left) Swamis Trigunatitananda, Shivananda, Vivekananda,
Turiyananda, and Brahmananda; below: Swami Sadananda

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Baranagar Math, 1887
(from left) standing: Swamis Shivananda,
Ramakrishnananda, and Vivekananda,
the monastery cook, Devendra Mazumdar,
Mahendra Nath Gupta (M), Swami Trigunatitananda,
Mustafi (maternal uncle of Devendra Mazumdar);
sitting: Swamis Niranjanananda and Saradananda,
Hutko Gopal, Swami Abhedananda



Maniktala Garden, 1902
(from left) sitting on bench: Swamis Brahmananda,
Trigunatitananda, and Premananda;
sitting on ground: Swamis
Turiyananda and Saradananda



*Alambazar Math, 1896 (farewell to Swami Abhedananda leaving for the US)
(from left) standing: Swamis Adbhutananda, Yogananda, Abhedananda,
Trigunatitananda, Turiyananda, Nirmalananda, and Niranjanananda;
sitting: Swamis Subodhananda, Brahmananda (on chair), and Akhandananda*

TO OUR READERS

THE story of the Ramakrishna movement is the story of the ‘unfolding of a Truth, a Power, through men and institutions.’ Its ideology of Practical Vedanta—‘Vedanta philosophy in the modern idiom in the light of the life and experiences of Sri Ramakrishna’—was expounded and articulated globally by Swami Vivekananda. Sri Sarada Devi demonstrated in her life how this Practical Vedanta could be made a living reality in the workaday world.

The lives and teachings of these three founding figures of the Ramakrishna movement are now widely known and have been extensively studied and researched. Less well known is the story of the innumerable monastic and lay followers who have been striving to actualize the ideology of the movement in their lives and to contribute their mite to the threefold activity of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission: spiritual, social welfare, and propagation of faith.

The monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna oc-

cupy a unique place in the movement. Not only did they help set the movement on a firm footing, often working in the face of heavy odds, they also amplified its ideology through their lives and teachings and set forth the means for realizing these ideals. They displayed a rich diversity of spiritual traits and played remarkably varied roles in the growth of the movement. Their story, though no less fascinating than that of the founders, is still not widely known. This number profiles these monks for us, highlighting some of the striking features of their personalities. Swami Vivekananda too figures in this panorama.

With this number the *Prabuddha Bharata* turns a hundred and fourteen. We take this opportunity to greet and thank all of you—our readers, contributors, reviewers, advertisers, and well-wishers—who have been helping us reach out to a global audience with ideas that Swami Vivekananda wanted to be made widely available. We look forward to your continued help and cooperation in reaching out to more people in better ways, both in print and on the Internet.

TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

To the Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna

January 2009
Vol. 114, No. 1

नारायणं परं नित्यमजमप्यव्ययं विभुम् ।
आविर्भूतं जगत्त्रातुं रामकृष्णं नमाम्यहम् ॥

I offer salutations to Ramakrishna,
the eternal, transcendent, Narayana, who,
though unborn and imperishable,
incarnated to protect the world.

ब्रह्मशक्तिस्वरूपां तामभिन्नामपि भेदगाम् ।
जननीं सर्वभूतानां सारदां प्रणमाम्यहम् ॥

I offer my salutations to Sarada,
the mother of all beings, who,
though unitary in nature, being the Power of Brahman,
has taken a distinct form.

लीलासहचरं श्रेष्ठं धर्मचक्रप्रवर्तकम् ।
वन्दे तं सङ्घनेतारं विवेकानन्दरूपिणम् ॥

I adore the leader of the Sangha,
the best of Ramakrishna's companions,
the initiator of the (new) cycle of dharma,
in the person of Swami Vivekananda.

सङ्घस्य प्रथमाध्यक्षं गोपालं व्रजवासिनम् ।
राखालं मानसं पुत्रं ब्रह्मानन्दं नमाम्यहम् ॥

To Brahmananda, the cowherd of Vraja,
Rakhal, the mind-born son (of Ramakrishna),
the first president of the Sangha, I bow down.

रामकृष्णपदं शान्तं शिवमद्वैतमव्ययम् ।
ददर्श सततं यस्तं शिवानन्दं नमाम्यहम् ॥

To Shivananda, who had the constant vision
of the tranquil, auspicious, and imperishable
non-dual abode of Ramakrishna, I bow down.

नमामि सारदानन्दं 'लीलाप्रसङ्ग'लेखकम् ।
तत्त्वतो वर्णितं यस्मिन् रामकृष्णस्य जीवनम् ॥

I bow down to Saradananda, the author of *Lilaprasanga*,
wherein is narrated Ramakrishna's life in all its significance.

रामकृष्णगतप्राणं रामकृष्णस्य पूजकम् ।
लीलाप्रवर्धकं रामकृष्णानन्दं नमाम्यहम् ॥

Ramakrishnananda, whose being was in Ramakrishna,
who worshipped Ramakrishna, and enriched his divine play, I salute.

लीलासहचरं शुद्धं सारदापदसेवकम् ।
नित्यमुक्तं सदा शान्तं योगानन्दं नमाम्यहम् ॥

Yogananda, Ramakrishna's divine companion, Sarada Devi's attendant,
the pure, the ever free, the ever tranquil, I salute.

मातृवत्सर्वभूतेषु प्रेमवात्सल्यविग्रहम् ।
राधारूपं प्रशान्तं च प्रेमानन्दं नमाम्यहम् ॥

The tranquil Premananda, a mother to all, the embodiment of love
and affection, personification of Sri Radha, I salute.

निरञ्जनं सदा मुक्तं पवित्रं मातृसेवकम् ।
वन्दे निरञ्जानन्दं रामकृष्णपदाश्रितम् ॥

I adore Niranjanananda, Mother's ever free and pure attendant,
who had Ramakrishna's feet for his refuge.

अनाथेषु तथार्तेषु सर्वदा शिवपूजकम् ।
नमामि निर्मलं विज्ञमखण्डानन्ददेशिकम् ॥

I salute the sinless and wise spiritual master Akhandananda,
who always worshipped Shiva in the orphan and the afflicted.

उद्बोधनप्रकाशेन कृत्वा जीवप्रबोधनम् ।
वन्दे तं त्रिगुणातीतं येन प्राणार्पणं कृतम् ॥

I adore that Trigunatita who laid down his life after raising
human consciousness through the publication of *Udbodhan*.

वेदान्तशास्त्रमर्मज्ञं योगिनं च मनीषिणम् ।
रामकृष्णानतं वन्दे तुरीयानन्दस्वामिनम् ॥

I adore Swami Turiyananda, the knower of the essence of Vedanta,
the yogi and the sage, who has surrendered himself to Ramakrishna.

व्याख्यानकुशलं वन्दे सर्ववेदान्तबोधकम् ।
कालीतपस्विनं पूज्यमभेदानन्दनामकम् ॥

I adore the venerable Kali-tapasvi, the renowned expounder
and teacher of Vedanta, who was known as Abhedananda.

भक्तः सुकर्मयोगी च बालभावसमायुतः ।
तं भक्तवत्सलं वन्दे सुबोधानन्दसंज्ञितम् ॥

I adore that devotee and great karma-yogi called Subodhananda who,
possessed of a child-like nature, was full of affection for devotees.

अज्ञं निरक्षरं चापि ह्यक्षरं येन वीक्षितम् ।
वन्दे तमद्भुतानन्दं सरलं शुद्धमानसम् ॥

I bow down to that simple and pure-minded Adbhutananda who,
though uneducated and unlettered, realized the imperishable Brahman.

नमामि वृद्धगोपालं सारदाप्रियसेवकम् ।
अद्वैतानन्दरूपेण भक्तवृन्दैः सुपूजितम् ॥

I salute the elder Gopal, the beloved attendant of Sarada,
who is revered by the devotees as Advaitananda.

निर्मितं सुन्दरं येन रामकृष्णस्य मन्दिरम् ।
कर्मवीरमहं वन्दे विज्ञानानन्दविग्रहम् ॥

I adore Vijnanananda, the embodiment of wisdom and bliss,
the heroic worker, who built the charming Ramakrishna Temple.

रामकृष्णांशकान् सर्वान् भिन्नरूपैश्च रूपितान् ।
लीलासहचरान्वन्दे नानाभावप्रदर्शकान् ॥

I adore the companions (of Ramakrishna),
all of whom are parts of Ramakrishna,
appearing in different forms and
manifesting diverse spiritual moods.

लीलासहचरान् सर्वान् युगधर्मस्य रक्षकान् ।
सारदारामकृष्णौ च भूयो भूयो नमाम्यहम् ॥

I salute again and again
Sarada and Ramakrishna
and the companions in their divine play,
who are the protectors of the dharma of this age.

—Adapted from Swami Balaramananda, *Saparshada-sri-ramakrishna-pranama*

EDITORIAL

Fraternity of Love

Six of us at one time lived in the same cottage at Rishikesh for nearly two months. This very much astonished the other sadhus of the place. They said to us, ‘How do you brother disciples live together? If only two of us, brother disciples, should live for two days together we will begin to quarrel.’ Once I told this to Vijaykrishna Goswami at Vrindaban. He was overjoyed to hear me and said, ‘There is nothing surprising in this. It is no ordinary thread that binds you. Was your Master an ordinary man and saint? Had he been an ordinary man, could he have trained you Calcutta boys in this fashion? I do not wonder that there is such love and union amongst you.’

—Swami Akhandananda

SRI RAMAKRISHNA was indeed no ordinary trainer: ‘Sometimes the Master was strong like a thunderbolt and other times tender like a flower; sometimes he crushed their egos by scolding them and again overwhelmed them with his unselfish love. He checked their physiognomies, read their minds, guided their eating and sleeping habits, and demonstrated to them how to practise karma, jnana, bhakti, and raja yogas. When he initiated them, he empowered them and removed the obstacles to their spiritual journey. He taught them the technique of reading one’s life like a book rather than depending solely on the scriptures, or swallowing others’ ideas. Most importantly, he always kept before them the shining ideal of renunciation, never allowing the slightest compromise with the basic principles of truth and purity. He sang, danced, played, had fun and cracked jokes with them, and also taught them how to pray, meditate, and be immersed in God-consciousness.’

The critical element underlying all these components of Sri Ramakrishna’s training, and also overriding them, was love. ‘Do I love you?’ Swami Premananda, who was widely known as an espe-

cially loving soul, would tell the young monks at Belur Math, ‘No; if I did I would have bound you for ever to me. Oh, how dearly the Master loved us! We do not even bear a hundredth of that love towards you.’ Swami Vivekananda confessed that he could not ‘think or talk of Sri Ramakrishna long, without being overwhelmed’. The other brother disciples too bore eloquent testimony to the Master’s unworldly love that bound them into a fraternity.

This extraordinary love had a supramundane source. At the end of his sadhana, it was revealed to Sri Ramakrishna in a yogic vision that as an instrument of the Divine Mother he would have to found a religious order based on the universal truths revealed in his life and that many devotees would come to him to attain spirituality. It took several years for this vision to fructify fully. The great yearning that Sri Ramakrishna felt for his devotees in the intervening period—a longing that appears comparable to his longing for God—has been thus described by him: ‘In those days there was no limit to my yearning. During the daytime I could just manage to keep it under control. Severely tormented by the worthless mundane talk of worldly people, I would wistfully anticipate the day when my beloved companions would arrive. I hoped to find solace in conversing with them about God. ... I kept planning what I should say to this one and what I should give to that one, and so forth. When evening came, I couldn’t control my feelings any longer. I would climb up to the roof of the *kuthi* [bungalow] and cry out at the top of my voice, with the anguish of my heart: “Come to me, my children! Where are you? I can’t bear to live without you!” A mother never longed so for the sight of her child, or a friend for a friend, or a lover for his sweetheart, as I did for them.’

For the last five years of his life, Sri Ramakrishna was actively engaged in training his monastic disciples, initiating them into 'the secrets of his own nature and that of yoga' and familiarizing them with the essentials of scriptural truths. Just before his passing away 'he called in all his disciples but Swamiji [Naren] and gave them an express command that they were always to pay every attention to Swamiji, and never to leave anything undone that could add to his health or comfort. Then sending them out and calling in Swamiji he committed all his other disciples to his charge.'

Swami Vivekananda testified to the strength of the bond that bound the brothers to him. Speaking of the decade-long struggle to set the Order on a firm footing, he observed: 'There was one thing always to keep us hopeful—the tremendous faithfulness to each other, the tremendous love between us. I have got a hundred men and women around me; if I become the devil himself tomorrow, they will say, "Here we are still! We will never give you up!" That is a great blessing. In happiness, in misery, in famine, in pain, in the grave, in heaven, or in hell who never gives me up is my friend. Is such friendship a joke? ... You need not worship any gods in the world if you have that faith, that strength, that love. And that was there with us all throughout that hard time.'

Swamiji's love and admiration for his brother disciples was equally remarkable: 'Sri Ramakrishna was a wonderful gardener. Therefore he has made a bouquet of different flowers and formed his Order. All different types and ideas have come into it, and many more will come. ... Know each of those who are here to be of great spiritual power. ... When they will go out, they will be the cause of the awakening of spirituality in people. Know them to be part of the spiritual body of Sri Ramakrishna, who was the embodiment of infinite religious ideas. I look upon them with that eye. ... They are each a centre of religious power, and in time that power will manifest.'

Sister Nivedita was witness to the life of the monastic community at Belur Math in its early days. She wrote: 'Nothing in the early days of my life in India struck me so forcibly or so repeatedly as the

steadiness with which the other members of the Order fulfilled this part of the mission laid upon them. Men whose lives were cast in the strictest mould of Hindu orthodoxy, or even of asceticism, were willing to eat with the Europeans whom their leader had accepted. Was the Swami [Vivekananda] seen dining in Madras with an Englishman and his wife? Was it said that in the West he had touched beef or wine? Not a quiver was seen on the faces of his brethren. It was not for them to question, not for them to explain, not even for them to ask for final justification and excuse. Whatever he did, wherever he might lead, it was their place to be found unflinching at his side.'

Nivedita was actually seeing the early development of a new Indian monastic order that held together in its fold richly diverse personalities dedicated to a higher cause: 'The highest types of the religious life in the past had been solitary, whether as hermits or wanderers. In the monastery besides us there were men, as we were told, who did not approve of their leader's talking with women; there were others who objected to all rites and ceremonies; the religion of one might be described as atheism tempered by hero-worship; that of another led him to a round of practices which to most of us would constitute an intolerable burden; some lived in a world of saints, visions, and miracles; others again could not be away with such nonsense, but must needs guide themselves by the coldest logic. The fact that all these could be bound together in a close confraternity bore silent witness to their conception of the right of the soul to choose its own path.' The power that bound them together was, however, that of Sri Ramakrishna's love and the palpable spiritual ideal he set before them.

A close study of the history of the Order leads one to the inevitable conclusion that 'meaningless as would have been the Order of Ramakrishna without Vivekananda, even so futile would have been the life and labours of Vivekananda without, behind him, his brothers of the Order of Ramakrishna.' It is to these monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna that this annual number is dedicated.



Prabuddha Bharata—100 years ago

Chasing the Shadows: January 1909

It is simply necessary to scan briefly the past and present history of the world, to enable us to see that only a tiny fraction of the inner consciousness of humanity has been awakened; that few in number have been those who followed with intelligence the path of religion; and that vast multitudes have wasted their lives. ...

The very thought of a wasted life brings a feeling of sadness. It is surely a painful spectacle to see before you a being of god-like endowments and measureless potentialities, utterly ignoring them, and giving the reins to the undeveloped, the low; to a vampire that enslaves and bewitches all who come under her spell; thus becoming a victim spiritually dead, for he has not entered into himself that he may smelt the precious ore of his higher nature from the surrounding dross.

The world goes on its ceaseless round; the multiplicity of clashing interests, the innumerable and overwhelming materialities weary the heart and dazzle the attention. There are so many corrupting influences and so much that strangles and destroys high idealism and lowers the standard of morals. We drift on the ocean of the world without rudder or anchor, and the horizon of our intelligence is bounded by existing phenomena; we placidly acquiesce in the demands of the senses, and our sensibilities are blunted; the reason is assailed by doubts and fears, and our minds are led astray by lying sophistries as we flounder in the dismal waves of illusion.

The world's thoughts are inclined to think through us, to use our brains as organs, as if a stronger will had entered in and caused thoughts according to its purpose. The spirit of the times is one of inordinate ambitions, rivalry, and ostentation veneered with shams. There are many that succumb to the pressure of constant disappointment; they live in the Cimme-

rian darkness of despair and their affrighted imagination enlarges the real extent of their woes.

Civilisation exacts a heavy price for its advantages, and the question is forced upon our consideration as to where modern civilisation is taking us. If we cast a dispassionate eye around, we shall see that it threatens to extinguish all the best and purest in human lives, to ruthlessly crush the weak, and be dominated by organised greed. *Tædium Vitæ* is the characteristic of all civilised nations of the globe, because civilisation over-emphasises the inequalities of individual faculty and produces the greatest disparities of fortune, so that some have a profusion of luxuries, and others a lack of the common necessities of life. It has been truly said that the power to use is the sole right to possess.

There is nothing new in the condemnation of chasing the shadows of life by prophets and preachers, but the value of iteration as a helpful remedy must be recognised. The great messengers to humanity, the teachers of their fellow-men, who with infinite love and pity hold a mirror up to life, affirm again and again that all earthly power and the glory of the things it fashions are transitory—that all delights culminate in unsatisfying results and suffering. There is no good shutting our eyes to obvious facts or affecting to believe that in due time we shall witness in the world a new birth of all that is great and good.

But those people who have finer moral and intellectual developments sometimes pause and inquire whether in this whirling, seething world of unrest, misery, and discontent, amid this interplay of human passions and human desires, with their legion of undesirable consequences; among these ever-changing forms, what things are real? Is there not something stable beneath all these phantoms and jangling discords? Upholders of the Vedantic view answer with

an uncompromising affirmative. There is no rest for a body till it is united to its centre. The centre of rest for the soul is the Oneness which it seeks. "He who is the One Life in the Universe of death; He who is the constant basis of an ever-changing world; One who is the only Soul of which all souls are but delusive manifestations." Spirit is superior to and controls matter, because all matter is changing and spirit is unchangeable and eternal. The spirit that reigns within man is independent and creates the desire for freedom. As the sun is eclipsed by masses of cloud, so the spiritual sun "I" remains eclipsed by the images of objects in the phenomenal world. Vedanta teaches us to place ourselves beyond the reach of the ever-changing tides of the external world. It lays down principles by which we can still the insatiate longings of the human heart; it teaches that spiritual realisation is everything. ...

"The world of our experience consists at all times of two parts, an objective and a subjective part, of which the former may be incalculably more extensive than the latter, and yet the latter can never be omitted or suppressed. The objective part is the sum total of whatsoever at any given time we may be thinking of, the subjective part is the inner state in which the thinking comes to pass. Yet the cosmic objects, so far as the experience yields them, are but ideal pictures of something whose existence we do not inwardly possess but only point at outwardly, while the inner state is our very experience itself." Religion is no trivial, ephemeral thing to take or leave as man goes on his way through life, gathering up the aggregate of human experience, but a direct influence upon the development of both the individual and the race. It is the relation between the soul and God. The basis of all knowledge is divine, the process of all true education is from that source. It may be always relied upon for inspiration with a surety that when its truths are absorbed into the soul, and thus have spread their mighty vitalities into the ultimates of being, its possessor will be a really peaceful man; the world pain dies out of his heart, and his destiny is in his own hands. A man's life is only narrowed and limited by himself; the difference between being happy and unhappy is mainly dependent upon the mental atmos-

phere generated by his own thoughts.

The ultimate for which we should labour while here on earth is that we should become living souls. It is necessary to give a vigorous direction to the cultivation of our inner resources as a defence against the assaults of the world. Man is capable of infinite progress, and when he begins to build his life on a nobler pattern he develops a receptivity of mind to admit intuitively enlightenment, and conceives of a higher self, a living thinking reality, one that is master rather than servant. He comes into self-knowledge and finds out that beyond each man there exists a higher power which is larger and more god-like than his conscious self; that existence means an educating, a drawing forth of what is fundamentally within, which leads to pure and heroic action. The object of life is to learn the laws of spiritual progress. It is a grand thing to know the value of life, to be born into a universe with boundless possibilities, with the germ of infinite perfection, and with a hunger and thirst after righteousness. ...

We have been brought up in a world of limiting adjuncts where our senses perceive nothing but plurality. We are encompassed by sights and sounds which make us see that duality is the prevailing law of the universe. It is the thick and palpable clouds of ignorance that overshadow the mind, and it is only the light of knowledge that can dispel the darkness, the one fading into the other, and finally the shadow diminishes to a point where it vanishes. The body, mind and world are only broken reflections of the one Light. As the rays of the sun are to the sun itself, so are the individual souls to the Divine Being. They are phenomenally distinct but substantially One. With the recovery of this sense of the essential Unity will come a larger love for all mankind, until unison blends into unison and ultimately union merges into the perfect Oneness. Nirvana or Moksha is not the annihilation of the ego but its infinite expansion into the Universal Consciousness—into the Reality of our being, which is ever pure, ever perfect, ever blissful. And the aim of the Advaita Vedantin is to realise this substantial Unity.

—A WESTERN DISCIPLE

Swami Vivekananda's Spiritual Mind

Swami Atmarupananda

AFTER Swami Vivekananda had passed away, Swami Ramakrishnananda asked Sister Nivedita if she would write the swami's life. He felt that she had understood the swami more than anyone else, both because of her close association and because of her extraordinary intelligence and insight. And then there was her skill as a writer. But Nivedita demurred, saying that she could only write about her own perception of the swami, because he was far too vast for her to capture in a biography. She wrote, addressing her words to Vivekananda:

Should I tell the story of your life, beloved Master? Alas, I cannot. You satisfied so many, widely diverse, in such widely diverse ways. Who am I, that I should understand it all? ... Therefore I ... am content to record the story of my own vision and understanding only. How it began, how it grew, what memories I gathered; my tale will be a record of fragments, and no more. Yet do I pray that through this broken utterance some word of yours may here and there be heard—some glimpse caught of the greatness of your Heart.¹

And so she wrote the beautiful *The Master As I Saw Him*. If the swami was far too vast for Sister Nivedita to contain him in a biography, how much more true is it of the rest of us. And then, to write on the swami's spiritual mind! Sister Christine wrote about the swami in her reminiscences:

Such a being is beyond all comparison, for he transcends all ordinary standards and ideals. Others may be brilliant, his mind is luminous, for he had the power to put himself into immediate contact



with the source of all knowledge. He is no longer limited to the slow processes to which ordinary human beings are confined. ... Others may be good, powerful, gifted, having more of goodness, more of power, more of genius than their fellow-men. It is only a matter of comparison. ... But with Swami Vivekananda, there could be no comparison. He was in a class by himself.²

How can such a mind be described? It can't. Nor can it be fathomed except by another mind of the same quality. But we can love, and love wants

Swami Atmarupananda is a monastic member of Ramakrishna Monastery, Trabuco.

to hold its beloved within its grasp and to give expression to itself, even if it can only babble. And so we proceed, aware of our limitations.

Someone once told the present author that they found Vivekananda too obvious: 'I already knew all of that,' they said. Are Vivekananda's teachings obvious, and if not, why would someone think so? It's true, when we read about Sri Ramakrishna going into ecstasy repeatedly in the course of a day, about his extraordinary spiritual practices without sleep for twelve years, his incredible spiritual experiences, his transformative influence over others, we know that we've come across a unique phenomenon, like none we've encountered even in books. Then we come to Swami Vivekananda's life, and see that he travelled around the world, gave lectures, taught ideas, corrected people's notions about India, organized a monastic order, and started service work—perhaps it all sounds so ordinary. Yes, he did a *lot* of things for his short life; but he was just very energetic. We can imagine ourselves travelling, meeting people, giving lectures, studying philosophy and the scriptures so that we can deal with ideas, practising our public speaking skills—it's all within the realm of the possible. Maybe we just need to eat more vitamins to have the energy he did.

Then we see the swami getting angry and impatient, scolding even the great Swami Brahmananda till the latter would weep, and lashing out at those who tried to advise him, like Sara Bull. And there are his alleged tendency to exaggerate and his penchant for making categorical statements.

Being Introduced to Vivekananda

Before joining the Ramakrishna Order, I came across a passage in one of the Order's publications that spoke about overcoming egotism. It quoted a passage out of context from a letter of Vivekananda: 'Behind my work was ambition, behind my love was personality, behind my purity was fear, behind my guidance the thirst of power!'³ And then the author commented that if even the great Swami Vivekananda found egotism so hard to overcome,

how much more difficult it is for us. I thought: I'm looking for an ideal. Sri Ramakrishna had no egotism, but Swami Vivekananda admitted to his own. I therefore have nothing to learn from the swami.

Shortly thereafter, when I went for the first time to an American centre of the Ramakrishna Order with the idea of joining as a monk, a devotee asked me, 'Have you read anything about Swami Vivekananda?'

'No,' I replied, 'I'm not so interested in him.'

'But this centre is named the *Vivekananda* Vedanta Society. You should know *something* about the person after whom this ashrama is named!'

'Yeah,' I reluctantly said out of a sense of obligation, 'I guess I should; but I don't know what to read.'

I was handed a biography of the swami, which I began to read that night, and it created a revolution in my thinking, in my whole orientation towards spiritual life. Here was a Man, not a man. Everything about him was vast—his heart, his knowledge, his power of action, his spirituality. And everything was positive. He never appealed to the lower side of human nature—fear, guilt, weakness, dependence, repugnance, rigidity, moral superiority—which so many teachers, even great teachers, have appealed to in their attempts to herd people toward God. He was moreover a fully modern man, with the best of modernity—its liberality, its egalitarianism, its freedom from superstition and freedom from the weight of dead tradition—and yet he was ancient in wisdom and in depth and in experience, with none of the shallowness of a modernity which has tried to destroy its own roots and its spirituality.

Joseph Campbell believed that the loss of a believable mythology in modern times had caused much of the angst and lack of direction in modern humanity. But here in Vivekananda—a man so rational, so free of superstition—was a living myth. Look at him! At the edges of his being he blends into the mythic, not only in the proportions of his being but in his origins, his destination, and in the course his life takes.

The Divine Touch

I went ahead and found Swamiji [Swami Vivekananda] standing at the door. On seeing me he said, 'You are the first to come; come along.' Saying so he took me to a small room, and sitting down on a small rug asked me to sit on another.

Soon, Swamiji entered into a meditative state and passed into the realm of *savikalpa samadhi*—the body still, limbs motionless, spine erect, eyes fixed and bright; with feeling, power, love, and bliss welling up in his face, and gravity intensifying all the other moods. ...

After remaining immersed in samadhi for quite some time, he controlled his mind and taking my right hand in his own remained quiet for a while. Next he started telling me about my past. ... When Swamiji was holding my hand, all my desires and thoughts subsided. There was neither inclination nor disinclination—no desire, no wish; even bhakti and mukti were

gone. All was peace; the world was peaceful, steady and calm. Creation was, Creation was not; [all was] filled with bliss. And there was something beyond bliss that I cannot describe in words—I began to enjoy that. Peace, peace, supreme peace—all-pervading peace. ...

I do not know how long I was in that state. Slowly I found my mind descending from that high state and entering my body, and I started faintly apprehending the room and other objects, like one just awakened from sleep. ... But one new thing became evident—a sweetness and peace pervaded all objects. Every object appeared holy and dear to me, something to be revered. I saw that the wind was holy, space was holy, the waters were holy, the directions were holy, every created being was holy!

—Swami Sadashivananda

Before I was halfway through the biography, I was converted. Swami Vivekananda was my hero and continued to dominate my mental and spiritual life for years. In time I came to see that there are as many Vivekanandas as there are people who love him. As Sister Nivedita said in the passage quoted earlier, he 'satisfied so many, widely diverse, in such widely diverse ways'.

Only Sri Ramakrishna knew who Vivekananda really was. His statements about the swami's spiritual origins—his eternal identity—are some of the most beautiful passages in religious literature. And of the swami's greatness Sri Ramakrishna used to speak in extraordinary terms. He would say that one or two parts of the Divine Mother's power are enough to make one famous, but that Narendra⁴ had all sixteen parts in full measure.⁵ And he would say that no one like Narendra had ever been born before. Some of his great disciples, he would say, were like ten-petalled or sixteen-petalled lotuses, at the most some were hundred-petalled. But his Narendra was a thousand-petalled lotus.⁶ He would even suggest that he himself had taken birth only to introduce Narendra to

the world.⁷ The Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi spoke similarly of Narendra, as did Narendra's own brother disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Why, then, are some people not attracted to the swami? Why are some others actually turned off by him?

Understanding Vivekananda

There will always be some who are unattracted simply because they aren't seeking anything spiritual. And among those who *are* spiritual seekers, some won't be attracted because of temperament. The swami himself recognized this. Therefore he said, 'My own life is guided by the enthusiasm of a certain great personality, but what of that? Inspiration was never filtered out to the world through one man!'⁸ People should be allowed to seek inspiration where they find it. He said that Sri Ramakrishna had not come for name and fame but to provide life-giving ideas, and it was the same with the swami himself.

Even among those who are attracted to the Ramakrishna movement, not all are attracted to Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Viveka-

nanda equally. Some are attracted to just one or two, not all three. Will Sri Ramakrishna be angry because one is attracted to the Holy Mother and not to him? Will Vivekananda be angry because someone is attracted to Sri Ramakrishna and not to him? To think so, even to fear so, is to project our own littleness onto them. Inspiration comes in different ways from different sources.

But then there are those who simply misunderstand Swami Vivekananda, like the friend who found Vivekananda 'obvious.' Just the other day I overheard someone explaining to another that Swami Vivekananda was Sri Ramakrishna's St Paul, who only travelled around giving lectures, organizing the Order, training monks, and starting service work for the uplift of India, while Swami Brahmananda was the spiritual powerhouse who, like St Peter, was the great mystic, silently keeping the movement on its spiritual track. None of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, nor Sri Ramakrishna himself, saw Vivekananda in this light. They saw his spirituality as unparalleled among the disciples and followers of Sri Ramakrishna.

Illustrating this, there's the beautiful vision that Swami Subodhananda—another disciple of Sri Ramakrishna—had in a dream, long after Swami Vivekananda had passed away. In the dream Subodhananda left his body. Going to a high realm, made of pure bliss, he saw Swamis Brahmananda, Yogananda, Premananda, and all the other great disciples who had already deceased. But he didn't see Swami Vivekananda anywhere. They told him to remain with them, but he said, 'No, first tell me, where's Swamiji?' They replied, 'Why would he be here? He's far away, merged in God.'⁹

Even a great soul like Sri Ramana Maharshi, who was established in Self-knowledge and who spoke highly of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, could not understand fully the nature of Vivekananda. He once said: 'Sri Ramakrishna did not touch all for that purpose [the purpose of giving realization]. ... Vivekananda was ripe. He was anxious to realize. ... A strong mind controls the weaker mind. That was what happened in the case

cited. The effect was only temporary. Why did Vivekananda not sit quiet? Why did he wander about after such a miracle? Because the effect was only temporary.'¹⁰ If even he had doubts about Vivekananda, is it any wonder that others do?

Taking Ramana Maharshi's statement first, either he was right about Swami Vivekananda or Sri Ramakrishna was right. Ramana Maharshi was an illumined soul of a very high order, with deep insight, but so was Sri Ramakrishna. Ramana Maharshi never met Swami Vivekananda, only knew *of* him. Sri Ramakrishna knew Narendra inside and out, knew his origins in the deepest, spiritual sense, knew his nature, his path, and his destination more than anyone. And he was present when Narendra attained *nirvikalpa samadhi*, the experience of the Absolute. It was he who said: 'Now, then, the Mother has shown you everything. Just as a treasure is locked up in a box, so will this realization you have just had be locked up and the key shall remain with me. You have work to do. When you have finished my work, the treasure-box will be unlocked again; and you will know everything then, as you did just now.'¹¹



What happened after Narendra's experience of *nirvikalpa samadhi* was outside Ramana Maharshi's experience. How could one's experience of the Absolute be locked away by the Divine Mother for her own purposes? How could a thin veil of maya be drawn back over Narendra's—or anyone's—mind after the experience of the highest illumination? In Ramana Maharshi's experience it couldn't, nor could it according to traditional Vedanta. Sri Ramakrishna, however, said that his own realizations went beyond the Vedas and the Vedanta, this being one example. On several occasions in Vivekananda's ensuing life he was on the verge of entering *nirvikalpa samadhi* again, when Sri Ramakrishna appeared and brought him back, as his work was not yet finished. As far as we know, what happened after Narendra's *nirvikalpa samadhi* is unique in religious history. Because of Sri Ramakrishna's extraordinary breadth and depth of spiritual experience, because of his status as an avatara, and because of his whole-souled dedication to truthfulness in thought, word, and deed, it seems safe to assume that his estimation of Swami Vivekananda's spiritual state outweighs the opinion even of other illumined souls.

But if Swami Vivekananda had a thin veil of maya drawn over his mind, was he then deluded like the rest of us? Wouldn't that explain why he said things such as the one quoted earlier: 'Behind my work was ambition, ... behind my guidance the thirst of power ...'? No, for he *did have nirvikalpa samadhi*, its memory was with him, and it did transform him, though he couldn't regain it fully—due to Sri Ramakrishna's intervention—try though he did, until his mission was completed. That thin veil of ignorance was to prevent his merging forever into the Absolute, his natural abode. It was to keep a highly refined sense of agentship in him so that he could perform his mission. It wasn't drawn over him by the Divine Mother to delude him. We have so many accounts from various people telling of the swami's tendency to plunge into deep meditation, easily and frequently, and his ability to transmit spirituality to others at a touch.

Yet from another standpoint this incident *does* explain the swami's statements such as the one just cited. Because this thin veil was drawn over his powerful mind, a mind that always tended towards the Absolute, he felt it to be an unbearable burden and rebelled against it the rest of his life. The very fact that he had a highly refined sense of agentship was enough to cause him to rebel against it. As Ashtavakra says, to an illumined soul even the egotism involved in 'closing and opening of the eyelids is an affliction.'¹² And so the swami rebelled against the veil and all that it entailed.

In Criticism of Vivekananda

Ramana Maharshi's statement of doubt about Swami Vivekananda is, of course, unique because it came from such a great soul, one who had great respect for Sri Ramakrishna. The other criticisms are more common, coming from different people's different perspectives. These criticisms can be grouped in two classes:

Class I: The swami's message was too obvious. He was more a great teacher/organizer than a great mystic. He had a bad temper. He always exaggerated and made categorical statements and thus lacked subtlety. He contradicted himself endlessly.

Class II: He never came up with a consistent philosophy. He was a reformer who tried to change Vedanta in an effort to make it palatable to Westerners, coming up with 'Neo-Vedanta' which is his own invention, not true Vedanta at all.

The first class of criticisms is based on the swami's style. Stylistic likes and dislikes can be quite deep-seated, but we can all learn to look beyond our personal likes and dislikes to appreciate a wider spectrum of expressions, even if they don't become our own. The second class of criticisms are perhaps even more self-assured, based on intellectual convictions and, in some cases, prejudices. They, therefore, need to be addressed separately. Let's first look at the first class of criticisms.

Romain Rolland, the famous French writer and thinker, was a person who responded immediately to Swami Vivekananda, and hence he wrote of him:

'His words are great music, phrases in the style of Beethoven, stirring rhythms like the march of Handel choruses. I cannot touch these sayings of his, scattered as they are through the pages of books at thirty years' distance, without receiving a thrill through my body like an electric shock. And what shocks, what transports, must have been produced when in burning words they issued from the lips of the hero!'¹³ There are many of whom this is true. To them the swami speaks immediately and powerfully, whether they begin with his works or his life. For them there is no special approach needed to understand the swami; it's just a matter of deepening and expanding their relationship over time.

For others there are several things to keep in mind as we approach the swami. First, we must remember that everything about the swami was vast. There was no littleness in him, no pettiness. His mind was luminous, his heart was universal. We speak of people who are 'larger than life.' Swami Vivekananda was larger than all of our categories, as Sister Christine said. When one writes or speaks of him, one is tempted to use nothing but superlatives and words like 'extraordinary.' But all the superlatives in the world seem pale, insipid, when used to describe him. Second, the swami's words came from the heart of direct spiritual experience, filled with the living power of that experience. Third, he had a profound influence over the people he encountered. His lectures weren't words, his silent presence wasn't the absence of conversation. Many were transported to higher states of awareness just by a brief encounter.

And so we need to understand his works in the context of who he was. As Swami Paramananda, one of the swami's disciples, said, 'We imagine a great man as someone we cannot approach. Swami Vivekananda however was the simplest of people. ... His interior was like a child, gentle and mellow, and that was the real Swami Vivekananda. A great, loving heart! Sometimes reading from his books, you do not get quite the picture.'¹⁴ Yes, to get the true picture, we have to read his words in the context of his life.

The outstanding impression made by the Swami's bearing, during all these months of European and American life, was one of almost complete indifference to his surroundings. Current estimates of value left him entirely unaffected. He was never in any way startled or incredulous under success, being too deeply convinced of the greatness of the Power that worked through him to be surprised by it. But neither was he unnerved by external failure. Both victory and defeat would come and go. He was their witness. ...

He moved fearless and unhesitant through the luxury of the West. As determinedly as I had seen him in India, dressed in the two garments of simple folk, sitting on the floor and eating with his fingers, so, equally without doubt or shrinking was his acceptance of the complexity of the means of living in America or France. Monk and king, he said, were obverse and reverse of a single medal. From the use of the best, to the renunciation of all, was but one step.

—Sister Nivedita

Was the Swami a St Paul?

Was the swami Sri Ramakrishna's St Paul in the superficial sense—a missionary who travelled about, organizing and teaching, while the real mystics stayed immersed in God-realization? Even a cursory acquaintance with the swami's life will dispel such opinions. Listen to Lillian Montgomery's impressions, recorded half a century later, of the swami, whose lectures she attended in New York in 1900:

Swami entered by a side door, and immediately I knew that there was something extraordinary about him. He was very unassuming, very calm, but there was something about that presence that you couldn't take your eyes off of him; he fascinated you. And as he sat in the chair, his head ... was perfectly poised, and power seemed to emanate from it. I was fascinated. ... Eventually he rose to speak, and the voice was extraordinary. It was

mellow, resonant, but possessing a great purity. And as he spoke, veils just seemed to fall from your eyes, because he gave you an entirely different impression of personality as he was speaking of the relationship of the individual to the Divinity.

I remember as I looked at him, it seemed to me that there was an ocean of consciousness back of him, and in some way there was no limit to his personality. ... [And] this ocean of consciousness ... focused and flowed through his words. It was as if his mind was a limpid lake that was reflecting a divine light.

Every word he spoke was a revelation, because he brought with it the realization he was living. At one time as I listened ... I seemed to sense that if this form of his vanished, that a light which was shining through it would stay there forever, that it would never disappear. It was a strange sensation.

[One] thing that impressed me very much was the absence of the sense of ego. And I saw even-

tually what that was, because his whole awareness was turned to that inner vision. Where the ordinary person has a sense of the little ego, in Swami Vivekananda the sense of 'I' had expanded into something vast, and deep, and very very pure, and very very powerful, because it just penetrated within [me] and it aroused something within that was never there before.¹⁵

No, the swami was not an organizer, though he brought organization to the Ramakrishna Order; he was not a lecturer, though he gave many lectures and classes; he was not a missionary, though he brought Vedanta to lands far from India. As he once said, 'Oh, how calm would be the work of one who really understood the divinity of man! For such, there is nothing to do, save to open men's eyes. All the rest does itself.'¹⁶ And that was the swami, an illumined soul who went through the

Swami Vivekananda's Love

A young man had just then come from the country [to Varanasi]. Having no other means of subsistence he joined the ashrama work. He was weak and sickly. One day he went to have Swami Vivekananda's darshan. ... Finding him sickly and thin Swamiji felt sad and worried and said to him sweetly, 'Son, your body is rather weak; you must come and have your lunch here everyday. It is not possible to work unless you have had your fill; so you come here daily and have your lunch with me.' The youth would sometimes get held up by the Sevashrama work. Swamiji was not keeping well; any irregularity in his routine aggravated his illness. ... But love is a power that overrides all rules, regulations, and physical discomforts and asserts its primacy. Swamiji's mind would be anxious for the young man at lunchtime. He would keep pacing about in anticipation, his eyes fixed on the door and the approach path. He would anxiously enquire of anyone at hand, 'Has the boy come? Why is he so late today? He has not had anything till now; he is sickly, and young, and has to cope with bone-breaking labour.'

Just as any big work requiring special effort and attention would leave Swamiji serious and preoccupied, the delay in this young man's lunch would elicit a similar

reaction from him. ... Tasks, small and big, were not different for him. Lecturing in public, discussing Vedanta with pandits, deep meditation, and feeding this boy were all the same to him. ...

At long last the boy arrived in a hurry. Just as a mother cow is pleased to find her lost calf, Swamiji's face was filled with a similar joy on seeing the boy at the door. The worry, tension, and anxiety disappeared, and he began smilingly questioning the boy in a sweet voice, 'What happened son, why are you so late? Did you have a lot of work? Did you have something in the morning? I have been waiting for you and have not had anything as yet; come, wash yourself, let's quickly have our lunch.' ...

... Swamiji went for his lunch, with the boy following. When all were seated, Swamiji kept a watch over the boy, passing the best dishes from his own plate to the boy's. ... He kept feeding the boy with items from his own plate till he was full. Not once did Swamiji think about his own lunch. He probably ate less than usual; but to serve the homeless poor—and feeding this young boy, knowing him to be young and without support—was a big work in Swamiji's view. Filled with the joy derived from this work, Swamiji forgot his own food.

—*Kashidhame Swami Vivekananda*, 21–5

world opening people's eyes, while he contained the whole world in his vast heart.

Was the swami all too obvious, speaking of oneness and the harmony of religions and things that we already know? People who say this have only skimmed over the swami's words without hearing their music and without perceiving their depth. As the swami once said, 'I am a voice without a form' (6.283). Yes, if we can perceive *that* as we read the swami's words, we'll get a glimpse of their depth, coming from the heart of God. His words will be living and life-giving. Otherwise, we'll just see his words as words, the concepts as concepts, and—like all words and concepts on their own—they'll be flat.

Malvina Hoffman, the American sculptress, met the swami briefly and informally as a child. Many years later she wrote: '[There] was a sense of tranquility and power about him that made an imperishable impression upon me. He ... combined with this a kindly and gentle attitude of simplicity towards his fellow men. [Years] later ... I recalled, with emotion, that the only time I had seen this holy man, he had revealed to me more of the true spirit of India, without even uttering a word, than I had ever sensed in the many lectures *on* India, or *by* Indians, which I had attended since.'¹⁷ Did she just hear words? Obviously not. Something living was conveyed.

Josephine MacLeod wrote about her first encounter with the swami, when she and her sister went to hear him speak in New York:

He said something, the particular words of which I do not remember, but instantly to me that was truth, and the second sentence he spoke was truth, and the third sentence was truth. And I listened to him for seven years and whatever he uttered was to me truth. From that moment life had a different import. It was as if he made you realize that you were in eternity. It never altered. It never grew. It was like the sun that you will never forget once you have seen.¹⁸

Was the swami 'obvious' to her? In the sense that it was unnecessary for the swami to say what he said: certainly not. In the sense that he made what

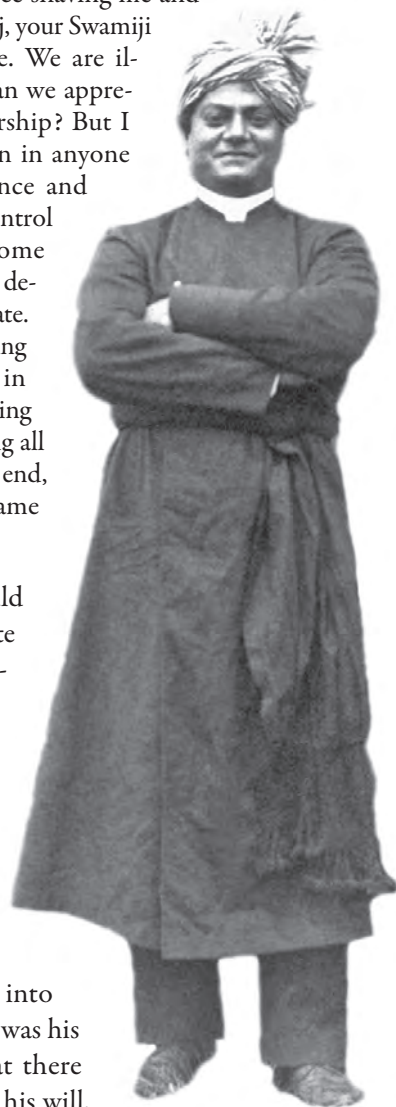
he said obvious to her by conveying the experience, yes, it was blessedly obvious, 'like the sun'.

Swamiji's Anger

Was the swami a hot head, always getting angry? He can appear that way when we read about him, or when we read his letters. He could be fierce in his scoldings. That also we have to see in context. Swami Akhandananda said:

Among us, there was none equal to Swamiji. He was truly 'one without anger and the embodiment of supreme bliss'. When I was in Rajputana, a barber was once shaving me and he said, 'Maharaj, your Swamiji is incomparable. We are illiterate. How can we appreciate his scholarship? But I have hardly seen in anyone else such patience and the ability to control one's anger. Some scholars came to defeat him in a debate. They were insulting him, while he, in turn, was answering them and smiling all the while. In the end, his vilifiers became his slaves.'¹⁹

The swami could be engaged in debate and yet not be controlled by anger. The swami could scold severely, but the severity came not from anger, it came from throwing the whole force of his being into the scolding. Such was his concentration that there was no division in his will,



such was his purity that there was no conflict in his desires to sap his strength, and so there was power in all of his actions, all of his thoughts.

Anger is something else. When we get angry, anger takes over. It comes up from an unconscious and therefore uncontrolled level of mind, fired with *prana*, and motivated by the will to destroy. In extreme cases the will to destroy is aimed at the life of a person, and we get crimes of passion. In more ordinary cases it comes as the will to embarrass or shame or silence the object of our anger: it's still destructive, just not murderous. None of that was present in the swami. As Akhandananda saw, he was utterly free from anger.

The severity of his scoldings was another manifestation of a phenomenon noted by Josephine Macleod: 'He had a curious quality that when he was a *bhakta*, a lover, he brushed aside *karma* and *rāja* and *jnāna yogas* as if they were of no consequence whatever. And when he was a *karma-yogi*, then he made that the great theme. Or equally so, the *jnāna*. Sometimes, weeks, he would fall in one particular mood utterly disregardful of what he had been, just previous to that. He seemed to be filled with an amazing power of concentration; of opening up to the great Cosmic qualities that are all about us.'²⁰ It was, again, his ability to throw the whole of himself into whatever he did which is seen in the power of his scoldings. This should be kept in mind as we study the swami. And we should also remember what those who knew him said repeatedly: that he was the embodiment of love, as tender as a flower, and utterly forgiving.

Did the Swami Exaggerate?

This is harder to answer, because anyone familiar with the swami's words can find multiple examples of exaggeration, and the swami's apologist is left silenced. But what was behind the swami's exaggerations? If we look to that, we no longer see them as exaggerations in the ordinary sense, which are matters of the will, matters of motivation. We ordinary people have to exaggerate in order to inject some colour into the greyness of our petty lives. Swami

Vivekananda had no such need. His apparent exaggerations had another source.

For example, someone once complained to me that Vivekananda—writing of the reconquest of India by a resurgent Hinduism during the early Middle Ages—had said that there was not a single Buddhist left in India. 'Not *one* Buddhist?' the friend exclaimed, disgusted at the swami's exaggeration. 'Not even *one*?' So was there not a single Buddhist in India when the swami wrote, in the late 1890s? Of course there was, more than a single. Not counting Buddhists from other countries residing in India, which of course were not included in the swami's statement, there were native Buddhists living in what is now Bangladesh but was then still part of India. Then, as now, they lived in the area around Chittagong, on the border of the Buddhist country of Burma. Technically they were living in India, so technically the swami was wrong. Furthermore, there must have been a rare Indian intellectual who, like some Western intellectuals of the time, had fallen under the spell of Buddhism. There again the swami was *technically* exaggerating. But that ignores the swami's point: the vigour and success of a resurgent Hinduism which had, practically speaking, completely driven Buddhism out, after long periods of Buddhist domination.

What is the intent of a statement? That is what we have to look at. What is the speaker trying to convey? That is at the heart of a statement's truth. Are they trying to fool us, or hide something from us, or impress us, or are they speaking forcefully, which means without footnotes? The swami never spoke in footnotes. He never tried to qualify his statements so that they would be technically correct with no possible exceptions. He spoke the truth by making the thrust of his statements true. That's why his words are fire. Sri Ramakrishna said that Vivekananda was the most truthful of men. And the swami's disciple Paramananda said: 'Swamiji always expressed great aversion to exaggeration and self-glorification. Not only would he not blow his own trumpet, but he disliked it very much if anybody else tried to do it for him. It was truth—truth in its nakedness and

entirety—that was his great passion.²¹

The swami's categorical statements are some of his best. He had an extraordinary ability to encapsulate a world of meaning in an epigrammatic statement: 'Religion is the manifestation of the divinity already in man.'²² Well, historically speaking religion has been about a lot more than that, positive and negative: what about the importance of community, what about tradition, what about the inquisitions and religious wars and persecutions, what about the abuses of power? If we can grasp what the swami is saying, we see that elements like community and tradition are secondary, and those abuses mentioned are not religion, but the failure of people to manifest religion. 'Religion is being and becoming' (9.543). Well, what about doing, isn't that important? Yes, and what spiritual teacher gave more importance to action than the swami? But why is action important? It's because of its effect on our being and what we are becoming, not independent of that.

Swamiji and Neo-Vedanta

What about the second class of criticisms mentioned above? Did the swami leave a consistent, systematic philosophy? And did he reinvent Hinduism, perhaps with suspect motives?

No, he didn't leave a consistent philosophy, thank God! We can see from his conversations, letters, and lectures that he was fully aware of the danger of internally consistent systems of thought: they become prisons of human thought, especially when left by one with the natural authority and power of a Vivekananda. Buddha said that all is transitory. Later, when Buddhists became philosophical, they came up with the extraordinary idea that nirvana itself changes every moment, though it keeps changing into itself. Why? Because Buddha said *everything* is momentary. That must mean nirvana too. They couldn't see outside of the system.

Swami Vivekananda taught by what is called the 'backshot method': throwing out all kinds of truths from all kinds of perspectives, and letting each take those truths that appealed to the individual. Reality can't be systematized; it is infinitely complex. The

Swamiji, some of his *gurubhais* [brother disciples], and some newly initiated sannyasins and brahmacharins were sitting in the visitors' room in the Belur Math. One of his *gurubhais* asked Swamiji: 'Swamiji, your sayings and teachings contain so many apparently contradictory things that these young men are often at a loss to understand what to do or what not to do.' Swamiji, not replying directly to his *gurubhai*, said to the disciples present: 'You see, my children, I am a religious preacher. So I have to say different things to different persons according as the occasion arises. Why should you feel yourself obliged to act according to all my different instructions? Do you not see, my *gurubhais* do not always follow me though I tell them many things? Whenever anyone of you feel puzzled as to how to act on a particular occasion or need guidance in your personal spiritual culture, come to me in private and ask my opinion and advice.'

—Swami Shuddhananda

swami therefore gave out truths, but didn't impose systems on the limitless nature of Truth.


What about 'Neo-Vedanta'? The term has been taken up in a positive context by some modern Vedantists. But it is generally used by scholars in a somewhat derogatory fashion. It is used to indicate that Vivekananda reinvented Hinduism according to his own light, probably with some suspect motivation, like making Hinduism palatable to a Western audience. This criticism comes from two directions: from Western and Eastern secular scholars who look on Vedanta as a static object of historical interest, and from orthodox Hindus who look on it as a system perfected in ancient times and thus in no need of re-statement but rather demanding rigid conformity.

Did the swami reinvent Hinduism according to his own light? In a sense, certainly he reinterpreted Hinduism, and one can only do that according to one's own light. But in the case of the swami, he did it according to the light that Sri Ramakrishna's life shed on Hinduism. And he certainly wasn't trying

to make Hinduism 'palatable'. The swami's multiple criticisms of a 'comfortable' religion attest to that. He *was* trying to extract the universals from Hinduism, to make the principles of Hinduism accessible to the world, to all cultures. And that is part of his greatest genius: what had for long been an ethnic religion became accessible to anyone anywhere, practicable in any culture by people of whatever ethnicity.

Many scholars are upset because for them Hinduism is something defined in books, static, like a display of butterflies pinned to a cork board. Hinduism is a living system, as different from academic religion as a living butterfly in the field is different from a dead butterfly pinned to a board. If what Vivekananda taught is Neo-Vedanta, all Vedanta from the beginning is Neo-Vedanta, because it is a living tradition. In every historical period it has adjusted to the times, and its periods of greatest glory have been periods when it best met the needs of the age, not when it held to a rigid conservatism that feared the world and its changes. Was Shankaracharya nothing but a repetition of the past? Was Ramanujacharya nothing but a repetition? Jnaneshwara? Madhusudana Saraswati? God forbid. That is death, not life. Neither, of course, is change for change's sake life—that's nothing but superficiality. But finding new expressions of eternal truths to suit changing times is life. If an organism stops adapting, it dies. It is no different with a religious tradition, or for that matter with a country or an organization. Vedanta *is* Neo-Vedanta, so there is no need to coin a new term which adds nothing to our understanding but only demeans the very life of the tradition.

To those who don't care for Swami Vivekananda, Godspeed! May you find inspiration that suits your needs, and may you attain to the Light beyond all darkness. We can be sure that the swami's unqualified blessings are on you to find your way. To those of you who want to understand the swami but find him too obvious, try to see who he is, and read his words in that light. See what he's trying to say, what he's trying to do, and where his teachings and actions are coming from. Know most of all that

those who knew him said over and over that he was the embodiment of love, an all-accepting love, all-forgiving love, a love that gave freedom to all. 

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Swami Brahmananda: A Spiritual Dynamo

Swami Sarvadevananda

'My child, withdrawing the mind from the entire universe and keeping it on the *kuta*, the Unchanging—is that a small matter?' Saying these words, Swami Brahmananda lost himself in deep thought. I remembered the verse from the Bhagavadgita with the following phrase: '*kutastham-achalam dhruvam*; the Unchanging, the Unmoving, the Eternal'. I started wondering if I had understood the real significance of *mantra-diksha*, spiritual initiation, though I had been anxious to get it. I was overwhelmed by this thought.

—*Kalisaday Pashchima*.¹

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA would keep his mind absorbed in 'the Unchanging, Unmoving, the Eternal' even as he lived in the world for the good of humanity. Standing by the Brahmaputra River at Mymensingh, examining its extended banks spanning eight to ten miles, he once said, 'Coming here, my mind is getting merged in the infinite' (419). In its natural state his mind would be moving on higher planes of consciousness. He would force it to come down to the normal workaday world by participating in such mundane acts as fishing, playing cards, smoking the hookah, or talking about mangoes. It was very difficult for ordinary people to understand the greatness of this extraordinary personality, who held firm the rudder of the Ramakrishna Order during its critical initial days after the passing of Swami Vivekananda.

Transcendental Guide

At the beginning of the last century the Indian media had expressed serious doubts about the vi-

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ability of the fledgling Ramakrishna Order. The Calcutta newspapers criticized the monks for 'living a luxurious life' unconcerned about the needs of the motherland. They suggested that the sadhus did nothing to help the freedom movement after Sister Nivedita dissociated herself from the Order to actively pursue her political work. The British government also weighed in with its own—though diametrically opposite—criticism: it seemed convinced that the Order was secretly harbouring and inspiring the freedom fighters. One could not have been blamed for thinking that the very survival of

the Order was at stake, caught as it was between the insinuations of the local press and the oppressive surveillance of the British government. Taking all these pressures in his stride, Maharaj—that was how Swami Brahmananda was popularly known—protected, nurtured, and facilitated the growth of the Order with his singular spiritual power. But for Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda, whose footsteps Maharaj followed, few believed that such an unassuming monk could, merely by the force of his spiritual presence, hold the Order steady against such cross-currents—the Order created by Swami Vivekananda to nurse the spiritual ideal that is to invigorate India for the next fifteen hundred years.

Brahmananda's spirituality was his dynamo—the fountainhead of power behind his personality; and it was this spirituality that had a remarkable impact in transforming the lives of those who came to him. One day Swami Akhilananda, who was then a very young boy, was told by Swami Vijnanananda to tell Swami Brahmananda: 'There is something within me that needs awakening—please help me to do it.' When Akhilananda asked Vijnanananda why he himself did not do this awakening for him, Vijnanananda replied with his usual humility: 'I have very little spiritual power within me, but Maharaj lives in the powerhouse. He can easily do what you ask.' Maharaj, of course, took Akhilananda's words very seriously, telling him that 'for this awakening one needs initiation' and promising to initiate him. According to Akhilananda: 'Maharaj made us feel that spiritual awakening and God-realization are not difficult to achieve. He made us understand that tremendous help will be given us if only we will struggle a little, and that we can easily reach the goal.'² After the inception and establishment of the Bhubaneswar Math, Maharaj instructed a monk saying, 'Perform intense japa, practise mental japa with every breath. If this turns into a habit, then japa goes on spontaneously. It even continues before and after sleep. If a boy performs meditation and japa in right earnest, a math can run on the merit of his practice.'³

Swami Shankarananda said: 'We have seen him

always stay in an introspective mood, in a spiritual atmosphere which is profound and grand, while running the administration of the Order.'⁴ One incident may be mentioned in this context. It was 5 March 1916. The annual meeting of the Ramakrishna Mission was being held at Belur Math. Maharaj was presiding. Swamis Saradananda, Premananda, and others were present. After Swami Shuddhananda had finished reading the statement of accounts, Maharaj looked at Premananda and said: 'Now you give them some spiritual instructions. ... Have these people come here—in this afternoon heat, spending money and undergoing trouble—to listen to these dry statement of accounts! Pour some nectar into their hearts.' Needless to say, Premananda complied.⁵

Maharaj kept the twin ideals of God-realization and the welfare of the world ablaze in the minds of the monastic and lay members of the Order. Swami Vivekananda did not find it easy to convince his brother monks about the need for the new ideal of Practical Vedanta with its emphasis on service in the spirit of worship. Harder still was it for Maharaj to promote the ideal among the monks of the next generation. Though Maharaj emphasized meditation and japa, he gave service activities equal importance. In 1916 the Mission was in need of workers for relief activities. Many monks were hesitating to join the relief work, considering it an obstacle to spiritual practice. Coming to know of this, Maharaj said to the monks of Belur Math: 'Some amongst you, I hear, say that the activities of the Mission are obstacles to spiritual practice; that spiritual development is not possible through relief work and such other activities. ... You do not understand our attitude. You ought to accept the spirit [in which our work is carried out]. Of course, I have been repeating again and again, and even now I say this emphatically, that whether you go to do famine relief or any other work, call upon God in the mornings and evenings and at the end of the work—perform japa and meditation.' Maharaj reminded them of Swamiji's exhortation that one ought not to be afraid to dedicate one lifetime to

the welfare of the world, as many previous lives have been wasted through laziness. Hearing these inspiring words, the monks became free from confusion and misgivings and prepared themselves for the relief work with rejuvenated spirits (189–90).

Equally telling are Swami Turiyananda's utterances of 14 January 1921 on the same issue:

Many take these [service] activities to be inferior to meditation. They do not understand the significance [of these activities]. They say this on a whim. ... People fail to understand that Swamiji instituted this path after seeing the Self in all created beings. They merely repeat old-fangled ideas—wishing to confine themselves to meditation and japa. If one performs this service to Narayana [the Divine] in the right spirit for three days, one will have direct realization. ... You regard them as patients, not as Narayana, that is why you do not have any realization. But is it not true that everyone is Narayana? '*Ishvara sarva-bhutanam hrid-deshe'rjuna-tishthati*; God resides in the hearts of all beings, O Arjuna.' If you cannot see that, the fault is yours (190).

The Unfolding of a Perfected Soul

From the very early days of his life, Rakhāl—that was Maharaj's pre-monastic name—used to live in another plane of consciousness. As a young boy, he would get totally absorbed in the thought of Mother Durga while looking at the image of the deity during the annual worship of the Divine Mother at his birthplace Sikra. He used to prepare images of gods and goddesses and worship them. There was a big banyan tree in the middle of a vast meadow near his ancestral home. Rakhāl used to visit that secluded place known as Gazitala and spend long hours in meditation! The scriptures say that holy people are responsible for creating the holiness associated with places of pilgrimage. Even now many people report feeling a deep spiritual atmosphere at Sikra, though Maharaj lived there only for a short time.

Rakhāl belonged to the class of *ishvarakotis*—those that are spiritually perfect from birth. Even then, to set an example for posterity, he did practise intense spiritual austerities to acquire a lofty state

of mind. His intense love for God, sincere spiritual effort, and utmost renunciation made Rakhāl a Brahmananda.

Sri Ramakrishna, an ideal spiritual teacher, whose being was steeped in samadhi, whose consciousness was raised to the dizzy heights of non-dual Truth, took great care to build the spiritual edifice that each of his monastic children was. He guided Rakhāl step by step, making him a spiritual powerhouse. He taught him to be regular in his spiritual practices. On one occasion Sri Ramakrishna freed him from depression and mental distraction at the lack of spiritual experience by writing something on his tongue. Another day he gave Rakhāl a special mantra and also a vision of his Chosen Deity saying, 'Look, this is your mantra and this is your Chosen Deity.' Immediately Rakhāl saw the luminous form of God in front of him and was overwhelmed. He also instructed Rakhāl in many spiritual disciplines—*asanas* or postures, *mudras* or gestures, methods of japa, meditation, yoga, and the like.⁶ Practising these disciplines in solitude Rakhāl experienced the highest realization.

Sri Ramakrishna's training was suited to meet individual needs and temperaments. Of Rakhāl's spiritual nature, vis-à-vis Narendra's, he had this to say: 'Naren dwells in the realm of the Absolute,

One evening while he was at Madras, he [Maharaj] went into *Samadhi* (the super-conscious state) during *Arati* [vesper]. He sat on the rug at the far end of the hall, his body motionless, his eyes closed, a smile of ecstasy playing about his lips. Swami Ramakrishnananda was the first to observe that he did not move when the service was over. Realizing what had occurred, he motioned to one of the young swamis to fan his head. ... For half an hour no one stirred—a boy who was crossing the hall did not even draw back his foot. Perfect stillness pervaded the monastery—a radiant, pulsing stillness.

—Sister Devamata,

Days in an Indian Monastery, 154



Swamis Brahmananda and Premananda with other sadhus and devotees in front of the house at Kashimpur, East Bengal, where Brahmananda stayed for a few days in 1916

the Impersonal. He is like a sharp, drawn sword of discrimination. Rakhhal dwells in the realm of God, the Sweet One, the repository of all blessed qualities. He is like a child on the lap of his mother, completely surrendering himself to her in every way.⁷

While living with the Master at Dakshineswar, Rakhhal's renunciation and indrawn mood went to such heights that he could not tolerate the company of any worldly-minded people. At times, in such deeper moods, he did not enjoy even the company of Sri Ramakrishna! There were times when Rakhhal would go into deep ecstasy while doing japa; then Sri Ramakrishna had to bring him back to normal consciousness. Rakhhal had many visions and developed many occult powers. But he did not pay any attention to the latter, as Sri Ramakrishna specifically warned against the serious hindrance to spiritual life that arises by possessing them. In later years Maharaj told Swami Sharvananda, a disciple of his, 'It is easy to acquire occult powers, but hard indeed to attain purity of heart.'⁸

One day at Udbodhan Swami Saradananda told his assistant Kiran, Swami Aseshananda: 'Do you take Maharaj to be an ordinary person? He can mould our minds into any shape he wishes, like a lump of clay!'⁹ This statement is indeed remarkable, coming as it does from Saradananda, who was blessed with the vision of Brahman in all beings. Only a jeweller can value a priceless jewel. Saradananda's statement gives us a glimpse into Brahmananda's spiritual stature.

Making God-consciousness Habitual

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, Maharaj continued his intense spiritual practices at Baranagar Math, Alambazar Math, and in different places of pilgrimage; he wanted to make the spiritual experiences that he had been vouchsafed under Sri Ramakrishna's care his permanent possessions. While at Omkareshwar he remained absorbed in the impersonal Absolute for six days and six nights, completely oblivious of the outer world.

At Panchavati by the River Godavari, Maharaj had the vision of Rama and Sita and experienced their living presence. He remained absorbed in samadhi for three days and three nights. In Vrindaban he lived in a state of perpetual ecstasy. He would not even talk to Subodhananda, who would attend to the few needs that he had. Subodhananda would beg food for him and put it in a corner of his cottage. One day Subodhananda asked Maharaj: 'Why do you live so strictly? You are the spiritual son of God Incarnate. He has already done everything for you. Through his grace you have attained samadhi. Then, why do you still have to sit like a beggar, begging for God's grace?' Maharaj replied: 'What you say is true. The Master did everything for us. But still I find a lack within. This proves that we need repeated practice in order to make the state of samadhi natural and habitual to us.'¹⁰

Vijaykrishna Goswami, a great Vaishnava saint who had seen Sri Ramakrishna and was influenced by him, also asked Maharaj the same question. Maharaj replied: 'I am only trying to become established in that vision of God which I received

through my Master's grace' (46).

These are only a few glimpses of the extraordinary life of intense spirituality that Maharaj lead. Experiencing the Truth in all its aspects and keeping his mind absorbed in God, Maharaj guided the lives of monks and devotees of the Ramakrishna Order. To him God was not a mere theory but a palpable presence. He would not do anything without direct instructions from the Master. The great spiritual treasure that he accumulated through intense tapasya was then laid open for distribution to innumerable people. Maharaj's life is a testimony to the veracity of the ancient spiritual truths.

The Dynamo at Work

Swami Vivekananda once remarked: 'Raja [Swami Brahmananda] is the greatest treasure house of spirituality.' On another occasion Swamiji sent to Maharaj a European devotee who had come to him to have his spiritual problems solved, saying: 'There is a dynamo working and we are all under him.'¹¹ Standing on the ground of his own profound experience, Maharaj could say: 'Spiritual life begins after *nirvikalpa samadhi* [the highest transcendental experience]!'¹² This is indeed an astounding concept and a grand standard of spiritual life.

Maharaj was the embodiment of dharma and condensed spirituality. He once said to a disciple of Swami Vivekananda: 'Look here Shukul, I find that the realm of the Absolute is separated from the realm of lila by a fine glass screen. Now and then I feel like merging myself into the Absolute by breaking through the barrier. But the Master does not permit it.'¹³ Living on this high plane of consciousness, Maharaj managed the affairs of the Sangha.

Boshi Sen, the renowned botanist, who was very free with Maharaj, once said to him, 'Maharaj, you are a miser.' 'Why do you call me a miser?' Maharaj asked. 'He is a miser,' Boshi continued, 'who has plenty of money but does not give it to anyone. If you wish, you can make others see God, but you are not giving that [vision]—that is why you are a miser.' Maharaj instantly turned grave and said, 'Who wants? Even monks and brahmacharins come

and tell me: "Maharaj, grant me initiation, grant me brahmacharya, grant me sannyasa." No one says help me get God.'¹⁴ It seems that Maharaj was waiting to give this knowledge and realization, and searching for the right person who was ready to receive it.

Maharaj once told Swami Prabhavananda: 'There are times when it becomes impossible for me to teach anyone. No matter where I look, I see only God, wearing many masks. Who am I, the teacher? Who is to be taught? How can God teach God? But when my mind comes down again, to a lower level, I see the ignorance in man and try to remove it.'¹⁵ Remaining in this state of consciousness Maharaj used to guide and help every seeker of Truth.

Girishchandra Ghosh, the famous Bengali dramatist, actor, and producer, who was an embodiment of faith and devotion to Sri Ramakrishna, once contracted a serious illness that affected his physical and mental health. He said:

I found that I had lost my faith in Sri Ramakrishna. My heart felt dry. Many of the brother-disciples

The Correct Raga · Maharaj was then visiting Dacca. Everyday many visitors would come to have his darshan. [The famous sarod maestro] Ustad Alauddin Khan would also come to meet him occasionally. One evening he started playing on the sarod with Maharaj's permission. There was a big gathering. The recital went on for a long time. The whole atmosphere turned solemn, still, and divine. Maharaj's mind was getting absorbed in samadhi. After he had finished a piece, the Ustad asked Maharaj with folded hands, 'Maharaj, what shall I play now?' With eyes closed in meditation, Maharaj said in a soft voice, 'Ustad, now play Shukla Bilaval.' The Ustad kept aside his sarod and making repeated prostrations at Maharaj's feet said, 'Maharaj, that this is the raga appropriate to this solemn atmosphere, to this time of the day, and as a sequel to the raga which I just played—only you could tell this!' Saying so the Ustad burst into tears.

—Swami Nirvanananda, *Devaloker Katha*, 118

came to see me. I had told them about the unhappy state of my mind, but they only kept silent. Then, one day, Rakhal came ... listened attentively, [and] then he laughed aloud. 'Why worry about it?' he asked me. 'The wave rises high out of the ocean; then it goes down again, and again it rises. The mind is like that. But please do not worry. Your present mood is due to the fact that you are about to rise to a much higher level of spirituality. The wave of the mind is gathering its strength.'¹⁶

When Maharaj left, Girish felt uplifted, his dryness had gone and faith had returned. That was the transforming power of Maharaj's words—they could bring back faith and joy.

While receiving spiritual initiation from Maharaj, many felt the direct touch of the Divine. 'The day Maharaj was to initiate me,' said Swami Yatiswarananda, 'I felt a spiritual power tangibly emanating from him. He raised his hand in benediction above my head, giving me instantly a vivid consciousness of an immanent Presence. I realized that the whole universe was merged in that Presence.' Further, 'That day, also, I got a glimpse of the divine nature and power of the guru. I was literally

Divine Forgetfulness . When I [Swami Prabhavananda] met Maharaj, he was living, moving, and having his being in God continuously. The state of samadhi was natural to him, and he had to struggle at times to bring his mind down to the work of teaching and presiding over the Order. The following incident, originally told by Swami Ambikananda, may serve as illustration.

A legal document required Maharaj's signature. Three days passed, and Maharaj had not yet signed it. When the secretary came to get the document, he found Maharaj looking at it, pen in hand. An attendant said, 'Please Maharaj, won't you sign?' And Maharaj answered, 'I know, I know, I am trying. But you see, I have forgotten how to write my name.'

—*Vedanta and the West*,
(September–October 1954), 59

transported into a new life, and the power that he transmitted to me that day is still working within me.'¹⁷

Another striking incident from the life of Devendranath Basu, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, indicates the remarkable nature of the spiritual power working through Maharaj. Some time after the Master's demise Deven busied himself in a managerial job. One day he happened to meet Swami Akhandananda who took him to Maharaj at Belur Math. Seeing Deven after a long time, Maharaj entertained him with great affection. After he left, Maharaj said to Akhandananda: 'O Gangadhar! What has happened to your Deven? His walk, attitude, and behaviour—everything seems to have changed. Has he forgotten the Master and all of us?' When Akhandananda narrated these remarks to Deven, there was a tremendous reaction in his mind. He went again to the Math to meet Maharaj, terribly restless. Maharaj put his hand on Deven's chest and remaining silent for a while said: 'What has happened, Deven Babu? Everything will be all right—remember the Master.' This brought about a great transformation in Deven. After offering his salutation to Maharaj, he said: 'Maharaj, all my restlessness has gone away. What a state I had been reduced to. Now, by your blessings and kindness, there is no more any sorrow or conflict within me.'¹⁸

It has been said that Maharaj would not initiate anyone with a mantra unless he received the vision of the Chosen Ideal of the disciple. That was probably one reason why some aspirants received their mantra immediately on approaching him, while there were others who failed to get their spiritual initiation even after visiting him for six years. According to Swami Jagadananda, in the case of one aspirant Maharaj got the vision of the Chosen Ideal but did not know the mantra of the deity. He initiated the aspirant only after he had confirmed the mantra from the *Tantra-sara*. Then there were others like Mahamaya Sarkar and Chinmoy Basu who were initiated by Maharaj of his own accord.¹⁹

A Mart of Spirituality

Maharaj took great care in building the spiritual lives of young monastics. He would himself get up at three in the morning and ask others to come and join him in meditation. Once he said to Swami Shyamananda: ‘The Master could give us everything, there was nothing that he could not give. Even then he would wake us up at night and make us meditate. He would say, “If you eat during the day and sleep at night, then how will you realize God?”’ (48). Shyamananda recalls:

Maharaj would get up from sleep at around three in the morning every day. I would offer him tobacco and sit down on the floor in front of him. He would ask me to chant a kirtan comprising the divine names of Krishna: ‘*Hari haraye namah, krishna yadavaya namah, yadavaya madhavaya keshavaya namah*; salutations to Hari and Hara, to Krishna, Yadava, to Yadava, Madhava, Keshava.’ I would chant in a tune that he had taught me and he would listen as he smoked. As he did so he would lose outward consciousness and the pipe would drop from his hand. If I happened to pause, he would say, ‘keep going, keep going.’ I would keep chanting. There were days when he would become very quiet, as if he had stopped breathing. At such times Swami Premananda would occasionally come over from the adjacent room and offer him pranams.

Maharaj used to tell me: ‘Get intoxicated chanting the holy name. Whatever you do—it be meditation, japa, prayer, or any other spiritual practice—let it be between you and the Master. Do not worry at all about others hearing or watching, or about making mistakes. Be totally intoxicated, be absorbed’ (48–9).

A remarkable spiritual atmosphere was created in the presence of Maharaj. Swami Mukteshwarananda’s recollection confirms this:

Maharaj used to provide great encouragement regarding meditation, prayer, worship, and scriptural study. ... He would often repeat: ‘Tapasya, tapasya, tapasya.’ He could also be heard saying: ‘One should perform intense meditation and japa when one’s devotion is still fresh. You have come

A Spiritual Presence · Brahmananda did not have the eloquence of a Vivekananda. He inspired people by his silences quite as much as by his words. It is said that he could change the psychological atmosphere in a room, making the occupants feel talkative and gay and then inclining them to silent meditation, without himself saying anything. For the most part, his teachings were very simply expressed. ‘Religion is a most practical thing. It doesn’t matter whether one believes or not. It is like science. If one performs spiritual disciplines, the result is bound to come. Although one may be practising mechanically—if one persists one will get everything in time. ... And if you go one step towards God, God will come a hundred steps towards you. ... Why did God create us? So that we may love him.’

—Christopher Isherwood,
Ramakrishna and His Disciples, 330

here leaving hearth and home—what are you doing? Immerse yourself in the ocean of His holy name! Pray saying: give me love, give me knowledge. If you do not do something now, you will have to repent later.’ I remember how at one time an intense storm of meditation, japa, prayer, and study blew over Belur Math. At that time Maharaj used to provide great inspiration to each one of us. ...

There was no end to our physical labour. ... Maharaj kept instructing us to undertake meditation and japa along with work. He would also keep watch to see if we were following his instructions (50–1).

Maharaj could even give the experience of samadhi, but he recognized the need for preparing one’s spiritual nerves through sadhana. Swami Shuddhananda once asked Maharaj: ‘Can you provide the experience of samadhi?’ Maharaj was pacing to and fro at that time. He said: ‘Yes, I can. But it would be difficult to hold. Even as one rises up [rapidly], one risks falling down. It is better to have it through one’s own effort. Holy Mother [Sri Sarada Devi] can give this with ease’ (59).


But sadhana under the guidance of Maharaj was obviously a unique experience. Mukteshwarananda's description transports our minds to Belur Math and into the heavenly reaches of a divine realm. We can imagine what deep vibrations of spirituality were generated in the presence of Maharaj:

It was not yet dawn. A deep silence pervaded everywhere. The entire creation appeared to be absorbed in the meditation on Brahman. Swami Brahmananda said to us, 'Please sing this song: "Look, there exists the abode of bliss—exceedingly beautiful, effulgent, and beyond the ocean of worldly existence!"'

We sang mostly Brahma-sangeet after our meditation hours. When we sang the line, 'O we know not how many saints and sages are absorbed in the deepest meditation in that abode of bliss' with great enthusiasm, we felt inspired by the deep, spiritual mood of Swami Brahmananda. Our voices reverberated all around, saturating the whole atmosphere, and we were transported to a domain of exceeding bliss.

I hear that particular song being sung even today, but I don't experience that heart-enthraling bliss that we experienced when we sang it together in the presence of Swami Brahmananda. Whenever we sang the song 'Meditate on His feet resting on the lotus seat of thy heart; behold the

unparalleled beauty of His countenance with thy eyes soaked in love!' I saw, to speak the truth, the 'lotus seat' of my heart quite empty! But when I looked out and saw Swami Brahmananda's face, I was amazed to see the wonderful transformation that had come to it. His face shone with a kind of divine light. His gaze was indrawn and steady, and his eyelids didn't blink! ... And in wonder I couldn't take my eyes off his peaceful and grave countenance.²⁰

The blazing life and profound spiritual teachings of Brahmananda remain with us as a great example—inspiring monks, devotees, and lovers of God. That great spiritual dynamism that we see in his life can alone liberate sincere seekers of God from ignorance of the Self and the bondage it entails. 

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Swami Premananda: Love Personified

Swami Atmeshwarananda

grasp of common understanding. In the language of the Upanishads, saints belong to a realm from which speech returns gasping and the mind returns without grasping: *yato vacho nivartante, aprapya manasa saba*; and again, neither speech nor mind can get there: *na tatra vag-gachchhati no mano*. As knowers of God, saints too seem to possess some of God's seeming—*seeming* because, in reality, there is nothing mysterious about the Divine; it is the only 'simple'—mystery and profoundness. And again, like God, 'they will remain largely incomprehensible to those who are not yet evolved enough to bear the weight of spiritual knowledge'.¹

Blazing Purity

Swami Premananda, his intimate companions testify, possessed the qualities of a saint to the fullest extent. Saintliness shone in him. His was a blazing purity. So unblemished was his character that Sri Ramakrishna was once moved to remark: 'Baburam [that was the swami's pre-monastic name] is pure to his very marrow. No impure thought can ever cross his mind.'² To the very end of his life, he evinced a childlike simplicity and guilelessness which was noticed by all who made his acquaintance.

Once a young man came to Mahapurush Swami Shivananda at Belur Math and was relating the sinful acts of his past. Out of compassion, Shivananda listened attentively. Premananda happened to be nearby, and after listening for a while exclaimed, 'What are all those things he was talking about?' Shivananda asked him, 'Have you understood none of it?' 'Not a bit,' replied Premananda. Looking at him from head to foot, Shivananda remarked, 'Now I understand why the Master used to say that you

OUTWARDLY, there is very little to distinguish an illumined soul from ordinary men and women. In most instances saints appear to be simple, maybe enigmatic, unobtrusive figures. Barring a few exceptions they remain unknown to the world at large. Much of a saint's life is obscure and is lived within. Saints elude investigation because, by its very nature, saintliness is beyond the descriptive power of words or the

Swami Atmeshwarananda is a monastic member of Belur Math.

were “pure to the marrow”.³ Swami Ashokananda remarks: ‘Seeing him, you could not but be impressed by the purity of his being; it was as though a flaming purity were walking there in the grounds of the monastery.’⁴

When Baburam first visited Sri Ramakrishna, the Master thoroughly examined his face, hands, and feet, and expressed great satisfaction. ‘He weighed Baburam’s forearm by placing it on his palm. It was one of his ways of judging a person’s spirituality; if it was lighter than ordinary he would say that this showed a “beneficent intelligence”. Observing the auspicious signs, the Master expressed with joy, “Very good, very good”.’⁵

At their very first meeting Sri Ramakrishna seemed to sense Baburam’s purity. When he entered into samadhi, Sri Ramakrishna could not bear the touch of impure people. Baburam was one of the few people who could touch him in such states without causing pain. He later recalled: ‘During the Master’s samadhi we had to hold him so he would not fall, but we were afraid. We thought that if we were not pure enough, then, when we touched him during samadhi, he would publicly cry out in pain. So we prayed for purity. It was the Master’s grace that I was allowed to live with him’ (185).

The Divine Play of Vrindaban

Baburam Ghosh was born on 10 December 1861 in Antpur, a village sixty-five kilometres from Belur Math, the international headquarters of the Ramakrishna Sangha. His was a very devout family. None in the family, young or old, would take food until the daily worship of the family deities Lakshmi-Narayana and Gangadhara Shiva was over. His elder sister Krishnabhavini was married to Balaram Bose, an ardent devotee of Sri Ramakrishna who is known in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition as one of Sri Ramakrishna’s *rasaddars*, supplier of needs.

Baburam manifested spiritual traits even as a young boy. He had a great abhorrence of marriage and would shed tears of misery if anyone would talk of his marriage. At the tender age of eight it was his ardent desire to live with a monk in a secluded wood

by the Ganga and meditate on God. No wonder his first reaction to Dakshineswar was one of sheer delight. The natural beauty of the place, the imposing temple of Mother Kali with temples to Krishna and Shiva by its side, the sweet murmur of the Ganga caressing the temple’s western boundary, and the tranquil atmosphere in which God walked on earth transported him to another world. On his second visit to Dakshineswar he visited the Panchavati—the site of Sri Ramakrishna’s sadhana—and the sight rekindled memories of his childhood vision of the hermitage by the Ganga.

Young Baburam’s spiritual leanings appear hardly surprising when we remember that Sri Ramakrishna recognized him as being born as a part of Srimati Radha, the consort of Sri Krishna and the embodiment of divine love. In a vision he also saw Baburam in the form of a goddess.

In 1895–6 Premananda visited various holy places in northern India and spent considerable time in contemplation at Vrindaban, the divine playground of Krishna’s disport with the gopis. Most of the time he would be absorbed in God, but would visit the temples in the afternoons and evenings. The ecstatic atmosphere of this sanctified place filled him with a special devotional fervour; under the spell of this he would bow to all women of the place as manifestations of the gopis.

Later, he recalled one of his experiences:

After visiting different places in Mathura, I went to Vrindaban—the playground of divine love! There was so much excitement in my mind! After taking a bath in the Radhakunda, I was meditating, sitting on the bank of the pond. At that time, a beautiful young girl wearing gorgeous clothes and shining jewellery placed before me a plateful of sweets and vanished. I called the *pandas* (priests) and inquired about the girl. They replied, ‘We are poor people who have hardly enough to eat. Where would we get such good food? And where would we find such costly jewellery? My dear son, could you not recognize the girl? It must have been Radharani herself who came and graced you with a vision of herself.’ Then, like a madman, I went around the pond shouting, ‘*Pyariji! Pyariji* [the beloved]!’⁶

Nikunja Bihari Mallik recalled another incident that gives a glimpse of Premananda's divine nature:

I came to Vrindaban before Baburam Maharaj. Hearing that he was going to visit Gokul, I accompanied him there. Before Radhabag, we waded across the Yamuna river and proceeded straight towards Gokul. It was summer. He was tired, and when we got to a mango grove, he lay down. On his lips was only, 'Pyariji! Pyariji!' A number of men and women were there guarding the place and keeping the monkeys away. They asked him why he was staying outdoors in the scorching sun. Then they cut some branches, soaked them in water drawn from a well, spread them on the ground, and bade him to lie down on them. Then each of them took a branch and started to fan him. Hearing 'Pyariji! Pyariji!' from his mouth, they said, 'You are indeed Lali (Radha) herself.' When I approached him, they became annoyed and scolded me, saying, 'Who are you? Get away from here!' Oh, what a sight! Even after such a long time I have not forgotten this incident (12).

The Sangha

A few months after Sri Ramakrishna's mahasamadhi a significant event took place at Antpur. Baburam's mother had always wanted the young disciples of Sri Ramakrishna to come to her place and enjoy her hospitality for a few days. The time being opportune now, Naren, Baburam, and seven other young disciples journeyed to Antpur by train, singing kirtan all the way. One evening, in the serene village atmosphere of Antpur they lit a large *dhuni* fire, and sitting themselves around it meditated for a long time under a starlit canopy. Naren then spoke to them about the life of Jesus, emphasizing his great renunciation. He in turn inspired his brother disciples to renounce everything for the realization of God and to dedicate themselves to their Master's cause. Later, they were pleasantly surprised to find that that evening had been Christmas Eve.

After the group returned to Baranagar Math, the brothers performed *viraja homa*, the ceremony of formal renunciation of the world by embracing mo-

O n True Love • Once when Swami Premananda was preaching that one should worship God in man as Swamiji had taught, a listener began to pester him: 'Sir, tell us about love, something about love.' The swami turned to him, 'Yes, I am willing to talk about love. Are you willing to pay the price? Do you know the price of love? Your own severed head. Are you willing to give your very head to God? Everything that you have? Then only will you understand what love is.' This was the kind of love that we saw demonstrated in the swami's life: he possessed nothing, wanted nothing, and in this very simplicity you could always taste the joy of God and feel His presence. You couldn't miss it.

—Swami Ashokananda, *Swami Premananda*, 38

nastic life. Baburam became Swami Premananda. Despite devilish poverty, the Baranagar Math was a mart of joy. The young monks were all aglow with the fire of renunciation. They talked only about their Master's glorious life and regularly discussed the scriptures. Later, Premananda was to say about those blessed days: 'At Baranagore we would always see the good in every brother. None of us searched for fault in one another.'⁷

The bond of mutual love and respect remained with the brothers throughout their lives. The following incident, which probably took place when the monastery was at Alambazar, testifies to this. Swamiji had made a rule in the Math that the monks must rise before a given time in the mornings; this was of course meant to instil discipline among the newcomers to the monastery. Those who failed to rise at the proper time were to go out of the monastery and beg their food for the day. One morning Premananda could not get up on time. When at Swami Vivekananda's prodding someone rung a bell near Premananda's ear, he realized that he was late in rising. He went to Swamiji and said that he was ready for the punishment. At this Swamiji became very grim and with tears flowing from his eyes said to Premananda, 'How could you ever think I could

punish you!’ Premananda too was visibly moved. Swami Brahmananda, who was nearby, intervened and saved the situation: ‘It is not a question of who is to be punished. But there is a rule that he who fails to rise on time must live on alms for the day.’ Premananda left the monastery for alms.⁸

Devotion to Sri Sarada Devi

Premananda’s love and reverence for Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother of the Ramakrishna Sangha, were no less than his devotion to Sri Ramakrishna. Her mere wish was a command to him and he lived in total submission to such wish-commands. In 1914

some devotees wanted Premananda to go to Malda for a function. They approached Holy Mother for permission. As Premananda’s health was bad at that time, Mother

at first turned down the request. But on being implored again, she said to Premananda: ‘Baburam, these devotees are so entreatingly inviting you. Will you go?’ Premananda said, ‘What do I know, Mother? What do I know? Whatever you order, I will do that.

If you order me to jump into water, I will jump into water; if you order me to jump into fire, I will jump into fire; if you order me to enter the netherworlds, I will enter the netherworlds. What do I know? Whatever is your order, I will do.’ At last Mother said, ‘Go for a while; don’t stay there for long.’ Premananda obeyed.⁹



Premananda’s devotion to Sri Sarada Devi was born of a direct awareness of her divinity, which evoked reverence as well as awe in him.

One morning three devotees came to Jayrambati with a letter of introduction from Swami Brahmananda. The Mother heard the letter read out and called in the devotees; but she sat with her legs folded, though it was usual for her, because of her rheumatism, to keep them stretched out even in the presence of devotees. After the devotees had saluted her, she was heard saying, ‘So, at last Rakhai has sent me these!’ She refused to initiate them and directed them to go to Belur Math. The devotees obeyed her for the time being and went to the outer apartment. But their disappointment was too great to be easily assuaged; and hence they approached her for the second time to be more propitious. She, however, was inflexible and spoke to the Master thus, ‘Master, I prayed to you yesterday that the day might not pass uselessly. And at long last you too bring these!’ Inexorability was, however, against her grain; and she yielded at last saying, ‘Master, let me carry on your work so long as the body lasts.’ The initiation was duly finished. A few days later Swamis Brahmananda, Premananda, Shivananda, and Saradananda heard the whole incident sitting on the upper verandah of the Belur Math on the Ganges side. The narration over, Brahmananda sat without a word for a pretty long time. Premananda heaved a long sigh and said with folded hands, ‘Mercy, mercy! It’s by this glorious compassion that the Mother is protecting us for ever. We can’t express in words the poison that she has accepted. If we had done so, we would have been burnt down to ashes.’¹⁰

Premananda was keenly aware that Sri Sarada Devi was none other than the Divine Mother. Towards the end of 1896, while returning from his stay at Vrindaban, Premananda visited Holy Mother at Jayrambati and stayed there for a couple of weeks. One day during his walk, he noticed many lotuses in bloom in one of the village ponds. Seized with a sudden desire to worship Holy Mother’s feet with these lovely flowers, he jumped into the pond and collected lotuses to his heart’s content. These came at a cost though. Numerous leeches clung on to him

and he was covered with blood. When he appeared before Holy Mother thus, she was very worried and cautioned him against such rashness.¹¹

A very significant event related to the Durga Puja at Belur Math is worth recalling. 16 October 1912 was the day of *bodhana*, the ceremonial awakening of the goddess at the beginning of the autumnal Durga Puja. Holy Mother was expected to visit the Belur Math for the puja. The evening was advancing, and yet there was no sign of Mother's coming. Premananda was greatly worried. He noticed that the banana trunks and the sacred pitchers, *mangala ghata*, were not yet arranged at the Math gate. He exclaimed, 'These things have not yet been done; how can Mother come?' As soon as the *bodhana* of Mother Durga was over, Holy Mother's carriage arrived at the Math gate. Immediately, many monks and devotees, with Premananda at their head, unharnessed the horses and drew the carriage into the Math courtyard. Premananda was all the while trembling with emotion, joy scintillating from his eyes, face, and limbs. Later, after the third days' worship was over, Golap-ma conveyed to Saradananda that the Holy Mother was very pleased with the Durga Puja. The swami was simply lost for words. Seeing Premananda nearby he said to him, 'Baburam-da, did you hear that.' And Premananda, saying 'Indeed I did,' hugged him in sheer delight.¹²

In Obedience to the Leader

Premananda was also deeply committed to carrying out the behest of Swami Vivekananda, whom Sri Ramakrishna had designated the leader of his group of disciples. In the summer of 1887 Narendranath fell seriously ill and turned delirious. Baburam was terribly anxious for him and began to weep, fearing that Narendra might die. He was pacified when Naren reassured him saying, 'Don't weep Baburam. I have much work to do—the shape of which I am beginning to visualize. I shall not die till I have finished my work.'¹³

Premananda played an important role in Swamiji's plans; but he also had his moments of

Swami Premananda's life was unusual in many respects. Even his appearance was extraordinary. He was very straight—straight as an arrow. He was not very tall—I think probably he was about five feet eight—and he was rather slim. He had jet black hair, there was not a sign of gray in it, and his complexion was pure gold—you have never seen such a complexion. When he was in an ecstatic mood, which was most of the time, his face and the upper part of his body had a sheen of fire through this gold; it was the most wonderful thing to see.

—Swami Ashokananda, *Swami Premananda*, 3

apprehension about them. When Swamiji thought of accepting Pavahari Baba of Ghazipur as his teacher of yoga, Premananda went to Ghazipur to persuade him to return to Baranagar. He was again worried when he found that Swamiji was not preaching his Master to Western audiences. This worry was laid to rest by the letters that Swamiji wrote to his brother disciples at Baranagar Math. These reassured everyone about Swamiji's devotion to his Master and his commitment to the Master's message.

On 4 July 1902 Swami Vivekananda left his mortal body, plunging the Ramakrishna brotherhood into utter despair. Nonetheless, Brahma-nanda immediately stepped into the void and took over the task of guiding the Sangha's activities. The onerous responsibility of managing the Belur monastery fell to the lot of Premananda. He was perfectly equipped for this—endowed as he was with an affectionate and loving nature, a perfect blend of compassion and strength. His potential for work was fully utilized now: he performed the daily worship of Sri Ramakrishna in the shrine, trained the novitiate brahmacharins, attended to the many devotees and guests, and catered to the spiritual needs of one and all. The swami went about his demanding chores with characteristic cheerfulness and boundless energy. He endeared himself to everybody and earned the sobriquet 'mother of the Math'.

Training Young Monastics

Premananda tried to infuse into the young novitiates Swami Vivekananda's spirit of versatility: 'from mending shoes to expounding the scriptures'. He wanted the newcomers to be perfect in even seemingly insignificant tasks. He would say, 'These boys must learn everything—dressing vegetables, cooking, worship, bookkeeping, lecturing. And in all these matters they must be perfect. I am trying to train them thus. If I am harsh, it is only for their good. I do not harbour the least anger towards anyone; I love them dearly.'¹⁴

A monk reminisced:

Just after I had joined the Order at the Belur Monastery, I happened to be present when Swami Premananda was severely scolding another monk. I said to myself: 'Ah, this holy man loses his temper.' As soon as this thought crossed my mind, Swami Premananda suddenly turned to me—and smiled! I knew then that his anger was never a real anger, but only employed as a means to instruct us. From that moment on I could never be upset when he scolded me. On the other hand, I felt a strange undercurrent of joy, and considered his reprimands to be blessings.¹⁵

Premananda trained the young monastics with an eye to spiritual perfection:

Everything had to be perfect. He would not allow a person to become slack in anything. He continually impressed upon the minds of the monks that they had to be completely devoid of ego, completely devoid of any kind of carelessness, completely devoid of any kind of worldly desire. Everything had to be done perfectly from beginning to end. Once he explained the reason for it: 'My boys, one day you will have to do very responsible things. If you don't learn the habit of responsibility in small things, you will not learn the habit of responsibility in big things. You will cheat.'¹⁶

And he taught through personal example. He joined the monks in dressing vegetables, preparing food for cows, making cow-dung balls for fuel, and clearing weeds. He did not consider any work beneath him. Although he was the manager of the

monastery, he would work along with the youngest brahmacharin. He never just gave orders. 'Every work here is sacred,' he would say. 'Whether you cut vegetables, whether you prepare cow-dung balls, whether you go out to give lectures or worship in the chapel—everything is service unto the Lord. You have to learn to do everything with an equal sense of reverence and sanctity in your heart.' And he would ensure that the mind was turned towards God even during work. While dressing vegetables with the young monks he would talk about God and tell them many stories (31–2).

Swami Vivekananda wanted the Belur Math to become a centre for the spiritual renaissance of India. Premananda strove his utmost to actualize this. He drew others to him through his love. Implicit faith in the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and untiring zeal to live the Master's wishes were his guiding principles. He was determined that, one way or the other, the life-giving message of Sri Ramakrishna reaches the minds and hearts of all willing souls. He wrote in one of his letters: 'To make mankind your own by loving all—that is the real *jnana*, the real *bhakti* of this age. Work and serve with all your heart. ... The ideas of Sri Ramakrishna are being well-propagated. Let them spread over the whole world. Let the flood of bliss and peace come to all places throughout the world.'¹⁷

Serving Devotees

Premananda was full of concern for devotees visiting the Math. This is a remarkable testimony to his loving nature. His affection for the devotees was not simply an act of ceremonial piety; it was an overflow of profound devotion. Sri Ramakrishna had graciously vouchsafed to the swami the state where he actually saw service to people as worship of God. He received newcomers as cordially as old friends. He sat among them very informally in the visitors' room, or in one of the porches, and spoke to them with great fervour on spiritual ideals and practices as exemplified in the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and other spiritual teachers. It often happened that visitors to the Math would turn up at

odd hours. They would come when everyone would be having a short midday rest. On such occasions Premananda would himself go to the kitchen and, without disturbing anyone, cook a dish or two for the visitors. He would later explain: 'Householders have much to do. Is it always possible for them to arrive at the proper time? And what can we do but serve them? This costs only a little physical effort. Through the Master's grace, nothing is wanting here. Should we not be blessed by doing these things for his children?' (27).

Swami Ashokananda recalls:

He had such great love for the devotees! He was strict with the monks, but devotees were kings. He could never see fault in them, never. He would serve them without sparing himself, and he taught the monks this kind of selfless service, tremendous service. Some of them never had any opportunity of going to bed at all. One of them once told me: 'I didn't have any time to sleep in those days. I would just lie down on a bench for two or three hours.' If among the younger monks there was grumbling, the Swami would say, 'Look, people suffer so much in the world. They come to Sri Ramakrishna's place to get some peace. It is your duty to make them feel welcome. It will be of great benefit to you; it will be of great benefit to them.'¹⁸

Living Spirituality

The ecstatic states of Sri Ramakrishna and the appealing atmosphere of Dakshineswar had whetted young Baburam's appetite for spiritual experience. He had importuned the Master for granting him samadhi. Sri Ramakrishna had tried to pacify him saying, as was his wont, that everything happened only by the Mother's will. Nonetheless, Sri Ramakrishna did pray to the Divine Mother for granting Baburam some spiritual experience. The Mother, however, conveyed to him that Baburam would have jnana and not *bhava*. This did pacify both master and disciple. The great love that Premananda exuded in later life was indeed tempered by divine jnana. Although essentially gentle-natured, he was neither emotional nor sentimental. There were of course times when he did overtly manifest signs of

The Incomparable Meal . A high government official came with his wife to the Math to have a dip in the Ganga. After his bath, he inquired if there was any hotel nearby where they might have a meal. The meal was already over at the Math; but when Baburam Maharaj heard of the man's inquiry from brahmachari Nepal, he extended a cordial welcome to them, and with folded hands, he offered them all that was left of Thakur's *prasad*—rice, lentils, and a vegetable preparation. He then explained: 'We do not make any food-arrangements for ourselves. Whatever we are able to procure, we prepare as an offering to Thakur, and then we partake of his *prasad*. Today we have only this lentil preparation and this curry made with the stalk of a plant. Please do not hesitate to eat as much as you like.' Moved by such hospitality, they ate their fill. The next time they came to the Math, Baburam Maharaj was no longer in his physical body. Inquiring about him, they said, 'Never in our life had we tasted such food, every morsel full of love and affection. We have tasted so many delicacies in the homes of our relatives, but none can compare with that food. Who could have known that so much sweetness was hidden inside that simple vegetable preparation? And what amiable and unassuming behaviour in a man with so much charm!'

—Brahmachari Akshay Chaitanya,

Swami Premananda: Love Incarnate, 71–2

God-intoxication and his blissful mood would unfailingly draw others into an elevated state.¹⁹

When Premananda spoke, people listened with rapt attention. That was because he would pour his heart out into whatever he said. He would hardly talk of anything but God and spirituality. Sri Ramakrishna pointed out that a saint shuns all vain talk—*anya vacho vimunchatha*, as the scripture tells us—and speaks only of God. This was very true of Premananda.

Just to be near him was to realize something; you couldn't believe that God was not there—visible,

tangible God there along with him. It was not merely that one's faith was reinforced; no, being near him was to share in a living experience of God. So crowds would come.²⁰


It was an extraordinary sight to see him sitting in meditation. You could stand at the door of the chapel and see him in profile—his nose, his forehead, his body—just perfectly straight. He seemed to be the personification of meditation, of calmness of mind. You would feel, looking at him, that the whole universe stood still. And as he would meditate his face would become flushed; you could almost see light beaming out of it—a most wonderful sight. In different parts of the world I have seen many images of Buddha seated in meditation, but I have not seen any figure looking as beautiful as Swami Premananda. Sometimes in meditation he would go into samadhi, and he had taught the monks how to bring him back to normal consciousness so he could finish the worship (34).

An Austere Soul

Although Premananda was occupied day and night with the welfare of others, he paid scant attention to his own needs. His mode of living was very simple. The spirit of renunciation was manifest in all his ways. The choicest foodstuff from his plate would often be given away to youngsters. He kept only a pair of clothes for his personal use. A dhoti, a wrapper, and a pair of brown slippers constituted his complete dress. He seldom wore any seamed garment. In deep winter the swami would occasionally use a woollen jacket. During his tours he carried only a small bundle with him. Once, when he had to be attended upon, a devotee gifted him four shirts through his attendant. On coming to know of this, the swami reprimanded the attendant saying that a monk ought to live very frugally.

The following were his possessions when he passed away: an empty canvas bag, a few books including a copy of the Bhagavadgita, and one extra piece of clothing! Everything was exceedingly simple with him. This was one of the things one learned from his life: As long as there is the slightest touch

of selfishness, as long as one possesses anything, one cannot truly love God (38).

Once a swami said to Premananda, 'Sri Ramakrishna made you great.' Immediately Premananda burst out, 'No! Sri Ramakrishna did not make us great, he made us "nobodies". You also have to become "nobodies".'²¹ Undoubtedly, to become such nobodies, each one of us will have to truly struggle for God vision, for only that can erase our puny obstinate egos. May Swami Premananda, with his love for us, hasten us to the goal. 

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Swami Yogananda: Scepticism and Faith

Swami Ritananda

Yogin developed a religious tendency very early in life. Even at a tender age he would often be overwhelmed with spiritual moods. After his sacred thread ceremony he began to spend more time in meditation and worship. He was sent to a Christian missionary school at Agarpara, a few miles from Dakshineswar. During his final year at school he met Sri Ramakrishna and began to visit him daily. This contact with the Master brought about a great change in his thinking; the attainment of God became the sole purpose of his life.

After his entrance examination Yogin began to live with Sri Ramakrishna for longer periods of time and to spend more time in meditation. Around 1884 he went to Kanpur in search of a job to relieve his family of the straitened circumstances it had fallen into; but he did not succeed. Though he strongly resolved not to marry, he had to do so at the earnest request of his mother. He felt convinced that by marrying his spiritual future would be doomed. After marriage a feeling of guilt kept him away from Sri Ramakrishna. But the Master took the entire happening calmly and accepted Yogin with more sympathy, love, and care and also blessed his wife. The spiritual relationship between them was re-established.

In September 1885 Sri Ramakrishna was taken to Calcutta for treatment of his throat cancer. Yogin followed the Master and served him heart and soul. He even neglected his own health and fell sick during this period. Sri Ramakrishna gave final shape to his future Order while staying in the garden house at Kashipur. He made Narendra the leader of his young disciples. One day the Master distributed ochre cloths among his disciples, including Yogin. Some days before his passing away, Sri Ramakrishna asked

SWAMI YOGANANDA'S LIFE, as it appears on the surface, is not strikingly eventful—one that we may discuss for hours or write a multi-volume biography about. But closer scrutiny reveals that the few details of his life that have been recorded deserve to be deeply analysed, thought over, and meditated upon. If we do this, we are likely to be surprised by the profound significance of virtually every important incident of his short life. We would then be led to wonder if the ideology of the Ramakrishna movement would have attained its present dimension and depth had Yogananda not entered the circle of Sri Ramakrishna's disciples.

Biographical Sketch¹

Yogindranath Roy Choudhury, later known as Swami Yogananda, was born in a well-to-do aristocratic family at Dakshineswar on 30 March 1861.

Swami Ritananda is a monastic member of Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata.

Yogin to read from the almanac the events of each day and the position of the stars. When Yogin completed the reading pertaining to 16 August 1886, the Master asked him to stop. The Master passed away on the same auspicious day that he had earmarked.

A few weeks after the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, Yogin left for a pilgrimage with Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and her party. While at Vrindaban, Holy Mother had the first direct intimation of her future mission. After three consecutive visions of the Master directing her to give Yogin formal spiritual initiation, Holy Mother initiated Yogin, who became her first initiated disciple. After spending about a year in Vrindaban, and visiting Hardwar and some other places of pilgrimage as well, they returned to Calcutta. Yogin then joined the young disciples of Sri Ramakrishna at the Baranagar Monastery, where they took formal vows of sannyasa. Yogin was now Swami Yogananda.

At the Baranagar Math Yogananda did not care much for study, though in later days he undertook regular study and discussion on the scriptures. He loved to be in solitude, and would practise japa and meditation for many hours. From the last part of 1888 to 1890 he stayed in many centres of pilgrimage, reaching Varanasi in 1891. There he lived in a small cottage in a solitary garden and practised extreme austerities. In 1892 he returned to the monastery, which had been moved to Alambazar, and lived there for some months. Then he devoted himself to serving Holy Mother and became her attendant and caretaker until his death.

During his last illness Yogananda suffered from fever and dysentery. His whole body was emaciated and his voice was feeble. Before his passing away, he said to Holy Mother: 'Mother, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, and Sri Ramakrishna have come to take me' (241). Yogananda left his mortal body on 28 March 1899. He was the first among the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna to be reunited with the Master.

A Strong Mind

Yogananda's inquisitive and probing attitude brought to light many facets of the Ramakrishna

ideal and contributed significantly to the foundation of the ideology of the Ramakrishna movement. If there was one person in the history of this movement who dared to distrust Sri Ramakrishna—the very embodiment of purity—and to throw a direct challenge to the world-renowned Swami Vivekananda, that person was Yogananda. It is amazing how his uncompromising attitude gave Yogin the mental strength to examine and question a man like Sri Ramakrishna, who did not deviate from truth even unknowingly, whose great sincerity was clearly discernible at every stage of his life, and who was even at that time known and worshipped as an avatara. We again marvel at his straightforwardness in throwing a strong challenge to the *modus operandi* of Swami Vivekananda on the very day the Ramakrishna Mission was founded.

Yogananda had rendered personal service to Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi, and he also had a fluent relationship with Swami Vivekananda. These close interactions provided him with special insight into the depth of their lives and thus made him an important spokesman and critique of the Ramakrishna ideology. Time and again he re-discovered the trinity anew and in brighter light.

What Yogin Found in Sri Ramakrishna

On closely examining Sri Ramakrishna's teachings and character, Yogin perceived in him certain remarkable divine qualities:

Humility • Sri Ramakrishna used to repeat 'Not I, not I; Thou, Thou,' 'I am the dust of the dust of everyone's feet', and so on. One day, while the young Yogin was picking flowers in the temple garden of Dakshineswar, he met a middle-aged man walking there, and thinking that he was a gardener, sought his help. Immediately the man picked some flowers and gave them to him joyfully. Afterwards, he was flabbergasted to find that the man who he thought was a gardener and whom his friends called a 'mad brahmin' was none other than Sri Ramakrishna (219).

Truth and Renunciation • It is said that not only did Sri Ramakrishna cling to truth, truth itself actually followed him. He was the personification

of truthfulness. An instance would substantiate this fact.

Once when Sri Ramakrishna developed swelling of feet, an Ayurvedic physician advised him to take lemon juice. Yogin took the responsibility of supplying fresh lemons. The Master would take the juice regularly, but one day he could not drink it. Yogin wondered why. Later, after investigation, he learned that the lemon grove had been leased out to another party on that very day. The Master was not able to drink the juice of the lemons that Yogin brought without informing the new owner, as that would have been regarded as an act of theft, though unconscious. The disciples were astonished to witness how the Master's body and mind were so established in truth and how natural his renunciation was.

Divine Assurance • Swami Vivekananda said: 'Avataras are Kapalamochanas, that is, they can alter the doom of people. ... No sadhu, however advanced can claim this unique position.' In the lives of all the incarnations of God we find divine assurances or promises coming forth from their lips and acting as a vital force in the disciples' hours of despair, changing their lives, and remaining an eternal source of confidence for posterity.

Yogin witnessed a profound depth and farsightedness in each action and word of Sri Ramakrishna. Yogin used to consider himself prudent and rational, but many times he was proved wrong and was exposed as being otherwise. He later realized that Sri Ramakrishna's intention in doing so was formative and sometimes diametrically opposite of what he had thought it to be.

Polite, calm, and sparing with his words, Yogin had a perfect horror of marriage. Still, at the supplication of his mother and against his own will he had to yield. Thinking that his spiritual life was totally shattered, he stopped visiting the Master. Sri Ramakrishna came to know the reason and repeatedly sent word for Yogin to visit him. As Yogin disregarded his repeated summons, the Master hit upon a plan. He knew that before Yogin's marriage, a man from the Kali temple had given Yogin a few rupees to buy some articles for him. Yogin had sent the articles to

Of all the sects, they alone shall gain the day who are able to show most character in their lives, no matter how far they may be.

Let me tell you a little personal experience. When my Master left the body, we were a dozen penniless and unknown young men. Against us were a hundred powerful organisations, struggling hard to nip us in the bud. But Ramakrishna had given us one great gift, the desire, and the lifelong struggle not to talk alone, but to live the life. And today all India knows and reverences the Master, and the truths he taught are spreading like wild fire. ...

Neither numbers nor powers nor wealth nor learning nor eloquence nor anything else will prevail, but *purity, living the life*, in one word, *anubhuti*, realisation. Let there be a dozen such lion-souls in each country, lions who have broken their own bonds, who have touched the Infinite, whose whole soul is gone to Brahman, who care neither for wealth nor power nor fame, and these will be *enough* to shake the world.

—Swami Vivekananda

the man through a friend, and sent word also that he would soon return the balance amount. The Master therefore sent this message to Yogin: 'What sort of man are you? A man gave you money to buy certain articles, and you have neither returned the balance nor even sent word when you will return it!'

These words touched Yogin's pride and he was grievously wounded. He thought: 'The Master considers me to be a cheat even after such a long association! Well, I'll go there today and somehow put an end to the quarrel, and afterwards I will never again turn my steps towards the Kali temple.' In the afternoon Yogin went to the Kali temple. He saw from a distance that the Master was standing outside his room, as if in an ecstasy, with his cloth under his arm. As soon as he saw Yogin he came forward quickly, saying: 'What if you are married? Haven't I too been married? What is there to be afraid of in that? If you have the grace of this place [meaning

himself], even a hundred thousand marriages will be powerless to affect you. If you want to live a family life and realize God at the same time, bring your wife here once. I will make both of you fit for that. And if you want to renounce worldly life and attain God, I'll make that also possible for you.'

Yogin was stupefied. What was this that he had heard? Was it possible? He felt himself suddenly transported from a region of utter despair to one bright with hope. Was this why the Master had accused him—just to make him come to see him? A dead weight was lifted from his heart and he breathed freely again. Yogin bowed down to the Master with tearful eyes. Then the Master, taking Yogin's hand, escorted him to his room. When Yogin referred to the payment of the balance of the money, the Master would not even listen (224–5). Yogin understood that every action of the Master had a deep significance.

Another day Yogin took his wife to the Master, who accompanied them to the Kali temple. Yogin and his wife bowed down before the Divine Mother. The Master blessed Yogin's wife, touching her head. He then said to Yogin, 'You will not have to worry about her anymore.' Yogin realized that the Master had taken on the responsibility of his wife and relieved him of it forever (225).

Divine Shelter • Yogin was deeply involved in spiritual life. His parents upbraided him for his indifference to the world. One day his mother said, 'If you don't care to earn money, why did you marry?' 'Didn't I tell you again and again,' replied Yogin, 'that I had no intention of marrying? But I had to give way to your tears.' 'What do you mean?' exclaimed his mother. 'How could you marry unless you had the desire to do so?'

Yogin stared at her and remained speechless. He thought: 'Gracious God! I committed the act only to please my mother, and now she talks like this! Fie on the world! Sri Ramakrishna is the only person I have met whose words and thoughts are in perfect accordance.' After that he became disgusted with the world, and found his only solace in the company of Sri Ramakrishna (225).

The Doubting Yogin Learns

Doubting Ramakrishna's Instructions • Sometimes Yogin disbelieved Sri Ramakrishna and wanted to act according to his own understanding. Once, when Yogin asked him how he could free himself of lust, Sri Ramakrishna told him to repeat the name of the Lord. Yogin did not like these words at all. He thought that as Sri Ramakrishna did not know of an appropriate scriptural rite, he had just said something casual. If it were as the Master said, then why were the many people repeating God's name not free from lust?

Meanwhile, Yogin was drawn to a hatha yogi who was staying at Dakshineswar. The Master discouraged him from visiting the yogi because if one were to practise all the hatha yoga procedures one's mind would be concentrating only on the body, it would not be drawn towards God. Yogin again doubted the Master's motive, thinking that he was jealous of the hatha yogi and was afraid that he might transfer his allegiance to the latter. All the same, he said to himself: 'Why don't I do what he told me to do and see what happens?' Later he confessed, 'Thinking thus, I took the name of Hari with a concentrated mind. And as a matter of fact, shortly afterwards I began to experience the tangible result mentioned by the Master' (222–3).

Doubting Ramakrishna's Actions • Doubts cropped up in Yogin's mind even with regard to Sri Ramakrishna's behaviour. Once at Dakshineswar Yogin was disturbed to find the Master turn restless on not receiving in his room his daily allotted share of prasad. Being vexed at the lapse, the Master himself went and complained to the manager of the temple and had him send the prasad to his room immediately. Proud of his aristocratic birth, Yogin felt disgusted with the Master's attitude and concluded that, in spite of his great spirituality, the Master had not been able to overcome the petty attractions of his priestly class.

In the meantime, Sri Ramakrishna returned to his room and clarified the matter of his own accord, explaining that Rani Rasmani had bequeathed her large estate to the service of sadhus and devotees.

Instead, the temple priests had deviated from the norms and were misusing the offerings, thus defeating the Rani's original objective. Therefore, he felt it necessary to ensure that Rasmani's objective might at least be partially fulfilled. Yogin was wonderstruck. It was beyond his imagination that even such a trivial act of the Master could have such a deep significance!

Doubting Ramakrishna's Character • Sri Ramakrishna would often ask his disciples to test him as money changers test their coins. But it was only Yogin who had the temerity to suspect Sri Ramakrishna's character. One evening, with the Master's permission, he decided to spend the night in the Dakshineswar temple in order to serve him in case of need. About midnight Yogin suddenly woke up to find the door of the Master's room open and the Master missing. At first he thought he might be taking a walk outside, but he did not find him there. The Master's absence at the dead of night smacked of something horrible to Yogin. A suspicion flitted across his mind: 'Could he have gone to be with his wife? Are his actions contrary to what he professes?' Unpleasant though it was, he resolved to ascertain the truth and stood watching the door of the room where Sri Sarada Devi lived. Suddenly he heard the sound of slippers coming from the direction of the Panchavati. A moment later Sri Ramakrishna stood by his side. 'Well, why are you standing here?' he asked. Yogin hung his head in shame for having doubted the Master's sincerity and could not utter a word. Instantly the Master understood the whole matter and reassured the penitent boy, saying: 'Well done! You must examine a sadhu by day and by night and then only believe in him.' Though forgiven, Yogin could not sleep for the rest of the night (226).

Sometimes Sri Ramakrishna would ask his disciples to evaluate him in order to check their level of understanding. Once the Master asked Yogin, 'What do you think of me?' Yogin replied, 'You are neither a householder nor a sannyasin [in any exclusive sense]; meaning thereby that the Master was beyond such attributions. Ramakrishna was

greatly pleased and exclaimed, 'What an extraordinary statement you have just made!' (226). Yogin now had a deeper understanding of the Master.

The Sentimental Yogin Matures

Sometimes, when people begin to practise religion, they become so kind-hearted that their kindness becomes an obstacle and can even drag them down from the spiritual path. Ramakrishna would instruct such soft-hearted people to be firm and resolute. One day the Master saw a cockroach in a chest that he used for his clothes. He asked Yogin to take it outside and kill it. But Yogin took it outside the room and let it go. As soon as he returned, the Master asked, 'Have you killed it?' 'No, sir, I let it go,' replied Yogin. Thereupon the Master rebuked him, saying: 'I told you to kill the cockroach, but you let it go. You should always do as I ask you to do. Otherwise, later in more serious matters also you will follow your own judgement and come to grief' (228).

Sri Ramakrishna trained each disciple according to his temperament. How wonderfully the Master taught each person so as to remove his particular wants! He used to illustrate this method of teaching by saying: 'A mother has made various curries out of a fish. She doesn't give all her sons the same thing. She gives each what will exactly suit his stomach.' The Master followed this in practice also.

Niranjan, one of his beloved direct disciples, was headstrong and impetuous. One day, as he was coming in a country boat to Dakshineswar, some of the passengers began to speak ill of the Master gratuitously and tried to tarnish his character. Niranjan protested against their remarks, but finding that they did not stop the criticism he began to rock the boat, threatening to sink it midstream. That silenced the offenders. When he reported the incident to the Master, the latter rebuked him for his inability to curb his anger and to be indifferent to baseless calumny.

Yogin, on the other hand, was gentle to a fault. One day, under circumstances very similar to those that had evoked Niranjan's anger, the timid Yogin decided to keep quiet. The Master, learning of his

conduct, scolded him roundly, saying: ‘That man abused me for nothing and you kept silent! Do you know what the scriptures say? You must cut off the head of him who speaks ill of your guru or at least leave his presence at once. And you did not even protest against these false accusations!’ Thus what was a fault in one was recommended as a virtue to the other. The guru was striving to develop, in the first instance, composure, and in the second, mettle. The secret of his training was to build up, by a tactful recognition of the requirements of each given case, the character of the devotees.

On another occasion Sri Ramakrishna was annoyed with Yogin’s wrong application of his own thinking instead of following his instructions. The Master wished to eat *palo* pudding (a kind of custard made from the zedoary root) and asked Yogin to buy it in Calcutta. Yogin thought that home-made *palo* would be better for the Master than that bought from the market. He then got it prepared by the lady devotees of Balaram Bose’s house and brought it to Kashipur. The Master did not even touch the food—saying that it was not proper of him to have troubled the devotees, and that the home-made *palo* was very rich too—and warned Yogin to follow his instructions unflinchingly (230–1).

On Being Practical

The Master taught the devotees how to be practical in day-to-day life. It is extremely difficult for a person to make any progress in spiritual life if one is careless and unmindful in small matters. A person has to reach God with the help of the mind; hence there should be no insincerity or inadvertence. The Master scolded Yogin when the latter bought a cracked cooking pot from the market. He remarked: ‘Why did you buy the pot without examining it? The shopkeeper was there to conduct his business, not to practise religion. Why did you believe him and get deceived? Be a devotee, but don’t be foolish!’ He had more practical advice on shopping for Yogin: ‘When you go out shopping, first determine the usual price of the item by going round to several shops and then thoroughly

examine the thing you want to buy. And do not fail to demand the little extras where allowed’ (228).

Sri Sarada Devi’s Attendant

Though he had accompanied the Holy Mother on several pilgrimages after the Master’s demise, it was around 1892 that Yogananda devoted himself fully to serving her, becoming her attendant and caretaker until his death. He was among the three or four monastic disciples of the Master who had free access to Holy Mother. He treasured in the depth of his heart the following scene which he witnessed while he was serving the Master at Dakshineswar: It was three o’clock in the morning. Holy Mother was immersed in meditation on the veranda of the Nahabat. A gentle breeze blew away her veil and the light of the full moon fell on her face. Sri Ramakrishna went to the pine grove and the young Yogin carried the Master’s water pot. Both saw her in that condition, but she was unaware of it (236).

Yogananda was so respectful towards Holy Mother that he would not salute her by touching her feet. When Mother would leave the place, he would touch that spot with his head. Asked about this strange behaviour, Yogananda replied: ‘What! I don’t have the audacity to keep Mother standing and waiting for me so that I can bow down to her’ (ibid.).

Having repeatedly witnessed Mother’s *bhava* and samadhi while staying in Vrindaban, and having realized the oneness of the Mother with Sri Ramakrishna, Yogin had knowledge of her real nature. He was one of the first monks to discover Mother’s extraordinary spiritual greatness, hidden under her rural simplicity. Once Saradananda said to Yogananda: ‘Brother, I do not always understand Swamiji. He speaks in various moods. Whatever stand he takes, he makes so much of it that the others pale into insignificance.’ Yogananda said: ‘Sharat [Saradananda’s pre-monastic name], I tell you one thing: Cling to Holy Mother. Whatever she says—that is right.’ Yogananda then took Saradananda to Holy Mother, and gradually the latter became an attendant of the Mother, remaining so for twenty-one

years after Yogananda's passing away (238).

Holy Mother once said, 'Sharat and Yogen—these two belong to my inner circle.' She would refer to Yogananda and Saradananda as her 'burden bearers'. It so happened that while Yogananda was ill during his last days, Holy Mother's own health would concomitantly go up and down according to the state of Yogananda's health. After his passing, she remembered him with great feeling: 'Nobody loves me as Yogen did. If anybody gave him as much as eight annas, he kept it by, saying, "Mother will go out on pilgrimages, etc., and then she will need it." He was always by my side. Because he lived in the midst of women, the boys taunted him. Yogen told me, "Mother, you will call me 'Yoga.'"²

The day Yogananda passed away, in the morning while performing worship, Holy Mother saw that the Master had come to take him. When Yogananda breathed his last, Brahmachari Krishnalal cried out. Holy Mother was upstairs and she realized what had happened. She also burst into tears and said, 'My Yogen has left me—who will now look after me?' Because Yogananda was the first disciple of the Master to pass away, Mother remarked with a deep sigh: 'A brick has slipped away from the structure; now the whole thing will come down.'³

Doubting Swamiji's Ways

In every age the incarnation of God shows a new light suited for the time. In the beginning people can hardly appreciate these new ideas unless and until confusion and doubts are cleared by the powerful personalities of the movement. This has been true of the Ramakrishna movement too. Many, including Mahendranath Gupta (or M), could not approve of the varied service activities initiated by Swami Vivekananda as being in tune with Sri Ramakrishna's teachings. They had heard the Master's words on many occasions, but had failed to fathom its deep significance in the way that Holy Mother or Swami Vivekananda could do. Yogananda represented the disbelief and doubt of this age. He was at the same time a relentless appraiser of the high ideals of the Ramakrishna movement.

As is customary for mendicants, he [Swami Yogananda] went to beg for food one day and arrived at a thatched cottage in Alambazar. A poor woman was sweeping the house. Seeing the young monk begging food, she angrily said: 'Get away from this place! You are a young man, why don't you work and make money? You come in the disguise of a monk at daytime to check the houses and will return at night to steal!' Saying this she hit her broomstick on the ground. Yogananda suppressed his laughter; but when he returned to the monastery, he mimicked the woman out of fun. The brothers rolled on the floor with laughter. Yogananda had a good sense of humour, and at the same time he was a serious monk with burning renunciation.

—*God Lived with Them*, 234

On 1 May 1897, after inaugurating the Ramakrishna Mission at Balaram's house in Calcutta, Swamiji invoked help and co-operation from all quarters and said to Yogananda: 'So the work has now begun in this way. Let us see how it succeeds by the will of Sri Ramakrishna.' Immediately Yogananda protested: 'You are doing these things by Western methods. Would you say that Sri Ramakrishna left us any such instructions?'

Swamiji replied: 'How do you know that these methods are not in keeping with his ideas? Sri Ramakrishna was the embodiment of infinite ideas: do you want to shut him up in your own limits? I shall break those limits and scatter his ideas broadcast all over the world.'

Yogananda admitted: 'We are always ready to follow your leading. I clearly see that the Master is working through you. Still, I confess, doubts do sometimes arise in my mind, for, as we saw it, his method of doing things was so different; and so I am led to ask myself whether we are not straying from Sri Ramakrishna's teachings. And so I take the opposing attitude and warn you.'

Swamiji cleared the doubt: 'The thing is this: Sri Ramakrishna is far greater than his disciples understand him to be. He is the embodiment of infinite

spiritual ideas capable of development in infinite ways. Even if one can find a limit to the knowledge of Brahman, one cannot measure the unfathomable depths of our Master's mind! One gracious glance of his eyes can create a hundred thousand Vivekanandas at this instant! But if this time he chooses, instead, to work through me, making me his instrument, I can only bow to his will.⁴

The percipient Yogananda was deeply moved. After the above-mentioned argument, he told one of the persons present: 'Ah, did you hear Naren's words of faith? He says that lakhs of Vivekanandas may be created by the mere gracious glance of Sri Ramakrishna? What great devotion to his guru! We would have been blessed if only we had a hundredth part of that devotion. ... In Naren the Vedic knowledge of the rishis, the renunciation of Shankara, the heart of Buddha, the detachment of Shukadeva, and the full manifestation of the knowledge of Brahman are all present simultaneously.'⁵

Swami Vivekananda also had high regard for Yogananda. Once he remarked: 'If there is anybody among us who has completely conquered his sensual craving, he is Yogin.'

An Efficient Mantri

From 1895 to 1897 Yogananda arranged the birth anniversary festival of Sri Ramakrishna on a large scale at Dakshineswar. The next year he organized a similar celebration at Dawn's temple complex at Belur. The success of these celebrations, against tremendous odds, was due to the great influence Yogananda had over men—especially the younger generation. In 1897 when Swami Vivekananda returned from the West, Yogananda took an active part in organizing the reception for Swamiji that created a sensation all over Calcutta. After founding the Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Vivekananda made Yogananda the vice president of the Order.⁶ He presided over the weekly meetings of the Mission on several occasions.

Yogananda also had a role in the publication of the *Kathamrita*—the 'Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna'—in book form. At that time M was publishing the *Kathamrita* in a very small booklet

format. Yogananda felt that it ought to be available in a larger format. So he fixed up everything by informing Holy Mother about his thoughts. After that, when M came to offer his salutation to Mother, she advised him to publish the *Kathamrita* in book form. M obeyed her directive.⁷

Swami Vivekananda had great faith in Yogananda. Here is an illustration: After his return from the West in 1897, Swamiji wanted to 'establish a monastery under the direct guidance of the Mother [Sri Sarada Devi]'. He believed that 'the Mother's glowing personal example of purity and character, her spiritual talks and teachings based on her realizations, and her ennobling love and care will inspire and elevate the inmates of the proposed Math.' Thus they would be 'transformed entirely and endowed with a new vision and realization of their own *sakti*' they too could work for 'the highest good of humanity'. When Yogananda heard of Swamiji's plans he said to him, 'Do whatever you think would be conducive to the good of society at large; but please do not bring Mother into public prominence now. Don't you remember the Master telling us that his body would not survive if we preached him before the public? The same may be said in respect of Mother too. ... Therefore I request you not to disturb the Mother at present. You may start the women's Math with the help of women devotees of spotless character and spiritual realization, also possessing learning and skill in various branches of knowledge and work, who are capable of taking charge of this organization without any direct association with men.' As soon as Swamiji heard this he thanked Yogananda and said with a smile, '*Mantri* [Minister], you have given me sound advice and aptly reminded me of the Master's words in this respect. I shall not disturb Mother. Let her fulfil her mission according to her own will and in the manner she chooses. Who are we to dictate to her? Rather, we can accomplish everything with her blessings.'⁸

Indeed we find that the news of Mother's breathing her last was published in the *Shravana* 1327 BE number of the Bengali journal *Udbodhan*. And only in the next issue did the journal—then in its

twenty-second year—publish its first text on Holy Mother: ‘Mayer Katha’ by Saralabala Dasi.

In May 1897, when Swami Vivekananda went to Almora after his return to India, he took Yogananda with him so that the latter could recover his broken health. He wrote to Swami Brahmananda on 20 May: ‘Yogen is well.’ But after spending a couple of months there, Yogananda came down on 9 July. Almora did not suit him any more. Swamiji wrote regretfully: ‘I tried my best for brother Yogen. But he set out for home the moment he felt a little better.’ He again fell ill soon after his return to Calcutta. When the news that Yogananda’s illness was gradually taking a serious turn reached Swamiji, he wrote: ‘There must not be any lapse in arranging for Yogen’s treatment—spend money even by encashing fixed deposits.’⁹

Swamiji valued Yogananda’s judgement and foresight in many matters. He sent Yogananda to finally inspect the piece of land chosen for the Belur Math before purchasing it. When he returned to the Math, Yogananda told Swamiji: ‘Extensive land, beautiful. You should go and see it once.’ But Swamiji relied on his words and did not visit the site (176).


When he found Yogananda’s condition deteriorating fast, Swamiji’s sorrow was very great. He said: ‘Yogin, you should come to life and let me die instead.’ By that time the Belur Math had been founded, but Yogananda did not get to stay at the Math. Swamiji brought him one day by boat to see it (178–9).

Grief-stricken at Yogananda’s passing away, Swamiji did not go to Sri Ramakrishna’s shrine for three days. He remarked, ‘A beam is down and now the rafters will fall one after another.’¹⁰

Yogananda’s Legacy

Swami Yogananda exemplified the role of critical thinking and questioning in the development of the ideology of the Ramakrishna movement. Hidden within his seemingly ordinary personality was great boldness. He did not hesitate to sully his own ‘reputation,’ if necessary, in pursuit of truth. The source of this strength can be traced to his being an *ishvarakoti*—as Sri Ramakrishna termed him—

one eternally free from the bondage of karma, who allows himself to be born to do good to humanity. The Master also declared that Yogin had been Arjuna, the hero of the Mahabharata, in his previous life. Holy Mother too said: ‘Yogin is Krishna’s friend Arjuna, holding Gandiva in his hands. He has been a companion of the Lord in his divine play in human form for establishing righteousness.’¹¹

Once Niranjanananda said to Yogananda: ‘You are the jewel in our crown.’ This statement sums up Yogananda’s position among the brother disciples. Truly, Yogananda is the crest jewel in the crown of the Ramakrishna ideal. His life was the touchstone for testing the movement’s ideology. It provides evidence for the place of doubting, questioning, verifying, and if found pertinent opposing each and every circumstance with the purpose of upholding a glorious movement. And this he did at the risk of darkening his own image. In so doing he became Nilakantha, the ‘blue-throated Shiva,’ of the Ramakrishna movement. 

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Swami Niranjanananda and Sri Hanuman

Swami Sukhananda

SRI RAMAKRISHNA once remarked that Niranjan, who later became Swami Niranjanananda, was an *ishvarakoti*—a god-like soul, perfect from the very birth and never trapped by maya. He also recognized that Niranjan had been born as a partial incarnation of Sri Ramachandra. And about himself, Sri Ramakrishna said: ‘He who was Rama, He who was Krishna, He himself is now Ramakrishna.’¹ This statement would mean that Sri Ramakrishna was Sri Rama in a previous incarnation. Thus ‘a partial incarnation of Sri Rama’ would, by implication, mean ‘a partial incarnation of Sri Ramakrishna’. Once Sri Rama asked Hanuman, ‘How do you look on me?’ Hanuman replied, ‘O Rama, as long as I have the feeling of “I”, I see that you are the whole and I am a part; you are the master and I am your servant. But when, O Rama, I have the knowledge of Truth, then I realize that Thou art I and I am Thou.’² In this article we shall focus on two facets of Niranjanananda’s personality. One, how he became ‘whole’ from being a ‘partial manifestation’ of the Divine; and two, the similarity between the lives of Niranjanananda and Hanuman.

Recognizing the Spiritual

Sri Krishna declares in the Bhagavadgita: ‘It is verily a part of mine that has become the eternal individual soul in the region of the living beings.’ All the jivas in this mortal world are His parts. We all are parts of Bhagavan, but this fact remains incomprehensible to us at present. How shall we attain

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to the knowledge that we are parts of the Divine? Though Niranjanananda was part of Sri Rama, he did not know it. Due to this ignorance he got involved with a group of spiritualists, serving as a medium for contacting spirits. Spiritualists hope to get things mundane through supernatural means. So here we have this interesting phenomenon: Niranjanananda is part of Bhagavan and Bhagavan is using him as a medium for contacting spirits. Our plight is not much different from this. We are

all partial manifestations of Bhagavan; but what do we do? We use our bodies and minds, through which God can be realized, for trifle sense enjoyments. In exchange, we get momentary joy. Moreover, that momentary joy fetches sorrow in the end. Satisfaction of worldly desires cannot give us eternal peace. We try to gratify ourselves, but we fail. A fire is bound to flare up if we try dousing it with oil; same is the case with sense enjoyments. Is there a way out of this dire situation? We get an answer to this question from Niranjanananda's life.

The group of spiritualists with whom Niranjan was associated before he came to Sri Ramakrishna used to gather in the house of Dr Pyarichand Mitra. The group would use Niranjan as a medium, for spirits, it seems, could descend very easily on the person of Niranjan. The group would cure many apparently incurable diseases and do other magical things with the help of the spirits that Niranjan contacted. Once the group decided to visit Sri Ramakrishna, thinking that it would be a considerable achievement if they could influence him. At their request, the childlike Ramakrishna agreed to sit with them while they tried mesmerizing him. But soon the spiritualists realized that it was impossible to mesmerize him, however hard they tried. They agreed that he was a great soul with a strong mind.

Another day, when Niranjan went to see him, Sri Ramakrishna said to him, 'See Niranjan, if you think of ghosts day and night you will become a ghost and if you think of God, God you will be. Now which is better?' 'In that case it is better to become God,' Niranjan replied.³ Sri Ramakrishna then asked Niranjan to sever his relations with the spiritualists. Niranjan agreed.

In the context of spiritual life, to think of ghosts means to think of and indulge in worldly desires and sense objects. If we think of mundane affairs day in, day out, the ghost of worldliness will certainly haunt us. To exorcise this ghost we need to think of God continuously. Sri Ramakrishna wanted Niranjan to progress from his seemingly imperfect state and become perfect and complete. Hence, he told Niranjan to keep away from spiritualists.

Reciting the name of God is the first step to becoming perfect. To think of God means to go towards God. Sri Ramakrishna says that the name and the person named are not essentially different. The *Ramcharitmanas* declares: "The name and the object named are regarded as one and the same, but the close connection between them is that of master and servant."⁴ The name is the master and its possessor has to follow his name. So God must come to one who recites his name. By reciting God's name one can attain to godhood. But dwelling on God's name may not be very attractive or interesting in the beginning. There are times when we feel drawn towards God, and at other times we are enticed by the world around us. Niranjan was in a similar situation. When Sri Ramakrishna asked him to stay back at Dakshineswar, Niranjan pleaded that he had not informed his people at home about his visit and would therefore have to return. It was getting dark and his home was far away. So Sri Ramakrishna was worried. But he could not dissuade Niranjan from returning home. All the same, Niranjan's being had been deeply affected by the Master's concern for his welfare. On his way home the following thought kept crossing his mind repeatedly: 'I could well have stayed back.' Here, we see Niranjan caught between the attraction of mundane matters as well as that of Sri Ramakrishna.

The Lone Goal

After a few days Niranjan went again to Dakshineswar. As soon as Sri Ramakrishna saw Niranjan he rushed to meet him. Spiritual masters tell us that if we take one step towards God, he comes ten steps towards us. Here we find Niranjan approaching the Master and the Master in turn rushing towards Niranjan. The Master embraced Niranjan and exclaimed: 'O Niranjan, my boy, the days are flying fast. When will you realize God? This life will be in vain if you do not realize Him. When will you devote your mind wholly to God? Oh, how anxious I am for you!' Niranjan was dumbfounded. 'A strange man this,' he thought. 'Why is he so anxious for my spiritual welfare?'⁵ Sri Ramakrishna seems

to be telling us that God cannot be realized without real longing. He reminds us that God-realization—to make life meaningful by offering oneself heart and soul to God—is the only goal of human life. If we want to go beyond our imperfect state and attain to perfection, then we must act according to this message of Sri Ramakrishna.

Niranjan experienced the truth of Sri Ramakrishna's message in his heart of hearts. He made God the only goal of his life. Renouncing all desires and hankering for the world, he engrossed himself in sadhana for God-realization. His spiritual practices culminated in the realization of God within himself and in others as well. Sri Chaitanya had this experience: Wherever the sight goes, there appears Sri Krishna. Niranjanananda had a similar experience when he was staying at the Baranagar Math. One day he was carrying some sweets from the market to offer to the Master in the shrine. A poor woman with her young boy in her arms was also walking in the same direction. Seeing the packet of sweets in Niranjanananda's hand, the boy cried out, 'Mother, I want to eat sweets!' The more she tried to control her son, the more he cried. Niranjanananda gracefully went to the young boy and placing the packet before him said, 'Please eat these sweets.' The poor mother protested: 'No, father. You are carrying these sweets for the Lord. It would be inauspicious if my son were to eat them.' Niranjanananda replied: 'No, mother, it would be all right. His eating would be the same as the Lord's eating.' Handing the packet to the boy, Niranjanananda returned to the market to buy fresh sweets for the Master.⁶

Approaching the Divine

Let us now look at the other aspect of Niranjanananda's being. When Hanuman went to Lanka in search of Sita, he could recognize her even though he had not seen her before. Similarly, Niranjan was one of the first to not only recognize Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's divinity but also to act in accordance with this belief. In 1891 Girish Ghosh lost a very dear son born of his second wife. Girish firmly believed that Sri Ramakrishna had come to him as

his son. So he had a special affection for the child. The boy too was very devoted to Holy Mother. So Girish's grief knew no bounds when the boy died. Niranjanananda knew that Girish's sorrow would be assuaged if he obtained the grace of Sri Sarada Devi. So he took Girish to Jayrambati. Girish stayed there for a few months and derived immense spiritual benefit.

The water of small ponds struggling to survive the scorching summer heat gets suddenly swept away by the gushing flow of rivers in spate during the rains and is swiftly carried to the ocean, reaching which there is no more struggle for existence, no more fear of drying up. In a similar manner, the goddess of good fortune smiled on Girish, who was taken by Niranjanananda of his own accord to the benign comforting presence of Sri Sarada Devi, who reminds us time and again about her relationship with us: 'I am the mother of the virtuous as well as the wicked'; 'I am your real Mother; not just the wife of your Guru, not an adopted mother, not a vague mother; your real Mother'; 'If someone comes here and calls me "Mother", I can't neglect him'; 'If my child gets covered with mud or dust is it not my duty to cleanse him and take him on my lap?' As the tender leaves of trees scorched by the heat of the summer day are soothed by the evening breeze, so, taking refuge in Holy Mother, Girish forgot the sorrow occasioned by the loss of his son. He obtained deep peace of mind.

Niranjanananda helped a person like Girish reach the Divine. Initially, Girish could not appreciate the spiritual depth of Sri Sarada Devi's personality. Niranjanananda helped him fathom this depth. Hanuman had helped Sugriva meet Sri Rama. Sugriva's case was similar to Girish's. He too was passing through difficult times, having been driven out of his kingdom by Vali. When he first saw Sri Rama, Sugriva could not recognize him. He was suspicious that Rama and Lakshmana had been engaged by the fierce and vindictive Vali to eliminate him. Therefore he sent Hanuman, his most intelligent lieutenant to ascertain if they were actually Vali's men. He also instructed Hanuman that if he found that they

had indeed been sent by Vali he was to signal back to him, allowing him enough time to flee from his refuge. Hanuman met Rama and Lakshmana in the disguise of a brahmana and asked them:

*Ko tumba shyamala gaura sharira;
Kshatrirupa phirahu bana bira.*

Who are you, with dark and fair frames, roaming the woods in the guise of warriors?⁷

Further: 'Are you among the three gods—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—or are you Nara and Narayana?' Hanuman bowed down to Sri Rama and the latter smiled at him, as if to say, 'You have disguised yourself as a brahmana, but you don't know how to act like a brahmana.' Hanuman, perceptive as he was, said, 'O Lord, I haven't done anything wrong in bowing to you, for I am acting as a brahmana though I am not actually so. Same is the case with you. You appear to be a kshatriya, but you are not so. You are Bhagavan, the Supreme Being. I do not bow down to each and every person I come across. You are the Supreme Brahman appearing in this mortal world.' Sri Rama laughed at Hanuman and said, 'Do you know the characteristics of Brahman? Brahman is birthless, ever free, omniscient, and omnipotent. Do you find any of these attributes in me? I am born of Queen Kaushalya, the wife of Dasharatha, king of Ayodhya. And about being ever free: I have been forced to go into exile for fourteen long years to keep my father's promise to his beloved wife Kaikeyi. Again, see the plight of the "omnipotent": a demon king abducted my wife and I couldn't prevent that from happening. And as regards omniscience, I don't know where my wife is, and I can't find her even though I have been looking for her everywhere.' Hanuman heard everything that Sri Rama said, and then fell at his feet saying, 'O Lord, I was looking for just this Brahman: that takes birth, that hears others, and looks for others!' Hanuman implored Sri Rama to befriend Sugriva, the exiled Vanara king. But he did not ask Sugriva to make friends with Rama, for he well knew that if the mortal soul, jiva, befriends someone, it is anybody's guess how long such friendship will last.

It is a common experience that even between close friends, when the selfish interests of one are hurt by the other, albeit accidentally, the deep friendship turns into enmity. Then one hates to even look at the face of that very friend whom one once loved so dearly. Therefore, the wise Hanuman didn't ask Sugriva to seek Sri Rama's friendship; instead he implored Sri Rama to offer his friendship to Sugriva, for if Bhagavan accepts someone as his friend, if he extends his gracious hand to someone, he never retracts it under any circumstance.

Spiritual Guidance

When two little brothers separated in a huge crowd, having lost all hope of meeting each other, happen to get reunited after a long and tedious search, their joy is indescribable. When Hanuman went to Lanka he met the faithful Vibhishana, the youngest brother of the treacherous *rakshasa* king Ravana. Vibhishana was deeply devoted to Sri Rama and would worship him as his Chosen Ideal. But despite this devotion he used to assist his brother Ravana. Hanuman convinced Vibhishana that he must give up his association with Ravana if he wanted to realize God, for Ravana represented lust, greed, arrogance, and similar evil qualities deleterious to one's spiritual life. Without giving these up one cannot attain God. Vibhishana took Hanuman's advice and obtained refuge in Sri Rama. Such is the effect of holy company.

Niranjanananda too influenced many people to take their spiritual lives to its logical conclusion. One such person was Kedarnath Moulik of Varanasi. He had recently joined the police force and cherished the ambition of becoming an officer dedicated to removing corruption and injustice from society. But after meeting Niranjanananda and hearing from him the glory of renunciation as exemplified in the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, Kedarnath lost all interest in worldly pursuits. He began to devote greater time to meditation and when he found that thoughts of his office work were disturbing his meditation, he resigned the job and gave himself up fully to spiritual practice. Soon, at Kedarnath's earnest request,

Niranjanananda initiated him into sannyasa. Kedarnath was now Swami Achalananda. In due course he became the vice president of the Ramakrishna Order and was highly respected for his deep spirituality.⁸

Doing the Master's Behest

The *Hanuman Chalisa* speaks thus of Hanuman:

*Ram duare tum rakhavare;
hota na ajna binu paisare.*

You are the sentry at Sri Rama's door.
None can enter without your permission.

We find Niranjan in a similar role at Shyampukur and Kashipur: as the doorkeeper of Sri Ramakrishna. Niranjan was physically very strong and had a fearless mind. He felt it his duty to see that Sri Ramakrishna was not disturbed unduly during his last illness. In this job he had to displease many visitors. Once at Kashipur he even denied Ramchandra Datta, a very prominent devotee, access to the Master. But noticing his love for the Master, instead of getting angry, the visitors usually felt happily surprised.

Hanuman is a lifelong celibate. Niranjan also had a natural disinclination for marriage. The Master would praise his natural renunciation: 'Look at Niranjan. He is not attached to anything. He spends money from his own pocket to take poor patients to the hospital. At the proposal of marriage he says, "Goodness! That is the whirlpool of the Viśālākshi."⁹

The Master once said to Niranjan: 'Look here, my boy, if you do ninety-nine good deeds for a person and one bad, he will remember the bad one and won't care for you anymore. On the other hand, if you commit sins ninety-nine times but do one thing to God's satisfaction, He will forgive all your wrongdoing. This is the difference between the love of man and the love of God.'¹⁰ Hanuman could well bear testimony to the veracity of the above statement, having been witness to Sugriva's plight. Sugriva loved Vali deeply. He had helped Vali in many ways. Once Vali, accompanied by Sugriva, went to fight

the demon Mayavi. Mayavi took flight and entered a cave to escape the brothers. At the mouth of the cave Vali said to Sugriva, 'You wait here. I shall go in. If I don't return within a fortnight, take me for dead. Sugriva waited there for a whole month. Then he found blood flowing out from within and concluded that Vali was really dead. He closed the entrance to the cave with a big stone and fled to Kishkindha. On his return home the ministers and subjects of Kishkindha implored him to become the king. He agreed after some hesitation. In actual fact, Vali had killed the monster. When he tried to come out of the cave he found the entrance blocked. This maddened him. He managed to break the boulder blocking the cave and returned to Kishkindha. But when he saw Sugriva seated on the throne he could not contain himself. He beat up Sugriva and drove him out of the kingdom. Sugriva tried to reason with Vali and pacify him, but in vain. Vali forgot all the favours and good turns that Sugriva had done to him. His sole mistake was enough for Vali to punish him severely.

After having befriended him, Sri Rama helped Sugriva kill Vali and become the king of Kishkindha again. But Sugriva, on becoming king and regaining his family and wealth, forgot the commitment he had made to Sri Rama. He had assured Sri Rama that he would help in his search for Sita. Sri Rama pardoned this mistake of Sugriva. Here we notice the difference between the love of a worldly person and God's love.

Hanuman is famed for providing help to the needy. Niranjan also helped the needy even at the risk of his own life. When Saradaprasanna—later Swami Trigunatitananda—was accidentally getting drowned while bathing in a pond at Antpur, Niranjan, ignoring his own safety, rescued him. Such challenges always enthused Niranjan. Once, in the early days of the Baranagar Math, Shashi—Ramakrishnananda—happened to come down with fever while he was away from the Math. On hearing the news, Niranjanananda brought him back to the Math and carefully nursed him back to health. Similarly, when Yogananda fell ill with smallpox

at Prayag, Niranjanananda was by his bedside at very short notice. He also served Adbhutananda when he was suffering from pneumonia in 1888, and then joined Shivananda and Sadananda in nursing Balaram Basu during his fatal ailment. Adbhutananda observes: 'Whenever he heard that anyone was ill, Nirajan would take all responsibility for physical service upon himself.'¹¹


The parallels that we have drawn between the lives of Hanuman and Niranjanananda should not surprise us, for both of them are partial manifestations of Sri Rama. Both display a heroic nature. Hanuman is always ready with his bludgeon to carry out Sri Rama's behest, and Niranjanananda is ever alert, staff in hand, to meet his Master's needs.

Realizing Our Perfection

In Niranjanananda's life we have the prescription for rising to perfection from our present imperfectness. Through Niranjanananda, Sri Ramakrishna reminds us that if we want to realize God we must first forget the world. We must exorcise the ghost of worldliness and start thinking of God and taking his name. We can go towards God only by reducing our worldly desires. Our love for God must be deepened. By perceiving the difference between worldly love and the love of God we must realize that worldly existence is ephemeral and God is the ever-present Reality, the only Truth. Once this notion is ingrained in our minds, our love and longing for God will increase gradually. We must also learn to see God in humans and devote ourselves to serving them.

God descends on earth as an incarnation to free humankind from sorrow and help it taste divine joy. Those who realize God wish that others too partake of that supreme bliss. The devotee prays that all may share in the divine bliss. Once a devotee prayed, 'O God, numerous people in this world seek you. How and when shall they get to you? Please mention a particular time, so that all can get to you at that time.' God replied, 'One must practise spiritual discipline to realize me. There is a procedure for that. There are definite steps to realization. One must

climb these steps slowly and steadily. Realization depends on how one climbs each step. Hence, all cannot reach me at one time. Someone may succeed in one life; others may need many lives to accomplish this.'

The devotee said: 'O Lord, I asked you a question. But you did not answer it properly. I said that we want to get you all at once. But you are unable to tell us how. You have failed my test. I know the answer to this question. I shall tell you about it, and if you like it you ought to act accordingly.' God agreed. The devotee continued, 'O Lord, I asked the means to reach you and you showed the ladder of spiritual practice, and said that all have to climb this ladder. But, my Lord, we are so many standing below, and you are all alone above. Just as one can climb up the ladder, one can climb down as well. If you climb down, our problem will be solved. We shall all have you at one go.' Sri Ramakrishna has shown us the easy path to God-realization. We only need to be aware of the Divine presence within us to realize our own perfection. 

References

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2. See M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 105.
3. Swami Gambhirananda, *Sri Ramakrishna Bhaktamalika*, 2 vols (Calcutta: Udbodhan, 1359 BE), 1.221.
4. *Ramcharitmanas*, 1.21.1.
5. *Life of Sri Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1995), 293.
6. Swami Chetanananda, *God Lived with Them* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 254.
7. *Ramcharitmanas*, 4.1.4.
8. See Swami Abjajananda, *Monastic Disciples of Swami Vivekananda*, trans. Chhaya Ghosh (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2003), 273-301.
9. *Gospel*, 810.
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11. *Sri Ramakrishna Bhaktamalika*, 1.231.



Mahapurush Maharaj: Swami Shivananda

Swami Atmajnanananda

Ramakrishna as his very own spiritual son. Swami Shivananda, however, has the special distinction of being addressed, even by Sri Ramakrishna's other disciples, as 'Mahapurush', great soul, a name given to him by Swami Vivekananda himself in recognition of Shivananda's perfect celibacy in married life. More often, though, he was simply addressed by his brother disciples and others as 'Tarak-da', elder brother Tarak, an indication not merely of his being senior in age to almost all of the direct disciples, but also of their great reverence and love for him.

Very often, our own introduction to these great souls is through the writings and reminiscences of those who had the good fortune to be blessed with their holy company. Mahapurush Maharaj lived to the ripe old age of eighty, was president of the Ramakrishna Order for nearly twelve years, and had many disciples, so the number of reminiscences we have of him is quite large. The original Bengali version of his reminiscences, *Shivananda Smriti Sangraha*, fills three volumes. I was fortunate enough to be part of an editorial team under Swami Swahananda working on translations of some of these reminiscences into English; the result of our efforts was the book *Mahapurush Maharaj as We Saw Him*. Prior to working on these reminiscences, I had great devotion for Swami Shivananda as one of Sri Ramakrishna's great monastic disciples and as the second president of the Ramakrishna Order. But my love and reverence for Mahapurush Maharaj increased tremendously after I read the descriptions of him in the words of his own disciples. I could feel the strength of his personality and the touch of his love through their words, and it is that feeling that I will try to convey in this short sketch of his life. Of course, the basic facts of his life

IT is extremely difficult to fathom the greatness of the direct monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. All were men of the highest realization and purity of character. Swami Vivekananda was the bearer of Sri Ramakrishna's message to the world and the inheritor of his spiritual power, and Swami Brahmananda was looked upon by Sri

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are well known to all, and therefore I will mention them only briefly. But I shall try to also include a few of the incidents that are perhaps not as well known and which are found in the reminiscences of his own disciples and devotees.

A Seeker of Samadhi

Mahapurush Maharaj was born into a devout brahmana family in 1854 in a small town east of Kolkata, called Barasat. Since his mother had prayed to Shiva for the birth of a son, he was given the name Taraknath, and was known simply as Tarak. Like Swami Vivekananda's father, Tarak's father, Ramkanai, was both a successful lawyer and an extremely generous man. He and his equally pious wife, Vamasundari, maintained nearly thirty poor students in their home on different occasions. But Tarak's father was not merely a generous man, he was also a great Tantric sadhaka. In fact, it was Ramkanai who recommended that Sri Ramakrishna wear an amulet containing the name of his *ishta devata* in order to cure him of the burning sensation he was experiencing at that time. Ramkanai used to visit the Dakshineswar Kali Temple, both in his capacity as attorney for the Rani Rasmani estate and as a spiritual seeker, and it was on one of those occasions that he met Sri Ramakrishna for the first time.

The seeds of dispassion were sown in Tarak's life from an early age. His mother died when he was only nine years old, and although his father remarried, his stepmother could not take the place of his own mother in his heart—it was only after coming to Sri Ramakrishna many years later that Tarak once again felt that same motherly love and affection. In addition to this, his elder sister also passed away, leaving behind two children, and a brother-in-law died leaving his second sister a widow.

Tarak was a good student in school, though he was rather indifferent to his studies. When his father's income fell due to lack of work, Tarak—who was in the tenth grade then—left school to take a job. He worked for the railways in northern India, and spent his spare time in spiritual practice. He spent long hours in meditation during this pe-

riod, with the one desire of attaining samadhi. He would later say: 'Then the idea of samadhi would agitate my mind. How to be absorbed in the bliss of samadhi, forgetting the world—this keen desire occupied me most of the time. I was very fond of the meditation pose of Shiva and Buddha. I tried to attain samadhi month after month—I rarely slept at night. I had that one thought—how to attain samadhi.'

A Noble Mind

We often hear that Shivananda was a grave and serious man, that prior to becoming president of the Ramakrishna Order he was a little indrawn and stern, and that after becoming president his heart expanded and he became a great, loving soul. However, when we examine various incidents in his earlier life, we find that that great heart and intense love were always there, only perhaps a little hidden. One of the first intimations we get of this is the story of his marriage. Because of the poor financial condition of his family, his father could not afford the dowry for his daughter's marriage. One prospective family offered to give their son in marriage if their daughter could marry Tarak at the same time. In that way there would be no exchange of dowry and the double marriages could go ahead without any hitch. Though Tarak was not at all interested in marriage, and actually was determined to lead a monastic life, he agreed out of love for his sister and respect for his father. It is well known that he and his wife lived as brother and sister for the short period of their marriage—she passed away in 1883.

Recovering One's Mother

Tarak first met Sri Ramakrishna in May or June of 1880, in the home of Ramchandra Datta. The room was filled with devotees, and Sri Ramakrishna was speaking on the very subject that had become the passion of Tarak's life: samadhi. Tarak seated himself nearby and listened spellbound. As there was no opportunity for him to talk with Sri Ramakrishna during this first meeting, Tarak went to Dakshineswar the next month. As soon as he

bowed before Sri Ramakrishna, he experienced a tremendous reaction. He felt as if he had once more got his own mother back. He placed his head on Sri Ramakrishna's lap, and Sri Ramakrishna caressed him like a child. Many years later Tarak explained: 'At once I felt a deep attachment for the Master. I felt as if I had known him for a long time. My heart became filled with joy. I saw in him my tender, loving mother waiting for me. So, with the confidence, faith, and certitude of a child, I surrendered myself to him, placing myself entirely in his care. I was certain that at last I had found him for whom I had been searching all these days. From then on I looked upon Thakur as my mother.'

Tarak's second or third meeting with Sri Ramakrishna was very much like that of his brother disciple Narendranath. Sri Ramakrishna went into an ecstatic mood in his presence and touched Tarak lightly on the chest. Tarak lost all outer consciousness of the world and remained absorbed in that joyful state for a long time. He recalled: 'As a result [of Sri Ramakrishna's touch], everything became revealed to me. I realized that I was the Atman, eternal and free. I realized that the Master was the Lord born as man for the good of humanity, and that I was born on earth to serve him.' Not long after this incident, Sri Ramakrishna initiated Tarak by writing a mantra on his tongue, as he would often do. Once again, Tarak lost all outer consciousness of the world, and only regained his normal consciousness when Sri Ramakrishna touched his chest with his fingers.

Tarak was the first of all the disciples to renounce the world. After his wife died in 1883, he quit his job and told his father of his decision. As his father was also a highly spiritual soul, he blessed his son, and with tears in his eyes said: 'May you realize God! I myself tried to renounce the world and realize him, but I failed. Therefore, I bless you that you may attain God.'

Tarak spent the next three years of his life, that is, up until the time of Sri Ramakrishna's passing away, living mainly at the home of Sri Ramakrishna's great householder disciple Ramchandra Datta. Here he cooked his own food and spent the

greater part of his time in meditation and spiritual practice, either in some solitary place or in a nearby cremation ground. After Sri Ramakrishna was diagnosed with throat cancer and was moved to the Kashipur garden house, Tarak, along with many of Sri Ramakrishna's monastic disciples, moved into Kashipur to serve him. Here also Tarak spent all of his spare time in intense austerities in the company of Narendra and his other brother disciples. Sometimes they would pass entire nights in meditation, either in the Panchavati at Dakshineswar or at Kashipur itself.

In the Joy of Sadhana

Since Tarak had already decided to lead a monastic life years earlier, it was only natural that he would be one of the disciples to form the first monastery of the Ramakrishna Order. He had accompanied Baburam—later Swami Premananda—along with Narendra and others, to his ancestral home in Antpur, and was present on that auspicious Christmas Eve when they vowed to live the life of monks. Because of his great devotion to Shiva, as well as his calm, dispassionate nature, he was given the name Shivananda by Narendranath.

Since he was already free of all social responsibility and attachments to the world, Shivananda, who was later more commonly known as Mahapurush Maharaj, became the first resident of the newly formed Baranagar Math, along with Swami Advaitananda. Here, he and his brother monks practised intense spiritual disciplines, often spending entire nights immersed in meditation. As was his nature, Mahapurush Maharaj remained indrawn much of the time. This period of his life was one of great austerity, simplicity, and joy.

Even then, the call of the wandering life beckoned him to leave the Baranagar Math, and he took to the solitary life of the itinerant Indian sadhu. Because of his Shiva-like nature, he was drawn to the Himalayas, travelling on foot as far as possible and preferring to move about alone. He made several pilgrimages to such places as Kedarnath and Badrinath and spent a great deal of time in Almora

and Uttarkashi. Later, at the bidding of Swami Vivekananda, he laid the groundwork for a future centre in Almora, and also travelled to Sri Lanka, again preparing the ground for an ashrama there.

The Call of Service

During Swami Vivekananda's visit to Varanasi in 1902, the Maharaja of Bhinga had offered him five hundred rupees for starting an ashrama there. At that time Swamiji refused, but later relented and requested Mahapurush Maharaj to go to Varanasi and take up the work there. Shivananda left for Varanasi at the very end of June 1902, just a few days before the passing away of his beloved brother, Swamiji. Though he was spared the heart-wrenching sight of Swamiji's death, there is no question that Swamiji's early departure from the world left a tremendous void in the heart of Mahapurush Maharaj and greatly increased the burden of responsibility to carry on his work for his brother monks. Despite the great sense of grief Shivananda must have felt, he carried out Swamiji's will and remained at the new ashrama in Varanasi—Sri Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama—until 1909.

This period of Mahapurush Maharaj's life is of great interest. We begin to get a picture of his nature and behaviour from the early monks of the Order who joined under him in Varanasi. And we find a beautiful blend of the two aspects of Shivananda's character that seem to best define him: his austere, and seemingly serious, nature, and his very soft heart, often lost sight of behind his grave demeanour. Though it is true that the sweet side of Shivananda's nature was first seen after he became president of the Ramakrishna Order in 1922, and further developed after the passing away of his dear brother Swami Saradananda in 1927, we also find from a few events that took place during his years in Varanasi that his compassionate and loving nature was part and parcel of his character throughout his life.

Mahapurush Maharaj led an extremely austere life in the new ashrama in Varanasi. He slept on the bare floor in the library room with only a lit-

It will not do to be restless. One has to get deeply absorbed in spiritual exercises; one must strengthen one's spiritual attitude in one's own mind. One may get a temporary enthusiasm by noticing somebody else's spiritual fervour; but then one must remember that all such men had to pass through hard struggle.

—Swami Shivananda,
For Seekers of God, 246

tle straw and a tiger skin beneath him for comfort, even in the cold of winter. He would often awake at two o'clock in the morning and sit for meditation near the fireplace. Due to his grave demeanour, many were hesitant to approach him; yet, at the same time, like a loving mother he looked after the young boys who had come to join the ashrama.

There is a beautiful incident from this period, narrated by Swami Gaurishananda: A brahmacharin named Rishi had come to the ashrama to study Sanskrit. After some time, he was suddenly stricken with fever and dysentery. There were only two latrines at the ashrama. Mahapurush Maharaj was using one of them and the other was occupied by one of the other monks. Brahmachari Rishi felt a sudden urge to use the latrine, but did not feel bold enough to say anything. In his feverish condition, he stood outside the two latrines and, unable to control himself, soiled his cloth. As soon as Mahapurush Maharaj came out and saw Rishi standing there, he understood what had happened. With great affection he said, 'You are standing here, feverish, and in this condition. Why did you not call me?' Mahapurush Maharaj requested Rishi to go in and clean himself up. After he had done so, Mahapurush Maharaj insisted that he leave his soiled cloth and go back to his room. Rishi was naturally hesitant to do so, but at Mahapurush Maharaj's ardent request he had to comply. Then Mahapurush Maharaj, without saying anything to anyone, washed Rishi's soiled cloth, demonstrating both his wonderful spirit of service and love, as well as his perfect humility.

Gaurishananda also relates an incident which shows how Shivananda's compassion was not limited to human beings, but also included other creatures, especially dogs, for whom he had a life-long love. In those days, a dog was kept at the Advaita Ashrama and was fed four chapattis a day. The financial condition of the ashrama was quite poor, and perhaps some of the residents resented ashrama food being used to feed the dog. In any event, one day one of the monks had beaten the dog so badly that it had become lame. Mahapurush Maharaj lovingly called the dog to him, but when he saw the dog was unable to move, he understood what had happened. Again, he did not request the help of anyone else; he himself began to nurse the dog back to health. If any of the other monks would offer assistance, he would chide them and say, 'No, you have no feeling of mercy or compassion. You are just interested in your own spiritual practices, so go ahead and remain busy with them.' We have a further sign of Mahapurush Maharaj's compassion and feeling for others during this period: he started a free nursery school for the poor children of the area during his stay in Varanasi.

Humility and Love

Shivananda left Varanasi in 1909 and returned to Belur Math. Brahmananda was then president, and Premananda acted as manager of the Math. Whenever Premananda was away, Mahapurush Maharaj would take his place as Math manager, and after the passing away of Premananda in 1918, he became the permanent manager. During this period, two wonderful characteristics of Mahapurush Maharaj could be clearly seen. The first is the very high standards he set for the monks. If any of them did not execute his duties with great care and devotion, he could expect a good scolding from the swami. To some, this was a sign of Mahapurush Maharaj's critical and serious nature, but the truth was that he had high hopes for the young boys who had joined and wanted to see them develop to their full potential. The other factor was that he always felt the living presence of Sri Ramakrishna at the Math and could

not bear to see any defect in his service.

The second trait that we see during this period, and also after he became president of the Math, was an ability to completely let go of any anger or irritation he felt with any of the monks. He might have given one of them a good scolding, but it left no mark on him, and he was found to be his old self again within moments. In that way he was a living example of the Bengali expression '*sadbur rag jaler dag*; the anger of a holy man is like a mark on water'. We can see this in a particular well-known incident which, though more often cited with regard to Sri Sarada Devi than to Shivananda, tells us a great deal about the forgiving nature of Mahapurush Maharaj as well.

Whenever Mahapurush Maharaj became extremely displeased with one of the monks, he would respond by saying that he was unfit to live at the Math and should leave. He had his own creative and interesting way of expressing it. He would say to one of the older monks, 'Give that boy two paise'. That was the cost of taking the ferry to the other side of the Ganga, and it was Mahapurush Maharaj's way of saying that the person concerned should pack up and go home. But Mahapurush Maharaj would secretly tell the older monk, 'Give him four paise. If the fellow wants to come back, where will he get the money?'

One day, Brahmachari Nagen committed some indiscretion, and someone was sent to bring him to Mahapurush Maharaj. The brahmacharin had just come from his bath in the Ganga and was wearing only his towel round his waist. The person who was sent to bring him felt compelled to warn him first and said, 'It looks like it is your fate to get your two paise today.' Immediately Nagen understood what was in store for him and got so terrified that he took off then and there, with nothing to cover him but his towel, and started walking to Jayrambati to take shelter with Holy Mother. He walked for two days, with no money and no food, until he reached Arambagh. There one sadhu took pity on him and gave him a little food, a place to sleep, and a tattered gerua cloth to wear. The next day, Nagen

reached Jayrambati, fell at Holy Mother's feet, and explained everything. Holy Mother consoled Nagen and sent a letter to Mahapurush Maharaj: 'My dear son Tarak; what mistake has the younger Nagen made? Fearing that you would ask him to leave the Math, the boy has come to me all the way on foot, at great hardship to himself. My dear son, can a child commit any offence in the eyes of his mother? I am sending him back to you. Don't say anything to him.'


Mahapurush Maharaj wrote in reply that they were all worried about the boy and were relieved to learn he had gone to her. He also said that they would gladly accept him back. Nagen returned to Belur Math and met Mahapurush Maharaj. In a letter he wrote to Swami Gaurishwarananda, he described his meeting with Mahapurush Maharaj: 'When I reached Belur Math, I first made my pranams in the different temples and then went to Mahapurush Maharaj's room. He was seated on his cot, but as soon as I entered, he got up and embraced me. Then he said, "You fellow, you went to the High Court to lodge a complaint against me!" How many other affectionate things he said to me! He really showered me with love.'

There are a few small incidents that show us how this wonderful humility of Mahapurush Maharaj remained with him throughout his life. Once, when Swami Swaprakashananda was staying at Belur Math and performing the worship of Sri Ramakrishna, he went to make pranams to Mahapurush Maharaj after the evening worship was completed. As the swami was sitting in an indrawn mood, Swaprakashananda very quietly made pranams without touching his feet and then walked away. As Swaprakashananda was leaving the room, Mahapurush Maharaj called out to him and asked, 'Have you made pranams over there?' He was referring to the room where Swami Vivekananda stayed before his sudden passing away in 1902. After learning that he had not, Mahapurush Maharaj became displeased and scolded him saying, 'You should always make pranams there first and only afterwards here. Do you not know that

Swamiji—the veritable Shiva—is residing there? If you make pranams there, it is enough. What is there to bow down to here?'

Swaprakashananda also relates that when Mahapurush Maharaj would rise from bed early in the morning, he would go downstairs and use the lavatory there. He would never use the lavatory upstairs, which Swamiji used to use, despite the extreme inconvenience that was caused by using the far more primitive arrangements below. From this we can easily understand how great was his reverence for Swamiji, and how complete was his humility!

Perhaps the greatest example of his humility was the attitude he showed at the time of becoming president of Belur Math. His regard for Brahmananda was so great that he could never think of himself as the president. In his mind that position always belonged to Brahmananda. After Brahmananda passed away, he said: 'Maharaj is gone. I have no desire to continue living. The Math belongs to Maharaj. He was its head, he was its charm, he was its wealth. He was everything to the Math. We are his servants and are working according to his wishes.' Mahapurush would only agree to take the position of president as a representative of Brahmananda. He never looked upon himself as the actual president or thought of himself as a guru, though he initiated large numbers of devotees and monks into spiritual life.

There are no doubt many more aspects of Mahapurush Maharaj's life that are worthy of discussion: his great forbearance in the face of terrible physical suffering and disability, his immense kindness toward the devotees and young monks, his deeply indrawn and spiritual nature, which made samadhi and other great heights of spiritual experience something quite natural to him, and several more. While there is no space here to include the many incidents we read about these aspects of his life, we hope that sharing a few of them helped us be closer to a soul whose 'home is that high Power from which proceed name and form', as was told of Mahapurush Maharaj by Sri Ramakrishna. 

Swami Saradananda: Uncommon Versatility

Swami Purnananda

SRI RAMAKRISHNA is considered the emperor of the realm of divine *bhavas*, spiritual moods. He was *ananta bhavamaya*, the embodiment of infinite inner states of godliness. And all his apostles were different manifestations of those divine *bhavas*. Just as a spectrum of colours is generated when the radiant rays of the sun pass through a prism, so do the apostles of Sri Ramakrishna represent a spectrum of spiritual attitudes emerging from the Master's inner radiance of purity and beatitude. Each colour of that divine spectrum has taken human form to remind humanity of its goal—its identity with the Divine. Together they show the way to this goal and shed light on it—they, the apostles of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Saradananda was one of them.

One day at Dakshineswar, while pacing about in an indrawn mood, Sri Ramakrishna suddenly sat down on the lap of a young man only to get up in a few moments. To satisfy the curiosity of the devotees present there he said, 'I was testing how much weight he can bear.' This young man was none other than Sharat—Swami Saradananda—who, years later, was appointed secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission by Swami Vivekananda and carried this onerous responsibility for thirty long years.¹ As if this were not enough, he also served as Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's attendant; and that meant dealing with the host of eccentric people always orbiting around her. Once Holy Mother remarked: 'I don't see anybody else who can shoulder my burden. It is only Sharat who



can do it in every respect. Sharat is my "load-bearer", *bhari*.² But Saradananda used to consider himself the 'door-keeper', *dwari*, of the Mother (1,320).

Dhira, A Steady Mind

Saradananda was by nature very calm, quiet, and gentle even from his boyhood. Hardly anybody saw him in an angry mood or talking harshly. He used to speak gently and with a motherly tenderness. As secretary of the Ramakrishna Order he had to face many unpleasant and embarrassing situations, but nothing could perturb his men-

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tal poise. He was a real *dhira* in the true sense of the term: '*Vikara-hetau sati vikriyante yesham na cetamsi ta eva dhirah*'; those whose minds remain unperturbed under provocative circumstances are indeed of steady minds.³ He was a living example of a *sthitaprajna*, a man of steady wisdom, as has been described in the Bhagavadgita. A number of instances substantiating this fact may be cited from Saradananda's life.

In 1899, while lecturing in Kashmir, Swami Vivekananda fell ill and wired Saradananda to come over. Without delay Saradananda hurried to his side, hiring a tonga to drive him from Rawalpindi to Srinagar. It wasn't long before the coachman started acting peculiarly, whipping and urging the horse to go faster and faster, muttering to himself, 'I shall see if Allah saves me today.' The horse was running frantically when, at a bend, it was suddenly confronted by another carriage. The startled animal jumped off the road carrying the coach down a steep incline. Saradananda was not shaken. He kept his cool and jumped off the carriage when it struck against a tree, even as a big boulder crushed the horse to death.⁴

In 1920, during her last illness, Holy Mother was staying at Udbodhan. Only in special cases were visitors allowed to meet her, and that too with Saradananda's prior permission. One day an unknown woman came with an earnest desire to see Mother. Considering her earnestness Saradananda allowed her to go to Mother with a monastic attendant. The attendant was, however, busy with some other work and asked a brahmacharin who had recently joined the ashrama to accompany the woman to Mother's room. Saradananda came to know this and insisted that the attendant himself accompany the woman. But the wilful attendant refrained from going and sent the brahmacharin instead. The woman went upstairs and started wailing loudly, holding Mother's feet to her bosom. Everybody rushed upstairs to Mother's room and somehow managed to take the woman aside. Saradananda called the monastic attendant and told him that if he were to continue being disobedient, he ought to leave

Udbodhan and go to Belur Math. The monk replied to Saradananda's face that he was staying there to attend upon Mother, otherwise he would have left for Belur Math without further delay. Everybody was shocked to hear this harsh and audacious reply from a young monk. But Saradananda calmly added: 'All of us are here for the same purpose, and that is why we say something at times.'⁵

Even as the secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission Saradananda displayed no *amour propre*; he remained unassuming and modest throughout his life. He gave freedom to his subordinates, had confidence in their efficiency, and, above all, harboured sincere love for them in his heart. Once Swami Umananda left Vrindaban for Belur Math after duly sending a letter to Swami Saradananda informing him about his visit. Unfortunately, his mail got misplaced among a bunch of old letters before it was read. Saradananda had the impression that Umananda had left station without prior notice and so, for duty's sake, he reproved him. Later, when the letter was found, Saradananda went straight to Swami Brahmananda, the then president of the Order, and saying that he was totally unfit for the post of secretary begged to be relieved of the same. Still not satisfied, he went to Umananda, who was much younger than him, and apologized for his mistake (1.323-4).

Monastic Blaze

After the mahasamadhi of Sri Ramakrishna, many of his future monastic disciples returned to their respective homes. Sharat was no exception. But Sharat's mind was then fully alight with the burning fire of renunciation ignited by the Master. He started visiting the newly-established Baranagar Monastery off and on. Sometimes he would spend the night there. Observing this, his father advised him to put his mind to his studies, but to no avail. The desperate father locked him in a room. Sharat was not in the least perturbed; rather he gained more confidence and waited for the call of the Master from within. The call did come: one day his younger brother unlocked the room and set him

free. Sharat walked out silently and went straight to the monastery.⁶ Soon, in January 1887, Sharat had formal sannyasa at Baranagar Math, thus becoming Swami Saradananda.

Sharat had an indrawn disposition. Inspired by the monastic vows he undertook severe austerities. He was strict and uncompromising in his adherence to monastic principles. A blazing spirit of renunciation within and a sense of emptiness at the absence of the Master in physical form drove him out of the monastery into the itinerant life of a peniless mendicant. Like most of his brother monks, he too took to pilgrimage, depending completely on God for food and shelter and practising intense spiritual disciplines.

In 1887 he visited Sri Jagannath at Puri. Again in 1889–91 he travelled to various pilgrimage sites in North India, including the famous shrines in the Garhwal Himalayas. The following incident is representative of the mood that Saradananda harboured during these *parivrajaka* days. On a Shivaratri—the spring festival of Lord Shiva—Saradananda and Turiyananda went for the darshan of Nilakantheshwara Shiva, sixteen miles from Rishikesh. The shrine was on a remote hill in a jungle full of ferocious animals. On their way back that evening they lost their way. They decided to explore two separate routes. Luckily, Turiyananda found shelter in a solitary ashrama, and the next morning he and another monk went out to locate Saradananda. After a long search they saw him meditating, seated on a piece of rock. When he was asked why he did not try to find shelter, Saradananda replied, ‘When death is certain, it is better to die chanting God’s name without being anxious’ (321).

While Saradananda was practising tapas at Varanasi in 1891, an earnest elderly sadhaka seeking a guru was deeply impressed by his personality and austere ways and took sannyasa vows from him, becoming Swami Satchidananda. The many years of severe austerity, however, took their toll. Saradananda first contracted a fever and then suffered a severe attack of dysentery that forced him to end his pilgrimage and return to Baranagar.⁷

When Turiyananda went to the West with Swami Vivekananda in 1899, Saradananda had to take charge of guiding the novice monks and brahmacharins at the Belur Math. He started teaching them the scriptures and instructing them in spiritual disciplines. He made a rule that all the monks in the monastery should practise japa and meditation by turns in the shrine throughout the night. He would himself practise japa and meditation right through the day, an example that inspired all.⁸

Saradananda was a living example of the spirit of chastity and poverty, these being the main principles of a true sannyasin. Such was his integrity and spirit of renunciation that he would accept nothing for personal use out of the income generated from Swami Vivekananda’s works, even when he had difficulty meeting his basic needs (1,326).

Spiritual Ambassador

After spreading the message of Vedanta untiringly for two and a half years in the West, Swami Vivekananda was in great need of an assistant to help continue the work he had started there. He requested Saradananda to come to England. In the beginning Saradananda was reluctant, but at the same time was unable to refuse the call from the leader; so being in a dilemma he approached Holy Mother and sought her advice. Mother told him: ‘My son, be not afraid. You should go to the West. Sri Ramakrishna will protect you. Sri Ramakrishna will be with you wherever you go.’⁹

Inspired by Mother’s blessings Saradananda left for London, reaching there on 1 April 1896. After one month Swamiji reached London from the US and began coaching Saradananda in lecturing as well as in Western culture and methods. One of Saradananda’s first tasks in London was to supply Prof. Max Müller, the German orientalist, with material on the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. This was indeed an important task; it resulted in an article on Sri Ramakrishna by Max Müller in the *Nineteenth Century* entitled ‘The Real Mahatman’. On Swamiji’s advice, Saradananda worked hard to supply Müller with further authentic information,

which the professor incorporated in his book *The Life and Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*.¹⁰

In June 1896 Saradananda moved to New York. Following invitations from several institutions, he delivered a series of lectures on Vedanta. His sweet and gentle personality and his masterly exposition of the Vedanta philosophy made his lectures very attractive. His contribution in spreading the message of Vedanta and Sri Ramakrishna helped the Vedanta societies on the east coast of the US grow steadily.

After his return from the West in February 1898, Saradananda had to travel from place to place in Bengal, Rajputana, Gujarat, and the United Provinces, preaching the message of the Master as well as expounding ancient scriptures like the Upanishads and the Gita. His talks were very much appreciated for their scholarly and spiritual insights. He travelled the length and breadth of East Bengal inspiring innumerable individuals, especially the youth. They were already familiar with the works of Swamiji; so when they heard that one of Swamiji's brother disciples was preaching in East Bengal, they came even from remote places to hear him and seek his spiritual advice.

Servant of the Ramakrishna Sangha

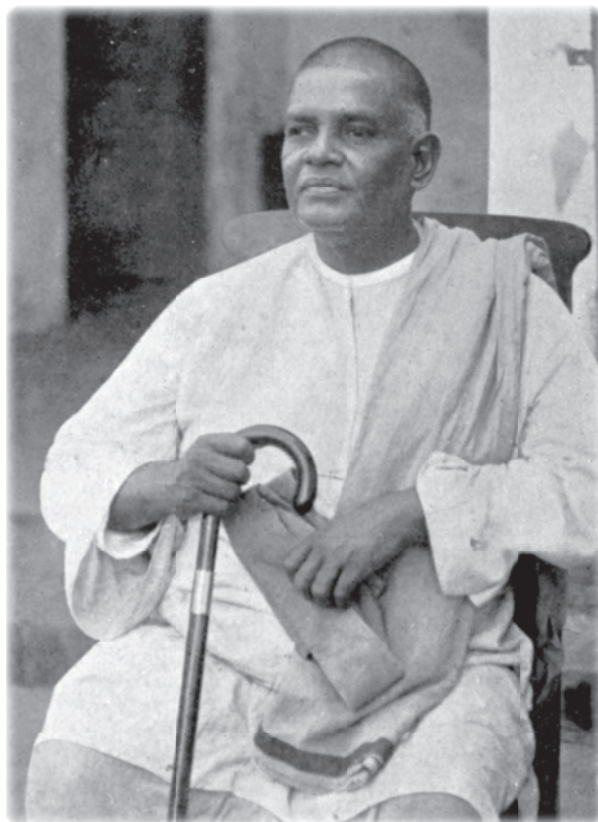
Just when Saradananda was at the height of his success in the US, Swamiji called him back to India to help him organize the Ramakrishna Mission at Belur. In all, he stayed in the West for over two and a half years. He left America on 12 January 1898 and reached Calcutta on 8 February.

Swamiji constituted the rules and regulations of the Ramakrishna Order. Saradananda and other brother disciples were given the task to implement them and also train the young novices accordingly. Swamiji made Brahmananda the president and Saradananda the secretary of the new organization. They shouldered these heavy responsibilities successfully till their last. They were born leaders.

Swamiji had rightly gauged the strength of Saradananda's leadership. He used to say, '*sirdar to sardar*—he who can give up his life for the sake of others is a true leader'. Once, in Varanasi, a young

monk told Saradananda that it would not be possible for him to go from door to door and distribute rice among the poor. Hearing this Saradananda instantly took one of the bags and went out to accomplish the work without being vexed by the junior monk's behaviour.¹¹ Hasty judgements and decisions were, however, foreign to Saradananda's character.

Saradananda was *tulya-ninda-stutih*—one to whom criticism and praise are the same—as has been described in the Gita. Nothing could upset him. Once Swamiji sent Saradananda and Brahmananda to Calcutta for some work. After returning to the Math Saradananda informed Swamiji that the work could not be done. Swamiji thought that had his advice been followed the task could have been accomplished. So he rebuked Saradananda harshly: 'You have but an ounce of intellect. Better keep it stored and allow it to grow; it will be of use later.' Immediately after this an assistant served both of them with tea, and Saradananda settled down with his cup as if nothing had happened. Finding that his provocative remarks had failed to



upset Saradananda, Swamiji remarked: 'He has the blood of a Bele fish; it never gets heated' (316-7).

There are numerous other instances of Saradananda's self-restraint, revealing him to be a man of steady wisdom. Once, seeing the muddy footprints of the cook in the shrine, he became very annoyed and called the cook to reprimand him. But no sooner did the latter approach him than Saradananda's annoyance disappeared, and he sent the cook away saying, 'No, nothing. You may go' (*ibid.*).

Anvil of the Sangha

As secretary of the Order Saradananda had to face problems one after another. But his calm temperament, keen judgement, and, above all, impartial and sincere love helped him surmount all difficulties. In 1909 Debabrata Basu and Sachindranath Sen, two young revolutionaries accused of being involved in the Maniktala bomb case, came to join the Order. Everybody was scared at this, because their joining would place the Math under suspicion and invite the wrath of the British government. But Saradananda took the bold decision to accept them in the Order as they had come for a monastic vocation renouncing their previous way of life (317).

Swami Chetanananda has thus summarized the story of these troubled times and the remarkable role Saradananda played in steering the Order during this difficult phase:

Although the Ramakrishna Order has never involved itself in politics, the presence of the former revolutionaries brought police surveillance upon the Order. When Swami Atmaprakashananda joined the Udbodhan centre in 1912, the police learned about it and summoned Saradananda and Atmaprakashananda for questioning. The police official did not offer a chair to Saradananda nor speak courteously to him. But Saradananda gently assured the police official that the young man who joined the Order had given up all political activities. While returning to the monastery, Atmaprakashananda said in an aggrieved tone: 'Swami, I am extremely sorry. It is for my sake that you have had to put up with an insult unworthy of your position.' 'Who can insult me?' Saradananda

replied. 'If my mind does not accept the rudeness, how can I be insulted? Have I kept anything for myself? I have already offered body, mind, and soul at the blessed feet of our Lord, where there cannot be any room for good and bad, honour and dishonour. Be at ease. You need not worry on my behalf.'

The problem continued. Most of the revolutionaries had been inspired by the patriotic lectures and writings of Vivekananda. When they were arrested, the police found Vivekananda's books in their homes. So the British government was very upset about the publications of the Ramakrishna Mission. In Dhaka on 11 December 1916 Lord Carmichael, the governor of Bengal, made some damaging remarks during his Durbar speech about the Ramakrishna Mission, which had a devastating effect on its activities. The general public became afraid of supporting the Mission, as they feared that they might be tortured or harassed by the government. Moreover, the British government had the full power to curb the philanthropic activities of the Mission.

During the crisis, Saradananda stood calmly at the helm of the Ramakrishna Mission. Wishing to remove this doubt and misunderstanding, on 23 January 1917 Saradananda wrote a memorandum, containing twelve points, to Lord Carmichael. On 2 March Mr Gourlay, the governor's secretary, and Mr Denham, the police chief, came to Belur Math to meet with Saradananda. On 10 March Saradananda was invited to the governor's house, where he talked with Lord Carmichael for an hour. On 26 March the governor withdrew his statement, a rare event during the British rule in India.¹²

A portion of the letter the governor wrote to Saradananda reads: 'As you, I know, realize my object was not to condemn the Ramakrishna Mission and its members. I know the character of the Mission's work is entirely non-political, and I have heard nothing but good of its work of social service for the people.' When this letter was published in the newspapers, the cloud of misunderstanding and the public's fear dissipated; the police surveillance was also withdrawn (340). But the strain took its toll and Saradananda's health was affected. He became bedridden with rheumatism and a urinary af-

fiction and suffered silently for nearly a fortnight.

Organizing the first Ramakrishna Mission Convention at Belur Math in 1926 was another of Saradananda's seminal achievements. A meeting of the monastic and lay workers of the Mission, it provided opportunity for comparing notes and planning the future activities of the Mission. Saradananda's welcome address at the convention was a remarkable assessment of the status of the Order and the problems that it was likely to confront in the future.

Scholarly Writer

Saradananda was a scholar and writer. Many of his lectures and writings were published in contemporary magazines. After returning from his lecture tour to East Bengal in 1900, he engaged himself in Tantric spiritual practices under the guidance of his uncle Ishwarchandra Chakravarty, who was an adept in Tantra. This practice unveiled for him the mystery of Shakti worship—the realization of the Divine Mother in all. In the dedication of his book *Bharate Shakti Puja* (Mother Worship in India) he wrote: 'By whose gracious glance the author has been able to realize the special revelation of the Divine Mother's power in every woman—to Her lotus feet the work is dedicated in all humility and devotion.'¹³

In 1909 Saradananda began writing his monumental work *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*—The Story of Sri Ramakrishna's Divine Play—in Bengali. This invaluable work has enriched the religious milieu as well as the literature of Bengal. It has been commended not only as an authentic, interpretive biography of the Master, but also as a classic in Bengali literature.

Saradananda had received a piece of land in the Baghbazar district of northern Calcutta as donation from a devotee, Sri Kedarchandra Das. On that land he built a house for the Holy Mother, which is now known as *Mayer Bari*—Mother's House. This building also housed the editorial office of the Bengali magazine *Udbodhan*. For this construction he had to take out a loan. To repay the loan he decided to write this biography of Sri Ramakrishna.

The Master and his chosen leader have done wonderful work to help poor India and other more fortunate countries through you! But still greater works remain yet to be accomplished, and the Master and the Swami [Vivekananda] will do it all in time, even through you, if you keep close to their purity and singleness of purpose, their sacrifice and self-surrender for all that is good, true, and noble, and follow their footsteps with that meek and humble spirit with which you have followed them. ...

... Wonderful as it is to think of the wide extension that our Mission has attained in the past quarter of a century, it requires us to consider seriously the question, whether or not we have gained this at the cost of that intense spirit of sacrifice and love for the Ideal, which inspired us at the beginning—whether or not the work that we did at first for the love and glory of the Ideal has turned into slavery and bondage, through any undue attachment on our part to name, fame, power, and position. Yes, the time is ripe for consideration and settlement of such momentous questions—for the separation of husks from grains, of dross from the pure metal.

—Swami Saradananda's 'Welcome Address,'
The Ramakrishna Math and Mission Convention, 1926

It was first serialized in *Udbodhan* and became justly famous. Saradananda also had other reasons for writing this book. At that time Mahendranath Gupta and some other householder disciples of Sri Ramakrishna used to express their doubts about the philanthropic activities conducted by the monastic disciples, considering these as not in keeping with the teachings of the Master. Saradananda understood that this wrong notion had to be redressed by presenting a correct interpretation of the Master's life and teachings. In fact, everybody was feeling the need for an authentic biography of Sri Ramakrishna. The *Lilaprasanga* fulfilled this need.

Saradananda used to write the *Lilaprasanga* in a small room on the ground floor of *Mayer Bari*. The location of the room did not offer the quiet

ambience required for such work. But Saradananda wrote the book in a meditative mood, withdrawing his mind from the outer world and concentrating it fully on the task. The Gita says: 'He, who finds action in non-action and non-action in action, is a real yogi.'¹⁴ He continued with his onerous project amidst the crowded and noisy surroundings. One day some young monks were talking loudly and laughing in the office adjacent to his room. Golap-ma, an attendant of Holy Mother, scolded them: 'Shame on you! Mother is upstairs and Sharat is [engaged in serious work] below, and you boys are making such a noise!' Overhearing Golap-ma's loud voice, Saradananda said to her: 'Well, Golap-ma, please don't give your ear to them. It is the nature of boys to behave like that. I am so close to them but I don't listen to what they are talking about. I have told my ears, "Don't listen to anything that is unnecessary." So my ears are not listening to them.' Such was his control over his senses.¹⁵

Vividha Prasanga—a collection of lectures, class notes, and short writings—and *Gita-tattva*, The Essence of the Gita, are two other important works of Saradananda.

Mother's Doorkeeper

After the passing away of Swami Yogananda, who was the first person to receive initiation from Holy Mother, Swami Trigunatitananda became Mother's attendant. When Trigunatitananda left for America, Saradananda took over that responsibility until Mother left her mortal frame in 1920. Saradananda served Mother most faithfully and efficiently. Being pleased with his extraordinary spirit of service, Mother once said, 'I shall be able to live at Udbodhan as long as Sharat is there.' Saradananda personally looked after her during his stay in Calcutta; he also took care of her needs and finances wherever she went. Saradananda's devotion and service to Mother has become a legend in the Ramakrishna Order. Mother used to speak of him as her 'Vasuki', a mythological serpent, who protected her with his thousand hoods. 'Wherever water pours, he spreads his umbrella to protect me,' she said (333).

Saradananda considered himself to be Mother's doorkeeper and felt proud of the position. He served her with all his heart, mind, and soul. He also looked after the welfare of her relatives, nursed her dying younger brother, and made provisions for her niece Radhu's future financial security. He accompanied Mother on several of her pilgrimages and often visited her at Jayrambati, especially when she fell ill.

The task of a humble doorkeeper was not at all easy; rather it was a thankless job. Once a devotee from Barishal came to visit Mother on a hot afternoon at about three o'clock. He had come walking a long distance. But Mother had just returned from a devotee's house and was taking rest. Observing the devotee going upstairs Saradananda said, 'I can't allow you to go up now. Mother has just come back and she is tired.' But the devotee was so anxious to see Mother that he practically pushed Saradananda aside and went upstairs saying, 'Is Mother only your own?' Very soon the devotee felt repentant for his rash act and started hoping that he would not have to face Saradananda on his way out. But going down the stairs he found Saradananda standing in the same place as before. The devotee saluted him and begged his pardon for the offence. Saradananda embraced him and said, 'Why do you talk of offence? Can one see Mother without having such yearning?'¹⁶

Saradananda served Holy Mother and her eccentric relatives as well, a most delicate and difficult task. For over fifteen years he had the unique privilege of being close to Mother and looking after her needs. In spite of all the affection and trust that he received from Mother, he was the very image of humility. On one occasion a disciple of the Mother made a long salutation to him, perhaps with a little show, as Saradananda was about to begin his daily duties. He asked the devotee, 'Why such a big salutation? What is the idea?' 'Sir, why do you say that?' the disciple replied. 'Whom else should I salute but you?' Saradananda said, 'I am seated here awaiting her grace by whom you have been blessed. If she wishes, she can this very moment seat you in my place.' When Saradananda prostrated him-

self before Mother, as a witness observed, it was an unusual sight. He melted, as it were, on the ground before her. He showed that with his salutation he offered at her feet his body, soul, and everything (269). Saradananda would often sing for Mother, and when she would be suffering from high fever she would, at times, cool her hands by placing them on his bare body. Her confidence in the swami was total (267–8).

On the other hand, Saradananda's resignation to the Mother was also total. A devotee once said to him that he could easily believe in the divinity of Sri Ramakrishna—at least he cherished that faith. But he could not comprehend Holy Mother as the Divine Mother. The swami replied: 'Do you mean to say that God married the daughter of a woman who maintained herself by gathering cow dung?' (269).

At the Service of All

Saradananda had a very soft and tender heart, a mother's heart ever full of love and affection. Swami Abhedananda, in his famous hymn 'Prakritim Paramam' eulogizes Holy Mother: '*ahetuna no dayase sadoshan*; in spite of our faults thou hast a motiveless compassion towards us.' Saradananda too had this virtue, just like Mother. Outwardly he seemed to be very reserved and grave, but whoever came in contact with him experienced his motherly affection. He was also a good nurse. He knew how to care for an ailing person with motherly tenderness.

Once Abhedananda had gone on a pilgrimage to north-western India. He had followed the conservative North Indian sadhus' custom of walking barefoot to all the holy places and had returned to the Alambazar Math with a nasty wound on his right foot. A doctor diagnosed it as guinea-worm infection. For three months Saradananda removed worms from the wound, washed the sore, applied ointment, and bandaged the foot. His unceasing care prevented the development of gangrene, and he kept Abhedananda from becoming despondent by reminding him how Sri Ramakrishna maintained an inner calm despite the excruciating pain of his throat cancer. Years later, at the memorial

meeting held after Saradananda's mahasamadhi, Abhedananda said, 'Brother Sharat, you are the giver of my life. How can I forget you? Please accept a few tears from my eyes in exchange for what you have done for me.'¹⁷

Anyone who was ill—be they sannyasins, brahmacharins, or householders—could rest assured that if somehow the news of their illness reached Saradananda, they would not be deprived of his loving care. Once Gauri-ma, one of Holy Mother's attendants, came down with smallpox while she was undertaking penance on the banks of the Ganga. Nobody was ready to nurse her, lest they catch the killer disease. As soon as he came to know this, Saradananda went and took charge of her nursing. Such acts were not mere duty to him; they were 'service' in the real sense of the term, requiring a motherly attitude. An ailing patient would perchance be vehemently unwilling to receive an injection. Saradananda would be at his bedside and with sweet words of persuasion would manage to have him take the injection. Any natural calamity or famine would stir him deeply, and he would arrange for prompt relief. In this regard Holy Mother once said, 'Did you notice Sharat's heart. After Naren you won't find another person with such a large heart as Sharat. There may be many knowers of Brahman, but there is not a single person as large-hearted as Sharat in India, not even in the whole world.' Saradananda's mantra of service is recorded in one of his letters: 'You give other's money to another. What do you give [of your own]? You [ought to] give your heart, your soul and mind, your love.'¹⁸

An Illumined Soul

A man of knowledge, a truly liberated soul alone can be a teacher, a spiritual guide. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'It is extremely difficult to teach others. A man can teach only if God reveals Himself to him and gives the command.'¹⁹ He who is a free soul can set others free from the fetters of maya. Saradananda was a teacher of this stature. In 1922 Brahmananda and Turiyananda passed away. Saradananda started feeling an emptiness


and became more indrawn. He told the monks: ‘Mother and Maharaj [Brahmananda] have left. Now you take the responsibility and get involved in the activities of the Order. I no longer have any enthusiasm or inclination to work.’²⁰ But his spirit of service now found greater expression in his spiritual ministrations—giving initiation to spiritual aspirants and conferring sannyasa and brahmacharya vows upon monastics.

Saradananda was an illumined soul. Some entries in his diary reveal his intimate interaction with the Divine Mother:

- Dec. 12, 1923: 1st day of communion.
- Jan. 4, 1924: 2nd day of communion.
- Jan. 17, 1924: 3rd vision of Divine Mother. ...
- Jan. 25, 1924: 7th day—special communion, repeating of *darshana*.
- Jan. 31, 1924: communion poor. ...
- Feb. 8, 1924: The circle of communion began again.
- Feb. 9, 1924: 2nd communion and massage.
- Feb. 10, 1924: Intense communion touching centre—massage. Repeated vision of the Divine Mother continues which culminated on Feb. 19.
- Feb. 19, 1924: Communion—‘*you in me*’.²¹

Once one of his disciples asked him: ‘Maharaj, the relation between the guru and the disciple is permanent. Isn’t that so?’ Saradananda replied: ‘Yes, of course.’ Disciple: ‘We ought to regularly repeat the mantra you have given us. That’s the rule.’ Saradananda: ‘Certainly.’ Disciple: ‘What if we now stop repeating the mantra?’ After keeping quiet for a short while, Saradananda said: ‘Well, try once and see if you can stop it. Do you think I have given you initiation expecting that you will be conscientious in your practice of japa and meditation? The child whose hand is held by the father never falls.’²²

A candle lights another candle, a life ignites another life. Saradananda was a blazing fire, a radiant luminary in the firmament of spirituality, kindling the inner light of those who came in contact with him. His versatile character presents an extraordinary example of spirituality applied to daily life.

In his early days with Sri Ramakrishna, the young Sharat asked the Master to so bless him that he might see God in every being. The Master had said, ‘Yes, you will attain it.’ The following incident indicates how that blessing was fulfilled towards the end of his life. One of the devotees, who had grown up under Saradananda’s loving care remarked one day: ‘Swami, why do you love us so much?’ Saradananda did not say anything. After a few days, when that devotee came to Udbodhan, the swami said: ‘A few days ago I went to Belur Math and prostrated before Sri Ramakrishna. The Master appeared before me and said, “You love all because you find me in all.” That is the answer I would give today.’²³ 

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Swami Ramakrishnananda: Guardian Angel of the South

Swami Ashutoshananda

SRI RAMAKRISHNA once said: 'As a large and powerful steamer moves swiftly over the water, towing rafts and barges in its wake, so when a saviour comes, he easily carries thousands to the haven of safety across the ocean of maya.'¹ Having merged his 'I' with the 'I of the Divine Mother', Sri Ramakrishna could also say: 'I destroy the *karma-phala* (fruits of past actions) of those who take refuge in me, and draw them close to me.'² If Sri Ramakrishna is a 'large and powerful steamer', Swami Ramakrishnananda is the 'barge' that takes us to the 'steamer'. While the former assures us of liberation, the latter reassures us by showing the way to Sri Ramakrishna.

Love, the Way

Ramakrishnananda did not merely show the way, he *lived* the way. His bright life itself is the way. His stupendous achievements were nothing but 'a series of activities centring round the Master'.³ He owned a small framed photograph of Sri Ramakrishna. For him, it was not a material object made of paper, glass, and wood; it was the real Ramakrishna. He took care of him, bathed him, fed him, fanned him, and stood holding an umbrella over him all night when it happened to rain—all in this photograph. He prayed and received assurance; he complained of his problems and was provided solutions—all by that small photograph. Loving service to Sri Ramakrishna was his way. This was not a love that excluded anything or anyone; it was an all-embracing love, expressed through service to Sri Ramakrishna.

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He achieved everything through that love.

The story of Ramakrishnananda is a story of the unfoldment of love; and it begins from his pre-monastic days, when he was known as Shashi. He was greatly devoted to his parents, especially to his mother. Even after taking to monastic life he was not able to forget the warm love he had for his mother. 'Alas!' he would lament and shed tears, 'I could not do anything for my poor parents! They had pinned their hopes on me. My mother could not wear any jewellery for want of money. I wished to get her at least a few ornaments. But now there is no way that desire of mine can be fulfilled. [Now that I am a monk,] returning home is impossible for me.'

But Shashi's love was not destined to remain confined within the small circle of family and friends. It was to grow and expand and become all-encompassing. And it grew for certain, assuming a larger dimension with Sri Ramakrishna's entry into his life.

Love for the Avatara

Shashi's love for Sri Ramakrishna was unbounded, extraordinary, and distinctive. While the other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna were spending much time in spiritual practices, Shashi's mind was occupied with only one idea: how to serve Sri Ramakrishna. It was for this reason that Swami Vivekananda gave him the name 'Ramakrishnananda', one who finds *ananda* (bliss) in Ramakrishna. In fact, Swami Vivekananda wanted to have this name for himself. But when he found that Shashi's love for Sri Ramakrishna was second to none, he bestowed it on him. Shashi remained supremely satisfied with the service of Sri Ramakrishna, to the point of ignoring his own need for rest and sleep.

A glowing picture of Shashi's loving service to Sri Ramakrishna is left behind by Ramchandra Datta, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, in his Bengali biography of the Master: 'Brother Shashi, you are indeed blessed! You mastered the secret of real service. ... By his grace, you stand at the head of the circle of his attendants. You are his chosen son and servant and are second to none in service to him' (22-3).

The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* assures us that the essence of the scriptures will shine forth of its own accord for one whose love towards his guru is on a par with that of God. Through the loving adoration of his guru, Ramakrishnananda could rise to the level of a rishi.⁴

A Rishi of the Ramakrishna Order

Rishis are *mantra-drashtas*, seers of mantras. Mantras are revealed to them, which they bestow unto humanity for the good of the many. It was the new-moon night of Dipavali, the festival of lights, in 1906. Ramakrishnananda was staying at the Ramakrishna Math,⁵ Madras, the first branch of the Ramakrishna Order in South India, founded by him. The Dipavali

night is especially auspicious for the adoration of the Divine Mother. After offering a short worship to Mother Kali, Ramakrishnananda formally initiated two members of the math into the life of brahmacharya, reciting mantras and vows and invoking the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna through the sacrificial homa fire. The entire ritual, with its constituent mantras, was born out of the depths of Ramakrishnananda's heart and revealed his deep spiritual insight. The basic condition of monastic life is brahmacharya, the meaning of which is partly conveyed by the word 'celibacy'. However, ordination into brahmacharya as a necessary preliminary step towards ordination into sannyasa had not been insisted upon by the Hindu monastic world till then.⁶ By bestowing these mantras, Ramakrishnananda became a rishi of the Ramakrishna Order.

Love for the Archavatara

Ramakrishnananda's love found another dimension when Sri Ramakrishna withdrew physically from the world. For the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna it was no ordinary loss. But in the absence of the physical form of Sri Ramakrishna, Ramakrishnananda's intense love was directed towards the *archavatara* of Sri Ramakrishna.

What is an *archavatara*? It is a representation of an avatara, a divine incarnation. *Archavatara* is a unique concept in Vaishnavism, which holds that the *archas*, or consecrated images in temples, are actual incarnations of God. The image or photograph is not perceived as a stone or bronze object on which God is superimposed or imagined; it is God himself. Dr N S Anantarangachar, an authority on Vaishnavism, writes: 'Rāma and Kṛṣṇa stay on the earth only for certain times, at particular epochs, and so cannot furnish solace for humanity at some later time. The Archas, on the other hand, are permanent incarnations ... meant for the sake of devotees of all times.'⁷

Ramakrishnananda gathered the articles used by Sri Ramakrishna and started worshipping them at the Baranagar Math, the first math of the Ramakrishna Order. Swami Abhedananda, another dis-

ciple of Sri Ramakrishna, writes: ‘Shashi came and rearranged the cot, bedding, shoes, and other articles used by Sri Ramakrishna ... more tastefully and, placing a photograph of Sri Ramakrishna on that cot, began to do daily worship, *aratrika* and chanting of hymns, etc. regularly. ... Gradually Shashi started attending on and taking care of Sri Ramakrishna’s photograph in the chapel in the same manner as we used to nurse and attend on Sri Ramakrishna during his lifetime.’⁸ Since then, loving service and worship of *archavatara-Ramakrishna* became part and parcel of his life.

As was his love for *avatara-Ramakrishna*, so was his love for *archavatara-Ramakrishna*. While his brother disciples took to pilgrimage, practice of austerities in holy places, or the life of wandering mendicants—so dear to sannyasins—Ramakrishnananda gave himself over to the loving service and worship of *archavatara-Ramakrishna*. Gradually, the worship of Sri Ramakrishna became the hub of the activities of the math. Thus was set in motion a new monastic tradition centred on Sri Ramakrishna, the incarnation of the new age.

Divine Aloneness

An atmosphere of aloneness enveloped Swami Ramakrishnananda. It was not created by lack of companionship. His intervals of solitude were few, except for those he stole from his sleep at early dawn or in the quiet hours of the night. There was a constant coming and going in the monastery hall where he sat. Members of the household moved back and forth, visitors came and went, servants brought offerings of fruit or vegetables. Rare were the solitary moments in the day, yet the swami seemed alone. The impression sprang, I believe, from his unconditional detachment. It was so complete that it insulated him. I do not know whether he was conscious of it or not. We never spoke of it specifically, but one day I made a passing reference to it and his decisive reply was: ‘I am full of God; what need have I of anyone else?’

He said no more, but the thought must have lingered in his mind; for a few days later he recurred to it again, saying: ‘Aloneness means singleness. When

Central Figure

No other period in the history of India saw so many religious movements springing up as the nineteenth century. Very few, however, have survived the test of time. If the Ramakrishna movement has withstood this challenge, the secret lies in *tapas*. Swami Vivekananda explains:

Tapas means literally ‘to burn’. It is a kind of penance to ‘heat’ the higher nature. It is sometimes in the form of a sunrise to sunset vow, such as repeating Om all day incessantly. These actions will produce a certain power that you can convert into any form you wish, spiritual or material. This idea of Tapas penetrates the whole of Hindu religion. The Hindus even say that God made Tapas to create the world. It is a mental instrument with which to do everything. ‘Everything in the three worlds can be caught by Tapas.’⁹

Through an unprecedented spiritual practice of twelve long years, Sri Ramakrishna founded this movement. It has also been sustained by the perpetual flow of the power of *tapas* generated by the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda,

there are two, there is always fear. We think we need a companion to protect us. ... Fear exists when there is duality, fearlessness exists when there is only One. Since we cannot be happy so long as we fear, we shall not be able to find peace until we can say, “I am alone. I need nothing”.’

These words reveal Swami Ramakrishnananda’s perfect freedom from human dependence. His being was complete in his contact with God. Yet there was no lack of love for mankind in his heart. He was pre-eminently generous in his attitude towards humanity. To condone or to forgive cost him no effort. ... If he spoke of a person’s failings, as he did quite frankly, it was without malice. ... ‘No love is really love that has for its opposite hate,’ he said to me one day. ‘True love is always inclusive and universal. So long as a man has an enemy and cannot bear to have any good come to that man, he cannot know what real love is.’

—Sister Devamata

other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, and a succession of great souls.

About the tapas of the early days, Swami Vivekananda says:

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna we underwent a lot of religious practice at the Baranagore Math. ... There have been days when the Math was without a grain of food. If some rice was collected by begging, there was no salt to take it with! On some days there would be only rice and salt, but nobody cared for it in the least. We were then being carried away by a tidal wave of spiritual practice. Boiled Bimba leaves, rice, and salt—this was the menu for a month at a stretch. Oh, those wonderful days! The austerities of that period were enough to dismay supernatural beings, not to speak of men (7.248–9).

In those early days of hardship, Ramakrishnananda played a crucial role. His unbounded love did not remain stranded in serving the Master; it equally embraced his children too. In fact, he made the survival of the young monks possible. In order to support the Math, he even worked as a teacher in the Baranagar high school for two hours daily after lunch, foregoing his rest. To continue the words of Swami Vivekananda:

Ramakrishnananda busied himself day and night with the duties pertaining to Sri Ramakrishna's worship and service, and occupied the same position in the Math as the mistress of the house does in a family. It was he who would procure, mostly by begging, the requisite articles for Sri Ramakrishna's worship and our subsistence. There have been days when the Japa and meditation continued from morning till four or five in the afternoon. Ramakrishnananda waited and waited with our meals ready, till at last he would come and snatch us from our meditation by sheer force. Oh, what a wonderful constancy of devotion we have noticed in him! ... Know Ramakrishnananda to be the central figure of the Math (ibid.).

Worshipping the *archavatara-Ramakrishna* on one side and serving his brethren on the other is the second phase in the life of Ramakrishnananda.

Why Such Worship?

Why was Ramakrishnananda so particular about the worship of Sri Ramakrishna? The obvious reason would be Ramakrishnananda's devotional temperament and his liking for ritualistic worship. Monks, who follow the tradition of Acharya Shankara, generally take to the path of knowledge. Accordingly, most of the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna were not much inclined towards worship and such other rituals. Ramakrishnananda's natural bent of mind was in line with Sri Ramanuja and his path of devotion. He later wrote an exhaustive biography of Sri Ramanuja, which was the first in Bengali and remains a classic.¹⁰ In order to write the book he visited the places connected with the life of Sri Ramanuja and himself collected the necessary facts and figures. He planted the medicinal herb *thoothu-valai* in the math precincts at Madras, tended it with great care, and included it in his diet just because of its legendary role in Sri Yamunacharya's great renunciation.¹¹ During his last illness, on several occasions, 'he expressed the desire to come back to Madras [he was in Calcutta then] and die in the birth place of the great Acharyas.'¹² Such was his devotion to Sri Ramanuja.

Puja, or ritualistic worship, was also something natural to Ramakrishnananda. He inherited the aptitude for puja from his father, who was an adept in the science of worship, both in theory and in practice. Even as a young boy Shashi would sit down and perform puja to the Divine Mother for twenty-four hours at a stretch. Later, when Girishchandra Ghosh, a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, saw him sitting and conducting Jagaddhatri Puja for a day and a night continuously, he remarked that Ramakrishnananda was an *asana-siddha*, one who had perfected the sitting posture. On summer nights he would be seen standing and fanning Sri Ramakrishna in the shrine, till dawn. For him, worship was not a mere external procedure, but an extension of devotion. Once he observed: 'Worship is not at all an external affair. It is almost wholly internal ... Real worship is not done till devotion overflows from the heart and tears roll down from

the eyes for a glimpse of God.¹³ Those who had been fortunate enough to witness his puja could vouch for his being a standing testimony to this kind of worship.

Guru-worship is not new to Hinduism. Therefore, it may seem only natural that Ramakrishnananda worshipped Sri Ramakrishna. In this case, however, the worship assumes a particular significance, as the guru was not an ordinary person—he was clearly perceived as an incarnation of God. The scriptures testify that God descends as an incarnation out of historical necessity. An incarnation comes with a mission. Among his many functions, providing a new focus of adoration is one. Writes Swami Bhajanananda: ‘It is difficult for the majority of people to turn to God unless they are attracted to an adorable divine Form ... Since the living conditions and standards of human society go on changing, ancient divine images become inadequate to attract people of a later age. A new Incarnation provides a new focus.’¹⁴ While Swami Vivekananda broadcast the message of Sri Ramakrishna to the world, it was given to Ramakrishnananda to introduce the worship of Sri Ramakrishna’s divine form to the public in general. In fact, Ramakrishnananda was aware that he had been entrusted with a special mission by Sri Ramakrishna. He called it ‘a little message’: ‘Swamiji [Swami Vivekananda] was given the big, all-round message, but a little message was kept for me.’¹⁵

It may not be out of place here to remember that

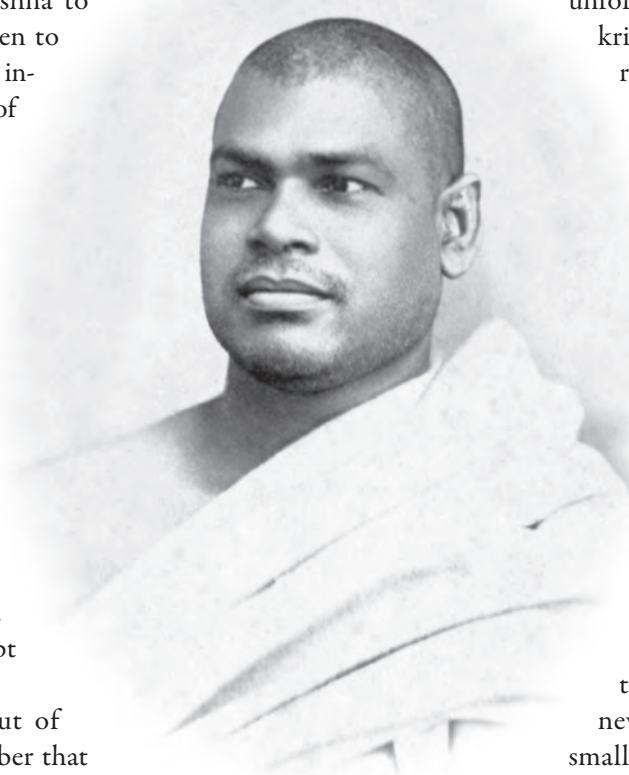
this worship was initiated by none other than the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, the very day after Sri Ramakrishna’s passing away.¹⁶ Moreover, this worship had the sanction of Sri Ramakrishna himself. On seeing his photograph Sri Ramakrishna once remarked: ‘This represents a high yogic state. This form will be worshipped in every home as time goes on.’¹⁷ There are also recorded instances of his offering flowers to and worshipping his own photograph.

How did Ramakrishnananda give out this ‘little message’? How did he introduce Sri Ramakrishna to the public? This question takes us to his life in Chennai, where his love for Sri Ramakrishna found a new dimension: the love of *vishwarupa-Ramakrishna*.

Love for the Vishwarupa

The first dimension of Ramakrishnananda’s love was the love for the *avatara-Ramakrishna*, the person of the incarnation. The second dimension of his love unfolded through Sri Ramakrishna’s photograph and relics—the *archavatara-Ramakrishna*. His love reached its consummation when he started worshipping Sri Ramakrishna in the whole of humanity—the *vishwarupa-Ramakrishna*.

In the beginning of 1897, Swami Vivekananda sent Ramakrishnananda to Chennai to start a centre. ‘The first thing that the swami did was to establish a shrine at his new residence, install the small picture of the Master



that he had brought with him, and start his loving service in the same way that he was habituated to at the Baranagar Math. He could conceive of his life only as a series of activities centring round the Master. Service of his living presence in the shrine was for him an absolute necessity. But unlike during the Baranagar Math life, the scope of this service was extended.¹⁸ Service now 'extended' to humanity at large. He tried to serve every one around him in every possible way. This was, in fact, the rationale for the worship of *archavatara-Ramakrishna*.

The concept of worship of *vishwarupa-Ramakrishna* is a unique contribution of Swami Vivekananda. It is due to his genius that the Ramakrishna temples stand apart, having for their background the profound philosophy of Sanatana Dharma, which insists on our seeing God not only in temples but also in every human being, and accordingly, on our loving and serving humanity at large. Elucidating this concept, he writes: 'Our work should be mainly *educational*, both moral and intellectual. ... The easiest way is to take a hut—make it a temple of Guru Maharaj [Sri Ramakrishna]! Let the poor come here to be helped, also to worship. ... They will keep up the temple themselves; maybe the hut temple will evolve into a great institution in a few years.'¹⁹

Elaborating this idea, Swami Ranganathananda says:

Behind any Sri Ramakrishna temple you will find various types of service—schools, colleges, hostels, tribal work, work during natural calamities, etc. This *seva-dharma* is a part of Ramakrishna-temple worship. Such temple worship has a great role to play in the future India, where service becomes the central theme—service of God in the temple, and service of God in human beings, outside the temple. ... A peaceful social revolution ... will come from a temple like this.²⁰

Ramakrishnananda was behind this process of silent social revolution from the very beginning. With undaunted zeal and enthusiasm he carried on the worship of Sri Ramakrishna on one side, and on the other made his life a bright example of *seva-dharma*. He was engaged in active public work

for about fifteen years—from 1897 to 1911. But the indelible mark that he has left over the religious history of South India transcends time. He initiated many of the activities that are presently going on in the name of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda in South India. He had commenced them in a humble way and they have been growing through the years, assuming larger and larger magnitude. His service activities can be classified into three major categories: preaching, relief, and education.

Preaching • In a way, Ramakrishnananda's mission started with preaching, and it remained his main method of service. His preaching included public lectures, classes for smaller audiences, writing articles, and publication of books. During the fifteen years of his life in Chennai, he gave a number of classes and delivered hundreds of public lectures. However, only sixty-seven of these are available today.²¹ They reveal his brilliant mind. Besides having a profound grasp of various subjects, he was an original thinker. It may be remembered here that when Swami Vivekananda thought of getting an assistant for his Western work, his first choice was Ramakrishnananda.²²

The Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, is presently one of the major publishing houses of the Ramakrishna Order. It was Ramakrishnananda who initiated this publication work. He got his lectures compiled in two books: *The Soul of Man* and *The Universe and Man*, published as early as 1908. Swami Vivekananda's *Inspired Talks* too was published from Madras the same year.

Relief • Today Ramakrishna Mission is much known and appreciated for its relief activities following natural calamities. The picture of the movement in its early stages was quite different. Social work was then not considered a valid component of religion, let alone an activity suited for monks. But when Swami Vivekananda proclaimed this new message, bravely taking his stand on scriptural evidence, the orthodox world had but to accept it. However, even some of the brother disciples of Swami Vivekananda were not ready to put the idea into practice—that

is, to take up relief work and other such activities. The 'more orthodox than the most orthodox'²³ Ramakrishnananda was among the very few to commence such work in those early days.

Education • It was during one such relief operation that Ramakrishnananda came across a few boys who had lost all their close relatives in a plague epidemic. He felt that something had to be done for rehabilitating these children. The result was the establishment of a students' home²⁴ with seven indigent orphans. During his inaugural speech at the Students' Home, on 17 February 1905, he said: 'Annadanam (gift of food) is spoken of as Mahadanam [great gift] and is considered very sacred in our country. Vidyadanam [gift of knowledge] is greater. But the greatest is the offering of spiritual knowledge. The harmonising of all the three must be the aim of this institution. May Sri Ramakrishna bless the undertaking with all success!'²⁵ The swami also inaugurated a primary school in 1906. It was opened in a place inhabited by economically deprived people, somewhat far from the math.²⁶

'The gentle breeze blows of its own accord. It cools and soothes everyone on its way and does not expect anything in return. To comfort all is its nature. The moon rises in the firmament and cools the earth parched by the flaming rays of the sun, unasked. Similar are the noble ones, calm and magnanimous. They keep removing others' troubles. Having crossed the dreadful ocean of birth and death, they help others also cross it, without any ulterior motive whatsoever.'²⁷ Such was the life of Ramakrishnananda.

A Guiding Life


Ramakrishnananda also helped shape the lives of many young monastics through his personal example. Swami Brahmananda, the then president of the Order, used to send young novitiates to Ramakrishnananda in Chennai for training. Through contact with him, many turned towards the spiritual life; many others took to the life of service to the poor and the needy; and several atheists became staunch devotees.

Training Under Swami Ramakrishnananda

His method of training was certainly violent and even at times harsh. But his whole heart was set upon the central point as to how to unfold the spiritual nature of the disciples or the novitiate. He would not brook any contradiction or questioning, much less a refusal from us. Indeed, his method was that of the sledgehammer blow of the blacksmith. He who could stand it, would get a form that could stand the stress and strain of all vicissitudes of life and be fit for the realization of the higher ideals. Many came, but few could stand his test. During my stay with him I found that he did not lay much stress on such spiritual practices as meditation or japa; his chief care was to see how precise and accurate, neat and devoted we were in our duties to Sri Ramakrishna and to him. Indeed therein lay the seed of self-control, concentration, and devotion that a true spiritual life requires. When one has these disciplines, one can easily progress in devotional

practices, if one so chooses. One thing he would constantly harp upon, in season and out of season, [was] that Sri Ramakrishna was actually present in the shrine room, nay, in the whole monastery, that every one of the things of the monastery belonged to him and that all our activities in life should be directed towards him or his services. That is the one sadhana we should adopt. Whenever he would stand before the picture of the Master and cry out in a sonorous voice, 'Jai Guru, Jai Guru', the feeling of the living presence of the Divine would be so deeply stirred up in one's heart that it has better to be felt than described. If spirituality means the awakening of the consciousness of the spiritual verity that resides not only in the depths of our being, but also outside as the basis of the phenomenal universe, then certainly the method of training of Sashi Maharaj was spiritual par excellence.

—Swami Sharvananda

Swami Vivekananda once observed: “The one characteristic of Indian thought is its silence, its calmness. At the same time the tremendous power that is behind it is never expressed by violence.”²⁸ Ramakrishnananda was a perfect exemplar of the spirit of this statement. His was a life lived in silence. He remained supremely contented as a little spark in the blazing fire that is Ramakrishna-Vivekananda, a spark that ignited the whole of South India with the ‘tremendous power’ of glowing spirituality—and his life continues to illumine countless minds. Swami Vivekananda sent him to South India as ‘the apostle of Sri Ramakrishna to the South’. Through his love and service, he became the ‘guardian angel of the South.’²⁹ 

Notes and References

1. *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*, (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1971), 220.
2. Vishwanath Chakravarti, *Swami Shankarananda* (Bamunmuda: Ramakrishna Sevashrama, 2005), 173.
3. Swami Tapasyananda, *Swami Ramakrishnananda, the Apostle of Sri Ramakrishna to the South* (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1972), 42. This is one of the authentic biographies of Swami Ramakrishnananda; the other is in Bengali: Swami Prameyananda, *Sevadarshane Ramakrishnananda* (Kolkata: Udbodhan).
4. *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 6.23.
5. Present Vivekananda Illam (Vivekananda House); the place in Chennai where Swami Vivekananda stayed between 6 and 15 February 1897. The Math was originally established in this house in 1897. It was shifted to the present site at Mylapore in 1907.
6. Brahmacharya is the first of the four traditional ashramas, which culminate in sannyasa. So the traditional sannyasin is also expected to have lived the life of a brahmacharin. But as the ashrama system grew weak, brahmacharya as a formal practice also lost much of its former importance.
7. N S Anantharangachar, *The Philosophy of Sādhana in Viśiṣṭādvaita*, (Mysore: Prasaraṅga, University of Mysore, 1967), 65.
8. Adapted from *Complete Works of Swami Abhedananda* 10 vols (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1970), 10.711. See also Swami Prabhananda, *The Early History of the Ramakrishna Movement*, (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2005), 53–4.
9. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 7.25–6.
10. *Sri Ramanuj-charit* (Kolkata: Udbodhan). English translation: *Life of Sri Ramanuja* (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math).
11. Sri Yamunacharya was Sri Ramanuja’s predecessor; and the latter revered him like a guru.
12. *Swami Ramakrishnananda*, 112. Incidentally, Sriperumbudur, the birth place of Sri Ramanuja, is close to Chennai.
13. *Swami Ramakrishnananda*, 74.
14. Swami Bhajanananda, ‘Three Aspects of the Ramakrishna Ideal—II’, *Prabuddha Bharata*, 87/8 (April 1982), 173.
15. *Swami Ramakrishnananda*, 192.
16. Swami Chetanananda, *How a Shepherd Boy Became a Saint*, (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2002), 68.
17. Swami Vidyatmananda, ‘Concerning the Photographs of Sri Ramakrishna’, *Vedanta and the West*, 172 (Mar-Apr 1965), 55.
18. Adapted from *Swami Ramakrishnananda*, 42.
19. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 7508.
20. Swami Ranganathananda, ‘Why a New Temple?’ *Universal Temple of Sri Ramakrishna: Maha Kumbhabhishekam Souvenir* (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2000), 15.
21. These lectures and other works of his have been collected and published by the Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, as separate books. There was an effort to bring out *The Complete Works of Swami Ramakrishnananda* in a few volumes. However, only one volume was published, in 1922.
22. His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 2.54.
23. Swami Vivekananda introduced him thus when he assured the devotees of Chennai that he would send Ramakrishnananda to continue the work there. See Swami Chetanananda, *God Lived with Them* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashram, 2006), 283.
24. Present Ramakrishna Mission Students’ Home, Mylapore, Chennai.
25. *Swami Ramakrishnananda*, 192.
26. Present Sri Ramakrishna Math National Primary School, at Basin Bridge, about 10 km away from the math.
27. A free translation of *Vivekachudamani*, 37–8.
28. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 3.274.
29. When Ramakrishnananda passed away on 21 August 1911, Brahmananda exclaimed: ‘The guardian angel of the South has passed away. The southern side is, as it were, covered with darkness’; *God Lived with Them*, 308.



Swami Turiyananda's Letters: The Heart of the Gita

Pravrajika Virajaprana

tire Bhagavadgita, Shankara's *Vivekachudamani*, and many of the Upanishads, to name just a few texts, in addition to many of the teachings of Tulsidas, Surdas, Ramprasad, Hafiz, and Kabir. He also studied a great many devotional scriptures, like *Bhakti Sutra*, Bhagavata, and many of the other Puranas, as well as *Yoga Sutra* and *Yogavasishtha Ramayana*.

Interestingly, when Turiyananda, who was known as Hari in his pre-monastic days, was being trained by Sri Ramakrishna, his studious nature was turned upside down. Once, when he hadn't visited Sri Ramakrishna for some time, the Master asked someone where he was and why he wasn't coming around. Sri Ramakrishna was told that Hari was immersed in studying Vedanta philosophy round the clock. So one day when Hari came, Sri Ramakrishna challenged him: 'I hear that nowadays you are studying and discussing Vedanta philosophy. That is good, of course. But tell me, what is the teaching of Vedanta? Is it not that Brahman alone is real and the world unreal? Isn't that its substance? Or does it say something else? Then why don't you give up the unreal and cling to the real?'¹ Hari understood immediately that his study would not be really effective until he had directly realized the truth contained in the scriptures.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that the scriptures were like a grocery list—once you know what's on the list, you can throw it away. The problem for most of us is that we can't remember what's on the list, so we have to refer to it repeatedly. We can't afford to toss the list too soon. Sri Ramakrishna encouraged this kind of practical, life-related study with direct realization as the goal, and not study for the sake of study or just for mere scholarship, or intellectual information—for such study, instead of

SWAMI TURIYANANDA was a knower of Brahman of the highest order, a *jivanmukta*—one who, according to Vedanta, having transcended body consciousness, is free while living and is immersed in the Atman. The swami was steeped in the study of Vedantic scriptures; from a young age he was drawn to study and meditation. To give an idea of the depth of his scholarship: he memorized the *Durga Saptashati*, which contains seven hundred mantras in praise of the Divine Mother, the en-

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reducing our egotism, tends to increase it. Thereby, the intent of the study is sidelined.

Sri Ramakrishna gave Hari a thorough grounding in Vedanta. The Master was not a scholar, but he knew the essence of all the scriptures. Once when Hari asked him, 'How does one become aware of the dawn of knowledge?' Sri Ramakrishna replied: 'A man does not jump about when he gets illumination. Outwardly he remains as he was; but his entire perspective on the world is changed. The touch of the philosopher's stone converts a steel sword into gold' (359–60). This is exactly what happened to Hari. Having touched the philosopher's stone, he became pure gold. Turiyananda was a profound scholar. But that's not all. He assimilated what he studied and verified it through his own direct personal experience. As a wandering monk, he said he used to read eight or nine hours a day. At that time he memorized eight Upanishads. How did he do this? He would meditate on every verse until the inner meaning flashed in his mind.

The swami was not only learned in the scriptures, but was also a perfect yogi; he had extraordinary control over his mind and remained in a state far beyond the grip of the senses. He was a meditative man by nature, but was equally approachable and full of love and concern for all. When he first came to the United States, someone who met him commented that he seemed to have an inexhaustible storehouse of wisdom. In response he said very simply, 'You see, I have lived this life from my youth; it has become part and parcel of me. And the Divine Mother keeps the supply filled up. Her store can never be exhausted. What goes out, she at once fills up again.'² He was a living embodiment of Vedanta. Indeed, when Swami Vivekananda was introducing him to people in America, he said, 'I have lectured to you on Vedanta; in Turiyananda you will see Vedanta personified. He lives it every moment of his life. He is the ideal Hindu monk, and he will help you all to live pure and holy lives' (20). This strikes me as the highest compliment Swamiji could have given him. It is exactly what Sri Ramakrishna had so carefully trained him to be, one who *lives* Vedanta.

A Masterful Teacher

Whatever a mystic—a knower of God such as Turiyananda—says goes straight to the heart. His words are full of power because they arise from his direct experience of Truth, not just from the surface mind. Only a person who has realized the truth can speak with conviction and real authority. God is a simple fact for such a person, like a fruit in the palm of the hand. It is that tangible.

Turiyananda did not write books or give lectures. He inspired, encouraged, and taught through his conversations and letters. Although letters are by nature personal, his words have meaning for all of us. He could easily detect a person's mental state through his or her letters, and with one stroke could cut through sentimentality, misperceptions, or biased thinking—obstacles that beset us all—by showing what real spirituality is. Once he told a monk, 'Whatever I have to give to the world, that I have given through my letters' (7). So it is to this great personality that we turn for inspiration and help in trying to understand the real meaning of the scriptures.

There are many angles from which the swami's letters could be discussed, since he has quoted extensively from many scriptural sources, but in this article I would like to focus on the swami's use and interpretation of the teachings given in the Gita. Writing in response sometimes to abstruse philosophical questions, sometimes to practical day-to-day issues that seekers face in their practice, and at other times to questions both general and personal, Turiyananda found in the Gita clear solutions for his correspondents. For example, to one devotee he wrote, 'You have asked whether a householder can attain samadhi. If it were not true, then how will the Lord's words be true? Krishna says in the Gita: "... those who take refuge in me, O Partha, though they be of low birth ... even they attain the supreme goal'" (96–7). He would respond to questions about family troubles, entanglement in work, ill health, how to serve effectively, attain peace, and control the senses, and how to perform karma yoga when one has so many desires. His letters make for a truly amazing and inspiring study.

In 1920 the swami wrote to Gurudas Gupta: 'I am delighted to hear that you are studying the Gita. The Gita is the embodiment of all scriptures. It destroys man's rebirth in this mortal world. The Gita is the heart of the Lord. It has no parallel. A person who practises the teachings of the Gita has his mind purified and develops the power of right understanding in every subject. That person attains supreme peace' (217). To a devotee named Hari-mohan he wrote: 'It is very good that you have been studying the Gita. The Gita is the quintessence of all the scriptures. Arjuna became free from doubt and delusion after hearing the Gita, and whoever reflects on the Gita will certainly get the same result. Never give up studying the Gita' (31-2). And to still another devotee: 'I am glad to know you are memorizing [the] Gita. Try to understand the spirit of it as well and live up to it. There is nothing like [the] Gita. It is the cream of all Vedanta Philosophy' (236). These three excerpts alone are enough recommendation for the study and practice of the Gita, and they give us a clear idea of the high regard in which the swami held this sacred text.

A Supreme Shastra

The Gita forms part of the *prasthan-traya*, the three principal source texts of Vedanta, the other two being the *Brahma Sutra* and the Upanishads. The Gita is considered in Vedanta and Hinduism in general to be not only an indispensable manual of religion and philosophy, but more importantly, a practical guidebook for living a spiritual life, emphasizing that religion cannot be separated from our daily life. The teachings are imparted during a sacred dialogue between Sri Krishna and his disciple Arjuna, which takes place on a battlefield. This may be taken as an allegory for our own lives: we know from our own experience that life is a battle. Some commentators say that Sri Krishna and Arjuna represent two aspects of reality, each incomplete without the other. The two form the total picture of reality. This idea is similar to Sri Ramakrishna's example of reality as Shiva, the Absolute, and Shakti, the relative, expressed through power. And indeed the Gita

encompasses both aspects of truth: the unmanifest as well as the manifest. The beauty of the Bhagavad-gita, which literally means 'Song of the Lord', lies in its poetic format; it is not a formal theology or a systematic philosophy. The following are some of the many facets of the Gita—all of which can be found beautifully woven throughout the swami's letters.

Yoga-shastra · The Gita is the supreme scripture on yoga; it is the *how to* book, delineating the techniques for bringing about the union of the individual soul with the universal soul, with an emphasis on the psychological approach to self-unfoldment through the four yogas—karma, jnana, bhakti, and raja. The instructions in the Gita are personalized according to the need of the seeker, taking into consideration different types of human minds: active, philosophical, emotional, and meditative.

Brahma-vidya · The Gita contains the science of the Absolute and the methods for its attainment—for example, asserting our true nature as the immortal, indestructible Self, in spite of our apparent identification with our psycho-physical nature. Sri Krishna says, 'I am the Self, O Gudakesha, seated in the hearts of all creatures. I am the beginning, the middle, and end of all beings.'³ Turiyananda wrote, 'The very existence of everything is God. Existence cannot be non-existence. The Gita says, "The unreal never is. The Real never ceases to be." This is a gospel truth. There is no reason that one cannot realize God.'⁴ In other words, God is our own Self.

Moksha-shastra · The Gita is the scripture that describes liberation from worldly concerns and bondage. The fourteenth chapter clearly describes one who has gone beyond the three *gunas* and remains unmoved by the forces of nature. Such a one remains the same under all circumstances, favourable or adverse. Sri Krishna says, 'He who worships me with the yoga of undeviating love rises above the *gunas* and becomes fit to be one with Brahman.' The swami wrote to Gurudas, 'Therefore, if you only practise and experience this fourteenth chapter of the Gita, you won't need anything else' (223).

The Gita discusses both philosophical and metaphysical issues and problems dealing with the

Self Effort v. Divine Grace · Once Swami Turiyananda was discussing spiritual matters with some young monks of the Order, when one of them said: Maharaj, now I have understood the way. Swami Turiyananda asked: What is that? The young monk replied: 'To sit quietly on the mast of the ship [referring to Sri Ramakrishna's parable of a bird sitting on the mast of a ship on the high seas after flying in vain to all corners—east, west, north, and south—and not finding any resting place anywhere]. Swami Turiyananda quipped gently: 'But when did you fly at all?'

—Swami Satswarupananda

Atman, God, jiva, the world, rebirth, matter and Spirit, and it also connects all aspects of life—duty, social service, and the like—to the Spirit in a practical way. Sri Krishna's teachings are aimed at removing the doubts and misconceptions which cloud our thinking. But as he points out, ultimately these can be wiped out only through realization. For Sri Krishna, religion means experience.

The Gita contains the essence of the Vedas. Though technically a Smriti, a religious commentary, it derives its authority from the Shruti, the revelations of enlightened seers. The language is often the same as that found in the Upanishads. Swami Saradananda said that another name for the Gita was 'Gitopanishad'. The colophon closing each chapter calls the Gita 'the essence of the Upanishads, the science of Brahman, the scripture of yoga.'

The concept of God in the Gita is universal and all-inclusive. There is a strong emphasis on offering all actions to the Divine, taking refuge in God, and self-surrender. The swami quotes the Gita: 'Fix your mind on Me alone, rest your thought on Me alone, and in Me alone you will live hereafter. Of this there is no doubt.'⁵ He continues, 'What a succulent, sweet, and joyful message!'⁶

Of course, the Gita is usually associated with its main discipline, karma yoga, which is the secret of work, and the performance of duties with non-

attachment as yoga, surrendering the results to God as a method of communion with God, or for the purpose of attaining liberation. Inactivity is not an option; in fact, it's impossible for embodied beings to remain inactive. 'No one can remain even for an instant without doing work.'⁷ The Gita examines the meaning of action and inaction in great detail, leading us to a deeper understanding of these terms. Sri Krishna says, 'Not by merely abstaining from action does a man reach the state beyond action' (3.4). 'Without action,' Turiyananda wrote to a devotee, 'how will you make yourself free from action?'⁸ Action gradually purifies the mind, enabling one to see the same Self in all. Then there will be no more work because, as the swami says, 'Even while working one will realize that one is not the doer' (2.21).

The Gita masterfully lays out the science of work following one's own *svadharma*. The word *dharma* is derived from the Sanskrit root *dhri* meaning to sustain or hold together. *Sva* means one's own. *Svadharma* signifies the attitude, the motive, behind a person's actions or duty that sustains one in one's present state of evolution and also helps one to move forward to realize the ultimate goal of Self-knowledge. This, in a nutshell, is what the Gita contains.

Essence of the Gita

About the Gita, Turiyananda has this to say:

You have asked me to write about the quintessence of the Gita. Perhaps you are aware of what Sri Ramakrishna has said about the Gita. The Master used to say: If one repeats the word 'Gita' a few times, he will comprehend its meaning. In other words, when you repeat 'Gi-ta-Gi-ta-Gita', it sounds like 'Ta-gi-Ta-gi-Ta-gi', which means 'one who has renounced'. So the quintessence of the Gita is renunciation. In fact, after studying the Gita, one understands that 'offer everything to God' is the central teaching of the Gita.

Some say that the message of the Gita is: Perform *svadharma* [one's duties] in the spirit of non-attachment and offer the fruits of action to God. I say that if one can do this, what more does one need? The Lord himself said in the Gita, 'What-

ever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give away, and whatever you practise in the form of austerities, O son of Kunti—do it as an offering to me.' In other words, don't keep anything for yourself. But is this an easy task? One has to make a tremendous effort; it does not happen by itself (65–6).

The swami continues:

The sum and substance of the Gita, according to my view, is: Surrender oneself to God and completely efface the ego. To belong entirely to God—and not to depend in the least on oneself or anyone else—this indeed is the main teaching of the Gita. In whatever way one accomplishes this, one's life becomes fulfilled. God is very compassionate; if we can depend on him, he will do whatever is necessary for us. Krishna promised in the Gita, 'My devotee never perishes' (ibid.).

In another letter the swami writes about this promise of Sri Krishna: 'These words are not a poet's imagination, nor a slogan, but the words of God' (137).

While studying the swami's letters in the light of his comments, I became curious to know which chapters and verses he quoted, how often and under what circumstances. After all, many of the letters he was replying to had common questions and difficulties that we seekers all face. A senior monk once said that there are only so many problems arising for everyone; we all have variations on the same theme. Following are a few facts regarding the swami's letters.

In *Spiritual Treasures* 179 letters have been published; the swami has quoted the Gita in sixty-six of these letters, and in half of these sixty-six he has quoted more than one verse, sometimes as many as seven verses in one letter. In all, he has quoted the Gita 132 times. He has quoted from all the eighteen chapters, with the exception of Chapter One, 'Arjuna's Grief', and quoted most from chapters nine and six, 'The Way of the Sovereign Wisdom and Sovereign Mystery' and 'The Way of Meditation'. One of the verses that he referred to most frequently from Chapter Nine was verse 27: 'What-

ever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give away, and whatever you practise in the form of austerities, O son of Kunti, do it as an offering to Me.' From Chapter Six he referred most to verse 5: 'Let a man be lifted up by his own self; let him not lower himself; for he himself is his friend, and he himself is his enemy.'

This, according to Turiyananda, is the heart of the Gita: self-surrender and self-exertion. These encompass the main practices outlined in the Gita—such as renunciation, offering everything to God, the practice of *svadharma* with non-attachment, and effacement of ego—all of which lead to real self-surrender. By leading a God-centred life, the small self is transformed into our true Self. This is the goal of spiritual life expressed variously in the Gita as Self-knowledge, God-realization, union with God, or attainment of peace. In his letters the swami has repeatedly referred to these two: self-exertion or the practice of yoga, and self-surrender or taking refuge in God, as the essence of the Gita's teachings for the expansion of self. The transformed, perfected individual is described in several important passages in the Gita: the descriptions of the sage of steady wisdom, the one who has gone beyond the three *gunas*, and the true devotee of God are particularly well known. In different contexts the swami continually emphasized the need to perform sadhana for purification of the mind.

Struggle!

The only barrier to the vision of God, according to the swami, is impurity of mind. We are that divine Being here and now; we don't have to acquire It. God is within our own hearts. How often we read this and hear this, but we don't really believe it. So our attention and interest drift elsewhere; we are not that eager to see Him. The swami wrote, 'God is real and the world is unreal—if we were fully convinced of this, we would renounce the unreal for the real; but we are reluctant to sever our attachments. That is why we are sleeping while awake' (139). Sri Ramakrishna used to say that people shed a bucketful of tears for their wife and children—but

who weeps for God? Where is the intensity? We are desperate over so many things, but rarely over God-vision. It just isn't high on our *to do* list. The swami wrote: 'But who seeks him? We only babble: our prayers come from our lips and not from our hearts' (135). Or perhaps we don't believe that we can see Him. Doubt is really a demon for us. 'Doubts in the mind,' he says, 'cannot be removed by correspondence or by studying books; one has to make an effort' (214). So we have to somehow get rid of our excuses, overcome our inertia, and remove the barrier blocking our vision. The swami doesn't mince words; he straightforwardly writes: 'I see human beings as generally very selfish. They expect that everything should be done for them, and they are unwilling to exert themselves. ... Everyone wishes to be perfect instantly. But who is ready to work for it? They do not realize how many bad impressions from their previous lives have accumulated in their minds, which, like a veil, do not allow them to see their own Self. If one can remove those impressions by hard labour, only then does knowledge or devotion manifest' (61). Practice leads to perfection.

Here the swami throws the entire responsibility on the individual. He is uncompromising: self-effort is indispensable. That is why he says, 'If one does not exert oneself, outside help is of little avail.' Sri Ramakrishna used to say that a person may have the grace of God, the grace of the guru, and of God's devotees, but without the grace of one's own mind nothing can be achieved. The Gita declares, 'To him who has not controlled himself, his own self is hostile like an external enemy.'⁹

Sri Krishna continues with his teachings on yoga in the

sixth chapter—on how to train oneself to become a friend to oneself. The training of the mind is done initially through control of the senses. The senses are actually extensions of the mind; that is how we contact the external world. Furthermore, the senses and mind are material in nature, composed of the three *gunas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*; so they are affected by the swings of nature, because they are part of nature. Restlessness of mind should not come as a surprise. When people would complain about the mind and the seeming impossibility of trying to whip it into shape, the swami would both console and exhort. He writes: 'It is extremely difficult to control the senses, but there is no other way.'¹⁰

So, restraining the senses is the first concrete step we must take to bring the unruly mind under control. Sri Krishna hastens to add that this can be done only through constant practice. Our empirical existence—which, of course, includes our mind and senses—is caught up in what Vedanta calls 'the pairs of opposites': pleasure and pain, heat and cold, virtue and vice, and so on. These are actually two sides of the same coin. They give a complete picture of the world, which is always in a state of imbalance. The swami unravels this complicated subject of *maya* and gives a simple solution: 'Happiness and misery alternate in this world. Have you ever seen anyone completely free from them? It is impossible: this world is made up of the pairs of opposites. By meditating on the Atman one can get rid of them' (81). We can't solve any difficulty at the mental level; we have to rise above it. Sri Ramakrishna used to say the farther you move toward the east, the farther you leave the west behind. Experiences



of pleasure and pain arise as a result of the contact between the senses and the objects; they are impermanent. Sri Krishna advises Arjuna to 'endure them'. He doesn't say that there will be no happiness or misery. The swami then gently points out the truth—'If there were any way other than forbearance, the Lord definitely would have told his dearest friend and disciple Arjuna about it' (81–2). So here is the solution in one word: 'forbearance'. We have to endure that which we cannot change. It is obvious that we have no control over external nature. The only thing that is possible for us to control is ourselves. The practice of forbearance takes us a long way towards taming our minds. When the mind starts to settle down through meditation, we are in a better position to try separating ourselves from the unreal or non-self. The pairs of opposites begin to lose their grip on us. As the swami says, 'By meditating on the Atman one can get rid of them.' Otherwise, we are glued to our lower self; and we all know what that is like. That is why we are trying to free ourselves through spiritual disciplines of various sorts.

Patience is critical. For a long period of our spiritual journey we are at the mercy of our own minds, often unknowingly. Our teachers say that in trying to realize ourselves as spiritual beings, we are going against the current of nature, like swimming upstream—it often takes tremendous energy and will-power just to stay where we are, what to speak of moving forward. The swami wrote: 'Mere prattling does not help. Learn to explore your mind and see what tendencies are there. Then purify your tendencies and offer them to God' (72). In other words, be a witness to oneself; practise detaching oneself from the mind. In this way, we can see ourselves more objectively, as if we were observing and analysing another person. So to strengthen our resolve, this exertion becomes essential. Through sincere efforts and, of course, God's grace, when the mind and senses no longer commandeer us, we cease to be slaves to our own desires and impulses. This is one of the main purposes of practising yoga: to free ourselves from nature's grip so that we can become united with the Divine within.

We cannot consider the practice of yoga without factoring in work. When it comes to karma or duty, seemingly his favourite subject, Sri Krishna says, 'Yoga is skill in action.'¹¹ Turiyananda never misses an opportunity to instruct us to consider work as being not secular, but actual worship of God. Regular work done with dedication is transformed into worship; work becomes yoga. How to make karma, yoga? The swami writes: 'That work really becomes worship when it is done by effacing one's ego and resigning oneself to God.'¹²

Let Go!

So this part of the equation, self-exertion, 'lifting the self by the self', involves hard spiritual practice: we must do as much as we can. The second part of the equation is self-surrender, letting go. When we reflect on what this word means, we can get an idea of *why* the swami considers it 'the sum and substance of the Gita'. Removing our identification with anything unspiritual is really the meaning of surrender—surrendering the self. We are surrendering whatever is small in us—beginning with our ego, which is actually pretty big—for that which is infinite in us. Whether we understand this in a theistic way, as is so often indicated in the Gita, or in a monistic way, that is, whether we surrender ourselves to God or to our own higher Self, the result is the same. The swami writes so frequently in this vein that one cannot but conclude that he himself found this approach enormously beneficial and pleasing. In fact, in a letter to Bihari Babu, to whom he wrote frequently, he has this to say while discussing the ideal of the Unmanifest: 'The state of a knower of Brahman is a lofty one. I don't care to know these high-flown things. I told you once that my main support is this saying of the Gita: "Verily I become ere long their saviour from the death-fraught ocean of the world"' (110). This is a fascinating comment, since Turiyananda was himself a knower of Brahman.

The swami strongly believed that the main thing in life is to worship the Lord. No matter where you are, hold on to the Divine in your heart and be

Swami [Turiyananda] is doing better now. He had his loose teeth extracted and has not any pain now. Of course, the life is so very difficult, I fear he will always suffer in this way. He is the only one among his brother swamis who continues in that wandering life. But he feels that it is the true life of a sannyasin. And how can we but admire such sincerity?

To live this life when one is strong and healthy and full of youthful enthusiasm is quite another question, but to persevere under the present conditions shows us what mettle these swamis are made of. In Swami Akhandananda we see another instance of perseverance and self-denial. Such men, though they remain unknown to the world at large, are the real ornaments of humanity, and the very types after which we have to be molded. It is good to see these things for oneself. What greater teachings can we receive—what greater help, than to live with men of character!

—Swami Atulananda,

With the Swamis in India and America, 255

content knowing that wherever the Lord keeps you is for your own good. Practise even-mindedness, because the Divine is equally present under all circumstances. He would repeatedly say, stay at His door with patience, thereby assuring us that the Lord's blessing and grace will dawn. The swami writes, 'You will see how the Lord is slowly guiding you towards him and how your spiritual thoughts are replacing worldly thoughts' (144). And discussing devotion, he writes to a devotee: 'He [Sri Krishna] clearly stated that he himself saves the devotee. Therefore, I don't understand why we should forsake such a compassionate Lord and take refuge in someone else' (97–8). When someone was complaining of weakness, he replied, 'You may be weak, but the One you have taken refuge in is all-powerful. Therefore, deem yourself strong in his strength' (36).

I think the comforting and encouraging tone of these letters comes through the swami's constant reference to the Lord's assurances to his devotees as they progress from self-exertion and self-surrender

to actual realization. The Lord is present as a safety net, carrying all the devotee's responsibilities, never letting the seeker down, if we but take refuge in Him. Therein lies the message of hope and fearlessness. The swami writes that ignorance, God's maya, is so powerful that it does not allow us to understand the simple truth that this world is impermanent. But Sri Krishna tells us the secret: 'Those who take refuge in Me alone, shall cross over this maya.'¹³ When a seeker practises this attitude of surrender sincerely, wholeheartedly, he attains liberation by God's grace. God's grace is necessary for realization. 'Who can know God?' the swami writes, 'It is possible only if he reveals himself out of his grace.' Sri Krishna told Arjuna, 'He who does My work, looks on Me as the Supreme Goal, who is devoted to Me, who is without attachment and without hatred for any creature, he comes to Me' (11.55). As if echoing the Lord's compassionate words of hope and support to Arjuna, Turiyananda wrote the following in a letter to Gurudas Gupta, two years before he passed away: 'May you attain your goal by studying the Gita—that is my prayer. Practise meditation on the Gita. Whatever you read, reflect on that all the time—even while walking, sitting, eating, and lying down. Then the meaning of the Gita will be revealed in your heart, and that will give you peace. If you practise the Gita, you will get the fruit—this is a gospel truth.'¹⁴



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The Uniqueness of Swami Adbhutananda

Swami Nityajnanananda

LATU [Swami Adbhutananda] is Sri Ramakrishna's greatest miracle. Having absolutely no education, he has attained to the highest wisdom simply by virtue of the Master's touch,' Swami Vivekananda once said. This does not mean that Sri Ramakrishna worked a miracle out of nothing. Swami Vivekananda himself said on another occasion: 'Our Master was original and every one of his disciples also is original. Look at Latu. Born and brought up in a poor family, he has attained to a level of spirituality which is the despair of many. ... Simply through one-pointed devotion he has made his life exalted. This speaks of his great latent spirituality.' Sri Ramakrishna, through his divine touch, facilitated the manifestation of the spirituality latent in an illiterate village boy. When Latu first came to Dakshineswar, in the company of his employer Ramchandra Datta, Sri Ramakrishna was greatly pleased to see him. He asked Ram Babu: 'Ram, did you bring this boy with you? Where did you get him? I see the signs of a sadhu in him.' The basic characteristics of any aspirant to God-realization are: simplicity, purity, and intense longing for God. At the very first sight Sri Ramakrishna saw, with his inner eye, all these qualities present to their fullest extent in Latu; and upon the strong foundation of these qualities he erected the wonderful edifice that was Swami Adbhutananda.

The *Katha Upanishad* says: 'This Self cannot be known through much study, or through the intellect, or through much hearing. It can be known through the Self alone that the aspirant prays

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to; this Self of that seeker reveals Its true nature.' Adbhutananda was a living example of this Vedic dictum. In the following paragraphs we shall discuss some of the unique traits which helped a shepherd boy become an extraordinary saint.

Simplicity

As already mentioned, simplicity was one of the basic characteristics of Latu Maharaj's personality. Born and brought up in a village atmosphere, he was simple and pure by nature. Giving a glimpse of

You have seen the jasmine flower; how small it is! On its tiny petal you may find a dewdrop in the morning, and in that dewdrop you can see the reflection of the infinite blue sky. Likewise, the 'I' may be limited, but by the grace of God it can catch the reflection of the infinite Atman.

—Swami Adbhutananda,

How a Shepherd Boy Became a Saint, 114–15

his childhood, he once said: 'I used to wander freely with the cowherd boys. How simple and guileless they were! You can't have real joy unless you are like that.' There are ample incidents in young Latu's life which show his simplicity. After meeting Sri Ramakrishna he no longer wanted to continue his duties at Ramchandra Datta's house. One day he requested Ramchandra's wife: 'Please tell Ram Babu that from now on I want to stay at Dakshineswar.' Ram Babu's wife asked him: 'But who will feed and clothe you at Dakshineswar?' 'I shall serve Sri Ramakrishna and get prasada to eat from the temple there, and you will give me a cloth to wear,' he replied. 'But if you are not working here, why should your master (Ramchandra) give you a cloth,' she pointed out. Latu replied innocently: 'Why, Ram Babu loves me. Won't he give me a cloth?' She laughed at his simplicity and guilelessness.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that simplicity is a virtue one attains only after many lives of severe austerity, and that simple-mindedness takes one easily to God. Latu was so simple that he would unreservedly speak of all his weaknesses and shortcomings to the Master, who used to guide him accordingly. In fact, it was his simplicity and guilelessness that opened the door to spirituality for him. One day he heard Ramchandra repeating some of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings to other devotees: 'God sees into the mind of a man, without concern for what he is or where he is. He who yearns for God and wants none other than God, to such a man God reveals himself. One should call on him with a simple and innocent heart. Without sincere

yearning, none can see God. One should pray to him in solitude and weep for him; only then will he bestow his mercy.' These words went straight into young Latu's simple heart; he started his spiritual life with absolute faith in these words. Later on, at Dakshineswar, he used to receive Sri Ramakrishna's instructions with unquestioning simplicity and put them into practice with utmost sincerity.

The childlike simplicity and illiteracy of Latu Maharaj made him unique among his brother disciples, who would sometimes make fun of him. But they also had a great regard for the depth of his spiritual insight.

Purity

Only the pure in heart see God. And Latu's purity was attested to by Sri Ramakrishna himself. After meeting the Master, Latu was longing to stay at Dakshineswar and serve him. In June 1881 Friday—Sri Ramakrishna's nephew, who had served and attended upon the Master for many years—left Dakshineswar. Sri Ramakrishna requested Ramchandra: 'Permit this boy to stay here. He is a very pure soul; and he also likes to stay here.' Ramchandra willingly agreed, and from then onwards till the passing away of the Master, Latu served him.

One day Sri Ramakrishna took Latu to Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and told her that he was a very pure boy and that he would help her in whatever way she needed. The Holy Mother was very shy and would not talk to anyone outside a limited group. Latu was one of the few disciples of Sri Ramakrishna who had a free access to the Holy Mother; Sri Sarada Devi too would converse freely with him.

Intense Longing for God and Self-surrender

It has already been mentioned that after hearing Sri Ramakrishna's teachings from Ramchandra, Latu started his spiritual practices in earnest. He had intense longing for God. At Ramchandra's house he would sometimes cover himself with a blanket and weep for God. But the family members could not understand why he was weeping. After meeting Sri

Ramakrishna it had become difficult for Latu to work for Ramchandra with his earlier enthusiasm. One day Ramchandra mentioned this to Sri Ramakrishna who told him: 'It is understandable that Latu should act like this, for he longs to come here. Send him again sometime.' Finally he did come to serve the Master permanently. At Dakshineswar, Latu would go to the Panchavati at the dead of night to practise sadhana. Mahendranath Gupta records seeing him in the Panchavati at three o'clock in the morning, crying piteously: 'O, where are you, Brother Madhusudan (Krishna)?'

After coming to Dakshineswar Latu surrendered himself completely to Sri Ramakrishna. In the Bhagavadgita Sri Krishna tells Arjuna: 'Giving up all duties, O Arjuna, take refuge in Me alone.' Latu followed this scriptural advice *in toto*.

Service and Obedience to the Master

Latu's life exemplifies how service to the guru leads to God-realization. He did not care for anything else in the world; serving the Master faithfully was his only concern. He accompanied Sri Ramakrishna as a devoted servant when he was shifted for treatment to Shyampukur and then to Kashipur, and served him till the last moment. Once he said to a devotee, 'Well, service to him was our greatest worship and meditation.'

Latu based his life upon complete obedience to the Master. To him, a mere wish of the Master was more than a law—it was a sacred injunction. There are many incidents which illustrate his uncompromising obedience to the Master.

Once Sri Ramakrishna told Latu: 'Be careful about wine and about lust and wealth. These things are obstacles that create doubts about God. A person who meditates after taking intoxicants and a yogi who is attached to women are both hypocrites and only deceive themselves.' After hearing this Latu would avoid passing through roads having wine shops. He would also keep away from the company of women.

After returning from the West, Swami Vivekananda went on a tour of northern India, taking

Latu Maharaj with him. In Kashmir, Swamiji hired a houseboat for their stay. The boatman and his family used to live in the boat itself; Latu Maharaj did not know this. As soon as he got into the boat, he saw a woman on board and immediately jumped out. Swamiji understood the situation and tried to persuade Latu Maharaj but he would not agree to living on a boat with women. At last Swamiji said, 'I am here with you. What is there to fear? Nothing will happen to you.' Only then did Latu Maharaj agree.

Another day Swamiji, in fun, asked the boatman's young daughter to give a betel roll to Latu Maharaj. As soon as the girl went to Latu Maharaj he jumped into the icy waters, even though he could not swim. Swamiji rushed to his rescue and with the boatman's help pulled him out of the water. Such behaviour may appear odd to us, but Latu Maharaj was a person who tried to live both by the letter and the spirit of monastic life.

One evening at Dakshineswar Latu fell sound asleep. Sri Ramakrishna woke him up and rebuked him saying: 'If you sleep in the evening, when will you meditate? You should meditate so deeply that the night passes unnoticed. Instead, your eyelids are heavy with sleep at this auspicious time. Did you come here only to sleep?' This was enough for Latu; he gave up sleeping at night forever. He would have a short nap in the daytime and the whole night he would pass in japa and meditation. Swami Saradananda writes, 'Latu was invariably seen praying and meditating the whole night and sleeping during the day. His life was a literal example of the teaching of the Gita, "In that which is night to all beings, the man of self-control is awake; and where all beings are awake, there is night for the sage who sees."'

Rigorous Spiritual Practice

At Dakshineswar Latu began a life of rigorous spiritual discipline under Sri Ramakrishna's guidance. He would spend considerable time meditating in the Panchavati, on the bank of the Ganga, or in the Shiva temples. Many incidents are told of Latu's capacity for deep meditation. One day

he was meditating on the bank of the Ganga when a flood tide started to engulf him. But he was unconscious of the external world. The news reached the Master who hurriedly waded to the spot and brought him back to normal consciousness.

Another day at noon Sri Ramakrishna sent Latu to meditate in one of the Shiva temples. Evening approached; Latu was still in the temple. The Master became anxious and sent his nephew Ramlal to see what the matter was. Ramlal found Latu deeply absorbed in meditation, his whole body wet with perspiration. On hearing this, Sri Ramakrishna came to the temple and began to fan him. After some time Latu returned to the plane of normal consciousness and felt greatly embarrassed at seeing the Master fanning him. Sri Ramakrishna, however, removed his embarrassment by saying: 'No, my boy, it is not you I am serving, but the Lord Shiva inside you. He was uncomfortable in such unbearable heat. Did you know that he had entered you?' Latu replied: 'No, I know nothing. I was gazing at the linga and saw a wonderful light. I remember only that the light flooded the whole temple. After that I lost consciousness.' At Dakshineswar there were times when Latu was constantly in high spiritual moods. Sri Ramakrishna once remarked: 'Latu will not come down, as it were, from his ecstatic condition.'

After Sri Ramakrishna left his mortal body, Latu took formal sannyasa at Baranagar Math. Swami Vivekananda gave him the name 'Adbhutananda, bliss extraordinary', because his was a life out of the ordinary. Latu Maharaj continued his intense spiritual practice throughout his life, first at Kolkata and then at Varanasi. Swami Ramakrishnananda once spoke of the intensity of Latu Maharaj's tapas at the Baranagar Math:

We often had to call Latu back to normal consciousness and virtually force him to take food. There were many days when we called him again and again but with no response, so we would place his food in his room and leave. The rest of the day would pass. When we went to call him for supper, we would find the noon meal still where it had

been placed, untouched and stale, and Latu lying down in the same straight posture as before, completely covered with a thick cotton chadar. We had to resort to many tricks just to force a little food down his throat.

Throughout his life Latu Maharaj used to be so engrossed in spiritual practice and so absorbed in spiritual moods that he was not able to stick to any regular time for food and drink. Even when he fell ill, he would sit for meditation in the evening. Once, at the Baranagar Math, he fell seriously ill with pneumonia. He was too weak to sit up by himself, but he insisted that he be helped to sit up for his evening devotions. When reminded that the doctor had forbidden him to sit up, he showed great resentment saying, 'What does the doctor know? It is his (the Master's) direction, and it must be done. If you don't help me, I shall have to take refuge in Mahavira (Hanuman).' And he actually did manage to sit up by himself.

Complete Reliance on God

Sri Krishna says in the Gita: 'To those who worship Me, and meditate upon Me with undistracted minds, being ever-devoted to Me, I supply all their needs.' An absolute dependence on Sri Ramakrishna was the essence of Latu Maharaj's life. He once observed: 'How could an ignorant person like me undertake severe austerities during that period of my life [after the passing away of the Master]? What do I know of austerities? It is he who is taking me by the hand through all these disciplines.'

Whether at Kolkata or Varanasi, Latu Maharaj never remained for long at any particular place. Even while living in a city he would follow the life of a wandering monk, unattached to people and places. In his 'Song of the Sannyasin,' Swami Vivekananda writes:

Have thou no home. What home can hold thee,
friend?
The sky thy roof, the grass thy bed; and food
What chance may bring ...

Latu Maharaj was a true illustration of this mo-

nastic ideal. There was no one place that he called home. Before going to Varanasi, he would sometimes stay at the homes of various householder devotees of Sri Ramakrishna, but most often he could be found living simply on the bank of the Ganga in the Baghbazar area without any fixed shelter. In later years Latu Maharaj himself would speak of these days in Kolkata: 'I used to spend the day at a bathing ghat near a Shiva temple and the night on the terrace of the Chandni at Baghbazar. These were my places for meditation and japa.' During rains, he would take shelter in some empty railway wagon. Once he sat for meditation on a boat loaded with straw and never noticed when the boat weighed anchor and moved on.

And about his food and clothing too he was not at all particular. He would often get food or a few coins or minimal necessities from different devotees. Sometimes a little quantity of gram soaked

in water would be sufficient for him. Once Girish Ghosh remarked to a devotee: 'If you want to see a saint as described in the Gita, go and see Latu. ... The nature of a man of steady wisdom is described there (in the Gita). You can see all those qualities exemplified in Latu's character.'

Navagopal Ghosh, a householder disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, bears testimony to this fact: 'Anyone could see that all of his dealings with the world were over. He had no personal desires, nor any obligation to anyone. He didn't relish food when it came to him, nor did he feel any want or suffering when it did not. A glance at him would convince anyone of his absolute desirelessness.'

Perseverance and Its Fruit—Realization

In 1912 Latu Maharaj went to Varanasi, the holy city of Baba Vishwanath, where he spent the last eight years of his life, staying at different places in the city.

My Mind Wanted to Be Here

One night in December 1900 Swami Vivekananda arrived unannounced at the Belur monastery, returning suddenly from his second trip to America and Europe. A householder devotee who happened to be at the monastery at the time told what happened:

When Swami Premananda was halfway to the gate, he encountered the guest, who suddenly began speaking in Bengali. With a smile of recognition Swami Premananda exclaimed: 'Swamiji! Why didn't you send us a cable?' Everyone rushed to greet Swamiji.

Latu Maharaj was seated near the monastery landing ghat on the Ganga. I ran up to him to tell him the news of Swamiji's arrival. I had expected Latu Maharaj to also run to see Swamiji, so I was surprised to find that he showed no sign of haste. Instead, he asked me to sit by the side of the Ganga and meditate. 'Why be so excited? This is a good hour to meditate. Sit; sit down right here,' he said. 'Look how calm the Ganga is. Meditate.'

After Swamiji had finished his meal, he came to the ghat to see Latu Maharaj. They embraced each other. After exchanging a few words, Swamiji said: 'Leto, what's the matter? Everyone came to meet me except you. Are

you annoyed with me?'

'Why should I be annoyed?' Latu Maharaj said. 'My mind wanted to be here, so I was here.'

'I heard that you have not been staying at the monastery. How have you maintained yourself?' asked Swamiji.

'Upen Babu helped me,' said Latu Maharaj. 'On days when food didn't come unasked for, I used to stand near his shop. He would understand at once and give me a four-anna or a two-anna piece.'

At this Swamiji gazed upward and said: 'O Lord, bless Upen.' Everybody can see now how this brief prayer was answered. [Upen Babu became a very rich man.] ...

After a few more minutes of conversation, Swamiji went inside the monastery to retire. Latu Maharaj remained sitting where he was and soon became absorbed in meditation.

At 4:00 A.M. the following morning, when the same devotee came to the ghat to take a boat to Calcutta, he found Latu Maharaj still meditating in the same posture on the same spot.

—*How a Shepherd Boy Became a Saint*, 114–15

Here he continued to be absorbed in meditation for long hours. A devotee who saw Lata Maharaj immersed in spiritual practices at Varanasi once said to him: 'Maharaj, you have seen Sri Ramakrishna and you served him for a long time. You have practised so much austerity on the banks of the Ganga in Kolkata. Why should you be practising such rigorous austerity now in your old age?' Lata Maharaj replied: 'You know, merely seeing him and serving him are not enough for the attainment of the Highest. It is not that easy. Spiritual practice is necessary. Through his grace one will arrive at the Truth, but without spiritual practices one cannot receive grace. You have to work hard for even a little grace. Is it easy to hold on to the Lord's grace? It requires a great deal of effort and strength. Do you think that grace is some small thing that the devotee captures once, and thenceforward he is satisfied? Grace is infinite. Who knows in how many ways he will show his grace?' This gives us the clue to understanding why Lata Maharaj continued with his intense spiritual practice till the last day of his life, although he had already tasted the state of samadhi and had realized the highest Truth while living with Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar.

Narrating one of his spiritual experiences he once told a devotee:

Don't think that once a spiritual aspirant has experienced samadhi, he can have it thereafter any number of times or whenever he wants it. There are many aspirants who have tasted it but once. ... The Master has given me endless grace. After making me struggle for only eight years, he graciously lifted me up to that state again. One day I was seated on the bank of the Ganga when I saw a light coming out of the waters of the river. It grew in size until at last it filled the sky, the earth, and the space between them. Inside that infinite effulgence there were numberless other lights. Looking at this, I lost myself completely. I do not know what happened next. However, when I returned from that wonderful realm, I remained in a state of ecstatic joy. What bliss! It cannot be expressed in words. ... I felt that the whole world was saturated with bliss and bliss alone.

Informal Preaching

Being illumined with the highest realization, Lata Maharaj manifested profound spiritual wisdom in the last years of his life. Once Sri Ramakrishna had told him in an ecstatic mood: 'One day the gems of the Vedas and Vedanta will pour forth from your mouth.' This prophecy came true during the later phase of Lata Maharaj's life. He had direct access to the fountainhead of knowledge. Great scholars and men of high position sat at his feet to hear the words of wisdom that dropped from his lips. Sri Ramakrishna said that when a ray of light comes from the great source of all light, all book learning loses its value. Lata Maharaj's life exemplifies this saying.

Biharilal Sarkar, who was deeply devoted to Lata Maharaj, observes: 'One inevitably gains something by coming in contact with great spiritual personalities, and whoever had the good fortune to come in contact with Lata Maharaj received something tangible. His company was uplifting. ... His love, compassion, and same sightedness with regard to all were the main traits of his character.'

Mahendranath Datta writes: 'Lata attained abundant spiritual power through spiritual disciplines. It was this power which manifested itself in various ways in his lucid explanations of the Truth and would hold people spellbound.'

Swami Turiyananda once said: 'Many of us had to go through the muddy waters of intellectual knowledge before we attained God, but Lata jumped over them like Hanuman. His life teaches us how to live in God without touching the dirt of the world.'

Lata Maharaj has demonstrated to the modern world, through his extraordinary life, that God can be realized without the study of books and scriptures; that spiritual wisdom comes not through intellectualism but through inner realization. He has also shown that it is purity, simplicity, intense longing and self-surrender to God, service to one's spiritual teacher, and sincere spiritual striving which actually matters, and not book learning or tall talk.

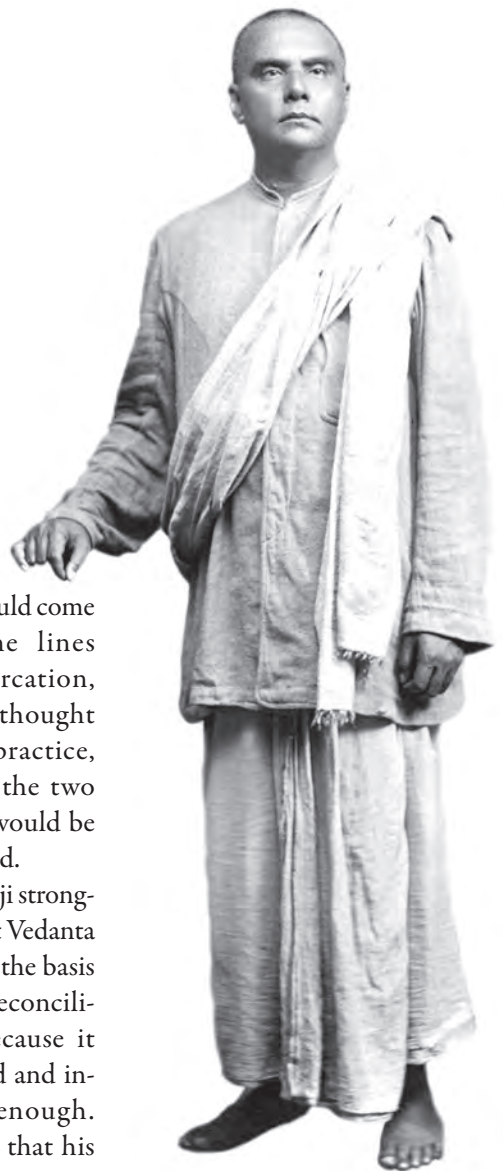
Swami Abhedananda: The Philosopher

Swami Vimalatmananda

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA became a Vedantic hero after the Chicago Parliament of Religions of 1893. Within a very short time he came to be recognized as ‘an orator by divine right’. Travelling from one corner of America to another, and also in England, he found fertile soil ready for Vedanta and planted its seed in several places. In the course of three years of continuous preaching and dissemination of Vedantic thought he managed to organize his New York class into a society. He wanted an exchange of ideals and ideas between the East and the West and to create centres of vital and constant communication between the two worlds. He also wanted to make ‘open doors, as it were, through which the East and the West could pass freely back and forth, without a feeling of strangeness, as from one home to another.’¹ Acquainted with this thought, his followers and disciples advised him to bring to the US one of his brother disciples who could conduct classes and manage other work in his absence. Swami Vivekananda too had conceived of this plan.

Swamiji had also another idea in his mind—to have an exchange of teachers between the Western world and India. In America and England, it would be religious and spiritual teaching. In India, it would be practical courses—in science, industry, economics, applied sociology, organization, and cooperation. He was always on the lookout for means to reconcile the social and spiritual differences between the East and the West. He would often tell his Western followers prophetically that

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a time would come when the lines of demarcation, both in thought and in practice, between the two cultures would be obliterated.

Swamiji strongly felt that Vedanta would be the basis for this reconciliation, because it was broad and inclusive enough. He knew that his master Sri Ramakrishna ‘came to teach the religion of today, constructive, not destructive. He had to go afresh to Nature to ask for facts, and he got scientific religion, which never says “believe”, but “see”; “I see, and you too can see”. Use the same means and you will reach the same vision. God will come to everyone, harmony is within the reach of all’ (2.72).

Swamiji wanted to take the universal ideas of Sri Ramakrishna to every nook and corner of the globe. To do this, he needed ‘a self-adjusting organization’. This was the motive that led him to organize the

work in the West. First, he organized his activities in New York, the metropolis of America, and then in London, the British capital. He also wanted to ensure that even in his absence the work would continue in these places. With this idea in mind he not only founded a Vedanta society, he also trained some of his trusted Western disciples to manage the affairs of the society. Moreover, he thought of bringing his brother disciples to the West for his Master's work. He wanted to hand over this responsibility to them before leaving his mortal frame. He commissioned some of his brother disciples, one after another, to this purpose—Swamis Saradananda, Abhedananda, Turiyananda, and Trigunatitananda, all of whom proved worthy successors.

To Swami Vivekananda's Aid

Swami Abhedananda arrived in London in the second week of October 1896. Swamiji was then in the heyday of his preaching in London. He was also considering moving out of London soon. The *Life of Swami Vivekananda* says: 'Swami Abhedananda had come to London to help in the work, and the Swami [Vivekananda] now did all in his power to impress him with the responsibilities of his new life. Day after day he trained his young brother-disciple; for he was thinking of sailing for India at the end of the year and was therefore eager to leave behind someone fitted both spiritually and intellectually to carry on the work' (2.129).

After a few days' training, Swamiji played a trick on Abhedananda. He made a public announcement that Abhedananda would speak at the Christo-Theosophical Society in Bloomsbury Square, on 27 October 1896. Abhedananda had not been consulted on this matter and he felt nervous at the prospect; nevertheless, he was determined to obey his leader's orders. He delivered an excellent address on the essence of Vedanta, based on the Vedantic treatise *Panchadashi*. It was a splendid success. Swamiji was very much pleased to see that Abhedananda possessed not only spiritual fervour but also the makings of a good orator. He was so charmed that he told his London admirers,

'Even if I perish on this plane, my message will be sounded through these dear lips and the world will hear it' (2.136). Hearing this lecture, Captain Sevier, an English disciple of Swamiji, remarked, 'Swami Abhedananda is a born preacher. Wherever he will go, he will have success.'² His success continued as long as he was in the Western world. He never looked back. He preached Vedanta throughout the West for a long period of twenty-five years.

His incisive intellect, profound scholarship, remarkable eloquence and oratorical skills, lucidity of exposition, charming personality, and above all the depth of his spiritual realization made a deep impression on the minds of intellectuals, scholars, philosophers, scientists, clergymen, and religious preachers. He interacted with such important scholars and intellectuals of his day as Max Müller, Paul Deussen, Josiah Royce, William James, Charles Lanman, and Lewis G Janes. These distinguished litterateurs as well as the general public recognized Abhedananda as both a philosopher and an exemplar of Vedanta and yoga. He proved to be a worthy successor to Swami Vivekananda in the West.

How Kali Prasad Trained Himself

Right from a very young age Kali Prasad Chandra, the future Abhedananda, had a strong leaning towards philosophy. He was to say later: 'From my childhood I wanted to know the cause of everything and used to ask questions about the "why" and "how" of all events. When for the first time I read in Wilson's *History of India* that Samkara-charya was a great philosopher, I had a thrilling sensation, and I wanted to become a philosopher and to study his philosophy.'³ 'Kali took a drawing class in school and within a year excelled. The teacher praised his skill and prophesied a bright future for him, but one day Kali told the teacher that he would not come to the drawing class anymore because he had decided to become a philosopher. Kali's teacher tried to convince him that it was better to be a painter than a philosopher. But Kali replied: "No, sir. A painter studies the surface of things but a philosopher goes below the surface

and studies the causes of things. So, I want to be a philosopher.”⁴ In his later life, Abhedananda was acclaimed as a philosopher.

The details of the efforts that Kali Prasad put in to achieve his aim in life make for fascinating reading. ‘When I was in the preparatory class,’ he later wrote, ‘I studied Sanskrit which was my second language. At home, I studied *Mugdabodha*, the Sanskrit Grammar, thoroughly, and acquired such a command of the Sanskrit language that I could compose verses in it.’⁵ In his youth Kali Prasad composed several exquisite hymns that reveal his deep insight into the spiritual nature of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi. ‘In addition to a natural poetic grace, richness of words, and an easy-flowing rhythm these hymns have an inner significance of their own. They are the spontaneous outpourings of a holy heart where Divinity was enshrined’ (409). Once when he recited one of his hymns on Sri Sarada Devi to her, the Holy Mother blessed him saying, ‘May Saraswati, the goddess of learning, sit on your tongue.’⁶

Even as a young boy Kali Prasad started studying the Bhagavadgita, a copy of which he discovered in his father’s library. His father tried to dissuade him saying, ‘It would make you insane,’ but to no avail. He also had an open-minded approach to his studies:

In my youth, I was fond of listening to discourses on Hindu philosophy and used to hear lectures on various phases of different religions. I attended the sermons on Christ and Christianity by Christian missionaries. ... I also heard many anti-Christian lectures which were based upon the higher criticism of the Bible and free thought. ...

In 1883, the noted Hindu philosopher, Pundit Sasadhar Tarkachudamani, delivered a series of public lectures on the six systems of Hindu philosophy at the Albert Hall. ... I attended the lectures on Vaisesika and Samkhya philosophies in which the Punditji explained the atomic theory of Kanada, and the evolution theory of Kapila, and compared them with similar theories of the ancient Greek philosophers as well as with the modern theory of evolution.⁷

Abhedananda would often speak about the Indian theory of evolution to his Western audiences. ‘The Sankhya Philosophy of Kapila’ was one such lecture.⁸

‘In India a true philosopher is not a mere speculator, but a spiritual man,’ Abhedananda observed. ‘He does not believe in certain theories which cannot be carried into practice into everyday life; what he believes, he lives, and, therefore, practical philosophy is still to be found in India.’⁹ This conviction was ingrained in Kali Prasad at an early age. ‘When I heard Punditji’s lectures on Yoga Psychology of Patanjali, I became interested in Hindu Psychology as well as in the practical methods of the Yoga system’ (2). Kali Prasad requested Shashadhar Tarkachudamani to teach him the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali. The latter said he had no time to spare and referred Kali Prasad to Kalibar Vedantavagish, who was then translating the *Yoga Sutra* into Bengali and also composing a commentary on the same. Unfortunately, Kalibar Vedantavagish too had little time to spare. But seeing Kali Prasad’s earnestness he consented to explain the aphorisms to Kali Prasad while his attendant gave him an oil massage before his bath in the morning. Kali Prasad readily agreed. He would read out the aphorisms and the pandit would explain their meaning and import.

Next Kali Prasad obtained a copy of the *Shiva Sambhita* and learnt about the disciplines of hatha yoga, kundalini yoga, pranayama, and raja yoga. But having been warned against practising these teachings without the guidance of a competent guru, he became eager to come in touch with one such guru. It was then that his friend Yajneswar Bhattacharya told him about Sri Ramakrishna.

In June 1884 he went to Dakshineswar, met Sri Ramakrishna, and requested him to teach him yoga. The Master agreed saying, ‘It is a good sign that you have a desire to learn yoga at this young age. You were a yogi in your previous life. A little was left for perfection. This will be your last birth. Yes, I shall teach you yoga.’¹⁰ Abhedananda later recalled: ‘Then, he initiated me and gave me instructions in concentration and meditation. He touched

Each of the twelve attendants [at Kashipur] was to watch Sri Thakur [Ramakrishna] for two hours. I used to attend on Sri Thakur for two hours in the day and two hours in the night. At midday I would rub oil on Sri Thakur's body and seating him on a low stool in the terrace I would bathe him. At the time of bath and thereafter he would tell me many things and explain to me deep spiritual truths.

—Swami Abhedananda

my chest and aroused my *Kundalini*, the “Serpent Power” at the base of my spinal column; and I went into *Samadhi*.¹¹

The great thirst for knowledge that Kali Prasad had is reflected in the wide range of his studies: ‘At that time, I began to devote myself to self-education and studied Ganot’s *Physics*, Herschel’s *Astronomy*, John Stuart Mill’s *Logic* and *Three Essays on Religion*, Herbert Spencer’s *First Principles* and *Psychology*, Hamilton’s *Philosophy*, Lewes’ *History of Philosophy* and attended the courses of lectures at the Science Association, which had been established by Dr Mohendra Lall Sircar’ (ibid.). He also studied such classical Sanskrit poetry as *Raghuvamsha* and *Kumarasambhava*. At the Baranagar Math Kali Prasad continued his self-education by studying Panini’s grammar, the six systems of Hindu philosophy, the Upanishads, and the *Vedanta Sutra* with the commentaries of Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka, Vallabha, and others (4).

Kali Prasad’s intense study was matched by the equally intensive tapasya he undertook as a youth. This earned him the epithet ‘Kali Tapasvi’—Kali, the ascetic—at Baranagar Math. He also travelled extensively across India, as he narrates,

bare-footed, from place to place, depending entirely on alms cooked or uncooked, whatever chance would bring to me. I always held in my mind the thought that the phenomenal world was transitory and unreal; that I was a spectator like the unchangeable *Atman* of Vedanta which always remains a witness (*Sakshi*) of the games

which the people were playing in the world. In this manner I endured all sorts of privations and hardship, practised austerities of all kinds, walked up to the sources of the Jamuna and the Ganges, where I stayed for three months in the caves of the Himalayas at the altitude of nearly 14,000 feet above the sea level, spending most of my time in the contemplation of the Absolute, I realized that the phenomenal world was like a dream. ... I met great sages and saints like ‘Trailanga Swami’, [and] ‘Swami Bhaskarananda’ at Benaras, Paohari Baba at Gazipur, many Vaishnava saints at Brindaban and great Vedanta philosophers at Rishikesh, where I studied monistic Vedanta philosophy under the great scholar ‘Dhanaraj Giri’, who was the eminent Advaita Vedantist of those days (4–5).

Swami Abhedananda’s Philosophy

Swami Gambhirananda observes:

He [Abhedananda] was not only a powerful speaker, but also a prolific writer. If his spoken words moulded the lives of hundreds of persons, his printed thoughts influenced a wider circle of people in different countries. His writings contain deep philosophy with a great wealth of information couched in a very popular style. As such, they have been of immense help in broadcasting the philosophical and spiritual ideas of India. As a matter of fact, they constitute a valuable legacy to the spiritually inclined souls all the world over.¹²

His writings and speeches are available in eleven volumes entitled *The Complete Works of Swami Abhedananda*. These volumes were first published by Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, Kolkata, in 1967 as part of the birth centenary celebrations of Abhedananda.

When Abhedananda was in London, he went to meet Professor Max Müller in the company of Swami Vivekananda. Müller was deeply interested in the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. He told Abhedananda, ‘Ramakrishna was an original thinker, for he was never brought up within the precincts of any university and, therefore, his teachings were new and original.’¹³ This remark impressed Abhedananda. In his discourses and writings over

the next forty years, he not only presented Indian philosophical systems to Western audiences, he also interpreted the teachings of these schools in the light of Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings. His interpretations were in line with those of Swami Vivekananda, which form the basis of what has been termed by some scholars as 'Neo-Vedanta'.

Prof. Satis Chandra Chatterjee has pointed out several features that lend uniqueness to Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy and make it a genuine philosophy of synthesis and reconciliation—*samuchchaya* and *samanvaya*. These include the concept of (i) Brahman, or the Absolute, as the 'omnipresent Reality'—impersonal (*nirguna*), personal (*saguna*) and beyond both categories; (ii) Brahman, Atman, and Bhagavan [as also God, Allah, and other such appellations] as different names of the same Reality; (iii) different levels of revelation—dualistic, qualified dualistic, and monistic—as being reflections of the level of consciousness of the sadhaka; (iv) the conception of the world as the sportive creative activity (*lila*) of Brahman; (v) religion as direct realization of God; (vi) realization of the Divine, or God-realization, as the end of human life; and (vii) the concept of all religions being different approaches to the same Reality.¹⁴ Abhedananda dwells on these themes in his speeches and writings.

On the occasion of Abhedananda's birth centenary, Justice Sankar Prasad Mitra, a social thinker of repute, wrote:

He [Abhedananda] was a philosopher in his own way—an original thinker, always seeking his insight into personal values. His search for the Ultimate Truth had never come to an end. His writings include a comprehensive survey of the main eastern philosophies with comparisons drawn from western philosophical theses. He had never asserted that he had found any permanent or eternal solution: he had all along given the impression that every answer could be improved upon by more and more rigorous exercises of the powers of the mind and the intellect. In other words, his was not a dogmatic approach to philosophy; but the approach of a scientist ever seeking to acquire greater knowledge and power except that there was consistency

in his fundamental thinking. He had undertaken philosophical researches appropriate to the challenges of the age in which he lived. His sole aim was to establish a universal value which left room for variety, was free from dogmatism and was ever open to revision without, however, any departures from the Vedantic approach. One turns to his writings for deeper philosophical understanding and the reader has every opportunity to test his own ideas and conceptions. With remarkable simplicity of language and clarity of thought, he has discussed eastern and western philosophies and the ways in which they compliment [*sic*] one another or co-ordinate into a future philosophy of mankind.¹⁵

In his tribute to the legacy of Abhedananda, Dr Satkari Mukherjee has this to say:

It is an uphill task to undertake [the delineation of] the evolution of the philosophy of Swami Abhedananda. In him, Sankara's Monistic Vedanta (Advaita Vedanta) received a new orientation. He was pre-eminently a subtle logician and his knowledge of modern science and his grasp of modern trends of thought-movement enabled him to put on an unassailable basis the truths of Vedanta and make them intelligible to the modern mind. ... It is undeniable that philosophy is the element in which Swami Abhedananda's genius shines most prominently. But one must not lose sight of the truth that the strength of his philosophy is not derived from the intellectual resources, but has at its back the realization of a Yogi.¹⁶

The Works of Swami Abhedananda

Abhedananda had approached Sri Ramakrishna wishing to learn yoga. It is therefore not surprising that writings on yoga constitute an important portion of his *Complete Works*. In the texts 'How to be a Yogi', 'Yoga Psychology', 'Yoga, Its Theory and Practice', and 'True Psychology' Abhedananda has surveyed the theory and practice of yoga in its diverse forms and elucidated the philosophy and psychological aspects of yogic practice.¹⁷ Patanjali's yoga aphorisms form the basis of Indian practical psychology, and Abhedananda spoke extensively on it, especially emphasizing the utility and importance

of yoga in our practical lives. In 'True Psychology' Abhedananda remarked that the term 'psychology' was used in the West 'not in the sense of science of the *psyche* or soul, but in the sense of physiological origin and ordering of the mind'. Modern psychology, he felt, was hamstrung by the denial of any existence beyond the body. The yoga system of Patanjali, he noted, was more comprehensive in recognizing the body, mind, and soul as distinct yet interrelated entities (3.445). He took care to show the weaknesses of such materialistic theories of the mind as the 'combination theory' and the 'production theory' that were popular among Western philosophers and psychologists (3.437).

'Spiritual Unfoldment' is one of the important works of the swami. It is a guide for beginners 'who are willing to learn methodically and earnestly the practices of Yoga and spiritual Sadhana, for attaining self-control and complete mastery over their senses, body and mind' (1.11). The swami would recommend this text as a first reading to anyone who wanted to be introduced to his philosophy.



Abhedananda, who was once the president of the Psychical Research Society of America, had many personal experiences involving 'departed spirits, seances, spirit communications, and other subjects of spiritualism'. He was always ready for adventure and would gladly accept invitations by spiritualists to join their experiments. But his experiences convinced him that 'most of the spirits are earth-bound, as they are not free from desires and passions'. So, he has said in his popular book 'Life Beyond Death' that everything about spirits should be examined with a logical and scientific mind (4.3). In the five lectures on 'Science of Psychic Phenomena', an array of historical and experimental facts have been skilfully treated with philosophical and scientific insight. The preface to this text begins with the following pertinent warning given by Abhedananda: 'Those who care for name, fame, and worldly prosperity may run after psychic powers and exercise them for their selfish motives; but the true seekers after spiritual perfection never crave for them, but shun them as obstacles and source of bondage and self-delusion' (4.243). In 'Mystery of Death', spanning nineteen lectures, Abhedananda focused on the central thought and philosophy of the *Katha Upanishad*: 'a systematic discussion on the religious and philosophical thoughts of ancient India' (4.319).

Abhedananda delivered a series of lectures at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences on the 'Great Saviours of the World' between 1907 and 1911. The principle aim of this series was 'to show that the fundamental teachings or sayings of the founders of all great religions of the world have had the same religious and spiritual keynotes and that the stories and annals, connected with the eventful divine lives and miraculous deeds are analogous'. It was also shown in these lectures how Vedanta harmonized sectarian religions and apparently contradictory religious creeds (5.3). Abhedananda based his lectures on historical and scholarly accounts. He had also a great interest in the study of comparative religions. In 1922 he 'went to Tibet from Kashmere, crossing the Himalayas on foot, to study

the manners, customs and Buddhist philosophy and Lamaism which prevail among the Tibetan Lamas.¹⁸ He was especially interested in visiting the Hemis monastery, twenty-five miles north of Leh, as he wished to examine the manuscript based on which N Notovitch had written his book *The Unknown Life of Christ*.¹⁹ The previous year he had spent time in Japan studying the Japanese culture, philosophy and religion (477).

Representing and interpreting Indian culture and tradition to Western audiences was one of Abhedananda's important tasks. His lectures on 'India and Her People' at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences was a part of this effort. About these lectures, he says: 'My main object has been to give an impartial account of the facts from the standpoint of an unbiased historian, and to remove all misunderstandings which prevail among the Americans concerning India and her people.'²⁰ He delivered five lectures on the scientific and historical accounts of Indian astronomy entitled 'A study of Heliocentric Science', which is available in the sixth volume of his *Complete Works*. He also lectured on 'The Ideal of Education', 'Christian Science and Vedanta', 'Vedanta Philosophy', 'An Introduction to the Philosophy of Panchadasi', 'Thoughts on Sankhya, Buddhism and Vedanta', and 'Steps towards the Perfection'. The lecture on 'Vedanta Philosophy' deserves special mention. It was delivered at the Philosophical Union at the University of California, Berkeley, to an august audience of four hundred professors from various universities who warmly appreciated the swami's presentation (2.239). Incidentally, the University of California conferred an honorary doctorate upon the swami in 1901-2.

Abhedananda published an abridged translation of M's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* in 1907 in New York. This *Memoirs of Sri Ramakrishna* 'was much appreciated in Europe and America. A Spanish edition also came out in 1915 [actually 1912] from Buenos Aires in South America, and a Portuguese edition soon followed in Brazil. In Europe, the *Gospel of Ramakrishna* was translated into various

languages like Danish, Scandinavian and Czechoslovak. This book also inspired the Austrian painter, Frank Dvorak, who afterwards made full-size portraits of both Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi, which are now installed in the temple of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, Calcutta' (5.191).


'Swami Abhedananda says that, of the tree of knowledge and wisdom, philosophy is the flower and religion is the fruit, philosophy is the theoretical side of religion and religion is philosophy in practice. In India, philosophy means the science of realization or a divine awareness of the Absolute which transcends the categories of time, space, and causation. Philosophy may be called a spiritual process by means of which a man sees God face to face.' He elaborated upon this in *Thoughts on Philosophy and Religion*, 'a collection of thirteen lectures on analytical and intuitive discussions on philosophy and religion' (7.3). *Religion, Revelation and God*, another of Abhedananda's important works, is a collection of lectures on such themes as 'What is the New-Pantheism', 'Pantheism and Vedanta', 'Ideal of Vedanta and How to Attain It', 'Vedanta and the Teachings of Christ', 'Gautama Buddha and His Philosophy', 'An Interpretation of Vedanta and Religion', 'Divine Inspiration', 'Revelation and God', 'God in Everything', and 'Soul and God' (7.59). In 'Religion of the Twentieth Century' Abhedananda argues persuasively for a scientific approach towards religion and philosophy. The twentieth century was in need of a religion 'that would not support any doctrine or dogma that cannot be sustained by scientific reasoning and, therefore, there must be wedding of science with religion and philosophy, and science must accompany both religion and philosophy [for us] to get comprehensive knowledge or experience' (6.113).

'*Vedanta Towards Religion* is a collection of seventeen lectures on the study of the philosophical and religious thoughts of India in a comparative way. ... Swami Abhedananda says that philosophy is flesh and bone, whereas religion is blood and life, and these two things make up the whole of the absolute Truth.' (6.271)

No important Indian philosopher can afford to ignore the Gita. In the US Abhedananda gave sixty four discourses on 'Bhagavad Gita: The Divine Message', starting in 1907. In these lectures he 'has followed the path of the ancient ones, but has thrown some new light with the teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, together with the theories of modern science and contemporary thoughts'. 'The Swami has also given the psychology of the *Bhagavad Gita* and has compared it with the psychological movements of the mind of every man and has given their solution. In fact, Swami Abhedananda's chief aim and object of the lectures on the *Gita* are to represent the real import and central religio-philosophical thoughts and ideas contained in the *Gita*' (8.15, 17).

Abhedananda's class discussions at the Vedanta Math, Calcutta, were recorded and edited by Swami Prajnanananda, and have been published under the title 'Tirtharenu—Thoughts on Yoga, Upanishads and Gita' (10.315–594).

On the occasion of Abhedananda's birth centenary in 1966, the renowned philosopher and then president of India Dr S Radhakrishnan wrote: 'Swami Abhedananda did his best for popularizing the teachings of Vedanta Philosophy. His work is still remembered in America.'²¹ Three decades earlier the volume on *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* edited by Radhakrishnan and Muirhead had included an autobiographical note on Abhedananda, in acknowledgement of his work of interpreting and disseminating Vedanta and related Indian philosophies in the West.²² Abhedananda's was indeed a yeoman's service in the cause of expanding the Vedanta work started by Swami Vivekananda in America and Europe. His lectures on Indian cultural heritage are a testimony to his monumental work as the cultural and philosophical ambassador of India. The *Complete Works of Swami Abhedananda* is an important part of the panorama of Indian philosophical literature. Swami Vireswarananda, the tenth president of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, summed up his contribution in a beautiful homage on Abhedananda's birth cen-

tenary: 'We recall with genuine pride and pleasure his many-sided contributions in the field of Indian thought and culture and also in the enrichment of the spiritual idealism of the people of the West, by his life of realization, profound scholarship, pregnant speeches and learned writings.'²³ 

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Swami Trigunatita: A Saint of Our City

Pravrajika Madhavaprana

IT was in San Francisco that Swami Vivekananda declared that souls should defy nature, that they should live and die game. This is the story of one of his brother monks, Swami Trigunatita, who did just that in our city, San Francisco. He lived here, earnestly serving the people of this city, and he died game in that service. Shortly before Swami Vivekananda left his body on 4 July 1902, he chose Swami Trigunatita for the San Francisco work. Swamiji knew his brother was well qualified for the assignment since he had put in fifteen years of excellent service in India—pioneer famine and plague relief, founding Vedanta teaching centres, starting the magazine *Udbodhan*, and serving Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. So three months after Swamiji's mahasamadhi, Swami Trigunatita launched out enthusiastically for his mission in the West—'taking the run like a monkey,' as he jocosely wrote to a friend.

In many ways Swami Trigunatita was a good match for the people of San Francisco, because of their willingness to take risks, their informal camaraderie and jaunty cheerfulness in the face of disaster. Witness the 1906 earthquake and fire, which killed an estimated three thousand people, and destroyed three quarters of the buildings and streets. Out-of-town visitors were amazed at the reaction of San Franciscans—helping one another, cheerfully camping in the parks, and pitching right in to clean up and rebuild. When pious critics suggested God was punishing San Francisco for its wickedness by causing an earthquake, quick came the reply,

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'If that be so how come He knocked down all the churches and left the brewery standing?'

It is not that San Franciscans were against religion and spirituality. They respected their ministers and monastics, they welcomed new thoughts, and they were open to what genuine holy people had to say. Their reaction to Swamiji and his brother monks bears testimony to that fact. In this article I would like to concentrate more on what Trigunatita was to this city, a saint working with the people of San Francisco, a missionary of Rama-krishna Vedanta.

Swami Trigunatita's San Francisco

It is a great good fortune to have had a saint live in our city even for a short time. Swamiji lived and taught in San Francisco for a few months, as did Swami Turiyananda. Swami Trigunatita, on the other hand, lived here for the best part of twelve years. One could truthfully say that he sacrificed himself to establish Vedanta in San Francisco. Because of Swami Trigunatita's work here, one of his successors, Swami Ashokananda, often used to say that the Vedanta Society is firmly rooted in this city. 'Swami Trigunatita stood like a rock,' as the swami graphically put it.

What was the city like when Swami Trigunatita was here? It was the hub of northern California and the major port city on the Pacific coast of America. More than that, it was the financial and cultural centre of the western United States. Actually Swami Trigunatita saw three different San Franciscos: the city before the 1906 earthquake, the devastated city immediately after the earthquake and fire, and the rebuilt modern city of 1914 America, looking out at the world.

In 1903, when the swami came, it was much like the city where his predecessors, Swamiji and Turiyananda, taught. One arrived by boat, either a ferry which finished a train journey at the Oakland Mole, or by Pacific Ocean steamer, which came through the Golden Gate and docked in San Francisco Bay. This latter is how Swami Trigunatita arrived on 2 January 1903. From the dock one took a horse-drawn cab, a cable car, or a streetcar to your destination. Swami Trigunatita's destination was Dr Logan's house on Steiner and Oak streets. Dr Logan had been a friend and host to Swami Vivekananda and was currently the president of the young Vedanta Society. Within the city ordinary people either walked or rode the streetcar. Only rich people owned a horse and carriage, and hardly anyone had even seen an automobile. Swami Trigunatita walked all over the city. When he went to Oakland, as he did every week to lecture and give classes, he took a streetcar to the Ferry Building, the ferry across the bay, then another streetcar or

train to his East Bay destination. When he went to Shanti Ashrama for his yearly month-long retreats with devotees, he took a train to San Jose, then a horse-drawn stage over the mountain. When he travelled to Los Angeles, he took a train and stayed for two or three months to lecture and start a Vedanta centre there. In his first three years in San Francisco the swami spent a lot of time travelling.

The houses in San Francisco were mostly wood, like the temple Swami Trigunatita built in 1905. They were the famous ornate Victorian structures which people admire today. Downtown office buildings, stores, and hotels were brick and stone. Brick, stone, or wood, they all came tumbling down in the earthquake, and what did not fall in the earthquake was wiped out in two days by the raging fire. Only the western part of the city, where his newly dedicated Hindu Temple stood, was spared. Immediately after the earthquake, Swami Trigunatita tried to reach the members by telephone, but most of the lines were down. Then he set out on foot to Steiner and Market streets, some two miles distant, to see what had happened to his disciples who lived there. Their house was off its foundation, and they were not home. So he left his calling card and walked back.

San Francisco, immediately after the earthquake, was in ruins. The streets were full of rubble, the streetcar tracks were twisted, and the water lines had burst. The fire could not be stanchied by fire-fighters. People watched from a distance as their city went up in smoke. Though the earthquake did not damage the temple, the raging fire came close. When it reached Van Ness Avenue, some six blocks away, the wind suddenly shifted. Swami Trigunatita happily reported to Belur Math, the headquarters in India, that through the grace of God the temple and its members were saved.

Almost as soon as the fire was out the cleanup began. All the rubble from downtown buildings was carted by big horse-drawn wagons to the waterfront by the temple for landfill to extend the Marina district. This was where they built the 1915 Panama Pacific World's Fair, right near the temple. Swami

Trigunatita watched the exposition buildings go up with great interest. He saw this World's Fair as a grand event: a celebration of the opening of the Panama Canal, the rebuilding of San Francisco, a display of all man's new inventions and of all the cultures of the world. For him it was a unifying, international, inter-cultural event akin to the Ramakrishna Mission of which he was part. And it was next door to the temple!



San Francisco: Aftermath of the earthquake and fire of April 1906

The year following the earthquake he added the third floor and towers to the temple. The third floor was equipped with all the modern conveniences and the towers represented the different religions and cultures of the world. It was to be lighted and decorated to go with the fair. All America's latest inventions that came out in quick succession in the period after the earthquake he embraced with enthusiasm. He went to Tanforan to see the new bi-plane demonstrate its flight. He went on excursions in Mr Wollberg's car. Now that travel was so much faster, he took a financial risk and bought a property in Concord for a colony which was to include a temple, library, orphanage, medical facility, and walnut orchard to support it. Though the project dissolved with his death, it is not impossible that some aspects of it might come to pass in the future.

San Franciscans always have been open-minded, companionable, and this was especially true in the early twentieth century. They frankly loved their city and their country, celebrating all the local and national holidays and events with gusto—flags, parades, fireworks, and so forth. Sitting on the hills overlooking the bay, they watched Teddy Roosevelt's great white fleet come steaming in through the Golden Gate. For all these occasions the swami would cancel classes so the members could take

part. Everyone he encountered knew and loved Swami Trigunatita, from the firemen in the station next door to the temple, to the mayor and officers in City Hall.

Not just in San Francisco, but wherever he went he made friends. Holy Mother believed you should make the whole world your own, and that was what the swami did. Once he went with a party of Vedantins to the Lake Tahoe area. They had a two-hour wait for the train in Truckee. It was a Sunday evening with a church nearby, so the swami said, 'Let's go to the sermon.' They sat in the back. At the end of the sermon slides of famous cathedrals and churches were shown. Lo and behold, the last slide was the Hindu Temple of San Francisco. When the minister came down the aisle to shake hands with people he spotted the swami. They both were delighted to meet each other. They became friends then and there, and the minister used to visit the swami in San Francisco. I heard a swami once describe a saint as a walking *utsava*, a moving divine festival. Swami Trigunatita certainly was that.

Portrait of a Saint

At this point I think I should say what I mean by a saint. First and foremost, of course, a saint is a realized soul. He has seen the Divine—however you

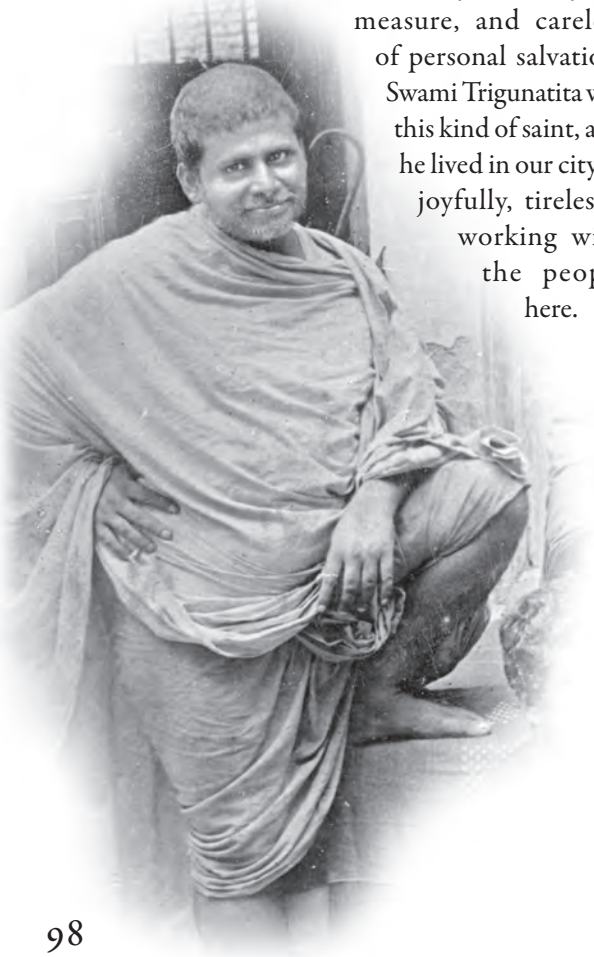
want to put it—God, Spirit, or his true Self. He has broken out of this world of ignorance and knows he is immortal. This, I believe, is what people of all faiths consider a saint to be. More than that I would like to speak of what a saint is in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition. Sri Ramakrishna, who is considered to be an incarnation of God, said that a saint is free from lust, greed, and egotism, and, further, he sees divinity in men, women, beasts, everything. His chief disciple, Swami Vivekananda, added that a saint is fearless, unselfish, sincere, and energetic, with a strong desire to help humankind.

Swamiji put it more dramatically in a letter to his brother monks: ‘To do the highest good to the world, everyone down to the lowest—this is our vow. Welcome Mukti or hell, whichever comes of it. ... Off with laziness. Spread! Spread! Run like fire to all places.’ In other words, Swamiji’s saint must be a tireless, selfless worker for humanity, brave beyond

measure, and careless of personal salvation. Swami Trigunatita was this kind of saint, and he lived in our city— joyfully, tirelessly working with the people here.

One of the ways you know this type of saint is by noting what other saints say of him. All of his brother monks remembered Swami Trigunatita for his loving, companionable nature as well as his austerity and scholarship. Swamiji himself gave Sarada—that was Swami Trigunatita’s pre-monastic name—the highest praise for his vigorous selfless service in India. After the pioneer famine relief which Sarada managed so deftly single-handed, Swamiji said, ‘Sarada is on my head now, I am his disciple!’ And when Swami Trigunatita was sacrificing his all to start the Bengali magazine *Udbodhan*, Swamiji said, ‘Trigunatita has given up his spiritual practices, his meditation and everything, to carry out my orders, and has set himself to work. Is it a matter of small sacrifice?’ Of course to Swami Trigunatita himself Swamiji was a severe taskmaster, and his scoldings were monumental. Swami Trigunatita took them with grace. For this we have the testimony of another saint, Swami Vijnanananda. He remembered that ‘[Sarada Maharaj] was a man of great forbearance. His face was always lit with a smile. Even after getting a severe scolding from Swamiji he would never feel disturbed. So Swamiji used to say of him: “A strange fellow! Never gets angry.” At the most, Sarada Maharaj would tell us, “Swamiji has scolded me today.” ... So sweet was his nature that he could easily win over people.’

If seeing God is the first prerequisite of a saint, Sarada had that immediately when he came to the Master, because Sri Ramakrishna was an incarnation of God, and he selected Sarada as one of his sannyasin apostles. Sarada was only a youth of nineteen when he met the Master in 1884, and though his discipleship lasted just one and a half years, he got the thorough preparation he needed for his mission. Swami Trigunatita used to tell his western disciples of all the spiritual gifts the Master gave him. He told how the Master removed all his pride of aristocratic birth and gave him a spirit of service to God in people; wiped out lust from his heart; gave him the ochre cloth of a monk; asked him to follow Swamiji; and put him in the care of Holy Mother. With Holy Mother he had a sweet



relationship which lasted all his adult life until his death in San Francisco.

Saint that he was, Swami Trigunatita recognized the identity of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and the Divine Mother as three forms of the same Divine Being. In San Francisco he would often speak of his work as being directed by the Divine Mother or the Master. Holy Mother was still alive in India when he was in San Francisco, and the swami would regularly send money to her. She would also write to him and do tender things like bless rosaries for his disciples. His respect and obedience for Swamiji, of course, was unwavering.

He felt a close spiritual connection to Christ also. Possibly this was because he was teaching in a Christian country; possibly it was a matter of his temperament. He had a strong idea of sacrifice, which is central to Christian practice. He felt that if he sacrificed himself in his life and work in San Francisco, he would be able to establish Vedanta firmly here. There was nothing grim or sorrowful about it though; he set out joyfully from India and was always noted for his cheerful enthusiasm for the work in this city.

Inspired Ministrations

There were two holy birthdays which the swami celebrated in an extraordinary way all the years he lived in San Francisco: one was his Master's, and the other was Christ's. In 1903, the year he came, he held a fifteen-hour service on the Master's birthday, lasting from five in the morning till nine in the evening. The swami had no Indian assistant as yet and just a few American devotees. He remained standing all those fifteen hours, talking of the Master. He wrote joyfully about it to a friend in India, saying he was doing a full fast for twenty-four hours, and he gave three long talks and four short ones, two of which were so good nearly everybody cried.

He did the same thing on Christmas every year: a fifteen-hour service, all the time standing and speaking of Christ. Some of the devotees would remain in their seats, fasting, listening, and medi-

tating all those fifteen hours. In later years more people participated in the ceremony. After 1906 his assistant, Swami Prakashananda, would participate; and, also, the choirs would sing. The swami's talks and readings would make Christ living for the devotees, and they felt they were transported to the Christian holy land. An experience like that would cut a new groove in the soul, as Ashokananda put it. Christianity was much more prominent in the lives of San Franciscans a century ago, and Swami Trigunatita often gave lectures on Christian subjects throughout the year; he took up the Bible, the *Imitation of Christ*, and other Christian texts in his classes.

It is important to note, however, that the main subjects for the swami's public lectures as well as his classes were about basic Vedanta, not just personalities. Holy persons were held up as examples. One of his first downtown lectures was entitled 'The Life of Sri Ramakrishna, a Model Vedantist at the Present Age'. Swami Vivekananda had taught him to work in this way. Swamiji wrote to Swami Trigunatita in 1896 from New York, giving instructions which would serve the young apostle well in San Francisco as well as in India. I will quote Swamiji's letter in part:

It is very easy to search for faults, but the characteristic of a saint lies in looking for merits—never forget this. ... You need a little business faculty. ... I am determined to make you decent workers thoroughly organized. ...

That Ramakrishna Paramahansa was God—and all that sort of thing—has no go in countries like this [the US]. ... That will make our movement a little sect. You keep aloof from such attempts; at the same time if people worship him as God, no harm. Neither encourage nor discourage. The masses will always have the *person*, the higher ones the *principle*; we want both. But principles are universal, *not* persons. Therefore stick to the principles he taught, let people think whatever they like of his person.

In giving spiritual guidance to his disciples as well as others, Swami Trigunatita laid emphasis on

self-improvement, character-building, and steady practice for Self-realization. He would ask the students to keep a diary of their own spiritual practice, and bring it to him to check at each weekly interview. 'Ask yourself,' he would instruct, 'what is *my* goal in life? Tell yourself you have strength. Analyse yourself.' He would ask the students to list in their diary the faults they wanted to overcome and show him what they had written. Once, on reading the list of one student, he laconically remarked, 'There are many more.'

He held a Gita class where the students learned the Sanskrit as well as the spiritual content of the verses in English. He wanted each of them to prepare to give a class on five Gita verses, looking on the audience to whom they were speaking as God. 'Smear everything with God,' he would advise, echoing the first verse of the *Isha Upanishad*.

His teaching was practical and tailored to fit the individual American student. To give an example, one woman could not agree to his instruction to give up attachment to a friend, which the swami considered detrimental to her spiritual progress. He said, 'If you cannot obey me we will stop the lessons.' And he did resort to that. She would come to the lectures and classes but there were no more interviews. Finally she became so unhappy she begged the swami to let her come see him. 'All right,' he said, 'if you can come here at 6 a.m. on New Year's Day, I will see you.' She made her way clear across town, walked from the streetcar down Fillmore hill, and made it on time. He did not give her a lesson then, nor did he on any of the other morning interviews that followed. Sometimes she would just sit there and watch him work, or maybe he would dictate to her a page from a Sanskrit primer he was composing for his students. Always he would give her some candy.

Many of his students were asked to come in the early morning. People often wondered why he did this. I would make a guess: Early morning in the ancient Hindu tradition is considered auspicious, it is called the *brahma-muhurta*. As a modern verification of the concept, once Sri Ramakrishna told

one of his disciples to meditate on him in the early morning because 'at dawn my mind pervades the whole universe'. Swami Trigunatita, being a saint steeped in the Indian spiritual culture, naturally knew all these things. So my guess is that his student's mind would be more receptive at this holy hour. And, of course, being in his holy company at that time would make it a double blessing.

The swami was fond of young people, especially little children, and they loved him in return. One is reminded of Christ's saying, 'Suffer little children to come unto me, for such is the kingdom of heaven.' Swami Trigunatita would let the children of devotees walk around his office and touch all the interesting things there. He would converse with them in detail about what they were thinking and doing. The two young sons of the Wollbergs were given particular attention. The swami allowed them to come to the summer retreats for serious students at Shanti Ashrama. He persuaded them to get up early and walk the mile or so from their home to see him at 5.30 or 6 a.m. He even got them to darn their socks and show him their work. When one of them started smoking at the age of fifteen, against the doctor's orders, the despairing parents appealed to the swami for help. The swami himself smoked. He said to the parents, 'Give me a week and then send him.' In a week's time the swami quit smoking for good, and when he talked to the boy, he quit cold too.

Mrs Edith Allan wrote in a 1924 *Vedanta Kesari* article entitled 'With the Swamis in America' these words of praise about Swami Trigunatita as a guru: 'His energy was untiring, nothing was too small to demand his attention. He was interested in all the little details and daily occurrences in the lives of his students. He was like a fond mother always looking out for the welfare of her children, training them in various ways as their nature required, now by strict discipline, now gently taking them by the hand and leading them into paths of peace and blessedness.'

His earnest work as a spiritual guide probably revealed his sainthood best. He carefully guided

all sincere aspirants, his own initiated disciples, and those of his predecessors. Though he admitted that spiritual life for an individual in the West was very hard, he knew that everyone's true nature was pure Spirit and, by steady practice, one could realize it.

Pioneer's Hazards

In his twelve-year ministry in San Francisco, Swami Trigunatita cheerfully faced one struggle after another, sometimes achieving a victory, sometimes not. It was designed that way, he said, because a life without struggle, without losses and failures, was no life at all. Besides, he knew that as an apostle of the Master a divine power was guiding him. He once told a student during an interview at the temple, 'I sit here and watch great waves of difficulties roll in and then I look into the waves and see God's hand.' To another close student he confessed, 'I could have lived a contemplative life instead of [doing] this work, but I would not have been so close to God.' Thus equipped with this divine knowledge, and with the practical training of Swamiji as well as his own considerable intelligence, imagination, and determination, he went about his work of establishing Vedanta in San Francisco. He did not expect it to be easy, and it never was.

It is a matter of regret that one of the major obstacles in his work came from his own disciples as well as those of other swamis who did not like his method of work, or his ideas, or his specific projects. No matter how outrageous they were, he always handled the problems with respect, patience, and forgiveness. The most striking of these, of course, was when his crazed disciple exploded a bomb at his feet, causing the swami's death. When he was interviewed for the newspaper shortly after the explosion the swami said, 'I do not know why he did it unless it was that he was crazy ... I assure you there had been no trouble between us as far as I know ... I do not harbour any ill will against the man. Please make that plain.'

The second major cause for the swami's difficulties was his own health. Soon after he came to San Francisco the doctor found that he had Bright's dis-

In addition to his lectures and interviews, (Swami Trigunatita) did all the cooking. The monks did the cleaning and dish washing and the gardening. To Swami a Temple required a garden. In that part of the city where there was almost no space between the buildings a garden seemed impossible, but the Swamis have a way of accomplishing the impossible. Sw. Tr(igunatita) applied for and received permission from the city to remove four feet of the sidewalk on two sides of the building. There he put some rich soil, protected and retained it by concrete blocks on which was an ornamental wrought-iron fence. Behind the fence they planted many beautiful flowers and shrubs. ... Seated in the big dining room and noting the lovely flowering vines peeping in the bay windows, one could easily imagine a beautiful and spacious garden adjoining the building.

—*With the Swamis in America and India*, 187

ease, a faulty valve in his heart, and rheumatism, in addition to the malaria he already knew about. He wrote to a friend in India that whenever the pain in his heart and stomach became too bad, he would just lie down for a while till it lessened. He had an extraordinary control over his body; in India he was famous for it. Towards the end of his life he himself said he was holding his body together by sheer force of will. One of his disciples illustrated his magnificent self-control at this time by telling a story. The disciple noticed a quaver in the swami's voice during his lectures and mentioned it to him. The swami tried in subsequent talks to stop the quaver but couldn't. Then the swami confessed that whenever he came out on the platform to speak, the Divine Mother appeared before him, which filled him with such love that he had difficulty speaking. Just imagine what self-control it took to speak at all in such a circumstance!

The third major cause for his difficulties was lack of money. The San Francisco Vedantins of his time were not rich. Most of his loyal supporters were middle-class and worked for a living, so their

contributions to the Vedanta Society were small. The earthquake made money even more scarce. As a consequence the swami took out loans in his own name at six or seven per cent interest. His brother monk, Swami Saradananda, who was secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, was doing the same thing in India in order to build a house for Holy Mother and the *Udbodhan* magazine. In India, as well as America, it was considered unorthodox, if not unethical, for a monk to do such a thing—that is, borrow such a big sum of money on interest, even for a noble cause. But these disciples of Sri Ramakrishna were not just orthodox monks. They were spiritual heroes working for the uplift of humanity. They were Swamiji's type of saints.

How Swami Trigunatita carried the San Francisco temple from its high-minded conception to an actual finished building is a fabulous story, literally something out of a fable. April 2008 was the one hundredth anniversary of the dedication of the completed temple, and it still stands as a testimony to the saint's determined work against all odds, as well as the divine power behind it. Today we Vedantins call it the Old Temple, and we rarely think of it as the firm foundation of Vedanta in San Francisco. So to honour the temple and the far-seeing swami who built it, I think it is apt to review the marvellous story now.

'A Place Dedicated to the Cause of Humanity'

When Swami Trigunatita arrived in San Francisco in January 1903 he studied the situation of Vedanta in America and, specifically, in San Francisco. He made a decision to make the city the centre of his work, rather than the ashrama in the countryside, as Turiyananda had done. He could see that America was fast becoming urban. The Vedantins in the San Francisco Bay Area were working people, and most of them could only afford a two-week vacation at the ashrama. So he decided to use the ashrama for a one-month-a-year retreat as an auxiliary to the spiritual training at the temple in the city.

In the first year, 1903, he had a month-long retreat at Shanti Ashrama in November. Included in the group of retreatants were disciples of Turiyananda, like Frank Rhodehamel who had never before been able to attend a retreat with a swami. Mr Rhodehamel wrote a beautiful description of this retreat in the May 1918 number of *Prabuddha Bharata*. In this article, titled 'Shanti Ashrama Days', he said that Swami Trigunatita 'enjoyed himself and made no attempt to conceal it. He was bubbling over with good spirits'.

Nevertheless, Swami Trigunatita's first priority would be a temple in the city, where Vedanta could reach more people than was possible by the swami giving lectures in rented halls or talks in private homes, and then living mostly in the Shanti Ashrama, as Turiyananda had done. Some of the old students regretted this change and started grumbling about it. But Swami Trigunatita was sure he had made the correct decision. His mind dwelt in the realm of his Master's divine mission and the worldwide movement he had so recently witnessed growing in India under Swamiji. He had seen Swami Vivekananda train Sister Nivedita for helping the women of India, he had served Holy Mother during her early spiritual ministry in Calcutta, he had witnessed the purchase of the Belur Math property—partly financed by Western women—he had watched Swamiji train the monks for a worldwide mission, and he himself had founded the *Udbodhan* magazine.

Thus Swami Trigunatita thought in international, if not cosmic, terms. He envisioned a temple in San Francisco, not just as a place which would serve a small group of devotees in the San Francisco Bay Area, but as a conduit for India's great spiritual ideas and practices to flow into America and meet with the best ideas and ideals of America and thus benefit all of humankind.

Probably it takes a far-seeing saint to think that way, or someone utterly dedicated to the cause of Swami Vivekananda, the world prophet. Swamiji used to think and speak that way. Some of Swami Trigunatita's successors in San Francisco also

spoke that way. For example, in the 1950's Ashokananda gave a lecture with the visionary theme 'India and America: Lands of Destiny'.

So during 1904 Swami Trigunatita and the officers of the Vedanta Society searched for a suitable piece of land on which to build a temple. They found a corner lot in Cow Hollow near the bay and bought it for eight thousand dollars. They financed it through Mr Juhl, a restaurant owner who knew and loved Swami Vivekananda. He gave one thousand dollars as a down payment, and for the remaining seven thousand he gave a loan at six per cent interest to Swami Trigunatita. This was the first big debt the swami took on. And that was just for the land. To finance the building and furnishings would require twice that much. Still, in 1905, the swami went ahead to build the temple. Then, out of the blue, so to speak, came a donation of seven thousand dollars from a Los Angeles lady to clear the mortgage for the land.

A number of devotees gave small donations to build the temple. Only one was large at nine hundred dollars. The names of all the donors were placed in the cornerstone. The nine-hundred-dollar donation was listed as coming from 'a woman disciple of Sri Ramakrishna', who probably was Mrs Ole Bull, the great American benefactor and disciple of Swami Vivekananda. The building went up rapidly in less than four months—August to December 1905. The architect, Mr Leonard, and the swami worked closely together, and Mr Leonard declared he learned more from Swami Trigunatita than the swami learned from him. It was a two-storey structure with just one dome. The first floor was for the Vedanta Society and the swami's residence, and the second floor was for Mr and Mrs Peterson, Turiyananda's disciples with whom Swami Trigunatita lived for all the twelve years he was in San Francisco. Even with-



The Hindu Temple in full regalia

out the towers, which came two years later, the swami proudly called it 'The First Hindu Temple in the Whole Western World, a place dedicated to the cause of humanity'. He stated that if there was the slightest trace of selfishness in its building it would fall; if it was the Master's work, it would stand. The dedication made headlines and drew an overflowing audience. The Vedanta Society during Swami Trigunatita's time always had a very good press. Both the dedication on 8 January 1906 and an interview of the swami the day before, were reported very sympathetically by the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

We have a written record in our archives of the talk the swami gave at the dedication. He addressed this very attentive American audience as 'My dear friends of the great land of liberty', and then went on to thank them for welcoming Vedanta, and indeed all religions, to America, and for spreading ideas of liberty and tolerance throughout the world. As a tribute to America, he said, the Vedanta Society will fly the American flag above the temple. Then he went on to say that the temple is being dedicated to God, not any particular person, society, or religion,

and will serve people of all creeds and faiths. He explained Vedanta as a religion which embraces all other religions and invited them to come to future services. The audience listened with respect and great attention. A week after the dedication the swami wrote a letter to Mrs Ole Bull, telling how he felt about the temple as a part of the Ramakrishna movement. It is worth quoting here:

The Temple here is almost finished; still a little work here, a little work there to be done. But we have been holding classes and meetings here. It is a very good little place. It cost us nearly \$14,000 including furnitures [*sic*]. I am still in debt to \$10,000 at 6% interest. It is a very important work no doubt, to establish a permanent basis of close relationship between India and America. In India, by the able and active good wishes of you all, we have been able to establish a permanent centre to carry out and to carry on the great work of Vedanta in the West. Now, this is the beginning of the permanent centre on the other end, i.e. in America, to receive constantly what India can give, and to take in return what America can give to India. All this is due to our blessed Swami Vivekananda.

Don't scold me, mother, for my daring spirit of having incurred such a great debt. It is a great disinterested work. And I believe, dear mother, all disinterested works (no matter by whom done) are directly looked out for by God.

He enclosed a picture of the temple and several copies of the pamphlet describing it.

The Hindu Temple was the home of the Vedanta Society. Here the swami felt free to train a group of serious students in meditation, self discipline, and Indian philosophy as found in the Gita and Upanishads. He called this training 'brahmacharya'. He also felt free to introduce more concrete things and customs from India. He performed at least two Indian-style weddings for his Western devotees, and several 'first-rice' ceremonies for Western babies. The swami kept a friend in India busy sending Indian food items such as dal, curry, pickle, and himself would cook them for the devotees. He asked his friend to send worship utensils and performed worship in Indian style. He sent for musical

instruments such as tabla, sheet music with English notation, and phonograph records with good melodies such as those of Ramprasad. Some of the swami's disciples were good musicians and were able to compose songs combining Western and Indian musical styles. At the temple he was able to have a printing press where he published a magazine—*Voice of Freedom*—and other Vedanta literature.

Some of the old Vedantins did not like all this trend towards Indian culture, nor so much organized activity. They preferred the straight philosophy and meditation as taught by Swami Trigunatita's predecessors. Soon after the 8 January 1906 dedication Brahmachari Gurudas, the caretaker of Shanti Ashrama, expressed dissatisfaction by suggesting in a letter to Swami Trigunatita that Shanti Ashrama be made a centre separate from the Hindu Temple, a year-round Vedanta retreat with a different swami as head. He volunteered to be head until a swami could come from India. Needless to say the executive committee in San Francisco said 'no' to this proposal. The swami sent a rather kindly letter to Gurudas along with the executive committee's refusal. This rejection turned out to be a boon for Gurudas because when he left the ashrama, he went to India and stayed six years, associating with his beloved Swami Turiyananda and other monks of the Ramakrishna Order.

Swami Trigunatita had planned to go to Shanti Ashrama with a small group of members in May for a month-long retreat. But the 18 April earthquake altered everybody's plans in San Francisco. The retreat was postponed. The Hindu Temple was spared, but everything in San Francisco was scarce—money, food, shelter, and easy transportation.

In August of 1906 Swami Prakashananda, Swami Vivekananda's disciple, came to serve as assistant swami in the Hindu Temple. This swami was a wonderful help in all the temple work until he left in May of 1914 to start 'his own centre'.

In 1907 Swami Trigunatita decided to add a third floor to the Hindu Temple and a group of towers to represent different religions and cul-

tures of the world. His original purpose for building the third floor flat was to accommodate Swami Brahmananda when he came to America. Then, when he found that the great swami could not leave his duties in India, Swami Trigunatita decided to start a monastery. The addition to the temple was completed and dedicated on 5 April 1908.

Again the dedication was well received by the San Francisco press and public. An overflowing crowd attended the grand affair, and the press noted that the Americans watched with awe as *arati* was performed at one of the towers on the roof. Again the swami went into heavy personal debt. Again there was opposition from some of the members, which the swami calmly addressed, this time with a question and answer meeting.

There was also one of the swami's amazing financial rescues from out of the blue, as it were. It happened like this: The swami was worrying where the money for the addition would come from. Suddenly the doorbell to the temple rang and in walked an old devotee with a friend carrying a satchel full of eight thousand dollars in gold—a gift for Swami Trigunatita.

The swami told a close disciple of a profound psychological reason for some of his actions like building of towers, insisting on the name Hindu Temple, and the blending of Indian and American customs in his ministry. He knew that prejudice against other peoples, religions, and cultures was deep-seated in the human mind, and this bad trait

would hurt others as well as impede an individual's spiritual growth. So he introduced some of these methods 'to disarm and break down prejudice and bigotry, and ignorance [in order to] harmonize and make the path smooth for those who would follow and carry on the work'.

There is no doubt that Swami Trigunatita and his work in the Hindu Temple have accomplished this noble purpose in great measure. When Ashokananda arrived in San Francisco in 1931, he was very much impressed by the holiness of the temple. He felt the presence of God vividly there. It was obvious to him that the temple was too small for the expanding work; but how could he move to a larger place, leaving such holiness behind? Ashokananda asked Swami Shivananda, the president of the Ramakrishna Mission, about it, and Shivananda replied: 'Now that the space is insufficient Swami Trigunatita himself would move the temple to another place, and if you do this, your effort will receive blessings first of all from him. He will be happy.' Then Shivananda gave his blessing by saying, 'Wherever you will move the temple, in that place not only the stream of Sri Ramakrishna's divine power will not be hurt in any way or diminished but rather will grow, so that more and more it will attract people's hearts and minds.'

So today in this New Temple we are continuing to benefit from what this great saint Swami Trigunatita did for us when he lived and served in our city a century ago.



The Glory of a Spiritual Life

There cannot be anything more stimulating in our spiritual life than knowing spiritual people, particularly those who have become illumined. We do not know the nature of spiritual truth or spiritual reality unless we come in contact with a person whose whole life and soul have become formed in the mould of this truth and fact. There are men who do not have anything else but God. They may appear to have a body, but that body is itself impregnated with the consciousness of God. This may sound unnecessarily exalted; it is not so, not at all. Words

cannot convey the greatness we saw in the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Until you have seen such people, you will not understand the meaning of the things that are spoken of in religion. You are told you must love God with your whole heart and soul. What can you understand of that, how can you learn to do it unless you have seen what it is you are to learn? You see it in these men who never wanted anything for themselves. You see the glory of spiritual life just bursting out in their lives.

—Swami Ashokananda



Swami Advaitananda: Transcending History

Swami Satyamayananda

human greed; and people keep dying in accordance with natural law. Recorded history is a jigsaw puzzle with many incomplete pieces; it is a narrative of flux, of things built and razed.

A closer look at history reveals two facets: One, the external world of 'objective facts,' which the positivist historians especially emphasize, and two, the inner or psychological side of humanity, which has engaged the attention of academics only recently. It is the second aspect that Indian historical records have long emphasized; and it is the inner life that drives outer history and makes it comprehensible.

Social life in ancient India was structured to lead people to spiritual freedom. Hence, every type of psychological terrain and the struggles and triumphs of the human psyche have been minutely detailed in a wide range of classical Indian texts. It is this literary, cultural, and spiritual wealth that has helped India not only to survive but also to thrive and contribute to the development of other cultures and civilizations.

Transcendence of History

Millions of wretched lives have no place in history. These millions live their own history, seeking a world where they can forget the poverty and tyranny that they suffer. From a philosophical perspective, 'the history of the human race is the history of relentless struggle against sorrows and sufferings. Positively, it is a struggle for more assurance and stability for making the world more and more habitable and hospitable. ... The course of human history is this gigantic process of experimentation and verification.'¹ This gives a purpose and place to history's unknown millions.

THOUGH India is one of the oldest living civilizations, Indians have long been charged with having a poor sense of history. Of course, history as we know it, is an oversimplification of actual happenings: power-hungry kings and potentates, scheming politicians, and violent warriors keep flitting across the canvas of nations; land and wealth keep changing hands, testifying to unending

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In Indian religious thought, however, things are viewed differently. Achievements and material progress can at best ensure only relative freedom from physical suffering. Even heaven is too narrow and fragile to hold the infinite potentialities of the Atman. So, absolute freedom, or spiritual emancipation, is what is to be aimed for.² India has always stood for the affirmation of the spirit over matter. This transcendence of history is also ‘transcendental existence’, what the Bhagavadgita calls *brahma-nirvana*, being absorbed in Brahman.

Yogeshwara amidst the Ruins

The story of a villager seeking livelihood in a big city—invariably due to poverty and sorrow—is bound to be worn out through a million repetitions. ‘History’ does not remember Gopalchandra Ghosh or his family.³ But it does remember Calcutta, capital of British India, where imperial authority was concentrated after the First War of Indian Independence was crushed in 1859.

The image of mid-nineteenth-century Calcutta would appear grim to our eyes: Filtered water was a rarity and sewers were almost non-existent. Roadside trenches served as sewers and storm drains, and these were often clogged with garbage and carcasses. Night soil was collected from latrines by sweepers and relayed by carts to a boat anchored at the Old Mint Ghat and dumped in the sea near Budge Budge at low tide.⁴ Swami Vivekananda’s graphic portrayal of the conditions in India held good for Calcutta too:

Worn-out huts by the very side of palaces, piles of refuse in the near proximity of temples ... devastation by violent plague and cholera; malaria eating into the very vitals of the nation, starvation and semi-starvation as second nature; death-like famine often dancing its tragic dance; the Kurukshetra (battlefield) of malady and misery, the huge cremation ground, strewn with the dead bones of lost hope, activity, joy, and courage; and in the midst of that, sitting in august silence the Yogi, absorbed in deep communion with the Spirit, with no other goal in life than Moksha.⁵

This was India then, and in Calcutta too there

were a host of such yogis and yoginis, monks and householders, young and old—both educated and uneducated; and they were to make a significant impact on the spiritual history of the world. They were all, unbeknown to themselves, converging towards the *yogeshwara*, the ‘lord of yoga’, who was waiting for them at Dakshineswar. Gopalchandra Ghosh was one of them. The time was ripe for a spiritual renaissance and India was undergoing one of her periodic renewals.

Old Gopal’s Detachment

Gopalchandra, the future Swami Advaitananda, lived at Sinthi, a northern suburb of Calcutta. He worked for Benimadhav Pal at his China Bazaar shop which sold household goods like brooms, mats, and curry-combs. Gopal was quite old when he started visiting Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. His background and mental make-up appear to have been rather different from that of the other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna; even he seemed to be little aware of the direction in which his psyche was leading him. Beni Pal used to invite Sri Ramakrishna to the Brahmo Samaj festivals at his garden-house in Sinthi. Gopal must have had occasion to see him at these festivals. But he does not seem to have been particularly interested in him; nor does Sri Ramakrishna seem to have taken particular notice of Gopal.

Gopal was jolted out of his reasonably comfortable life when his wife passed away. He was fifty-five, broken-hearted and lonely. He came to Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar encouraged by his employer, who found his conscientious employee shattered. This was in March or April 1884. On this first visit Sri Ramakrishna was indifferent to him. The cold reception only served to deepen his depression and grief, and Gopal decided not to visit the Paramahansa again. Grief had lead Gopal to become detached from the world. But such detachment Sri Ramakrishna called *markata vairagya*, the transient renunciation of the monkey. The scriptures say that there are three types of detachment:

Such thought as ‘the worldly life is not worth

The Master had said, 'A band of Bauls descends upon a house. They chant the name of the Lord and dance with joy. Then suddenly they leave. As abrupt in going as in coming! And the people know them not.'

He was referring to himself, to the Incarnation who comes to the world with his disciples and leaves the world unknown and unsung. Now Ramakrishna had come and gone like the Baul. But he had left behind him a band of young followers on fire with God. The fire had flared in Ramakrishna, the fire that had engulfed his personality, like a burning bush, without consuming it, that same flame that had finally consumed his body on the bank of the Ganges, destroying for ever the dark cage of the Spirit—that fire now burned in a handful of young souls who were bent on igniting the world.

The Baul had come and gone. But his band would continue to dance their way through nearly half of the twentieth century. Through most of the nations of the earth, through India, through the alien lands of Europe and America and the Far East, they would dance their heady dance—unsung, unknown perhaps to the great mass of men, but not without sowing the flaming seeds of Love on the winds of the dark age of untruth.

—Richard Schiffman

it' occurs temporarily in the loss of a son or wife or wealth, which is considered to be weak detachment.

The determination not to have a child, wife, etc. in this life is said to be strong detachment.

Such thoughts as 'for me the world with its cycle of rebirth etc. shall not be' is considered the stronger detachment. There cannot be any renunciation in weak detachment.⁶

Sri Ramakrishna may not have found 'strong detachment' in Gopal, but that was probably the furthest thing from the latter's mind at that time. He was seeking to be consoled rather than to renounce. He wanted someone to placate his restless mind. Urged by his employer, he went again to Sri Rama-

krishna. This time Sri Ramakrishna spoke of God and lifted his spirits and emphasized in fiery words the impermanence of the world. Gopal's mind was now suffused with hope and strength. The purpose of his life was revealed to him, as though in a flash. In a few minutes of conversation, Sri Ramakrishna, like an accomplished physician, had injected him with a strong dose of detachment. Gopal was now ready to renounce the world and begin his quest for God in right earnest. A third visit to Sri Ramakrishna, and Gopal's transformation was complete. He later reminisced: 'The Master possessed me. I would think of him day and night. The pang of separation from the Master gave me chest pain. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't forget his face.'⁷

Shubhechchha, Noble Resolve

Gopal sundered his ties with home and history—rather, he transcended these—and came to live at Dakshineswar. His mind now hankered for liberation; the old attachments had weakened.

'Two varieties of sannyasa namely, *hamsa* and *paramahamsa*, are possible in stronger aversion to worldly life and its goods. The difference between them is that the former leads to *brahmaloka* and the latter to moksha, complete liberation. The *hamsa* sannyasin realizes the absolute Truth in *brahmaloka* whereas the *paramahamsa* sannyasin, the ascetic of the highest order, who has subdued his senses through the practice of concentration, attains the same here and now.'⁸

Gopal's humility, management skills, meticulousness, and sweet behaviour endeared him to all, especially to Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. Sri Ramakrishna would call him 'Overseer' or 'Old Gopal'; to the youngsters he was 'Gopal-da'—elder-brother Gopal. He did the shopping for Holy Mother, who never veiled her face in his presence as she invariably did in front of other men. He was good at playing the tabla and used to accompany Narendranath—later Swami Vivekananda—and other singers during devotional singing. Slowly, the fire of his renunciation was being fanned through close contact with the *yogeshwara* and the

other yogis who were assembling at Dakshineswar. Old Gopal was under the close scrutiny of the Master, the embodiment of the Indian spiritual heritage. If India's inner history was in the process of renewal and rejuvenation, Old Gopal's mind and body were also being put in a new mould. The Master rebuked him for his occasional forgetfulness, instilled in him the importance of being truthful, and made him see sweepers and scavengers in a new light.⁹ This, the scriptures say, is the result of the first stirrings of knowledge, the first movement towards liberation; this is *shubhechha*, noble resolve: 'The will to know born of detachment in the form—why should I remain deluded, let me cogitate with the help of scriptures and learn from holy men—is called [*shubhechha*] goodwill by the wise.'¹⁰

This is the first stage of 'knowledge'. It is marked by the cultivation of the following: (i) discrimination between the real and the unreal; (ii) giving up desire for the fruits of karma in this world and the hereafter; (iii) the disciplines of controlling the external and internal sense-organs, withdrawing them, silently enduring all suffering, faith, and contemplation; and (iv) the desire for liberation.

Ascending to the first plane of *jnanabhumi*, 'the realm of knowledge', was also the first step towards knowing the *yogeshwara* and the other yogis.

Vicharana, Discrimination

There arose now in Old Gopal a tremendous urge to get initiated with a mantra, but something was holding him back from expressing his desire to the Master. His longing, however, had the better of his subconscious hesitation and he poured out his heart to the Master, falling down at his feet in tears in the temple garden. Sri Ramakrishna lifted him up, holding him by his arms, and spoke to him soothingly. Since that time people noticed Old Gopal regularly chanting God's name in front of the Radha-Krishna temple. Thus the guru paved the way for him to ascend to the second stage of knowledge, which is Vicharana, the plane of 'discrimination'. It involves intense engagement in *shraavana* and *manana*, hearing about and reflecting on

the truth declared by Vedanta. As Sri Ramakrishna was conditioning Gopal for this stage, he dissuaded him from going out on pilgrimage. He said: 'As long as a man feels that God is "there", he is ignorant. But he attains Knowledge when he feels that God is "here". ... What a man seeks is very near him. Still he wanders about from place to place.'¹¹

Palpable spirituality was at hand like fresh water, but Old Gopal wanted to go in search for it. Pilgrimage is good, but this was not the time for it. This is a mistake that many spiritual aspirants commit when they undertake pilgrimage after just a little spiritual awakening; in such cases there is always the danger of one's spirituality getting diluted. A pilgrimage would have interfered with the inner train of Gopal's *shraavana* and *manana*. In the presence of Sri Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother, and the brother disciples spiritual practices would fructify quickly; and Gopal being old had no time to lose. This was 1884. A year hence, Sri Ramakrishna would develop a cancerous sore in the throat and would have to move to Calcutta. Old Gopal would then be needed to serve the Master and help Holy Mother. And he did serve Sri Ramakrishna at Shyampukur in Calcutta, and later at Kashipur—nursing him, looking after his medicines and diet, cleaning the cancerous sore, and doing scores of other things. During this period his assistance was also invaluable to Sri Sarada Devi. The work was hard, and Old Gopal, out of love for his guru, overcame all personal discomfort and troubles to serve with energy and single-minded devotion, day and night.

Tanumanasa, A Fine Mind

This was a kind of intense meditation on Sri Ramakrishna; it was *nididhyasana* or meditative insight. With this, one enters the third stage of knowledge called Tanumanasa, the plane characterized by 'fineness of mind'. It is the ability to grasp subtle spiritual matters through concentration. This stage takes a long time to mature, but Old Gopal was enthusiastic and unflagging in spirit, and his guru blessed him abundantly at Kashipur. Besides devoted service, he also undertook intense meditation

to realize the Truth. Narendranath would urge the brother disciples: ‘The Master’s disease is extremely serious. May he not intend to lay down his body! Strive your best for spiritual enlightenment through service to him and prayer and meditation, while there is yet time.’¹²

It was common for Sri Ramakrishna’s disciples, these yogis, to spend entire nights in meditation under Narendranath’s guidance. Endowed with very strong renunciation, they made their personal comforts and family obligations but a distant memory. Sri Ramakrishna had told Old Gopal about these disciples: ‘Where else will you find such all-renouncing monks? Each one of them is equal to a thousand monks’ (519).

Old Gopal was free of family and professional obligations and he plunged wholeheartedly into the broad stream of spiritual life. Just before his passing away, Yogeshwara Ramakrishna disclosed to his dis-

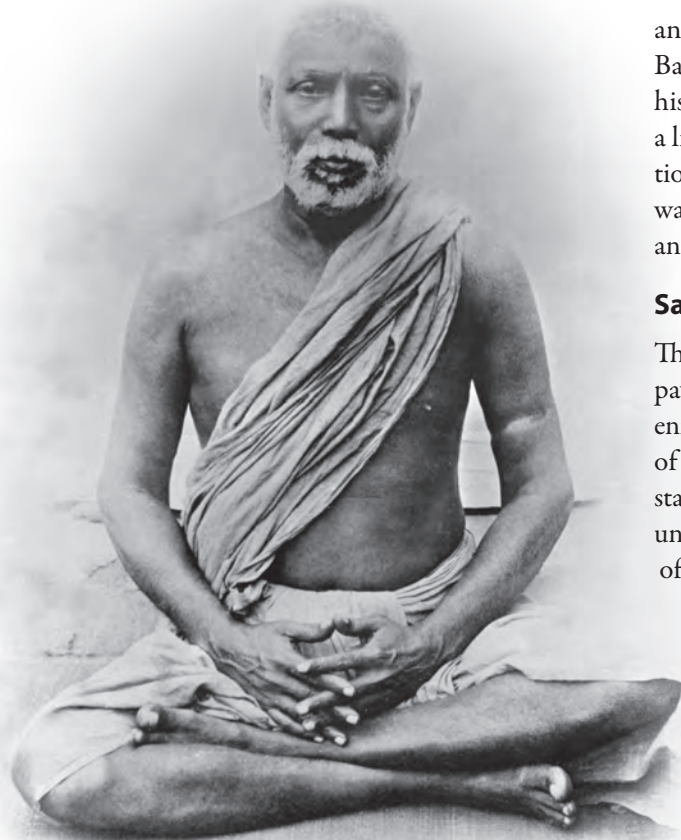
ciples his real nature as well as the mission that this select band of yogis was to accomplish. This knowledge cemented the bond that bound the disciples together. Old Gopal, who had received monastic robes from Sri Ramakrishna himself, took formal monastic vows after the Master’s passing away and became Swami Advaitananda—one whose bliss is in the non-dual Reality. He was one of the first disciples to join the monastery at Baranagar. At this time the brother disciples were carried atop a massive wave of monastic fervour, spending their days and nights in deep study, intense spiritual practice, rapturous devotional singing, and devoted discussions on the significance of the Master’s life. The process of establishment in the Tanumanasa plane was getting firmer and the minds of the disciples were becoming finer. The old Advaitananda was an easy target of jokes that enlivened the life in the monastery; and he in turn enjoyed it. He was egoless and unselfconscious.

The extensive pilgrimages and difficult itinerant life that Advaitananda undertook from the Baranagar Math crystallized his character. During his long stay in a small room in Varanasi, he lived a life marked by the stillness of prayer and meditation. With him everything went like clockwork. He was undeviating in his practice of making the body and mind mature for experiencing the Truth.

Sattvapatti, Enlightenment

The three stages of knowledge mentioned above pave the way for the fourth: Sattvapatti or ‘enlightenment’. It is the stage of superconscious realization of the identity of Brahman and the Atman. This stage is compared to the dream state, for therein the universe, as a whole, appears as unreal—composed of names and forms superimposed on Brahman. In contrast, the first three stages are comparable to the waking state, for in these planes the aspirant apprehends the universe just as it is—with its objective differences. Sattvapatti is therefore the knowledge of Brahman.

The long years that Advaitananda spent in the Tanumanasa plane led him to this spir-



itual illumination in a novel way. Novitiates who joined the Order at the newly established Belur Math could hardly meet the high standards set by the old Advaitananda, though the latter had become afflicted with rheumatism. Many of the novitiates would receive scoldings from the swami when they failed to meet his expectations. One day Advaitananda had a revelation: ‘The Master has shown me that it is He who is manifested through all. Then whom to blame or whom to criticize?’¹³

In this plane Advaitananda realized that Sri Ramakrishna, whom he had served and meditated upon, and who was the reality of his life, was also the reality pervading the objective universe. To experience this, the scriptures say, is to be free. He was thus a *jivanmukta*, free while living, and a *brahmavit*, knower of Brahman. Sri Ramakrishna had freed him of his grief and attachment, freed him from the world—from outer history—and now he was freeing him from the rounds of birth and death, making him immortal. The Master had pointed out that some of the direct disciples were partial incarnations or companions of well-known divinities, but Advaitananda had nothing except good karma performed in his previous lives to his credit.¹⁴ Despite this, he scaled the highest realms of spirituality.

History Maker

A sandstone obelisk stands as a silent sentinel inside a simple enclosure in the southeast corner of the hallowed Belur Math precincts. This is a *samadhi pitha*, a cremation site—the last resting place of some modern spiritual history-makers. The legend on this austere monument—written in Bengali and English—records, with utter simplicity, the names and dates of seven direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. This is visible history. Advaitananda’s name figures at the top. Born in 1828, he lived till 20 December 1909. The monument stands watching the vast verdant grounds where Advaitananda had put in back-breaking toil in his old age.

What is invisible to the steady stream of devoted visitors is the inner depth of the lives that are marked by these names and dates. Yet their impress is palp-



Samadhi Pitha, Belur Math

able, for these lives have entered into the inner history of humanity, into the veins of the future. These individuals now live a greater life, playing a pivotal role in raising human consciousness. This is what draws people to pay their obeisance here.

Jivanmukti and Beyond

The following are the three stages beyond Sattvapati: Asamsakti, ‘non-relational’ stage or the plane of ‘disconnection’; Padarthabhavini, the ‘objectless’ plane; and Turyaga, the plane of ‘transcendence’. These are but secondary divisions of *jivanmukti*.¹⁵

When the mind is able to remain detached from all duality, it has attained to Asamsakti. This stage of jnana is compared to sleep, because from this stage the yogi can emerge on one’s own. Such a yogi is called *brahmavit-vara*, a great knower of Brahman. When this stage matures further, it leads to Padarthabhavini, the stage devoid of objects, which is likened to deep sleep. From here, yogis do not return to the mundane world on their own, but they can be brought down by the efforts of others. There were numerous incidents in Sri Ramakrishna’s life where these two stages are clearly manifested; there were occasions when he would descend from samadhi on his own, and at other times someone would have to bring him back to normal consciousness by chanting God’s name. Such is the state of the *brahmavit-variyan*, the greater knower of Brahman. The seventh stage, Turyaga, is reached when the yogi goes beyond all duality and so cannot be brought down from samadhi even by external effort. Such a yogi is a mass of consciousness, full of

supreme bliss, 'with his bodily functions managed by others—without any effort of his own—as a result of his vital forces [*pranas*] being controlled by the supreme Lord'.¹⁶ This is *videha-mukti*, the 'liberation of the disembodied'. One who has reached this stage is called the *brahmavid-varishtha*, the greatest knower of Brahman.

It may be worth recalling Sri Ramakrishna's experience of this highest samadhi:

For six months the Master dwelt in the nirvikalpa state almost uninterruptedly. He later said: 'For six months I was in that state from which ordinary mortals never return. Ordinarily, the body can live only for twenty-one days in that state; then it falls like a dry leaf from a tree. There is no consciousness of time, the coming of day or the passing of night. ... Could this body survive? It should have died at that time. But luckily a monk then arrived at Dakshineswar. ... He recognized my state. He understood that much of Divine Mother's work was yet to be done through this body, and many people would benefit if it were preserved.'¹⁷

Apparently one does not see these higher stages of jnana manifested in Advaitananda's life as they are in Sri Ramakrishna's—clearly discernible and prominent. But Sri Ramakrishna assures us: 'As the children inherit the wealth of their parents, so those who mediate on me will inherit my treasures.'¹⁸ In his later life Advaitananda had done nothing but meditate on Sri Ramakrishna, and he naturally inherited the treasures that were Sri Ramakrishna's. In fact, it is impossible to think of Advaitananda as separate from the Master.

Sri Ramakrishna—the *yogeshwara* who had kept himself away from the public gaze for much of his life and had revealed his real nature only before he left this world—transcended the stages of *jivanmukti* and *brahmajnana* mentioned above. Having identified himself with Sri Ramakrishna, Advaitananda also rose above these relative stages of *mukti* and *brahmajnana*. Having begun his spiritual journey by transcending history, Advaitananda ultimately attained real transcendence and became part of history.



Notes and References

1. Hemant Ganguli, *God, Religion and Reason* (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1982), 2.
2. See *God, Religion and Reason*, 3.
3. 'Gopalchandra Ghosh was born in 1828 at Rajpur (Jagaddal), in 24-Parganas, nearly twenty five miles north of Calcutta. Very little is known about his family except that his father's name was Govardhan Ghosh'; Swami Chetanananda, *God Lived with Them* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 515.
4. See Sukanta Chaudhuri, *Calcutta: The Living City*, 2 vols (Calcutta: Oxford, 1990), 1.227.
5. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, vols 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 5.441.
6. Swami Vidyāraṇya, *Jīvan-mukti-viveka*, trans. Swami Mokshadananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2001), 2–3.
7. *God Lived with Them*, 515.
8. See *Jīvan-mukti-viveka*, 3.
9. Once when Dr Mahendra Pal and Old Gopal were walking with Sri Ramakrishna on the garden path outside the Master's room, they saw a woman sweeper approaching them, carrying a tub of excrement from a nearby privy on her head. To the amazement of his companions, Sri Ramakrishna prostrated before the sweeper, stretching fully on the ground, and said, 'Mother who can do this work except you?'; *God Lived with Them*, 516.
10. *Jīvan-mukti-viveka*, 285.
11. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 425–6.
12. His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 1.159.
13. *Apostles of Shri Ramakrishna*, ed. and comp. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1982), 300.
14. See *God Lived with Them*, 519.
15. *Jīvan-mukti-viveka*, 286–8.
16. *Bhagavad-Gita*, comm. Madhusudana Sarasvati, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2007), 233.
17. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. Swami Chetanananda (St Louis: Vedanta Society, 2003), 419–20.
18. Swami Chetanananda, *How to Live with God* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 86.

Swami Akhandananda: Service as Worship

Swami Devarajananda

IT was the Vijaya Dashami day. Durga puja had just concluded. As per local tradition, people of the Sargachhi village came to the local ashrama in the evening to offer pranams to their dear and revered 'Baba'. Baba asked them to wait for sometime so that he could give them some prasada. Pujari Maharaj, the monk in charge of worship in the temple, was making an offering of sweets to Sri Ramakrishna. The visitors waited patiently. But Baba became a little impatient after sometime. He asked a boy called Sidhu to go and see what Pujari Maharaj was doing. He went and saw Pujari Maharaj sprinkling water according to ritual procedure; the offering was still in progress. After sometime, Baba asked Sidhu to again enquire into the cause for the delay. This time Sidhu found Pujari Maharaj absorbed in meditation. When Baba was informed, he asked Sidhu to bring the offerings to him. 'To whom is he offering the sweets?' he asked. 'Sri Ramakrishna is verily seated in front of me in the form of these people. I see it very clearly.' Sidhu, who had received spiritual initiation from the swami, did as he was told. Generally, it is considered sacrilegious to remove the plate from the altar before the offering is completed. But this was a special case; the order had come from his guru, who saw Shiva in every jiva. For Swami Akhandananda, who was known as 'Baba' or 'Dandi Baba', it was improper to make the living God wait for an indefinite period of time. So he had the sweets brought to him and distributed them among his 'God the poor'. A few years later, Sidhu—or Siddheshwar, as he was formally

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named—joined the Ramakrishna Order and became known as Swami Amalananda. When he narrated this incident in his old age, it seemed to his listeners that he had again become that little boy Sidhu—mesmerized by Baba's love for the poor.

The Inspiration

Once, in his room at Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna was speaking about the sadhana prescribed for the Vaishnavas. Many devotees were present, including the young Narendra (Swami Vivekananda).

Sri Ramakrishna said that a Vaishnava is expected to cultivate the following qualities: (i) compassion for living beings, (ii) taste for God's name, and (iii) service to devotees of God. While uttering these words, he entered into samadhi. After coming down from that state he started speaking in an exalted mood: 'Compassion for living beings! Who are you to be compassionate to anybody? An insignificant creature you are! Who are you to show compassion? No; no. It is not compassion to jivas but service to them as Shiva (*shiva jnane jiva seva*).' Gradually, he came down to the normal plane. Soon after hearing these words Narendra declared that he had received a new light through the words of the Master. God willing, he would translate these words of the Master into action.

In the meantime a young boy named Gangadhar Gangopadhyay, son of Srimanta Gangopadhyay, started visiting Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. A resident of North Calcutta, Gangadhar had seen the Master at an early age, in the house of his neighbour Dinanath Bose. Sri Ramakrishna's personality attracted Gangadhar strongly and he started visiting the Master at Dakshineswar. This boy, who later became known as Swami Akhandananda, showed signs of strong dispassion for worldly life from his very childhood. Once his mother Vamasundari Devi put a gold chain round child Gangadhar's neck, but the boy lost no time in tearing it off, to the mother's dismay. After being invested with the sacred thread, he began to follow a very austere life. He would take bath four times a day before sitting for his *upasana* or ritual devotions as prescribed in the scriptures. He would himself cook his simple food once a day and practise complete disregard for physical comfort. When he started to frequent Dakshineswar, he would go in the evenings, undertake spiritual practices under the guidance of Sri Ramakrishna, and leave for home the next morning. He would not stay there any longer for fear of being asked by Sri Ramakrishna to take his midday meal in the temple premises. If he were to obey his orders, he would not be able to maintain the self-imposed strict habit of cooking his own simple

food. But one day Sri Ramakrishna asked him to stay on and partake of the prasada of Mother Kali. He told Gangadhar that Mother Kali's prasada was the purest food in the world. He should have no hesitation in partaking of it. Gangadhar obeyed. When he returned he saw Sri Ramakrishna standing in front of his room with a betel roll in his hand. He gave it to Gangadhar and asked him to chew it. Gangadhar was not habituated to chewing betel, as he considered this a luxury, which he ought to shun as poison. But Sri Ramakrishna told him that there was nothing wrong in chewing betel. He cited the example of Narendra, a young boy who takes 'a hundred betel rolls', but sees God everywhere. He asked Gangadhar to meet Narendra at Simla. Gangadhar did so, and was immediately fascinated by Narendra's personality. He was junior in age to Narendra only by about two years. But he developed a deep regard for him—a regard that lasted his entire lifetime—and became his follower in the truest sense of the term.

Sri Ramakrishna's words about Vaishnava duties threw a new light on practical Vedanta, and it was Narendra who grasped this fact immediately. As was mentioned above, on the very day that Sri Ramakrishna announced in an ecstatic mood the need to serve jiva as Shiva, Narendra took a vow to translate this teaching of his Master into action. And for this he needed a faithful lieutenant. The Master knew this; that is why he introduced Gangadhar to Narendra. Even when some of the other brother disciples of Swami Vivekananda were not fully convinced of the twin ideals he set before the Ramakrishna Mission—*atmano mokshartham jagaddhitaya cha*; for one's own liberation and for the welfare of the world—Akhandananda readily accepted it and began to work among the poor and the illiterate in a spirit of worship. When he started taking care of orphan children at Mahula 'his state of mind was such that, whenever he saw a dirty, ill-fed, and ill-clad boy in the street, he would take him to the ashrama, and with all affection, remove the dust and dirt from his body, rub him down with oil, bathe him in warm water and soap, and while doing

so, recite with deep feeling the Purusha Sukta as is done when bathing the deity Narayana: “The God with thousands of heads, eyes, and feet, who covers the whole universe ...”’

Learning the Essentials of Spiritual Life

Before coming to Sri Ramakrishna, Gangadhar had his own ideas about religious life. To him, leading a religious life meant undergoing a very strict and rigorously austere routine. In 1883, at the age of nineteen, he went to Dakshineswar for the first time, and for the next three years the Master provided proper spiritual guidance to him. He would generally visit Dakshineswar on Tuesdays and Saturdays, because the Master asked him to do so. During these visits, Gangadhar received instructions on meditation from Sri Ramakrishna; he also had the opportunity to render some simple services to his guru. One day, while going to the Ganga for his bath, Sri Ramakrishna asked Gangadhar to accompany him with his water pot. At the bathing ghat Gangadhar noticed the Master’s deep reverence for the waters of the Ganga—he sprinkled it

on his head and made sure he did not spit into the river after washing his mouth. The Master used to say that Ganga water was Brahman in liquid form, *brahmavari*; his behaviour at the river bank convinced young Gangadhar that Ganga water was no ordinary water. From then on he too began to feel the holiness of Ganga water.

After returning from his bath, the Master met a beggar in front of his room. He asked Gangadhar to give the beggar some coins from the shelf in his room. After Gangadhar had done so, the Master asked him to wash his hands with Ganga water and repeat God’s name. In this way he strengthened Gangadhar’s detachment from money. Later, Gangadhar travelled extensively in North India and Tibet without keeping a single paisa with him.

Gangadhar was used to having the darshan of Mother Kali and the supine image of Shiva at Dakshineswar from outside the *garbha mandira*, sanctum sanctorum. The face of the Shiva image is not clearly visible from outside the sanctum. Knowing about Gangadhar’s devotion to Shiva, the Master took him inside the sanctum one day and said, ‘See

The Quest for Knowledge

Swami Akhandananda was on an unceasing quest for knowledge throughout his entire life, being true to his Master’s ideal: ‘As long as I live, so long do I learn’. To him, study was a matter of joy and he never lost an opportunity for it.

During his days of wandering in the Himalayas as a young *parivrajaka*, he devoured with delight a manuscript of the *Avadhuta Gita* at Srinagar in Garhwal. In 1891, while resting at Etawah, he spent most of his time reading the *Mahabhashya*, Patanjali’s voluminous commentary on Panini’s Sanskrit grammar, as well as Sridhara Swami’s commentary on the *Bhagavadgita*. Reaching Jamnagar in 1892, he studied the *Charaka-Sushruta Samhita* with the help of the Sanskrit lexicon *Shabdārtha Chandrika Kosha*. There he also studied the *Shukla Yajur Veda* and its intonation. While he was at Khetri he happened to face ridicule for his incorrect Hindi pronunciation. He immediately applied himself to the study of *Bhasha Bhaskara*, a text on Hindi grammar, and mastered it in a short time. He also spent

much time in the Raja’s private library studying Sanskrit poetry and philosophy, Indian history, and the works of Theodore Parker. In the charming historical city of Udaipur he used the royal garden library to read works on history and archaeology, and the Vedantic text *Panchadashi*. While staying at an ashrama in Plassey, he read the *Manu Samhita* in one night. Similarly, at Indore, he completed a reading of the entire *Valmiki Ramayana* over a period of eighteen days. Later, while staying at Mahula, he undertook a critical study of the *Yogavasishta Ramayana*.

Swami Akhandananda was an exemplar *sans pareil* of the pursuit of knowledge. He demonstrated that a life of travel and hard physical labour was not incompatible with study and that a contemplative focus is obtained through an undying thirst for knowledge. This helps spiritual aspirants hold on to higher thoughts. This exercise of the mind also enriches individual and collective life and brings to light diverse human perspectives, broadening one’s outlook in the process.

Shiva, full of consciousness!’ Gangadhar found the image living and breathing, and was overwhelmed by the bliss that this experience brought him. Later he would see the same living Shiva in every being and would serve him in diverse human forms.

One day the Master asked Gangadhar if he knew how to pray to God. He then began to shed tears and pray like a disconsolate child: ‘Mother, give me knowledge, give me devotion. I want nothing else; I can’t live without you!’ Saying so, he went into samadhi. The intensity of yearning was palpable. The Master would also ask Gangadhar, without fail, if he shed tears while praying and meditating. He would be very pleased if the answer was in the affirmative.

Once Sri Ramakrishna heard somebody say, ‘I know, I know’. He immediately corrected the speaker, saying, ‘What do you say? “I know.” Never say it again. What do you know? Say, “As long as I live, I learn, friend.” He who says “I know” knows not. He who says “I don’t know” might be knowing something. Infinite is knowledge. How much do you know?’ He said this with such fervour that blood started oozing from the sore in his throat. Gangadhar was a witness to this incident. Many years later, in his old age, he said that the lesson he learnt that day lingered so vividly in his mind that throughout his life he had been learning from one and all, that even from poor villagers he learnt so many things. His door of learning was never closed.

The Himalayan Pull

In 1886 Gangadhar received an ochre robe from his guru, which he preserved as a special blessing. After Sri Ramakrishna entered mahasamadhi, Gangadhar spent some days at the Baranagar Math along with a few other brother disciples. However, the call of the Himalayas was resounding strongly in his heart and he prepared himself mentally to respond to that call. He did not divulge his intentions to anyone else at the Baranagar Math. It was only to his father that he expressed his desire to leave hearth and home forever and go to the Himalayas. Srimanta, who was possessed of spiritual in-

sight, readily agreed. He saw Gangadhar off at the Howrah Railway Station, and blessed him from the core of his heart: ‘Go, my son. Fulfil your mission in life. This world is unreal. I bless you: May you attain unflinching devotion to God.’

Now began a new chapter in Gangadhar’s life. Depending solely on God, he embraced the life of a penniless itinerant monk. Having left Calcutta in February 1887, wearing the gerua given by Sri Ramakrishna, Gangadhar spent nearly three and a half years visiting the holy pilgrimage sites of Uttarakhand and Tibet. He went to Gangotri, Yamunotri, Kedarnath, Badrinath, Kailas, and Manas-sarovar. His three visits to Tibet involved considerable risk. He gained ample experience during this period of his life and had the opportunity to interact with some very kind-hearted people who were ever ready to serve itinerant monks, even at the risk of being insulted by their close relatives. He felt that this love for the life of renunciation and service was the basis on which Indian civilization stands. He himself served many people who had no one to look after them and had to bear many inconveniences while doing so. But his spirit of seva did not allow him to overlook the sufferings of his fellow pilgrims and proceed along his own way without taking care of them.

He saw the dark side of the Himalayas too. Some monasteries had plenty of wealth but the residents were indifferent to the poor people of the locality. The heads of those monasteries were so busy with their own luxury and comfort that they did not pay any heed to the suffering of even the people who were working under them and supplying their daily needs. A fearless young man like Gangadhar, who had seen an ideal sadhu life in the person of Sri Ramakrishna, could not bear such a sight. In Tibet he tried to urge the lamas to do something to improve the lot of the poor illiterate people. But not only did the lamas turn a deaf ear to his pleas, they also threatened him with a sword and asked him not to give vent to such ideas. He had to hurriedly quit such places, but the idea of doing something for the hapless poor remained with him.

Gangadhar returned to Calcutta in June 1890 and formally received the vows of sannyasa. Swami Vivekananda gave him the name 'Akhandananda, unbroken bliss'. After spending a few months with his brother disciples, and relating his experiences of the previous years, Akhandananda left for the Himalayas once again, this time accompanying Swami Vivekananda. He had come down to Calcutta at the request of Swamiji, who wanted to have an experienced monk as his companion during his proposed pilgrimage to the Himalayas. Before starting, both of them went to the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi to receive her blessings. While blessing them she asked Akhandananda to take special care of Naren during the pilgrimage. She wanted him to see that her dear Naren, the greatest treasure of the Order, did not suffer from hunger.

While travelling with Swamiji, Akhandananda learnt many a lesson that gradually moulded his future life. But assisting the great Vivekananda was not always easy. Once Swamiji wanted to travel alone, and forbade Akhandananda to follow him. Akhandananda replied that it was in response to his request that he had come down from the Himalayas. How could he leave him now? While Swamiji insisted on travelling incognito, Akhandananda was equally confident he would trace him down whenever he wished to. The account of Akhandananda's travels in Rajputana and Gujarat in pursuit of Swamiji make fascinating reading. Having caught up with him at Mandavi, Akhandananda found Swamiji to be a transformed man, manifesting an extraordinary and irresistible power. He discussed with him the plight of the country as well as its future. Before he left Swamiji alone and moved to Jamnagar, his mind was probably already ready for the important turn that his life was to take now.

Seva-vrata, the Vow of Service

At Jamnagar Akhandananda's life entered a fresh phase. The vow of service, *seva-vrata*, that was to be observed

by him right up to the end of his life, had its origin at Jamnagar. He would say: 'At Jamnagar, the vow of service had its origin; at Khetri, its evolution; and at Murshidabad, its expansion and fulfilment.' He stayed for some time with Jhandu Bhatt, the famous Ayurvedic physician of Jamnagar, and observed how he served his patients with exceptional devotion, setting aside his own comfort. Bhattji used to recite to himself with great feeling a Sanskrit couplet: 'Is there any way by which I may enter into the bodies of other beings and suffer their pains myself?' The life of the seventy-year-old Bhattji was an eye-opener for Akhandananda. He had heard his Master say: 'I learn as long as I live.' Living with Bhattji was a great education. Akhandananda would later say, 'Serving and loving man is the highest good. This I have learnt especially by seeing it practised in Bhattji's life.'

The life of the monk who loved solitude and seclusion underwent a gradual change. God is not to be seen in the Himalayas or places of pilgrimage alone, he is also to be served in temples created by him: the human beings. God has himself announced that he dwells in the hearts of all beings. Then how could the swami turn a blind eye to human suffering? Akhandananda saw God in the poor, in the lowly, and in the oppressed. He felt the urge to serve him through these people. From Gujarat

Swami Akhandananda with the children he served



he went to Rajputana, where he started working among the poor and the illiterate. With the help of the local rulers he made some arrangements for educating poor boys as well as for establishing schools to teach the Vedas. Pleased with his pioneering efforts, Swami Vivekananda wrote him inspiring letters from the US. In 1895 Akhandananda returned to the Alambazar Math in Calcutta after engaging himself in several educational and developmental activities in Rajputana.

Akhandananda was again with his brother monks after a gap of five years. His expanded heart was eager to serve everybody. At that time there was an epidemic of cholera in the locality. Whenever he heard of anyone falling ill, he would attend to the patient, putting his own life at risk. One hot summer afternoon, when the brother monks were taking a short rest, Akhandananda said to himself: 'My vow is to render service to others. ... The others, though asleep, are suffering from heat. I may as well fan them, so that they can rest peacefully.' As he kept fanning, he realized that he felt no fatigue. Rather, he found himself refreshed and his heart was at peace. The act was insignificant in itself, but the swami found vistas of new possibilities opening up before his mind's eye as he kept fanning his brother monks.

In 1897 Swami Vivekananda returned to India after successfully preaching Vedanta in the West for about four years. Even as the whole of India was preparing to accord him a grand reception, Akhandananda was busy exploring the means to materialize projects that were especially close to Swamiji's heart. Starting a school for Vedic studies at the math was one of these. He corresponded with Babu Pramadas Mitra, a reputed scholar of Varanasi, and considered the possibility of bringing Vedic scholars from Avadh for imparting Vedic instructions in Calcutta, but financial and other constraints prevented the execution of his plans at that time.

Akhandananda had a keen interest in history and culture and would not let an opportunity to visit places of historical interest pass by. When

Swami Vivekananda retired to Darjeeling for some badly needed rest, Akhandananda decided to visit some historical sites in Bengal. A short while earlier he had visited, near Triveni in Hooghly, the home of the famous scholar Jagannatha Tarkapanchanana, from whom the pioneering orientalist William Jones had received his first instructions in Sanskrit. He now went to Navadwip, the birthplace of Sri Chaitanya, and then to Palashi in Murshidabad, where the sun of independent India had started setting during the regime of the nawabs. In Murshidabad his own life took a remarkable historical turn.

As Akhandananda entered the district of Murshidabad, he was shocked to see the emaciated famine-stricken people of the villages. With the few coins he was carrying, he procured some puffed rice and distributed it among the famished children. He then nursed a moribund old woman of ninety back to health. The sight all around was so pathetic that he wanted to run away from the place. But God disposed otherwise. Thrice he attempted to leave, but a voice from within held him back saying, 'Where will you go? You have much to do here.'

His remarkable work began in a few days' time. He had gone to the village of Mahula and was invited to attend Annapurna Puja by a local family. He pleaded with Mother Annapurna, who feeds all beings, on behalf of the innumerable poor people who were dying for want of food and drinking water. He also prayed to the Master for the famine-stricken people every day, with tears in his eyes. One day he received a response: 'Wait and watch.' He wrote letters to the brother monks at the Alambazar Math, describing the condition of the famine victims. Some of the brother monks asked him to return to Calcutta, as he would be an extra burden to the poor villagers. He had little means to help them. On the contrary, he would have to depend on them for his own subsistence. But Akhandananda was determined to do something. He wrote back to his brother monks: 'If even one life is saved with what I get here without asking, I shall feel gratified. As for myself, I can easily

go without food for six or seven days. So it is not possible for me to run away from here in a cowardly manner. I may die, but I must do something before that.' Eventually, he got the needed help. Swami Vivekananda wrote to him, 'Bravo, my hero! Victory to the Guru! Go on with the work! Leave the supply of funds to me.' And he sent money and men to assist him. Help came from some other sources as well.

First Organized Relief Work

The Ramakrishna Mission was established on 1 May 1897 at Balaram Bose's house, with the support of the monastic and lay disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. And two weeks later, on 15 May, the first organized relief work of the Ramakrishna Mission was started at Mahula, where Akhandananda began distributing rice among the poor victims of the famine. He had to work hard for days together to carry out this work, allowing himself little time for rest. He toured the local villages, surveyed the situation there, and made a list of people who were in urgent need of rations. The beneficiaries came to the relief camp and got their share of rice. In this way he was able to provide aid to over fifty villages.

Meanwhile, the swami came across some boys and girls who had no one to look after them. He thought of opening an orphanage for these destitute children. He sought the opinion of his leader, Swami Vivekananda, who readily agreed and wrote him an encouraging letter. The district magistrate also issued orders for all police officers of the district to send orphan boys to the swami. As the number of children increased, the ashrama had to be shifted from the relief camp at Mahula to a comparatively larger house in Shibnagar.

The children were not only given food and shelter, they were also trained to develop their character, to grow as true 'men' and 'women'. Together with lessons in reading, writing, and arithmetic, they were also getting scope to develop the three H's—head, heart, and hand—so that they would be able to stand on their own feet after completion of their education in the ashrama. They were

By serving, the heart is purified; by serving, the heart expands; by such service one can see oneself in all. This self-realization alone brings in the love for all.

—Swami Akhandananda, *The Call of the Spirit*, 92

taught beautiful prayers, which could be recited by any person irrespective of caste, creed, or religion. When Swami Vivekananda saw some of the bright and cheerful children of the ashrama he said to Akhandananda: 'Brother, henceforth, don't call your ashrama an orphanage; these boys are no longer orphans.' The boys were indeed under the care of their loving father, 'Baba.'

With the increase in its activities, the ashrama was in need of more space. In 1913 the ashrama was moved to its present premises, on the fifty bighas of land acquired from Haji Maharam Ali at Sargachhi. Here, with the help of a few sincere and dedicated workers, the swami built up the ashrama with its many service activities: 'Swami Akhandananda planted flowering plants and fruit trees all around and made the ashrama like an ancient hermitage. Along with education, the swami concentrated on improving the agricultural and industrial activities amongst the villagers. The ashrama ran a full-fledged industrial school, teaching weaving, sewing, carpentry, and sericulture, which was the pride of the locality. One room of the ashrama was allotted for a library and charitable dispensary, and another room for the shrine.'

Swami Vivekananda had been a source of continual inspiration for Akhandananda. His demise left Akhandananda terribly shocked. He lost all interest for life and work. It was only after he received Swamiji's vision that he again felt encouraged to continue with his work.

Owing to hard labour, frequent attacks of malaria, and lack of proper attention, the swami's health broke down. In spite of this, he was determined to work in the village till the end of his life. It was a command from his Master and from his

leader as well. When Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi came to know about his failing health, she had him brought to Calcutta, kept him with her, and arranged for a special diet and Ayurvedic treatment. Though he had lived an independent life all along, under Holy Mother's care Akhandananda was but a small child, following her affectionate instructions to the last detail. When some of his brother monks wanted to take him to Belur Math, he told them, 'Mother has brought me here for treatment. ... If I go elsewhere, Mother will scold me.' After recovering a little he returned to his work.

The reason why he chose to remain in the villages of Mahula and Sargachhi for much of his life can be easily understood if we go through the speech he delivered on 7 April 1926, during the closing session of the first convention of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission at Belur Math. His stirring words exhorted the audience to sacrifice everything at the altar of service to the motherland. He said:

There is another thing which you must always guard yourself against, and of this the Swamiji—our leader—constantly reminded us: That it is the small deeds done in secret that go to determine a man's character. The desire to do great acts sometimes fattens the ego and becomes the cause of one's ruin. Do not therefore think of doing a very great act and of showing yourselves in the public eye. ... It is easy to do loud deeds in a city where one can easily attract public notice and praise. But there are greater and far more important things to do where there is none to applaud you, none to encourage, none even to help you, and where there is no end to misery and helpless suffering. Go ye there, and devote inch by inch the whole of your life and sadhana, throw into those dark corners and alleys what light and leading you have received from the Master and the Swamiji and lay down tracks which others may follow. If you can do that at the risk of your very life even, then only I shall say that you have rightly caught the strain of Swamiji's thought-forces and set yourself to the task left by him.

His life was the practical demonstration of what

he spoke on that occasion. To him 'the Master and Swamiji are really one; the one spirit as it were, manifested in twin personalities. ... They are in fact inseparable—the obverse and the reverse of the same coin.' So deep was his love and reverence for Swamiji and his mandate to serve the needy that even after becoming the third president of the Order he continued staying in the remote village of Sargachhi. Sometimes he would come to Belur Math and stay in the room next to the one used by Swamiji while he was alive. At night, if he had to pass by Swamiji's room, he would literally tiptoe across, lest Swamiji be disturbed. To him Swamiji was verily living and working in that room.

Though he was growing old, Akhandananda had no time to rest. He had started his work at the command of the Master and was inspired by the fiery letters that Swamiji sent him; until and unless 'they' asked him to take a break, how could he do so? Had he himself chosen to start the work, inspired by his little ego, he would have had the option to pause. But his little ego had merged into the Master. He only prayed that he be allowed to breathe his last at Belur Math, associated with the memory of his dear brother monks. And his prayer was granted. In February 1937 he fell ill. He was brought to Calcutta and was taken to Belur Math when the physicians declared that there was little hope of recovery. Peacefully, 'Ganga' flowed into the Ocean.

Each one of Sri Ramakrishna's disciples is unique. The life that once searched for seclusion in the Himalayan heights and the life that remained surrounded by orphans and poor villagers for forty years at a stretch were seamlessly blended in Akhandananda's being. He saw the same living Shiva in the image under the feet of Mother Kali at Dakshineswar, in the soul of his soul while lost in meditation in the Himalayas, and in the hearts of the poor, illiterate, and distressed village people. That is why he could ask Sidhu to bring the plate of sweets from the altar before the offering to the Master was complete, and distribute its contents among the villagers, who were none other than God himself in various forms.

Swami Vijnanananda: A Hidden Knower of Brahman

Swami Jnanavratananda

The Master was completely oblivious of his surroundings. He wore a white cloth. His face shone with a heavenly lustre and a smile played on his lips. His teeth were visible, and there was such a joyful expression on his face that it seemed as if it would crack—like a cracked melon! His eyes seemed to be gazing at something, and he appeared to be immersed in an ocean of bliss.

Another thing that struck me has remained imprinted in my memory forever. From the base of the Master's spine right up to his head the whole column had become inflated like a thick rope. And the energy that rose upward towards the brain seemed to be spreading its hood and swaying its head like a snake dancing in joy.¹

THIS vivid account of what was probably his second meeting with Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa was narrated by Swami Vijnanananda on 14 July 1932 at Allahabad. Hariprasanna Chattopadhyay—that was Vijnanananda's pre-monastic name—had, in all probability, first seen the Master on 15 September 1879 at Keshabchandra Sen's spiritual retreat at Belgharia. At that time he was eleven and 'did not know at all what the term *paramahansa* meant', as he expressed later. The scene described above occurred at Dewan Govinda Mukhopadhyay's house, also at Belgharia, on 18 February 1883.

Although Vijnanananda was recalling the above incident when he was advanced in years and well-established in the knowledge of Brahman, it is remarkable that as a boy of fifteen Hariprasanna could have such a perceptive appreciation of Sri



Ramakrishna's spiritual stature and also notice the physical effects that only yogis can apprehend.

Sri Ramakrishna knew that Hariprasanna 'belonged to the Divine Mother' and that he would have to do 'a lot of work for her'. Accordingly, he guided Hariprasanna with suitable instructions and special blessings. Once Hariprasanna was finding it difficult to meditate and informed the Master about it. Vijnanananda later recalled: 'As I approached the Master he asked me to stick out my tongue. When I did so, he drew a figure on it with his finger. My whole body began to tremble, and I felt an unspeakable bliss within.' Deep meditation followed and the Master assured him that 'from now on you will always have deep meditation' (594).

Swami Jnanavratananda is a monastic member of Belur Math.

Hariprasanna was also a serious student with a wide range of interests, as his writings in later life reveal. In 1887 he graduated in arts from the Patna College and gained admission to Poona College of Science in the Department of Civil Engineering, where he completed a diploma course, Licentiate in Civil Engineering (LCE).

A very touching incident that shows Hariprasanna's large heart happened during the last two years of his student life at Pune. Among his classmates was one Radhika Prasad Roy, whose financial condition was not good. He was in need of a job immediately after the completion of the diploma course. In those days the students who stood first and second in the LCE course used to be directly employed by the government. Hariprasanna's classmates were of the opinion that a Marathi boy and Hariprasanna would obtain those positions that year. But Hariprasanna thought differently. He wanted to help Radhika Prasad. So he decided not to appear in that year's final examination in order that Radhika Prasad could, at least, secure the second position and get the benefit of direct employment in government service. It is worth remembering that he took this step when he was himself totally dependent on his elder sister's husband for his own expenses. He appeared in the examination only the next year, and stood second (596-7).

He started his government service as the district engineer of Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh. Later on he worked at Etawah, Meerut, Bulandshahr and others places. When he was working at Etawah, Swami Subodhananda stayed with him for some time. Having learnt from him about the great financial difficulties of the fledgling Ramakrishna Math at Alambazar, he used to send sixty rupees every month to the Math (597).

'One of my boys in training has been an executive engineer, in charge of a district. That means a very big position here [in India]. He gave it up like straw!' wrote Swami Vivekananda in a letter to Sister Nivedita on 20 June 1897. This information indicates the presence of Hariprasanna at the Alambazar Math around that time. He took his

formal sannyasa vows in 1899 and became known as Swami Vijnanananda.

Spiritual Visions

Biographical accounts of Vijnanananda are unanimous about his penchant for spiritual visions. The swami had many psychic as well as divine visions, some of which he disclosed while talking to others.

While studying at Patna, Hariprasanna had a vision of Sri Ramakrishna: 'I saw him standing in front of me. I wondered: "How did the Master come here? What is the cause of this vision?" The next day I read of the Master's passing away in the *Basumati* newspaper' (596).

What the seers speak about their own spiritual visions is indeed invaluable. That the great saints and prophets stay in subtle bodies after their physical death finds support from the saying: 'To this day Lord Gauranga is sporting, and some fortunate people do see him.' But this belief is strengthened a thousandfold when some such seer affirms: 'I have seen. I can see!'

This holds good equally with respect to their teachings and instructions. When such seers speak about the Truth realized by them, the faith generated in us [is such as] cannot be had merely by reasoning and arguments. The strength latent in the words of an eye-witness acts directly on our mind and generates this faith; removing the curtain of our ignorance, it opens out the path of soothing light of faith. Once Swami Nirvedananda, after listening to a discourse on the scriptures, asked Swami Turiyananda, a direct monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, 'There is certainly some difference between your discourses on the scriptures and those of an intellectual. What is it?' 'Oh, yes,' pat came the reply from Turiyanandaji, 'when you hear it from our lips, the darkness of your mind is dispelled immediately.'²

Vijnanananda moved to Allahabad in 1900 and stayed at the Brahmavadin Club for nearly ten years, practising great austerities. He visited Belur Math a few days before Swami Vivekananda's passing away. After his return to Allahabad, while medi-

tating in the shrine of the Brahmavadin Club, he suddenly had the vision of Swamiji sitting on Sri Ramakrishna's lap. He thought: 'Why have I seen Swamiji in this way?' The next day he received a telegram from Belur Math informing him about Swamiji's passing away.³

Vijnanananda had the vision of Shiva on various occasions, in Varanasi and other places. One of these visions has been narrated by him thus:

Bhagavan Shiva once gave me his darshan at Kashi. I had gone to Kashi from Allahabad for the construction of the Sevashrama wards [at the Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service]. ... I was going towards the Kashi Advaita Ashrama from Benares Cantonment railway station in an *ekka* [horse driven carriage]. Nearing a bend, the *ekka* overturned. I too fell down. My leg got stuck in the wheel and a heavy box landed on it; I was wounded badly. Somehow I managed to take another *ekka* and reached the ashrama. Doctors provided the necessary treatment. I had high fever. I became restless and started thinking: 'O Vishwanatha! I came to your kingdom for the Master's work. It is a work of selfless service. So, why did this happen? The work will be affected!' Thinking thus, I fell asleep. It was one or two o'clock at night. What do I see—Bhagavan Shiva, with matted locks and a smiling face, approaching me. I said, 'Have you come to take me? I won't go now! The Master's work is waiting; that has to be finished first.' But who would listen to these words? He moved towards me with a smile and wrapped me in a deep embrace. Immediately, my whole body turned cold as ice; all suffering disappeared. I said, 'Lord, you may go now. I have the Master's work to do.' Then Bhagavan Shiva left smiling. Surprisingly, when I woke up in the morning, I had no fever and there was no pain in the leg. Even now I can see Shiva standing with his matted locks and placid smile. I talk to him and feel great joy.⁴

On another occasion, at the Vishwanatha temple, he found that the linga had vanished and the entire ephemeral world was also dissolved, leaving only formless Existence.⁵

We find that these two experiences are of different types: one is the vision of Shiva with form

and the other an experience of the formless aspect of the same deity.

During his first visit to Dakshineswar Hari-prasanna had had an illuminating conversation with Sri Ramakrishna:

I asked him, 'Is God with form or without form?' The Master replied: 'God is with form as well as without form, and again he is beyond both form and formlessness.' Then I asked, 'If God is all, is this cot also God?' He answered emphatically, 'Yes, this cot is God, this glass, this utensil, this wall—everything is God.' As he spoke, I experienced an inner transformation and was lifted beyond the realm of ordinary consciousness. My heart was illumined, and I saw the light of Brahman everywhere.⁶

The visions of Shiva mentioned above confirm that he had made the knowledge and experience of the ultimate Reality given to him by Sri Ramakrishna his very own.

Vijnanananda's spiritual genius is reflected in his being granted the vision of a wide range of deities and spiritual personalities. About his experience at Kalighat, the swami said: 'I was taken inside the temple. I saw and touched the Divine Mother's image; then while I was circumambulating the deity, the Mother, out of Her infinite mercy, revealed Herself unto me. She roused my *kundalini* [the serpent power that resides at the base of the spine] to the *sahasrara* [the thousand-petalled lotus on the crown of the head] and illumined it quickly' (614).

The Bhagavata says that sages devoted to God sanctify the holy places or *tirthas* by means of the Divine residing in their hearts. Enlightened rishis are able to sense the presence of the deities associated with various *tirthas*. During his early days at Allahabad, Vijnanananda would go for a daily bath at the Triveni Sangama, the confluence of three rivers, before sunrise. One day, while he was reciting a hymn to Mother Ganga after his bath, he had the vision of Mother Triveni as a beautiful young girl. He saw the devi walking in front of him with 'three braids (*triveni*) hanging down her back' (603).

Regarding the veracity of such visions, Vijnanananda said, 'The test of a true vision is this: It leaves a lasting spiritual impression on the mind that generates awareness and bliss. I still get joy when I think of that virginal form of the Divine Mother' (ibid.). But there were also objective correlates to many of his insights. On one Kali Puja day, Pratibha Bandyopadhyay, a devotee, could not go to the Math as planned due to her young daughter's illness. Beni, the swami's attendant, started wondering why she had not come. Vijnanananda said to Beni, 'You see Beni, her daughter is leaving her body right now. How can she come today?' When Pratibha went to the Math the next day, she did not have to inform the swami about the loss. Instead, she was thus reassured by the swami, 'Do not weep for her; that will cause her pain. Know that she is under the care of the Master, no trouble can touch her.'⁷

Vijnanananda spoke of his vision of Bhagavan Buddha at Sarnath and at Pegu. At Sarnath 'in an instant the entire universe disappeared and got merged in an ocean of pure Consciousness. And out of this came up a very beautiful and lovely image of Lord Buddha. What an intense bliss I experienced!'⁸ He also vividly experienced the Ramayana world while he was translating this text: 'When I sit down to translate the Ramayana, I forget the world. I see Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, and Mahavira in front of me' (37).

A Paramahansa

From Sri Ramakrishna's utterances we learn about the nature of *paramahansas*. He says: 'A *paramahansa* is beyond the three *gunas* ... Like a child he is not under the control of any *guna*'; 'The *paramahansa* is like a five-year-old child. He sees everything filled with consciousness. ... He cannot distinguish between a stranger and a relative. He isn't particular about worldly relationships. ... He does not keep any track of his whereabouts. He sees everything as Brahman. He is indifferent about his movements. ... Sometimes the *paramahansa* behaves like a mad man.'⁹ It is clear that *paramahansas* do not have any attachment towards anything of this world. They be-

have like small children and like to mix with them. These qualities were evident in Vijnanananda.

Swami Bhavatitananda had his spiritual initiation from Swami Vijnanananda in 1935, when he was about fourteen. He wrote in his reminiscences:

Maharaj [that is, Vijnanananda] had come to Belur Math and I had gone to see him. Many people, both young and old, had gathered in his room. After offering my pranams I sat down quietly. Once, owing to some reason or other, Maharaj got up from his chair and went to the window. A small boy took this opportunity to get on to his chair. On return, Maharaj found his chair forcibly occupied. He immediately put on a serious face and said to the boy, 'Hey, you have sat on my chair! How dare you do that? I shall punish you! Get down from the chair quickly and stand before me with your eyes closed and hands outstretched.' Saying this, he took some sandesh and an orange from the table and putting them in the boy's hands announced in a serious tone: 'Now open your eyes.' This was the punishment. The whole room burst into laughter.¹⁰

Vijnanananda had the habit of dressing strangely. He would wear caps that would cover his ears and long shirts with many pockets. He would put on two or three pairs of socks, even on hot summer days. When people looked at him curiously, he would say: '*Kya dekhte ho—Bandar? Han, yeh to bandar hi hai, Ramji ka bandar*; What are you looking at—a monkey? Yes, this is indeed a monkey, Sri Rama's monkey (Hanuman)' (229).

Swami Ajayananda recalled:

On 22 December 1933 he came to Madras on his way to Colombo. ... Sitting in his room on the ground floor of the Madras Math, he was removing his shirts, one after the other. Noticing that we were watching this scene with interest, he started laughing. I said, 'Maharaj, this is much like what the Master used to say about the layers of an onion [the ego is like an onion; if you keep peeling off its layers, nothing remains in the end].' Hearing this he said: 'There are five sheaths in the body itself. I have added seven or eight more, otherwise people will get to see the Atman.' Hearing this, all of us started laughing' (67).

Further: 'Once a lemon had to be sliced. There was some delay in procuring a knife. Maharaj brought out six or seven knives from one of his pockets. Seeing this we started laughing' (ibid.). The swami also had a fancy for fountain pens and would keep several of them in his pockets.

Brahmananda once remarked, 'Vijnanananda is a hidden knower of Brahman.' The Bhagavata gives a description of an illumined soul's way of life: 'Though wise, he plays like a child unconcerned about status; though highly intelligent, he behaves like a fool without any plans; though learned, he speaks like one who is mad to avoid popularity; though established in the truth taught by the Vedas, he roams about like cattle with absolute unconcern for all established codes of conduct' (11.18.29). We must look at Vijnanananda's actions from this perspective in order to understand their true meaning; otherwise, he will be misunderstood.¹¹

Spiritual Guidance

Vijnanananda loved seclusion, was frugal in his speech, and avoided giving spiritual instructions, though he was 'pre-eminently qualified to be a guru'. It was only after becoming the vice president of the Ramakrishna Order in 1934 that he started

giving spiritual initiation freely. He had gone to Belur Math to see Swami Shivananda, the then president of the Order, after the latter suffered a stroke in April 1933. Shivananda had placed his hand on Vijnanananda's head when the latter was taking leave of him. Vijnanananda later said, 'That day when Mahapurush [Shivananda] laid his hand on my head, the touch changed my mental attitude. He passed on to me his guiding principle of helping people spiritually without stint and of assuming responsibility for them. I now feel that as long as I live and have the least strength in my body I shall do the same and give His [the Master's] name to all.' About initiating people with a mantra, he said: 'I only take (the devotees) to the Master and introduce them to him. Afterwards the Master will do whatever is necessary.'¹²

While answering questions from spiritual seekers, Vijnanananda would cite appropriate reasons and analogies to clarify his point. He was once asked if it was absolutely essential for a spiritual aspirant to get initiated by a guru. He replied, 'Yes, it is necessary.' When he was asked what would happen if after initiation one did not act according to the instructions of the guru, he said, 'Suppose a person takes a thing. He may not use it but can do so whenever he wishes. The other person cannot use

Sri Ramakrishna and His Photograph

Swami Vijnanananda observed: 'The Master's photograph reveals an image of transcendence of all six chakras (centres of consciousness). ... I see many things in it and so I talk about them.' Further: 'The Master himself said, "You should meditate on this picture of mine. And that will do." By invoking the Master one can have so many visions of light. But he must be invoked heart and soul. He is the light of the world—self-revealing and all-pervading. His manifestations are everywhere. The purer a person is, the more will the Master reveal himself to him.'

—Swami Vijnanananda: *Life and Teachings*, 42, 44



it even if he so wishes, for the simple reason that he does not have the thing at all.¹³

Japa · Vijnanananda used to say: ‘Japa means repeating His name. Whatever be the condition of your mind, do japa regularly. Think that you are different from the mind. Whether the mind registers a feeling of joy or sorrow or any other feeling should not be of concern to you. Go on performing your own work properly.’ ‘Go on performing japa regularly—morning and evening—even if the mind does not get concentrated.’ On being asked about the means for attaining *chitta-shuddhi*, purity of mind, he said: ‘Through the repetition of the *ishtha-mantra* everything will be achieved.’ On another occasion he told a group of devotees, ‘Now, you all get up saying “Rama” “Rama”. Do you know what *Rum* means? It is a kind of liquor. You cannot know what it is unless you have tasted it. The greatness of *nama*—the name of God—cannot be understood unless one undertakes *nama-japa*, repetition of the name.’

Faith and Truthfulness · Vijnanananda’s thoughts about the essentials of spiritual life were simple and crystal clear. ‘Hold fast to the way of truth, do harm to no one, and God will draw you to his sheltering care,’ he would say (58). He was himself very particular about truthfulness from his very childhood. Once when his mother suspected him to be untruthful he was so upset that he tore off his sacred thread saying, ‘If I have told a lie, then I am not a Brahmin.’ Unfortunately, the very next day news of his father’s demise at Quetta reached the family and his mother felt that the calamity was the result of his ‘curse.’¹⁴ In his later years the swami would thus advise devotees: ‘God is Truth and to realize him you have to be completely truthful in your words and deeds. ... Truth must be adhered to very strictly. There should be complete harmony between preaching and practice.’¹⁵

‘Faith is the foundation of spiritual life,’ Vijnanananda would say; ‘What you require is a good deal of faith, patience, and reliance, and gradually you will reach the goal’ (58, 62). His own life was a perfect example of deep faith and reliance on

the Divine. He would not take medicines when ill and would not allow people to attend upon him a bit more than his least requirement. Even when seriously ill he would say, ‘The Lord himself is my doctor.’

During a discussion about faith, the swami observed: ‘Faith is of three types: faith without any kind of discrimination, faith by seeing others, and faith through your own inner feeling.’ A questioner asked: ‘Which one is better?’ Swami: ‘Any kind of faith is good. Faith is the basis of spiritual life. Unfortunately, if someone does not have any faith whatsoever, he will have to be forcibly immersed in the waters of the Ganga. Even if he wants to get out of the water, he should not be allowed to do so. Then he will have faith.’ Questioner: ‘Is it possible to have faith by being pressed into the Ganga?’ Swami: ‘Yes, that happens. It is in this manner that God presses down (the human being) in the *samsara-jaladhi* (ocean of worldly life).’¹⁶

Humour

In spite of dwelling on high planes of consciousness, spiritual people can be extremely humorous. Apparently, Vijnanananda was a man of few words and very grave mood. But through some reminiscences we also get glimpses of his natural wit and pure humour.

Once Swami Vijnanananda asked Swami Ajayananda to address an envelope to the Ramakrishna Math, Allahabad, and dictated the name of the addressee as Dr Beni Madhab, MA, BL, LL.D. Ajayananda was curious to know who this distinguished inmate of the Allahabad Math was. The swami only smiled.¹⁷ Beni was actually the faithful attendant of the swami. He had lost his father at a tender age and had had little schooling. Vijnanananda loved him dearly and depended on him, and he too was very free with the swami. The swami would often tell his visitors, ‘Beni is always asleep, always asleep.’ Not that Beni would be sleeping then. Perchance, Beni were late in responding to the swami’s calls, the swami would ask him, ‘Beni, tell me if it is day or night now.’ Beni would not be very pleased. So, when the swami

would again tell him, 'Beni, you sleep a lot,' he would retort back, 'Father, you talk a lot!' This would elicit a smile from the swami and he would tell his listeners, 'Did you hear what he said?' (154-5).

Swami Bhavatitananda reminisces:

During the early days of the Belur Math he [Swami Vijnanananda] would discuss many matters with Swami Brahmananda, [the president of the Order]. We have heard that to bring their minds down from higher planes, sometimes they would engage in wit and humour; they would even play the game of word-making or sentence-construction. The sentence-endings would have to rhyme. One such construct of four sentences ran thus: You are my host. Then give me a toast. For this you have to go to the other coast. Then I shall suffer most' (200).

On another occasion, the two swamis were having a chat when it was decided that Swami Brahmananda would ask Swami Vijnanananda some questions and would pay him a hundred rupees for every correct answer. But if he answered incorrectly, Swami Vijnanananda would have to pay the same amount. Swami Vijnanananda lost eight hundred rupees against eight questions when the lunch bell rang. Swami Vijnanananda said to Swami Brahmananda, 'Maharaj, I shall ask one thing of you, will you give it to me?' 'Yes, I shall.' 'I ask eight hundred rupees of you.' 'Well, I give it to you.' 'Maharaj, then my bet is paid off.' And both burst into laughter (200-1).

Swami Shivaswarupananda writes:

I went to Allahabad from Belur Math to have the darshan of Swami Vijnanananda Maharaj. Having arrived in the morning, I went to the ashrama at Muthiganj, offered my pranams to him, and said, 'I have come from Belur Math.' The swami looked at me and said in a jocular tone: 'From Belur Math? Good. So, will you also take away the key with you?' I could not follow what he meant. Without uttering a word, I just kept looking at him. Then the swami explained with a smile: 'Belur Math sadhus are very forgetful. A few days ago, one of them had come and stayed at the guest house. We had provided him with a lock and a key. While returning to Calcutta he left with the key in his

pocket. As a result the lock had to be broken. That is why I ask if you will also take the key with you?' With folded palms I said, 'No Maharaj, I won't make that mistake. I won't take the key with me.' This satisfied the swami and he said, 'Good, good! Now that you are in Allahabad, go and have the darshan of Triveni, and take a bath there' (193).

Gopendra Krishna Sarkar, who supervised the construction of the Sri Ramakrishna temple at Belur Math recalls:

Once Swami Vijnanananda visited an ashrama without any prior intimation. After reaching there, he told the monk in-charge that he need only make arrangements for his rest. Needless to say, not only was his rest arranged for, he was also served refreshments which he gladly partook of. After he had finished, the monk in-charge asked him humbly, 'Maharaj, you told us that you would only like to take rest. But when refreshments were brought, you did not object!' The swami replied, 'Look, I have acted like a gentleman. Had you taken my words literally, then I would have run away from this place tomorrow morning itself!' (170).



Sri Ramakrishna Temple at Belur


The planning and construction of the famous and historic temple of Sri Ramakrishna at Belur Math is one of the outstanding contributions of Vijnanananda. Swami Vivekananda had himself approved of the design of the temple prepared by Vijnanananda. The harmony of various religions as manifested in the life of Sri Ramakrishna would have to be expressed in the temple dedicated to him—this was the idea that Swami Vivekananda wanted Vijnanananda to capture in the design of the new temple. A portion of the temple, the sanctum with its main domes, was finished while Vijnanananda was living. Its consecration was the last work of his life.

The Sri Ramakrishna temple was consecrated on 14 January 1938. Though his health was indifferent, Vijnanananda was ready for the holy occasion early that morning. Before going to the temple he was sitting on a chair. At that time he said: ‘Having seated the Master in the temple, I shall tell [Swami Vivekananda]: “Swamiji! The Master is seated in the temple you planned. You had said you would watch from above. Please see the Master seated in the new temple.” And I shall tell the Master one thing more.’ After the consecration, when Vijnanananda returned to his room, Swami Divyatmananda asked him, ‘You had said you would tell the Master and Swamiji something; did you do so?’ The swami replied: ‘Yes, I did. I told Swamiji: “Swamiji! You told you would see from above! Now see.” ... Then I distinctly saw Swamiji, Raja Maharaj, Mahapurush Maharaj, Sharat Maharaj, Hari Maharaj, and Gangadhar Maharaj [all disciples of Sri Ramakrishna who were no more] standing and watching (pointing towards the south-western corner).’ ‘And you also had something to tell to the Master,’ Divyatmananda pressed further. ‘Yes,’ the swami replied, ‘but I won’t tell that to anyone.’¹⁸

Mahasamadhi

That which he did not disclose on the day of the consecration became evident in a short time! He had been very eager to fulfil this most important responsibility entrusted to him by Swami Viveka-

nanda. He was now equally eager to go back to Sri Ramakrishna. He became more indrawn and reduced his food intake. He would spend much of the night calling on Mother, and on 25 April 1938 passed into mahasamadhi at Allahabad. After the performance of all the traditional rites prescribed for the occasion, his physical form was placed in the lap of Mother Triveni, who had once blessed him with her vision.

The direct monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna were cast in the mould of the Master. From their lives and teachings we get a glimpse of how Sri Ramakrishna’s life was. Therefore, the more we contemplate their lives and teachings, the more we will be able to get in touch with Sri Ramakrishna himself. 

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परमहंस चरित



संकलक - स्वामी विज्ञानानन्द

Swami Vijnanananda's Publications

Swami Vijnanananda was a versatile scholar. The eight books written and translated by him bear testimony to the wide range of his interests. A short description of each of these books is given below.

Paramahansa-charit (Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsadev-ka Samkshipta Jivancharit aur Upadesh): This is Vijnanananda's first book. It is also the first biography of the Master written by one of his monastic disciples. It was written and published while he was staying at the Brahnavadin Club at Allahabad. The book is in Hindi and was published in 1904. In it he has presented the life of Sri Ramakrishna and compiled some of his utterances. A translation of this book into English by Arun Kumar Biswas, *Swami Vijnanananda and His Paramahansa Carita*, was first published in 1994 by Sujan Publications.

Jal Sarbaraher Karkhana: A book in Bengali, written and published in 1905. In the introduction, he wrote: 'This book has been written for the students of engineering colleges, engineers, contractors, and municipal authorities.' He also mentioned: 'It is a confirmed fact that with the introduction and propagation of engineering and technical education, national development begins. To raise our country again, development of such faculties and their propagation is necessary.'

Engineering Shiksha: This is also a book on engineering in Bengali, written by him. The year of publication is not known.

Sri-surya Siddhanta: Vijnanananda translated into Bengali the famous Sanskrit treatise on astronomy, *Srisuryasiddhanta*, adding to it his own annotations. This was first published in 1909 by Panini Karyalaya of Allahabad. Swami Nirlepananda writes in his reminiscences: 'His [Vijnanananda's] *Suryasiddhanta* [a combination of mathematics and astronomy] in Bengali was a textbook in our MA class.'

The Brihajatakam of Varaha Mihira: This book is an

English translation of *Brihajataka*, written in Sanskrit by the great astronomer and astrologist Varaha Mihira. It was published in 1912 by Panini Karyalaya. In his introduction the swami wrote: 'In the field of the science of horoscope, Varaha Mihira's *Brihajatakam* is accepted to be the best and most authentic book all over India. In fact, Varaha Mihira is considered to be the best among the Indian astrologers. The book has four annotations. ... In the present work of translation the gloss of Bhatta Utpala has been followed.'

The Narada Pancharatram / The Jnanamrita Sara Samhita: Vijnanananda translated this important book on Vaishnavism into English. It was published by Panini Karyalaya in 1921. In the erudite introduction, the author wrote: 'It is one of the oldest, if not the very first, specimen of Vaiṣṇava literature in Sanskrit. It deals with Śrī Kriṣṇa, Śrī Gopāla, and Śrī Rādhā cult. ... It deals mainly with the first three of the four-fold objects of human existence, having for its goal ultimately the attainment of Śrī Vaikuṭhadhām, the region where Śrī Nārāyaṇa resides. Śrī Kriṣṇa resides in Go-loka, the highest heaven. It should be noted here that when Śrī Kriṣṇa is attained, everything is attained. Vairāgyam and Sannyāsa are not preached in this treatise, though Śiva is mentioned as speaking everything to Nārada. Two chapters in the end are devoted to certain yoga practices, how to churn the fire, to control the breath, and how to let the Soma juice flow over and thus how to have a perfect mind. The leading theme is devotion and love towards Śrī Kriṣṇa.'

The Srimad Devi Bhagavatam: Vijnanananda's English translation of this famous Shakta Purana was published in three volumes by Panini Karyalaya in 1932. Presently the book has been reprinted by Munshiram Manoharlal.

Srimad Valmikiya Ramayanam: Towards the end of his life, the swami took up the work of translating into English the Ramayana by Valmiki. The first volume, containing the 'Bala Kanda' and the 'Ayodhya Kanda', was published by Vijnanananda himself. He dedicated this volume to Sri Ramakrishna with the following statement: 'Inscribed to the Sacred memory of Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa Deva by his humble disciple—the translator Swami Bigyanananda, Allahabad.'



Swami Subodhananda: Beaming Simplicity

Swami Divyasukhananda

He who has surrendered his body, mind, and innermost self to God is surely a holy man. He who has renounced ‘woman and gold’ is surely a holy man. He is a holy man who does not regard woman with the eyes of a worldly person. He never forgets to look upon a woman as his mother, and to offer her his worship if he happens to be near her. The holy man constantly thinks of God and does not indulge in any talk except about spiritual things. Furthermore, he serves all beings, knowing that God resides in everybody’s heart.¹

Subodhananda’s sincere and steadfast adherence to the Master’s teachings and total self-effacement made him fit to manifest all the qualities of a genuine monk and to attain thereby a steady blissful state. Of medium build, he had strong legs and could walk long distances. His forehead was broad and his eyes sparkled with a lustre characteristic of yogis. His chest had a reddish hue—he himself once explained that doing a great deal of japa and meditation makes the chest reddish.

The renunciation seen in Subodhananda’s adolescence increased in later years and attracted deep reverence from everyone. The Master used to say: ‘A man will have the courage to practise renunciation if he sees one hundred percent renunciation in a sannyāsi. Then only will he try to give up “woman and gold”. If a sannyāsi does not set this example, then who will?’ (387). One evening Sri Ramakrishna was taking rest in his room. At that time Gangadhar and M (Mahendra Nath Gupta) arrived from Calcutta. The Master said to M: ‘Two boys came here the other day. One of them was Subodh. He is Shankar Ghosh’s great-grandson. The other, Kshirod, is his neighbour. They are nice

THE life of Swami Subodhananda, an apostle of Sri Ramakrishna, can only be fathomed by cultivating simplicity and renunciation. He was endearingly called ‘Khoka Maharaj’, the ‘child swami’. The intense love for God pouring out from his simple heart makes his life a sublime testament to spirituality and his legacy worth cherishing. We can consider ourselves fortunate to have before us such a life to ponder over, more so if we are able to imbibe the spirit and values he left for posterity.

Profile of a Renunciant

Subodhananda joined the Baranagar Math and was ordained into sannyasa when he was only around twenty—he was the youngest of the group. Here he led a life of extreme poverty and awesome austerity; spirituality was deeply ingrained in his being. Sri Ramakrishna pointed out the signs of a monk thus:

Swami Divyasukhananda is a monastic member of Vivekananda University, Belur.

boys. I told them I was ill and asked them to go to you for instruction. Please look after them a little.' M replied: 'Yes, sir. They are our neighbours.' But Subodh did not visit M. When asked about it, Subodh told the Master: 'He hasn't been able to renounce his family. What could I learn from him?' Immediately the Master said with a laugh, 'O Rakkhal, did you hear what this rascal Khoka said?' Though apparently upset at Subodh's reply, the Master well understood the real spirit of this young lad pulsating with inner renunciation. He corrected Subodh's notion about M saying, 'He won't talk about himself; he'll only tell you what he has learned here.'²

A deep conviction and an undying trust in his own self and experience mark Subodhananda's character. He questioned the beliefs of others regarding the avatarhood of Sri Ramakrishna until he was able to validate the truth for himself. One day the Master asked Subodh, 'What do you think of me?' Subodh replied without any hesitation, 'Many persons say many things about you. I won't believe in them unless I myself find clear proofs.'³

His meals were frugal, both at noon and at night. If any devotee invited him for a meal, he would first ask, 'What dishes will you serve?' Sometimes the devotee out of humbleness might say, 'What shall I offer you? Merely rice and pulses.' And during the meal Subodhananda would take only rice and pulses. Even if several items of vegetables were offered to him he would not take anything else, though fervently requested to. He would simply say, 'Truthfulness should be honoured. The Master taught us thus.'⁴

He had a great fascination for tea. When the Master was ill, he suggested that he take tea to cure his disease. He would even encourage the young monks to take tea saying that every drop of tea would produce a drop of blood! The following anecdote is worth recalling in detail:

One night at Belur Math, Vivekananda was meditating in his room; Brahmananda and Subodhananda were sleeping in the next room.

When Swamiji finished his meditation, he woke up Subodhananda and asked if he would mind bringing him a pipe to smoke. Subodhananda did so, and Vivekananda was so pleased that he exclaimed impulsively, 'Any boon you ask for shall be granted!' 'What could I possibly ask for?' said Subodhananda. 'The Master gave us everything we need.' But Brahmananda said, 'No, Khoka, ask for something.' So Subodhananda considered carefully and then said, 'Grant me this—that I may never, for the rest of my life, miss my daily cup of tea.' Many years later, Subodhananda was asked whether this boon had really been granted. He answered that it had and that the tea had sometimes arrived without his expectation, just as he was about to go to sleep at night.'⁵

Once Swami Prabhavananda was asked: 'Swami, how can we prepare ourselves to be able to take old age and disease with cheerfulness instead of depression?' His advice was simple: 'That's easy. If you make *japam* and meditate when you are well, devote yourself to God and try to be absorbed in Him when you are healthy and young, then old age, disease and death won't mean a thing to you.' He then narrated an incident he heard from Subodhananda:

He [Subodhananda] told me he was in Rishikesh practicing austerities, when he suddenly became very sick with a high fever. Then he saw Sri Ramakrishna sitting beside him with his hand over him, who [*sic*] said to him, 'Shall I send some rich man to take you to a doctor?'

'No, no, no!' answered Khoka Maharaj.

'Well, what is it you want?'

'I want to be sick like this so you will be seated beside me.'⁶

When he would be sitting quietly or smoking the hookah, his eyes would show signs of a mind immersed in the inner realm of the soul. Once a person enquired about this indrawn nature, and the swami said: 'The mind becomes concentrated through japa and dhyana; if you practise, you will also attain that.'⁷

Spiritual Journey

From time to time Subodhananda would go on pilgrimage to different parts of India and practise various spiritual disciplines there. During his itinerant days, he would often sleep under the trees on the road side. While touring different parts of Bengal and Bihar he faced many inconveniences and great hardship; in spite of that he would inspire people to work for the masses as taught by Swami Vivekananda. He was among the first few who dedicated their lives to the clarion call of Swamiji: '*Atmano mokshartham jagaddhitaya cha*; for one's own liberation and for the welfare of the world'. This shows his immense love for his leader.

The wandering lifestyle practised by Buddha and his disciples continues to be a model for monks. But practical concerns like diminution of solitary places, dangerous wildlife, border conflicts, and lack of lay support to mendicants forced more and more monks to live in monasteries. The monastic disciples of the Master initially lived together at Baranagar Math, but after some time most of them set out for pilgrimage and spiritual practice outside the math. Subodhananda too went on pilgrimage to different places, but from time to time returned to the monastery and stayed there.

At the Belur Monastery Subodhananda worked in various capacities. During the early days he used to labour in the vegetable garden with Advaitananda. Brahmananda collected various kinds of fruit trees and flower plants from different parts of India and planted them in the monastery garden. Subodhananda used to make grafts of those trees and plants so that they could be preserved and planted in other places.⁸ The tradition of flower and vegetable gardening is still maintained in different branch centres of the Order and in the monastery at Belur as well. It is difficult to say now how many rare plants were propagated from place to place thanks to the interest taken by Subodhananda.

Subodhananda was a 'friend, philosopher, and guide' to the young monks and brahmacharins. With his love and advice he helped them in their troubled times. 'He would be their mouthpiece

before elders, mediate for them and shield them when they inadvertently did something wrong.'⁹ A young member of the Alambazar Math had to go back temporarily to his parents because of illness. Subodhananda would now and then call on him and enquire about his health. That young member rejoined the monastery after his recovery and for ever remembered with respectful gratitude the kindness he received from the swami (372). He used to teach the new monks how to prepare betel rolls and tobacco for offering to the Master in the shrine. In his work he was punctual and methodical. His daily routine, which started early in the morning at 3.30, was also very regular.¹⁰

For the Welfare of the Distressed

Swami Vivekananda put a new monastic ideal before the Ramakrishna Order: the practice of the ancient principles of renunciation and God-realization combined with service to God in man—*shiva jnane jiva seva*. He elevated social service to the status of divine service. When Swamiji called his brother disciples to form an organisation in the hallowed name of Sri Ramakrishna, Subodhananda immediately stood behind him, leaving aside the mendicant life.

In 1896 a dreadful plague appeared in India. Its initial impact was limited to port cities, particularly Bombay, but later it spread to Pune, Calcutta, and Karachi. By 1899 it reached many smaller towns and finally affected the countryside as well. The cost in human lives was great. Swamiji tried to mobilize his brother disciples and others to combat the plague in Calcutta. Subodhananda had to shoulder great responsibility to relieve the suffering of the helpless, panic-stricken people during that time, and proved that the concept of 'service as a spiritual discipline' as presented by Swamiji is a practical proposition.

During the great famine on the Chilka islands in Orissa in 1908, he threw himself heart and soul into relief work. His heart was full of intense love for the poor, the despised, and the afflicted. He worked day and night for the famine victims without car-

ing for his own food and rest. After some time he fell ill. In addition he had a vision of the Master telling him not to continue with the work. But he still continued his selfless service, as he had an inexhaustible source of deep and spontaneous love for the afflicted (548). He would often be found near sick-beds nursing the sick at considerable risk to his own health. On one occasion he nursed a young student suffering from smallpox of a very malignant type with such loving care and attention that it amazed all who witnessed it. Sometimes he would beg money from people in order to help poor patients with diet and medicine. He helped many poor families with money given by devotees for his personal needs. One family near Belur Math was saved from actual starvation by his kind effort. If he knew that a devotee was ill, he would surely go to see him. The devotee would be surprised and overwhelmed with emotion at this unexpected stroke of kindness on the part of the swami.¹¹

Guiding Light

One day Sri Ramakrishna wrote on a piece of paper, 'Naren will teach others.' Naren was reluctant and said, 'I won't do that.' In later years the young Naren as Swami Vivekananda spoke eloquently and tried to rouse the spiritual thirst and divinity latent in everyone. Swamiji considered preaching an important activity of the Order and made a rule at Alambazar Math that everyone had to practise public speaking. The day it was his turn, Subodhananda was very unwilling to speak, but had no way to escape. Surprisingly, when Subodhananda stood on the platform a devastating earthquake rocked the city and he was relieved of lecturing without uttering a single word! In later

years he had to speak before devotees in different places and sometimes even deliver lectures to the general public. In 1897 he spoke at the Young Men's Hindu Association in Madras on 'Sannyasa and Brahmacharya'. He also spoke on the subject 'Sri Ramakrishna and The Harmony of Religions' at the Baliati Ashrama.¹²

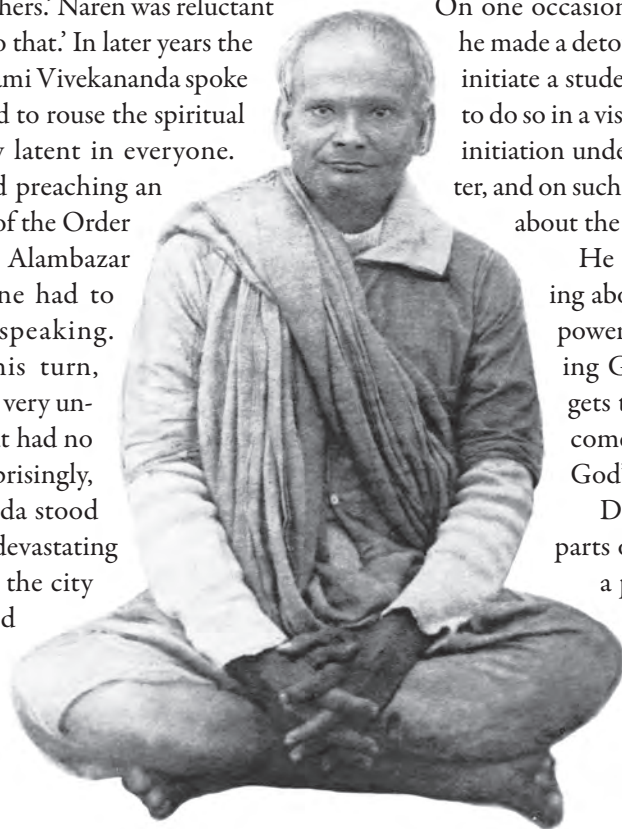
The swami was extremely self-effacing. In the earlier part of his monastic life he always tried to avoid women and did not talk with them. Swamiji noticed that and said to him one day, 'Khoka, women devotees come to hear about the Master; please talk to them. If you also avoid them, where will they go? They are the manifestations of the Divine Mother. Treat them as your mother or daughter.'¹³ Afterwards he guided many devotees, both men and women, to renounce their thirst for worldly enjoyment and develop intense love for God. Though in later years he started giving *mantra-diksha*, spiritual initiation, he did not consider himself a guru.

At times he gave spiritual initiation even to persons who did not express any wish to receive it.

On one occasion, while on a long journey, he made a detour to Deoghar Vidyapith to initiate a student as the Master asked him to do so in a vision. This shows that he gave initiation under the guidance of the Master, and on such occasions he did not bother about the time and place.

He was never tired of speaking about the efficacy of japa: 'All power belongs to God. By repeating God's name, one definitely gets the result. ... One can overcome all obstacles by repeating God's name.'¹⁴

During his tour to different parts of Bengal and Bihar he left a profound impression upon all who came in contact with him. People flocked around to hear him speak on spiritual subjects. One



of his woman disciples once asked him: ‘Swami, I don’t know the Gayatri mantra, nor ritual, nor chanting. People practise the Gayatri thrice a day. Could you instruct me about all these?’ Subodhananda said humbly: ‘Mother, I don’t know any of those things. You see, I am a *khoka*, a mere boy. But I have given you whatever I have received, whatever I have learnt, and whatever has kept me in bliss. You only need to practise meditation, japa, and control of mind.’¹⁵

In Narayanganj—now in Bangladesh—everyday in the afternoon many women devotees used to come. He would advise them and talk about the Master, the Holy Mother, and Swamiji. If someone asked, he would talk a little about his life too. He would lift their minds so high that they would forget to go home out of joy. They would often stay back till eight or nine and had to be reminded about returning home.¹⁶

Guru, Disciple, and the *Ishta*

Question: While meditating, should we concentrate only on the Master’s form or also on his attributes?

Swami Subodhananda: How can you meditate on the Master straight away? You must remember to take along someone else—the Holy Mother or Rakhai Maharaj [Swami Brahmananda], whom you have seen. Why should you take someone else along? Let me tell you a story, a true story.

In Ranchi a certain gentleman’s wife [Kusum] had heard about the Master from me [she had received spiritual initiation from the swami]. She had great devotion and love for me. She died at one thirty in the night. At that very time Mukherji and his wife—her neighbours—happened to see me take Kusum away by the hand. That was a moonlit night. Mukherji was dumbfounded—he called his wife and showed the scene to her—and she too saw me dragging Kusum along by the hand. Both of them started wondering: ‘He would always pay us a visit if he happened to come to this neighbourhood; why then did he go away in this manner tonight; what does it mean?’ The Mukherjis could not make sense of what they saw. Later, when they narrated the whole incident to me, and asked me about it, I said, ‘I don’t know, I am not able to tell anything right now; I shall tell you later, if I can.’

Afterwards, I went to Kashi. There I fell very sick. I had dysentery and pain in the limbs. When I was restless with pain, I remembered Kusum—she would rush to me at the slightest hint of my being ill, and would serve me a lot. While thinking of her, I happened to say, ‘Kusum, where are you now? Here I am suffering so much, who is there to look after me?’ Having said so I became drowsy, and

then I happened to see an eight- or nine-year-old girl by me. ‘Who are you?’ I asked her. ‘I am Kusum,’ she said. ‘Why have you come?’ ‘You called me, so I came.’ ‘Where were you, what were you doing?’ ‘Why, you told me to serve the Master, I was with him and was serving him.’ I asked her to fan me, which she did. I could feel the nice breeze. Then I asked her, ‘Tell me what happened when you died? Who took you by the hand?’ Hearing this Kusum said, ‘After one [night’s] sleep we don’t remember even the happenings of one day; now so many births have elapsed, which of them are you asking about?’ When I told her about Ranchi, she said, ‘The night I died my suffering was terrible, but I did not forget you. I was remembering you when you came, took me by the hand, and said, “Come along”. I followed you immediately. After having gone a long distance, I started talking to you, taking you to be Khoka Maharaj [Swami Subodhananda]. The person who was holding my hand then said to me, “I am not Khoka Maharaj.” “Then who are you?” I asked. “I am he whom Khoka Maharaj asked you to worship.” “Then why does your appearance resemble that of Khoka Maharaj?” “Otherwise, how would you recognize me? That’s the reason I have taken Khoka’s form and brought you along.” I said, “If that be so, kindly show me your own form.” Then the Master assumed his own form. How very effulgent, calm, and soothing was his appearance! I can hardly express it in words. Even now I was with the Master. You were calling me repeatedly; I told him that you were asking for me and so I would go and see what you had to say.’ Then I said to Kusum, ‘Very well, now you may go where you came from.’ Immediately, the girl went away.

—Swami Subodhanander *Smritikatha*, 32–3

Subodhananda had a remarkable capacity for assuaging people's grief. In one of his disciple's family at Narayanganj, a young son, well-employed, died of cholera. Everybody was terribly shocked. The elder sister of the deceased was so overcome with grief that she broke the picture of Subodhananda that was in the house. She also started behaving abnormally. Subodhananda happened to visit Narayanganj at that time. The mother of the deceased gave him a chair to sit and started weeping profusely holding his feet, saying, 'Father, I have no peace, why do I feel so sorry for the boy?' The swami gently passed his hand over her and spoke consoling words. After a few minutes the signs of despondency were removed from her face. Next he went to the elder sister's house. Seeing him coming she shouted, 'Why have you come, go away!' and gave him a furious stare. Subodhananda made her and her father sit on a cot, and he also sat there. What transpired next has not been recorded, but the girl became fully normal again in a short while. Such was the power of his spiritual presence (281-2).

In the evening of 14 December 1924 nearly thirty devotees came to meet Subodhananda at Sonargaon Math. After a long spell of bhajans, a question-answer session was started. Someone asked Khoka Maharaj, 'How can peace be obtained?' Maharaj said, 'Everyone has *viveka*, the capacity to discriminate between the real and the unreal. If one can hold to the real and renounce the unreal only then can one get peace.' 'How can this discriminative faculty be developed?' the questioner asked. Maharaj replied, 'This is developed by reading spiritual books, through spiritual discussions, and by keeping spiritual company' (270).

Subodhananda was guileless. He generally gave simple and concise answers to devotees' questions, blending them with beautiful parables which not only clarified and illustrated the ideas he wanted to convey but also made his teachings lively and practical. He had this story about calculating natures: A man would call on Mother Kali for money. 'If I get some money,' he would say, 'I would give half to you and keep the rest. If I get even one rupee, I would

give eight annas to you.' Just then he chanced upon an eight anna coin. 'You have already taken your eight annas Mother,' he exclaimed immediately, 'that's good.' 'Of what use is such faith and devotion,' Subodhananda would say (268). And the following story is about the nature and power of faith: A disciple obtained the power to walk on water by uttering 'Jai Gurudeva; glory to the guru'. Observing this, the guru thought, 'If by uttering my name he can walk on water, why should I not be able to do the same?' Saying 'glory unto me' the guru stepped into the water and promptly sank (269-70).

Letters that Inspire

The contents of Subodhananda's letters were predominantly spiritual. These contain many valuable suggestions for anyone truly interested in putting spiritual ideals into practice, and in particular for those who wish to transcend the limitations of the ego and be true devotees. Through his letters he tried to plant the seeds of spirituality in the hearts of innumerable persons. As tender as his heart were his written words. He addressed women devotees as 'Mayi', an expression of reverence to the Divine Mother in all women. Whenever devotees would write to him about their shortcomings and dissatisfaction with their spiritual progress, he would enthusiastically encourage them to go on with their spiritual practice: 'Mayi, that the mind has been unsteady all along from childhood is nothing particular to you; this is the case with everybody. But Mayi, remember one thing for certain: come what may, you have to proceed towards the Lord, who stands behind all sorrow and suffering.'¹⁷

His letters contained the basic tenets of philosophy and religion, but avoided complex language and hair-splitting arguments. The words were strong enough to bring out clearly the subtle points involved and to imprint them permanently into the devotees' hearts. In one letter he wrote to a devotee: 'First take hold of your mind through discrimination, and then make it calm through proper training, so that it flows towards the Lord all the twenty-four hours of the day. Then you will

understand everything' (24). On another occasion he wrote, 'If there is something "real" on this earth, that is God's name, existing perpetually; nothing else remains for ever' (88).

Simplicity that Overwhelms


True simplicity denotes purity and frankness. Simplicity does not mean drabness or narrow-mindedness but is an essentially positive quality—the capacity to direct one's attention steadily towards a goal, to the exclusion of complicating diversions. Subodhananda's face reflects his simplicity. A radiance shone from his ever-smiling candid face, inspiring love and reverence in one and all. This natural simplicity was the flavour of his life.

Sri Ramakrishna said, 'One cannot realize God without sincerity and simplicity.'¹⁸ When we cry out to God for grace and approach him in true childlike love, humility, and trust, he engenders a real change in our lives. This change will be lasting if we continue yielding to his grace, through faith and humble submission. Subodhananda is an ideal example of that humble submission.

'Great sages have childlike natures. ... They have no pride,' said the Master (862), who was himself simple in nature and at the same time deep in his spiritual experiences. Subodhananda mirrored the Master's childlike simplicity. It was a rare chance to see a person like him who combined unassuming simplicity with wisdom. It was this simplicity which enabled him to go and draw Swami Vivekananda out of his grave moods when other brother disciples dared not approach him.

He had a childlike fear of boat rides. Whenever he was asked to ride a boat, he would try to avoid it. Even in East Bengal, much of which comprises the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta, he tried to visit different places on foot in order to avoid boat rides. But later, when he was advanced in years and developed diabetes, he decided to have boat rides and even purchased a monthly first-class ticket for a daily boat ride on the Ganga.¹⁹

In his later years, though his physical health declined, he was astonishingly cheerful. His sim-

licity was such that those who came in close association with him never felt a barrier or distance between them, though there was a gulf of difference as far as spirituality was concerned. He had an exceptional knack to mix with all types of people: young and old, rich and poor, and people from all walks of life. It was his simplicity that made him accept God as his very own, keeping a natural human relationship with him. That explains why he did not bother much for the rituals of worship, though his natural love and devotion were always manifest when he visited the shrine. It is this simplicity that we pray for, for that is the means to God-realization. 

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Bridging Social Divides: The Indian Way

A P N Pankaj

(Continued from the December 2008 issue)

The Indian Vision

IN the Indian context we need to look at the problem from an essentially Indian viewpoint. Learning from others' experiences is not the same as copying them. Neither does it mean that we keep our eyes closed to our historical blunders and steadfastly defend our wrongs. Rightly did Kalidasa say in *Malavikagnimitra*: 'All that is old is not praiseworthy, nor must all that is new be spurned.' In this connection we are reminded by Bertrand Russell that 'when an intelligent man expresses a view which seems to us obviously absurd, we should not attempt to prove that it is somehow true, but we should try to understand how it ever came to seem true. This exercise ... helps us to realize how foolish many of our cherished prejudices will seem to an age which has a different temper of mind.'¹⁷

We have already mentioned that the idea of varna was originally based on race, culture, character traits, profession, and the moral development of the individual. The system of jatis on the other hand—which varna came to be equated with in later times—lays all emphasis on birth and heredity and tends to create the mentality of clinging to privileges.¹⁸ Thus, the system which served as a bulwark to provide stability to society and to the individual its place therein—as its inalienable functional component—got corrupted as the stranglehold of the Sutra and Smriti literature pushed the eternal laws enshrined in the Shruti texts into the background. Speaking of this corruption of dharma, Swami Ranganathananda says: 'What is the *dharma* of a Brāhmaṇa, a Kṣatriya, or a Vaiśya? To sit on the back of the Śūdra! And the Śūdra's *dharma* is to serve all the other three groups, without any rights to enjoy for himself or herself. ...

We lived by such narrow and evil interpretations of *dharma* these few centuries.'¹⁹ Elsewhere, echoing as it were the thoughts of Swami Vivekananda, he says: 'I indicated ... the primacy of the universal teachings of the *śruti* and the need for rejecting those teachings of our *smṛtis* which go against the *śruti* teachings of human unity, freedom, and equality. ... For all these 5,000 years, they have remained like rock on which our ancestors raised the enduring edifice of our culture and national life. The *smṛtis* contain only rules and regulations which need change every now and then' (56–7).

'We have to find our way,' Swami Vivekananda reminds us, 'between the Scylla of old superstitious orthodoxy and the Charybdis of materialism ... which has penetrated to the foundation of Western progress.'²⁰ Fortunately, we have a way, and it has been there even before the caste nomenclature started to turn perverse. From Vedic times, according to Swami Vivekananda, 'two forces, as it were, are constantly at work, one making caste, and the other breaking caste; in other words, the one making for privileges, the other breaking down privileges' (1.423). At that dawn of civilization we have the Indian rishi proclaiming: '*Sahyodayaṁ sārṁmanasyam-avidveṣaṁ kṛnōmi vaḥ*; like-heartedness, like-mindedness, non-hostility do I make for you.'²¹ The famous story of Satyakama Jabala in the *Chhandogya Upanishad* strongly vindicates the eternal supremacy of truth over considerations of caste and lineage. Satyakama, son of Jabala, learning from her that she did not know who his father was, goes to his teacher Haridrumata Gautama and tells him as much. This courage to tell the truth, howsoever unpleasant, is the foremost trait of a true brahmana and entitles one to

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brahma-vidyā, the knowledge of Brahman.²²

In his Ramayana, Valmiki describes the affection and friendship between Guha—who was of a low caste—and Sri Rama.²³ The epigraph to this article records how Sri Rama gratefully accepted the fruits offered by Shabari, a tribal woman living outside the pale of society, and emphasized the futility of social standing in obtaining divine grace (3.74). In the Bhagavata, Bhagavan Kapila—one of twenty-four divine incarnations—tells his mother Devahuti: ‘Forsaking me, existing in all beings as their Self and Lord, whoever offers worship only to images out of ignorance, he verily makes his offerings in ashes [instead of the yajna fire]. Hating me who resides in others, the proud one who sees separateness [and not unity of being] and harbours implacable enmity towards other beings, will never attain to peace of mind.’²⁴

The Mahabharata, which is a compendium of social mores in ancient India and is often referred to for its Smriti-like injunctions, also has passages that override traditional caste distinctions:

There is no difference between the varnas. The whole world consisted at first of brahmanas. Created equal by Brahma, people have, in consequence of their acts, become divided into different orders.

He who abides by truth and knows Brahman is said to be a brahmana. A kshatriya that practises such virtue may also behold Brahman.

The brahmana who is vain and haughty, who is addicted to vices and wedded to evil and degrading practices, is like a shudra. On the other hand, I consider a shudra who is always possessed of these virtues—righteousness, self-restraint, and truthfulness—as a brahmana.²⁵

In the Bhagavadgita Sri Krishna declares that a yogi is one who, being established in unity, adores the Supreme Being who resides in all creatures—*bhajatyekatvam-āsthitah*—and who looks upon the pleasure and pain of all beings as though they were one’s own.²⁶ Further: ‘He who sees the Supreme Lord abiding equally in all beings—the imperishable amidst the perishable—he sees indeed. For seeing the Lord abiding equally everywhere, he does not

injure the Self by self and thus attains the supreme goal. In fact, it is by regarding all beings alike that one attains supreme devotion to the Lord’ (13.27–8; 18.54). Among the several epithets of the Gita, an important one is *samatva-darśana*, ‘the philosophy of equality’. Verses scattered throughout the divine song underscore the significance of equality, equity, and equanimity—the three being interrelated.

Paramparā, Spiritual Tradition

This spiritual tradition or *paramparā* has had an uninterrupted flow in India, though there were times when it grew weak. Proponents of jnana as well as bhakti have asserted God’s presence in all beings and have considered its apprehension as one of the most important qualifications of the spiritual practitioner. The Alvars of South India—who preached love for God, and His love for the devotees without distinction of caste and gender—came from both upper and lower castes, and are equally venerated. In the eleventh century Sri Ramanujacharya sought inspiration from this tradition of the Alvars. Though a brahmana himself, he supplicated Sri Kanchipurna, a shudra, to accept him as his disciple and also desired to purify himself by partaking of the leavings of Sri Kanchipurna’s meal. ‘What is caste or sect,’ thought Sri Ramanuja ‘to him who communes with Sri Varadaraja—Vishnu—day and night.’

In North India Sri Ramananda preached bhakti to a God characterized by attributes, *saguna*, as well as transcending them, *nirguna*. His illustrious followers—Kabir, Ravidas, Dhanna, Sena, and Pipa among others—helped spread the bhakti movement widely across North India. Sri Chaitanya of Bengal declared that ‘a *candāla* outcaste devoted to Sri Krishna is superior to a *dvija*, twice-born’. In Assam Shankaradeva broke down barriers of caste and tribe by establishing Namghars, ‘houses of God’s name’. He brought such tribal communities as Kacharis, Miris, Garos, and Mikirs into a common fold. Sri Chaitanya’s devotion influenced both Hindus and Muslims, as did the works of other medieval North Indian saints. The Bauls of Bengal and the Siddhas in South India contributed significantly to rid

people of the shackles of caste and community.

In Maharashtra Sant Eknath spread the egalitarian ideas of Vedanta among the masses through his poetic compositions, the *abhangas*, while Sant Tukaram reinforced this tradition of an all-embracing devotion. The Varkaris, who undertake ritual pilgrimage to Pandharpur, the abode of Vithoba, dancing and singing across the province of Maharashtra, broke all social barriers—with members of lower and upper castes freely intermingling and embracing one another, saturated with love for Vithoba. Gora, the potter; Sena, the barber; Narhari, the goldsmith; Sanvata, the gardener; and many more created a flood of devotional fervour in which all hatred was submerged. They were the bearers of Sri Jnaneshwar's torch of spiritual illumination, which brought light to the entire country well beyond the confines of Maharashtra.

There was also Namdev, a tailor from Maharashtra, who travelled to Punjab, the land where Sheikh Farid's message was still reverberating. Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh tradition, spread the concepts of *langar*, community meals, *sangat*, collective chanting of God's name, and *pangat*, community living, that obliterates social differences. To drive home his convictions, as it were, he overlooked the claims of his own sons and installed the faithful Lehna, a petty trader, as his successor, paid obeisance to him, and declared him the second Guru—Guru Angad.

The great iconoclast Kabir condemned casteism in ringing tones: 'O Pande! Of what worth are your considerations of untouchability; hasn't the whole world been born of impurity? How come ours is blood and yours milk? How is it, O Pande, that you are a brahmana and we shudras?' While he sang his songs of love, devotion, and knowledge—with strong social overtones—his contemporary Ravidas, or Raidas, preached a similar message which has had a wide influence. From Gujarat Dadu Dayal, born of a carder, went to Rajasthan; and the Rajasthani princess Mira went to Dwaraka in Saurashtra via Vrindaban, even as Narsi Mehta was singing '*vaishnava jan to tene kahiye jo pira parayi jane re*; he is to be called a Vaishnava who feels others' pain' in

If ever a man of extraordinary parts and genius were born of the Shudra class [in ancient India], the influential higher sections of the society forthwith showered titular honours on him and lifted him up to their own circle. His wealth and the power of his wisdom were employed for the benefit of an alien caste—and his own caste-people reaped no benefits of his attainments. ... Vasishtha, Narada, Satyakama Jabala, Vyasa, Kripa, Drona, Karna, and others of questionable parentage were raised to the position of a Brahmin or a Kshatriya, in virtue of their superior learning or valour; but it remains to be seen how the prostitute, maidservant, fisherman, or the charioteer class was benefited by these upliftings. Again, on the other hand, the fallen from the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, or the Vaishya class were always brought down to fill the ranks of the Shudras.

In modern India, no one born of Shudra parents, be he a millionaire or a great Pandit, has ever the right to leave his own society, with the result that the power of his wealth, intellect, or wisdom, remaining confined within his own caste limits, is being employed for the betterment of his own community. This hereditary caste system of India, being thus unable to overstep its own bounds, is slowly but surely conducting to the advancement of the people moving within the same circle. The improvement of the lower classes of India will go on, in this way, so long as India will be under a government dealing with its subjects irrespective of their caste and position.

—Swami Vivekananda, *Modern India*, 54–6

Junagadh. Caste did not matter, love superseded it—love of the Divine who resides in his creation.

Reforms and the Vedantic Ideal


While medieval India witnessed the remarkable lives of these saints and listened to their songs, saplings of reform—partly influenced by the modernism of the West—were planted closer to our times. In the nineteenth century the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, and the Theosophical Society—with eastern, northern, and southern parts of India as their respective zones of major influence—made

useful contribution to the goal of achieving a casteless society. According to Shivanath Shastri, the Brahmo Samaj started appointing missionaries from 1864 to work against idolatry and the caste system. Lala Lajpat Rai wrote that ‘the Arya Samaj repudiates caste by birth. It condemns the numerous subdivisions into which the Hindu society has been split up.’ The Theosophical Society also worked for abolition of the caste system, particularly when Annie Besant was its president.

While all these organizations served a great purpose, the essential Hindu mind was intuitively fathomed by Sri Ramakrishna. His love overpowered the evil without striking at the traditional Hindu ethos. The Ramakrishna movement, spearheaded by Swami Vivekananda—who declared: ‘I am neither a caste-breaker nor a mere social reformer’—was not a reform movement in the accepted sense of the term. Respecting the faith and the traditions of the Sanatana Dharma, it reinvigorated the values of Vedanta and bhakti in Indian society. Sri Ramakrishna personified the spirit of loving humans as embodiments of the Divine—*śiva-bhāva*. An orthodox brahmana, he swept the house of Rasik, a sweeper, with his own long hair, praying: ‘O Mother, make me the servant of the pariah, make me feel that I am even lower than the pariah.’ This prayerful attitude touches human hearts spontaneously, unlike the anti-caste rhetoric that is not backed by concrete action. Swami Vivekananda’s wisdom was seasoned by Sri Ramakrishna. He said:

I have nothing to do directly with your castes or with your social reformation. Live in any caste you like, but that is no reason why you should hate another man or another caste. It is love and love alone that I preach, and I base my teaching on the great Vedantic truth of the sameness and omnipresence of the Soul of the Universe. ... We must try to keep our historically acquired character as a people. ... I am sorry to say that most of our modern reform movements have been inconsiderate imitations of Western means and methods of work; and that surely will not do for India. ... My ideal is growth, expansion, development on national lines.²⁷

Swami Vivekananda was sad about the way high caste people hurled atrocities on those of lower castes, treating them as outcastes. But his remedy was humanism in the spirit of Vedanta. He envisaged reform not by banishing religion but through it. He said: ‘This wonderful idea of the sameness and omnipresence of the Supreme Soul has to be preached for the amelioration of the human race, here as elsewhere. ... I have found out by experience that all evil comes, as our scriptures say, relying upon differences, and that all good comes from faith in equality, in the underlying sameness and oneness of things. This is the great Vedantic ideal’ (3.194).

Not through acrimony and recrimination, not by violence and competitive politics, not by efforts to bring down some to prove that others are equal to them—not by these negative means—but by raising those who did not have a chance in the past, through an attitude of care and love, can the slur of discrimination be removed. This is an attitude inspired by bhakti, by seeing the Divine in everyone and everything, by knowing that the Divine whose children we are—*ātma vai jāyate putrah*—does not just sit in heaven; he is here, dwelling among us all—*hari vyapaka sarvatra samana*—and by realizing that an injury to anyone is equal to inflicting injury on this Divine; only thus can an egalitarian Indian society be evolved. 

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Albert Einstein: A Humane Scientist

Swami Tathagatananda

(Continued from the December 2008 issue)

A Change to Militant Pacifism

WHILE the motives that inspired Einstein's pacifism were noble, he sometimes had to defend or explain them to others. From his youth, he had pondered the elusive treasure of world peace. His thoughts on pacifism, as well as on any other subject he focused upon, united with a wisdom gleaned from his realistic view of circumstances as they evolved. He understood that '[to] prevent the greater evil, it is necessary that the lesser evil—the hated military—be accepted for the time being.'²¹ He said, 'I am not only a pacifist but a militant pacifist. ... Every war merely enlarges the chain of vicious circles which impedes the process of mankind. ... We must begin to inoculate our children against militarism by educating them in the spirit of pacifism.'²² On 16 February 1931 he addressed several hundred students at the California Institute of Technology, remarking: 'I agree with the great American Benjamin Franklin, who said that there never was a good war or a bad peace. ... I am not only a pacifist but a militant pacifist. I am willing to fight for peace. Nothing will end war unless the peoples themselves refuse to go to war.'²³

When the Nazis seized power in Germany in 1933, Einstein was suspected of being a Communist. In spite of his earlier refusal to endorse the 1932 World Antiwar Congress in Amsterdam and a strong statement he made against Russian Communism, the Nazis raided his summer retreat in Caputh in an effort to find Communist weaponry in his possession. The Nazis found nothing they could use against him in his cottage—exasperated, they removed a small kitchen knife as evidence of

his so-called possession of Communist weapons.

The world was about to learn that his thoughts on absolute pacifism had evolved. Observing the growing force of Germany's militarism, Einstein adjusted his own view on pacifism. Previously, in 1930, Einstein had been one of the many prominent world figures to sign a manifesto 'against Conscription and Military Training of Youth' issued by the 'Joint Peace Council', a coalition of international peace organizations. Now, it seemed to him that only force could stop the Nazis:

This 'human nature' which makes wars is like a river. It is impossible in geological time to change the nature of a river. But when it continually overflows its banks and destroys our lives and homes, do we sit down and say, 'It is too bad. We can't change the river. We can do nothing about it.' ... Just as we use reason to build a dam to hold a river in check, we must now build institutions to restrain the fears and suspicions and greeds which move peoples and their rulers.²⁴

He stated his new position: 'Men should continue to fight but they should fight for things worthwhile, not for imaginary geographical lines, racial prejudices and private greed draped in the colors of patriotism. Their arms should be weapons of the spirit, not shrapnel and tanks' (ibid.).

In 1933 the moral view Einstein had expressed in the 1930 'Manifesto of the Joint Peace Council' was put to the test in a neutral country. An important experience would make him a militant pacifist. During a visit to Antwerp that July, Einstein was a guest of his friends King Albert I and Queen Elisabeth at the Belgian Royal Palace. While with his hosts, an urgent matter arose; the king summoned him to his private quarters. Two conscientious objectors had

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been imprisoned for refusing to serve in the Belgian army. The king had learned that international pacifists were clamouring for Einstein to defend their principles. Specifically, they were requesting Einstein to speak on behalf of the two prisoners.

Morally, Einstein had to respectfully consider the request, as well as the fact that he was a guest of the royals who were his friends, too. He also had to be true to his own convictions that were changing to meet the challenges of current events. Therefore, he politely avoided getting involved in the case, which pleased the royal couple. Later, Einstein issued to the public an official letter he had written that November to the king. It clarified his position and revealed the development of a more active pacifist view:

In the present threatening situation, created by the events in Germany, Belgium's armed forces can be regarded only as a means of defence, not an instrument of aggression. And now, of all times, such defence forces are urgently needed.

Men who, by their religious and moral convictions, are constrained to refuse military service should not be treated as criminals. They should be offered the alternative of accepting more onerous and hazardous work than military service.²⁵

Romain Rolland, a dedicated, absolute pacifist and famed biographer of composers whose works Einstein loved, was deeply disappointed with this new Einstein. Rolland wrote in his diary, 'Einstein, a genius in his scientific field, is weak, indecisive and inconsistent outside it' (417). Another pacifist, Professor C C Heringa of the University of Amsterdam, did not believe the published reports about Einstein's changed view about military service. On 11 September 1933, explaining his new stance, Einstein wrote to the professor: 'I assure you that my present attitude toward military service was arrived at with the greatest reluctance and after a difficult inner struggle. The root of all evil lies in the fact that there is no powerful international police force, nor is there a really effective international court of arbitration whose judgments could be enforced.'²⁶

By 1935 other pacifists, including Bertrand Rus-

sell, forsook their absolute pacifism. Years later, Einstein gave this reply to another pacifist who was confused about his position:

I am indeed a pacifist, but not a pacifist at any price. My views are virtually identical with those of Gandhi. But I would, individually and collectively resist violently any attempt to kill me or to take away from me, or my people, the basic means of subsistence. I was, therefore, of the conviction that it was justified and necessary to fight Hitler. For his was such an extreme attempt to destroy people. Furthermore, I am of the conviction that realization of the goal of pacifism is possible only through supranational organization. To stand unconditionally for this cause is, in my opinion, the criterion of true pacifism.²⁷

Crucial Departures

When Hitler came to power as chancellor of Germany on 30 January 1933, Einstein was already in the United States, living in Pasadena, California. He had fled the Nazis, as had other professors in Germany including Max Born, who had escaped with his wife. Other scientists—who were capable of influencing the outcome of the next world conflict by developing an atomic bomb—also fled Germany and other Fascist-ruled countries. Fourteen Nobel laureates alone fled Germany. In addition to Einstein, twenty-six out of the sixty theoretical physics professors then living in Germany also escaped—including Edward Teller, Victor Weisskopf, Hans Bethe, Lise Meitner, Niels Bohr, Enrico Fermi, Otto Stern, Eugene Wigner, and Leó Szilárd. Their departure from these countries ensured that the Allies were the first to develop the atom bomb; they continued their ongoing work for the benefit of the Allies. For Germany, their crucial departure was a tragic loss of intellectual power.

Influenced by Germany's rising anti-Semitism and hatred of Einstein as a Jew, many members of the Prussian Academy spoke against him or rejected him altogether. But Max Planck—who did not leave Germany—Max von Laue, and Walther Nernst never expressed such views. On 28 March

1933, as a protest against Nazism in Germany, Einstein resigned from his eminent position at the Prussian Academy. Planck was inwardly relieved that Einstein had found an honourable way out and hoped that their friendship would continue. He wrote to him, 'This idea of yours seems to be the only way that would ensure for you an honourable severance of your relations with the Academy ... despite the deep gulf that divides our political opinions, our personal amicable relations will never undergo any change.'²⁸

On 11 March 1933, two months after Einstein's resignation, Planck courageously spoke on Einstein's behalf at a plenary session of the Prussian Academy, at grave personal risk: 'I believe that I speak for my Academy colleagues in physics, and also for the overwhelming majority of all German physicists when I say: Mr Einstein is not just one among many outstanding physicists; on the contrary, Mr Einstein is the physicist through whose works published by our Academy, physics has experienced a deepening whose significance can be matched only by that of the achievements of Johannes Kepler and Isaac Newton.'²⁹

Planck's honest and forthright statement displeased Hitler (169). Earlier, when Planck approached him to speak on behalf of Einstein, whose life he hoped would be spared, Hitler had become infuriated. On another occasion, when Planck personally appealed to Hitler to reduce his harsh anti-Jewish policies, Hitler became enraged and shouted back: 'Our national policies will not be revoked or modified, even for scientists. If the dismissal of Jewish scientists means the annihilation of contemporary German science, then we shall do without science for a few years!'³⁰ Hitler once told Planck that had Planck been younger, he would have sent him to a concentration camp. Planck was so intimidated by the remark that he lived the remainder of his life in isolation. His home and vast library collection were destroyed in the Allied bombings. His son Erwin, having assisted in the plot to assassinate Hitler in July 1944, was executed after the plot was discovered. Despite these tragic events, Planck lived to the ripe age of eighty-eight and died in Göt-

tingen in 1947. All those years had not changed Planck's nationalistic view and love for Germany.

Einstein and Planck had enjoyed meeting together weekly or more often with the most brilliant scientific minds of their time. The two men had an intellectual relationship and friendship that helped their scientific collaboration. Their friendship, which had developed 'at regular intervals at the Berlin Academy' and 'went far beyond the exchange of scientific ideas', was thus described by Max Born:

Yet it is difficult to imagine two men of more different attitudes to life: Einstein a citizen of the whole world, little attached to the people around him, independent of the emotional background of the society in which he lived—Planck deeply rooted in the traditions of his family and nation, an ardent patriot, proud of the greatness of German history and consciously Prussian in his attitude to the state. Yet what did all these differences matter in view of what they had in common—the fascinating interest in the secrets of nature, similar philosophical convictions, and a deep love of music.³¹

Einstein became a US citizen in 1940. He retained his cherished Swiss citizenship but never visited Europe again. Democracy was the governing system closest to his ideals; even in the United States, he spoke out against dogmatic nationalism.

When Speech is Imperative: An Important Collaboration

Einstein was once asked to render a formula for success in life. He replied, 'If A is success in life, I would say the formula is $A=X+Y+Z$, X being work and Y being play.' He was immediately asked, 'And what is Z?' 'That,' he answered, 'is keeping your mouth shut.' However, if circumstances aroused his moral conscience, Einstein clearly understood that it was urgent to speak about them both privately and openly.

Bertrand Russell followed Einstein's work on quantum mechanics with great interest. After World War II he shared his deep concern about the international arms race with Einstein; he asked

him for his help in writing a proposal to alert the world about the dangers of another war: 'I think that eminent men of science ought to do something dramatic to bring home to the governments the disasters that may occur.'³² He hoped and expected that the leading intellectuals of the day would sign this document.

Einstein thoroughly approved of Russell's project and immediately gave it his support. Feeling certain of Bohr's agreement with the document's principles, Einstein described the project to Bohr in a letter.³³ He asked him to set aside their old differences about physics and to join in the effort.

The 'Russell-Einstein Manifesto'

In 1955 Einstein and Russell completed their 'Russell-Einstein Manifesto'. Signed by a total of eleven prominent scientists and mathematicians, it called for an end to the development of nuclear weapons: 'In view of the fact that in any future world war nuclear weapons will certainly be employed, and that such weapons threaten the continued existence of mankind, we urge the governments of the world to realize, and to acknowledge publicly, that their purpose cannot be furthered by a world war, and we urge them, consequently, to find peaceful means for the settlement of all matters of dispute between them' (539).

Unfortunately, like many other scientists, Niels Bohr considered the manifesto to be a futile gesture.³⁴ Einstein had first met him in 1920, when Bohr went to Berlin as a guest lecturer. They had both been enthused by the challenges confronting the scientists of their day and liked each other from the start. Einstein had written to him after he left Berlin, 'Rarely in my life has a man given me such joy by his mere presence as you have.' Bohr had written back, 'It was for me one of the greatest experiences I have ever had to meet you and to speak with you. You do not know how great a stimulation it was for me to hear your views' (178). In spite of the great mutual understanding between the two men, Bohr remained silent—his signature missing from the Russell-Einstein Manifesto—while Einstein signed it on 11 April 1955, one week before his

death, demonstrating again his lifelong dedication to matters he considered important. With this signature he fulfilled his last public act. Subsequently, thousands of other conscientious objectors added their signatures.³⁵ When the document was issued to the public on 9 July 1955, Russell gave the title 'Manifesto by Scientists for Abolition of War' to their collaborative work. It proved to have some influence.

One year before this manifesto appeared, Russell had delivered his famous BBC entreaty, 'Nazi Peril', warning of the dangers of the 'Bikini H-Bomb' tests—named after the Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. In 1954 when a second hydrogen bomb was exploded there, three surrounding islands had been entirely destroyed (131). In 1961, Russell was imprisoned for a week over his protest against nuclear weapons development. He died nine years later at the age of ninety-eight.

The Pugwash Conferences

In 1957, partly as a result of this manifesto, international scientists, scholars, and public figures concerned about the dangers of armed world conflict began meeting annually. Jawaharlal Nehru suggested that the conferences be held in New Delhi, but due to the outbreak of the Suez crisis this could not be done. The conferences were financed by a wealthy Canadian living in Pugwash, Nova Scotia, and were held there. The purpose of the 'Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs' was to discuss the dangers of nuclear war and to draw up a resolution for international disarmament of nuclear weapons. Twenty-two scientists participated in the first conference. Unfortunately, their discussions lasting hundreds of sessions proved inadequate. The escalation of the nuclear arms race, which was to produce a proliferation of atomic arsenals, was impossible to control. Still, the Pugwash movement and its organizer, scientist Joseph Rotblat, were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995 'for their efforts to diminish the part played by nuclear arms in international politics and, in the longer run, to eliminate such arms'.

A Compassionate Zionist

Einstein was compassionately supportive of the Zionist movement and helped to raise seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars for Jewish settlements in Palestine and for the construction of a Hebrew University in Jerusalem.³⁶ In 1929 he wrote to Chaim Weizmann, president of the World Zionist Organization: 'Should we be unable to find a way to honest cooperation and honest pacts with the Arabs then we have learned absolutely nothing during our 2,000 years of suffering. ... The two great Semitic peoples have a great common future' (381). He believed that unless the Jews worked towards harmony with the Arab culture, the goals of the Zionist movement would remain unfulfilled for decades (*ibid.*). He was sympathetic to Arabs who were being displaced by the Jews settling down in Palestine in the hope of establishing the future Jewish state of Israel. On 5 January 1955, three months before his death, he sent a letter expressing his view on the matter to his friend Zvi Lurie. He wrote, 'The most important aspect of our [Israel's] policy must be our ever-present, manifest desire to institute complete equality for the Arab citizens living in our midst. ... The attitude we adopt toward the Arab minority will provide the real test of our moral standards as a people.'³⁷

Chaim Weizmann became the first president of the new state of Israel. When he died in November 1952, Israel's prime minister David Ben-Gurion requested that Einstein become its next president through a formal letter to Einstein sent by Abban Eban, Israel's ambassador in Washington DC. Over the phone to Abba Eban, Einstein declined this proposal, saying, 'I am not the person for that and I cannot possibly do it.'³⁸ Eban then asked Einstein to send him his response in a written form. Einstein wrote back that he had been 'deeply moved' by the offer and would not accept it. 'All my life I have dealt with objective matters, hence I lack both the natural aptitude and the experience to deal properly with people and to exercise official function' (522). Privately, he remarked, 'I know a little about nature and hardly anything about men.'³⁹



Albert Einstein with his wife Elsa and other Zionist leaders, on arrival in New York, 1921

A 'Lone Traveller'

Despite his moral support and active participation in many causes, Einstein was a loner. This did not mean that he felt isolated from others: 'Although I am a typical loner in my daily life, my awareness of belonging to the invisible community of those who strive for truth, beauty, and justice has prevented me from feelings of isolation,' he wrote.⁴⁰ Solitude gave him strength and developed his moral virtues. In childhood he avoided contact with his playful cousins and other neighbourhood children engaged in noisy activities, preferring to be 'occupied with other quieter things'.⁴¹ Throughout his life, he would read and do his research alone, except for occasional collaboration with one or two friends whom he considered his colleagues. He enjoyed playing the violin in solitude. He experienced much joy from the deep wellspring of music while he played. Music also helped him to think. 'Whenever he felt that he had come to the end of the road or faced a difficult challenge in his work,' his son Hans said, 'he would take refuge in music and that would solve all his difficulties' (14).

His solitude was a rich, dynamic, and sublime experience from which he drew inspiration for his science and strength for his other activities. When he spoke at London's Royal Albert Hall in 1933, he said, 'The monotony of a quiet life stimulates the creative mind' (423-4). He loved sailing for this reason. He once said that he would like the life of a lighthouse keeper since he would be alone for many

hours at a time to pursue his interest in the sciences. On another occasion he said: 'If I were a young man again and had to decide how to make a living, I would not try to become a scientist or scholar or teacher. I would rather choose to be a plumber or a peddler, in the hope of finding that modest degree of independence still available' (533).

He agreed with Schopenhauer that serious persons feel suffocated by the travails of daily life. When he attended an official celebration in honour of Max Planck's sixtieth birthday, he said: 'I believe with Schopenhauer that one of the strangest motives that leads men to art and science is escape from everyday life with its painful crudity and hopeless dreariness, from the fetters of one's own ever-shifting desires. A finely tempered nature longs to escape from personal life into the world of objective perception and thought.'⁴²

His integrity of character was remarkable. He firmly believed that each person is under a moral obligation to work against falsehood, injustice, and oppression. 'Whoever is careless with the truth in small matters cannot be trusted in important affairs.'⁴³ Throughout his private and public life Einstein took the role of a servant to his fellow men, adhering to truth in all circumstances. He stood firm in his belief that, 'in matters concerning truth and justice there can be no distinction between big problems and small.'⁴⁴

The Conscience of the World

Simply put, 'He was indeed the conscience of the world.'⁴⁵ It is very important for us, in this age that has succumbed to moral degeneration and rampant violence, to follow in the footsteps of a saintly scientist like Einstein. In his youth Einstein said: 'I feel myself so much a part of everything living that I am not the least concerned with the beginning or ending of the concrete existence of any one person in this eternal flow.'⁴⁶ He floated like a bubble above this stream of life while remaining a part of it. For this reason the greatest scientist of the twentieth century and one of the most brilliant intellectuals of all time is known to us as both a humane scien-

tist and a lover of humanity. According to Bertrand Russell, Einstein 'remained sane in a mad world'. His marked compassion and sympathy for others inspired many to regard him as a prophet of peace. Like the ancient prophets he spoke simply and fearlessly on the significant public issues of his time. A Princeton colleague remarked, 'He was, in his last years, a very venerable figure and looked more like a typical sage.'⁴⁷ Though he had human frailties, he was driven by his concern for others. His simplicity and imagination, even in commonplace matters, made him great in the eyes of people throughout the world.



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Girish and the Monastic Disciples of Ramakrishna

Swami Chetanananda

(Continued from the December 2008 issue)

Swami Abhutananda

GIRISH had a very open and wonderful relationship with Abhutananda, the unlettered disciple of the Master also known as Latu Maharaj. Latu recalled:

One day Girish Ghosh saluted the Master by raising his folded hands to his forehead. The Master immediately returned the salutation by bowing from the waist. Girish saluted the Master again. The Master saluted Girish Babu with an even deeper bow. At last, when Girish Babu prostrated flat on the ground before him, the Master blessed him. Later Girish Babu would say: 'This time the Lord has come to conquer the world through prostrations. In his incarnation as Krishna it was the flute; as Chaitanya, the Name. But the weapon of his powerful Incarnation this time is the salutation.' The Master used to say: 'Learn to be humble. The ego will be thus removed.'⁶

Once Girish Babu came to Dakshineswar quite drunk. The Master told me: 'Go and see if he left anything in his carriage. If you find something, bring it here.' I did as I was told and found a bottle of wine and a glass. I brought both to the Master. When the devotees saw the wine bottle, they began to laugh, but the Master said to me: 'Keep the bottle for him. He will want it for a final drink.' Just see how liberal the Master was towards his devotees! (91).

When the Master was ill in Cossipore, he said to me: 'O Leto, Girish has come. Prepare tobacco for him.' Again he said: 'Go quickly to Fagu's shop in Baranagore and bring hot crispy *kachuri* [a fry] for Girish.' I followed the Master's order. On that day the Master served Girish Babu with a glass of

water. Girish Babu had a great desire to serve the Master for a year. In fact, the Master took his service for a full year. Girish Babu used to tell us: 'The Master blessed me in my old age. If he would have blessed me when I was young, then I could have shown you what monastic life is.' Only he who has one hundred twenty-five percent faith can speak that way! That kind of statement does not fit in your mouth or in mine.'⁷

Holy Mother told Abhutananda about Vivekananda's success in the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Girish also talked with Abhutananda about Swamiji's travels. Girish said: 'Latu would often come to my place and listen eagerly to every word about Swamiji's triumphant activities in America. His attitude was like a child's, full of faith and enthusiasm. When I told him that Swamiji's speech had been considered the best, he laughed gleefully like a boy and said: "It is bound to be so. Didn't the Master say that in him eighteen powers were working in their highest form? It cannot be otherwise. Can the Master's prediction be false?" One day he was so beside himself with joy that he cried out: "Please write to him: Fear not, the Master is protecting you."⁸

Once Girish remarked to a devotee, 'If you want to see a monk such as the Gita describes, go and see Latu.' The devotee did not know what Girish meant. Girish said: 'I see you have not read the second chapter of the Gita. The nature of a man of steady wisdom is described there. You can see all those qualities exemplified in Latu's character' (417).

Girish always appreciated the purity and renunciation of the Master's disciples. He told the following story:

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In 1897 Latu went with Swami Vivekananda to visit various places of northern India. When they were in Kashmir, Swamiji hired a houseboat. The boatman and his family used one corner of the boat as their home. But Latu was not prepared for this. He was the first of the party to get onto the boat, but the moment he saw a woman on board, he jumped out again. Swamiji understood the situation, but no matter how much he tried to persuade him, Latu insisted that he must not share a boat with a woman. At last Swamiji said: 'I am here with you. What is there to fear? Nothing will happen to you.' Only then did Latu agree.⁹

Girish's house, like Balaram Basu's, was a meeting place for the Master's disciples. For a time, Latu and some other disciples lived at Balaram's house, which was near Girish's. They would share their memories of their Master, and sometimes also chat and tease each other. One day Swami Brahmananda said: 'As soon as you assume a body, you suffer from disease and misery. These are the taxes to have a body; none can escape from them.' Soon afterwards a hornet flew through the window and stung Brahmananda beneath his ear. Girish immediately took a bit of lime from his betel roll box and applied it to the injured spot. When the pain subsided a little, Latu humorously said, 'Rakhal, now you are paying tax.' Everyone laughed (428).

Saradananda needed some money to pay the debt that he had incurred to buy the Udbodhan house for Holy Mother. Once he jokingly said to Adbhutananda: 'Sadhu, why don't you repeat your mantra: "*Taka dharma, taka karma, taka hi paramam tapah. Yasya grihe taka nasti, tasya grihe kuchu nai—sudhu thak-thak-thak-thak.*"¹⁰ Money is religion, money produces action, money is the supreme thing. He who has no money in his house, his house is empty—there is only a '*thak-thak*' sound."

Adbhutananda replied: 'It is the duty of a householder to earn money. If he cannot earn money, how will he maintain his family? Is it good to be a wretched poor householder?'

Saradananda went to Girish's house some days later. Adbhutananda was there. In the course of

conversation, Saradananda said to Girish: 'I took out a large loan to buy Mother's Udbodhan house. I don't know what to do. I shall not be able to keep my word if I cannot pay the interest on that loan.'

Adbhutananda then said with a smile: 'Sharat, now you see the power of my money mantra! It is creating anxiety even for a great monk like you. Now tell me whether you believe in my mantra or not.'

Saradananda replied in jest: 'Can you give me a guarantee that the money will come if I believe in your mantra?'

Adbhutananda: 'Of course, it will come. First accept this mantra.'

Saradananda: 'Look, Sadhu, I hope your words will not prove false.'

Latu: 'No, Sharat, you will see the power of the mantra.'

Saradananda then said to Girish: 'You have heard what this sadhu said. You are the witness.'

Girish said with a smile: 'I don't like to be a witness. Let me fulfil the words of this sadhu.' Saying so, Girish took some money from his pocket and gave it to Saradananda (429).

Girish wrote a play, *Kalapahar*, in which he depicted a character like Adbhutananda. Someone told the swami about this. One day when Girish said something, Adbhutananda remarked with a smile: 'Shape your mind; control your mind; never give license to your mind. Think before you say anything. Brother, be careful.'

Girish replied: 'Well, sadhu, you are speaking by hints and insinuations!'

Adbhutananda: 'It is better to speak that way; otherwise you will write another *Kalapahar*' (430).

Adbhutananda recalled:

Girish Babu used to say: 'I am not afraid of God, but I am scared of hypocritical devotees. They don't understand me, but they are expert in giving me trouble. God knows everything about me; I can't hide anything from Him. I am in His shelter; so how can I live being afraid of Him?' This is true. If you are afraid of God, you cannot love Him. Where there is fear, there is no love.¹¹

It is hard for ordinary people to understand Girish Babu's complex character. His life did not appear to be pure, and it was mysterious. If a man tries to imitate him, he may ruin his life. The Master used to say, 'Girish has one hundred twenty-five percent faith.' At one time [in 1904] I did not get any sleep for four or five days [because of excessive japa and meditation]. Girish Babu could understand this by seeing my eyes. He would then tell me many stories, and listening to his wonderful stories I would fall asleep. Thus he would give me rest for four or five hours. What a relief! Girish Babu would call me 'sadhu—a holy man' (241).

One day I went to visit Girish Babu in his house. As soon as he saw me, he said: 'Brother Latu, I see the Master clearly. Look, he is seated under that tree. Look, the Master is there.' In later years his mind was full of Ramakrishna. Just imagine his wonderful life! It is amazing how the Master's grace transformed his life! (176–7).

After Swami Ramakrishnananda's passing away, Adbhutananda told Girish that he would like to move to Varanasi. Girish told him: 'Look, sadhu, you are planning to run away. But who will let you go?' As it happened, he was unable to go to Varanasi until after Girish died in 1912.

During Girish's last illness Adbhutananda did not go to see him. Some devotees made some remarks about it. And he did not go even when Girish asked him to. Once, when a devotee asked him the reason for this apparent apathy, he replied, 'I can't bear to see Girish Babu suffer.' This one simple sentence reveals his deep love for Girish. But he would get news of Girish from the devotees twice a day. The day Girish passed away, Adbhutananda would not speak to anybody. The next day, however, he talked about Girish continuously. Following are some of his reminiscences.

One day the Master asked Girish Babu to massage his feet, but he declined. At that time Girish Babu did not have sufficient faith in the Master. However, when he developed intense faith in the Master, he did not get a chance to serve him because he passed away shortly thereafter. Later his conscience tormented him. Then he went to Kamar-

pukur and stayed there for some months. Every evening he would go to the Master's bedroom and sit there, hoping that the Master would ask him for a massage. Afterwards he returned to Calcutta.

Once the Master told Girish Babu: 'If someone frankly tells Mother Ganga one's weaknesses, she forgives all shortcomings.' The Master's advice penetrated Girish Babu's mind in such a way that every day he would inform Mother Ganga of all his faults. The day he could not go to the Ganga, he expressed himself while facing in that direction. Thus he became pure.

The Master never forbade Girish Babu to do anything. One day someone said to the Master: 'If you tell him not to drink, he will listen.' To this, the Master said: 'No, no, it is not necessary for me to tell him anything. He will be able to raise himself from all his defects.'

One day Brahmachari Nandalal said that the Master had taken only Girish's power of attorney and no one else's. In reply, Girish Babu said: 'Look, Nandalal, don't say such a thing. He has taken responsibility not only for Girish but for all. In a moment he can liberate millions of Girishes like me.'¹²

Swami Yogananda

Mahendranath Datta, Swami Vivekananda's brother, recalled:

In the summer of 1891 Swami Yogananda was staying at Balam's house in Calcutta. He was lying down and suffering from a terrible headache. His eyes were red. He told me: 'Please go to Girish and inform him that I have severe pain in my head and it is hard for me to bear it.' I immediately went to Girish, who was then about to take his bath. When I reported Swami Yogananda's condition to him, he said: 'I am coming soon. You make a light tea right now and give it to him to drink. It will cure his headache.' I returned to Balam's, made tea without milk and sugar, and offered it to the swami. As soon as the swami drank the tea, his headache subsided to a great extent. The swami sat up and told me the reason for his headache: 'For the last few days I have been repeating my mantra day and night continually. I think that is the reason I had

this terrible headache.' Meanwhile Girish came and asked him, 'How is your headache?' Yogananda replied, 'That light tea has almost cured my headache.' Girish jokingly remarked, 'Did you notice, rascal, the effect of my homeopathic medicine?' They continued to tease each other.¹³

Six months before Swami Yogananda's death, Ramakrishna appeared before him. Yogananda said: 'Master, I don't want to be born again. The lesson of this life is enough for me. Please give me final liberation.' The Master replied, 'You will have to come once more.' 'No, I won't come,' Yogananda said. 'Please release me forever.' Immediately Ramakrishna disappeared. Yogananda went through six months of physical suffering, hoping that the Master would grant his request.

Knowing Yogananda's resolution, Girish at last said to him: 'Brother, don't you know that you have been suffering terribly these last six months? Your pain is causing pain to all of us. Please agree to the Master's will. Don't refuse to come back with the Master. ... Look here, Jogin! Don't seek nirvana. Don't think of the Master as pervading the entire universe, the sun and the moon forming his eyes. Think of the Master as he used to be to us, and thus thinking of him, go to him.' At this Yogananda said: 'What! I have been suffering in bed for the last six months? All right. Let the Master's will be done. I am his servant. Whatever he asks me to do, I will do.' Saying so, Yogananda fully resigned himself to the Master.¹⁴ He passed away in samadhi shortly after, on 28 March 1899.

Swami Ramakrishnananda

The Ramakrishna Math was established in Baranagar in October 1886; in 1892 it was moved to Alambazar, near Dakshineswar. Swami Ramakrishnananda set up the shrine in Alambazar and followed the same routine as he had in Baranagar. One summer night when he was lying in his room and fanning himself with a palm-leaf fan, he felt that the Master too must be suffering from the heat. At once he entered the shrine and stood near the bed of the Master, fanning him till dawn.

Once Girish remarked about Ramakrishnananda: 'Shashi is *asana-siddha* [perfect in sitting]; otherwise it would be impossible for someone to worship Mother Jagaddhatri for a twenty-four-hour stretch sitting in one place.' Later someone asked Ramakrishnananda how he was able to do this. He replied modestly, 'Devotion can accomplish anything' (280).

In 1911 Ramakrishnananda was dying from tuberculosis and was being cared for in the Udbodhan house. Towards the end the swami expressed a desire to see the Holy Mother, who was then in Jayrambati. Swami Dhirananda was sent to bring her, but she could not come, perhaps for two reasons: first, she knew that she could not bear to witness Ramakrishnananda's death; second, there was not enough room in Udbodhan for her to stay. However, the swami was blessed with a vision of the Holy Mother on the night before he passed away. Ramakrishnananda exclaimed, 'Ah, Mother has come.'

On the morning of Ramakrishnananda's last day, Pulin Mitra, a famous singer and disciple of Brahmananda, came to see him. Ramakrishnananda expressed his vision in a Bengali line, *Pobalo dukha rajani*, 'the night of misery is over', and asked Pulin to take it to Girish to compose a song. Girish recalled: 'By the grace of Sri Ramakrishna, I completed the composition immediately. Pulin Mitra sang it before him. He was greatly moved and was satisfied with the composition.' Here is a translation of the song that Girish composed:

The night of misery is over.
 The terrible nightmare of ego is gone forever.
 The illusion of life and death is no more.
 Lo, the light of knowledge is dawning, and the
 Mother Divine is smiling.
 The Mother is bestowing the boon of fearlessness.
 Sing victory in a loud voice.
 Proclaim the conquest of death by blowing the
 trumpet.
 Let the name of the Mother vibrate all over the
 world.
 The Mother says: 'Weep no more. Look at the
 feet of Ramakrishna.'

Then all worries will vanish, all pain will go.
 Son, look by my side: The Saviour of the world is
 standing, His eyes full of grace and compassion.'

Pulin sang this song for a long time and Ramakrishnananda listened with rapt attention. It seemed that the song gave him peace because it corresponded to his vision. After this he desired to hear another, 'A Song on Samadhi' composed by Swami Vivekananda. Pulin sang that also. Ramakrishnananda was in an ecstatic mood for the entire morning. Doctor J N Kanjilal checked him and found that his condition had improved. He drank a small amount of sanctified water that had been offered to the Master, and for the last three hours of his life he was in samadhi. At 1.00 p.m. he began to perspire, his face was flushed, the hair of his body stood on end, and his gaze was fixed between his eyebrows. Swami Ramakrishnananda left his body while in samadhi at 1.10 p.m. on Monday, 21 August 1911 (307-8).

Swami Subodhananda

When he was not travelling, Subodhananda lived in the Alambazar monastery with his brother disciples. The monastery was extremely poor. One day Saradananda and Subodhananda went to Girish to ask for money. When Girish was approached, he said gruffly, 'Where is any money?' Subodhananda replied jokingly: 'Sharat Maharaj will grab you and I shall break your box and take the money.' Girish extended his hand to Subodhananda and said, 'First try to bend my finger.' Girish was extremely strong. When Subodhananda failed to bend his finger, Girish said to his secretary, 'Abinash, please give the monks whatever money I have in the box.' Girish fed the swamis and told Subodhananda: 'I am a wild horse; only the best jockey can handle me. Khoka [Subodhananda's nickname], I see you will be able to deal with me' (545-6).

Swami Shivananda

Swami Shivananda one day reminisced about Girish:

It was to save the sinners and the afflicted that the

Master incarnated. If anyone takes shelter in him with all sincerity, he passes his merciful hand over the supplicant and wipes away all his sins. By his divine touch one immediately becomes sinless. What is needed is sincere love for him and absolute surrender to him. Girish Babu had committed many sins, but the Master was impressed by his devotion and so accepted him as his own. That is why Girish Babu used to say at the end of his life, 'Had I known there was such a huge pit in which to throw one's sins, I would have committed many more.' The Master is full of compassion. He is a veritable ocean of mercy.¹⁵

Swami Premananda

Swami Premananda reminisced:

The Master lived in this world after giving the power of attorney to the Divine Mother; and Girish gave the power of attorney to the Master. The power of attorney means transferring full responsibility for one's activities to another person. Seeing his own weaknesses, Girish surrendered to the Master for his spiritual welfare. It is an extremely difficult thing to do. One cannot give the power of attorney as long as one has an iota of ego.¹⁶

In 1910 Premananda was in Varanasi, and Girish also went there for a change of climate. During that period Premananda visited Girish every day. He wrote to Ramakrishnananda on 4 December 1910:

Girish Babu is now in Varanasi. He is gradually recovering from his illness and we visit him every day. Ah, what a change has come in his nature! The Master said to him, 'People will be amazed seeing you.' That prophecy has been fulfilled. He tells us many wonderful things about his own life and the Master. His magnanimity and steadfast devotion to the Master are remarkable. He is humble and does not care for name and fame at all. I have not seen such noble traits even in many monks. I see clearly that he has become gold by touching the philosopher's stone [the Master]. He cherishes unselfish, pure love and affection for us. He is sixty-eight years old, but his nature is like that of a boy. He gets excited and intoxicated when he talks about the Master and Swamiji. Even his servants

have become devotees of the Master. This is all due to the grace of the Master!¹⁷

Swami Turiyananda

The following are some of Turiyananda's reminiscences.

Even a man like Girish Babu was accepted by Sri Ramakrishna. The Master could mix with all types of people. We try to mould everyone according to our own ideas, but he took each person from where he was and pushed him forward. He never disappointed anyone by failing to mould that person according to their own light. He had a unique relationship with each devotee and maintained it through the years. Often he would teach them through humour. Ah, what a teacher! Where can one find another like him?

Girish Babu used to say: 'My younger brother would take hold of my father's hand when he walked, but I used to sit on his lap. I would say all sorts of things to Sri Ramakrishna, but he was never displeased with me. Often when I was dreadfully intoxicated, I would go to him. Even then he would receive me cordially and say to Latu: "See if there is anything in the carriage. If he wants to drink here, how can I provide it?" He knew there must be a bottle in the carriage. Then he would gaze into my eyes and completely destroy the effect of the intoxication. I would say, "Why, you have spoiled the effect of a whole bottle!" He used to inquire about the past of each person who came to him, but he never asked me anything about my past life. Nevertheless, I told him the whole story. He never forbade me to do anything. Is it for nothing that I adore him so much?'

Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'If a water snake bites a frog, it produces no effect, but if the frog is bitten by a cobra the poor thing expires before it can croak thrice.'

There were few sins in which Girish Babu had not indulged. He once said to us, 'I have drunk so much wine in my life that if the wine bottles were placed one upon another, they would stand as high as Mount Everest.' He was a poet, so he spoke poet-

ically like that. Truly speaking, he did drink a lot. When he was asked by the Master to repeat the name of God morning and evening, he refused to do so. He said: 'I am not sure I can do it. I do not know in what condition or where I may be at those hours.' Then Sri Ramakrishna asked him to remember God before meals. 'That also I cannot promise you,' replied Girish Babu. 'I am often engrossed in lawsuits and have to attend to all sorts of things. I can't even do that.' At this Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Then give me the power of attorney.'

Referring to this conversation later, Girish Babu said to us: 'I readily agreed to give him the power of attorney, but later on I realized how difficult it was. I had told him I wouldn't be able to repeat the name of God even once in the evening, but afterwards I found I could not do the least bit of work without remembering Him at every step.'

In one day Girish Babu gave up his fifteen-year habit of taking opium. He said the first three days he suffered tremendously; his entire body became inert. By the fourth day, he was all right. Later in life he did not even smoke.

Sri Ramakrishna was knowledgeable on a variety of subjects. Girish Babu once said to him, 'You are my superior in every respect—even in wicked things.' At this the Master said: 'No, no, it is not so. Here [meaning himself] there are no samskaras [past impressions]. There is a world of difference between knowing something by actual experience and learning about it through study or observation. Experience leaves impressions on the mind which are very difficult to get rid of. This is not the case with knowledge through study or observation.'

Once Girish Babu asked the Master, 'Why did you have to practise [spiritual disciplines] so hard?' The Master replied: 'You know, there is eternal union of Hara [Shiva] with Gauri. Still, why did she practise so much austerity? It was to set an example to others. If I do so much, others will do at least one-sixteenth part of it. Isn't that so?'

The Master once said to Girish: 'What are you saying about knowledge of Brahman? Shukadeva

saw and touched the Ocean of Brahman. And Shiva drank only three handfuls of Its water and became a *shava* [corpse].⁷ Girish Ghosh clasped his head and exclaimed: 'Stop, sir, say no more. My head is reeling.'

A householder devotee once had a wonderful experience. He had drunk freely and was very excited. Stopping his carriage before a house of ill repute, he went upstairs. But at the top of the staircase he found Sri Ramakrishna standing in front of the door! He fled in shame. Unless God saves us, there is no way out. Blessed are those who have no evil tendencies in their minds. They alone are saved. None can escape this attraction by personal exertion. But as Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'If you are sincere, Mother will set everything right.'

Generally, people try to show their good side. They want to make a good impression, rather than trying to be good themselves. The first thing we learned from Sri Ramakrishna was to pay no attention to the opinion of others. He used to say: 'Spit on public opinion! Look towards God and try to please Him!' Swamiji was also like that.¹⁸

Swami Abhedananda

Swami Abhedananda recalled:

A crazy woman used to come to visit the Master at Cossipore. She had a sweet voice, and when she would sing the Master would be in ecstasy. One of her songs was:


Come! Come, Mother! Doll of my soul! My heart's Delight!
In my heart's lotus come and sit, that I may see thy face.
Alas! sweet Mother, even from birth I have suffered much;
But I have borne it all, thou knowest, gazing at thee.
Open the lotus of my heart, dear Mother!
Reveal thyself there.

The devotees were overwhelmed listening to her song. The woman was very obstinate and unpredictable, however. Whenever she had a chance, she would run upstairs to the Master's

room. The Master forbade her to come there as she had adopted the same attitude towards him as the gopis had had towards Krishna. Finding that the disciples would not permit her to visit the Master, she eventually stopped coming. Girish Chandra Ghosh was inspired by seeing and hearing this crazy woman, and he depicted her in the character of the mad woman in his drama *Vilwamangal* (225).

Swami Vijnanananda

Swami Vijnanananda recalled:

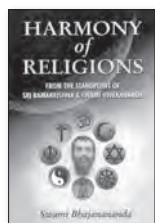
One day [Janmashtami (Krishna's birthday), 18 August 1884] Girish Ghosh came to visit the Master at Dakshineswar. I was also there. That evening Girish sang a song to the Master from his play *Chaitanya Lila*: 'O Keshava, bestow thy grace upon thy luckless servants here. O Keshava, who dost delight to roam Vrindaban's glades and groves!' The Master, out of ecstasy, embraced Girish and sat on his lap. Tears of joy flowed from the Master's eyes. After a while Girish left for Calcutta (247). 

References

6. *Ramakrishna as We Saw Him*, ed. and trans. Swami Chetanananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1993), 86–7.
7. Chandrashekhar Chattopadhyay, *Sri Sri Latu Maharajer Smritikatha* (Calcutta: Udbodhan, 1953), 254–5.
8. *God Lived with Them*, 420.
9. *Sri Sri Latu Maharajer Smritikatha*, 318.
10. Latu made up this mantra based on a *tarpana* mantra to the departed souls. It is made up of Sanskrit, Bengali, and Hindi words.
11. Swami Siddhananda, *Satkatha* (Calcutta: Udbodhan, 1974), 171–2.
12. *Sri Sri Latu Maharajer Smritikatha*, 435–7.
13. *Saradananda Swamijir Jivaner Ghatanavali*, 1.233–4.
14. *God Lived with Them*, 240.
15. *Ramakrishna as We Saw Him*, 130.
16. Swami Omkareshwarananda, *Premananda Jivan Charit* (Deoghar: Ramakrishna Sadhan Mandir, 1952), 2.16.
17. Hemendra Nath Dasgupta, *Sri Sri Ramakrishnadev O Bhakta-Bhairav Girishchandra* (Calcutta, 1953), 92.
18. *Ramakrishna as We Saw Him*, 206–8.

REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA, publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications.



Harmony of Religions from the Standpoint of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda Swami Bhajanananda

Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park, Kolkata 700 029. E-mail: rmic@vsnl.com. 2008. 57 pp. Rs 15.

A hundred and twenty years after Sri Ramakrishna, the pioneer figure of *dharma-samanvaya*, harmony of religions, this concept remains poorly understood and inadequately practised. Sri Ramakrishna's original insight into every religion being a path to the same goal, *yato mat tato path*, also continues to be misunderstood and misrepresented, even by scholars. The variety and contradictions within the global religious landscape keep baffling thinkers and religious conflicts keep topping the list of worrying international problems.

It is against such a background that this brief but cogent elucidation of the concept of 'harmony of religions' as conceived of and practised by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda assumes a singular significance. What is the basis of Sri Ramakrishna's *samanvaya*? On what grounds does he assert the validity of diverse religious paths? How do we practise harmony without losing our own moorings? How do we account for religious conflicts? This book should stimulate us to discover answers to such questions.

The author, well known to readers of *Prabuddha Bharata* for his extensive insightful writings on Indian religious, spiritual, and philosophical traditions as well as on interreligious themes, outlines four major interreligious attitudes—exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and universalism—and traces the history of their growth in Western cultures. He then examines the Indian socio-religious outlook and its organic, holistic approach to religious pluralism vis-à-vis the analytical trend of Western thought. He notes the Indian tradition of dialogue as a means of both highlighting and resolving religious differences. It is in this context that the teachings of Sri

Ramakrishna assume a special significance, which the author brings into sharp focus. He also discusses the three concepts of 'universal religion' proposed by Swami Vivekananda: the universal 'religious consciousness' of humanity, 'the sum total of the existing world religions', and religions as 'man's struggle to transcend his limitations'.

The text is summed up with a note on how the harmony of religions is a living tradition in the Ramakrishna movement and why the universal motherhood symbolized by Sri Sarada Devi is crucial to actual achievement of harmony in practice. This book should remain an indispensable guide to the subject for a long time to come.

PB



Thakur: A Life of Sri Ramakrishna Rajiv Mehrotra

Penguin, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi 110 017. 2008. xvi + 178 pp. Rs 250.

The last century has seen a proliferation of the Ramakrishna phenomenon in print media. The electronic media is not far behind: just google the name and you come up with innumerable references. The Master's message has woven itself inextricably into the World Wide Web. The author of the present volume has himself done a television series on Ramakrishna. In such a situation the question is: why another volume? And the answer is not far to seek: just one reading of this volume convinces us of the unending possibilities of the Ramakrishna tradition, as well as of the individual talent of the author who gives it an innovative slant with his distinctive presentation.

Let us begin with the cover: instead of one of the photographs, an artwork replete with the painter's perception—symbolic of each individual's own response to Ramakrishna, as the book highlights—adorns the cover. The 'charming, naïve and endearing' (7) image of Gadadhar, bathed in the glory of divine fervour, seems an extremely apt illustration

for the nature of the biography presented in this volume. The penguin in the inset—apart from symbolizing a prestigious publishing house—may have metaphoric overtones when applied to one or more of the sayings of Thakur. And the red hibiscus below the title is also significant.

The title *Thakur*, translating literally to ‘Master’, has subtle colloquial overtones in Bengali, where the word is most often used synonymously with ‘God’ and not merely ‘the master in social or caste hierarchy’. And it is the juxtaposed dimensions of the human and the divine that find expression in the present volume.

Interspersing the linear narrative of Sri Ramakrishna’s life are the author’s comments on various related issues—for instance, that on the efficacy of ‘Kali ... the Universal Mother, the maternal mystery at the heart of our lives to which we are tied forever, by invisible but real umbilical cords’ (23), and on ‘Samadhi ... the fourth state of consciousness, neither waking nor dreaming nor a dreamless sleep’ (27), to cite just two among examples which abound.

Not eulogistic or overtly sentimental, the narrative often takes on a tone of delving into the uncharted depths of ‘truth’, as for instance the author’s rhetorical questions after describing the incident of Mathur seeing Ma Kali and Lord Shiva in the person of Sri Ramakrishna. Says the author, ‘Mythologizing? Creating legends? The truth? Whose truth? It is difficult to say’ (36). The inner realm is shrouded with mystery, and Ramakrishna was the exemplar par excellence of this realm; therefore talking about his life would automatically raise such questions, and this quest is possibly the believers’ most meaningful sadhana. The tone of this biography may also be described as ‘unorthodox’, which one can gauge by the chapter heading ‘Blundering Towards the Divine’ (21–36). But this occasionally unorthodox stance seems most suited to depicting a life dotted with innumerable so-called ‘unorthodox actions’ (28).

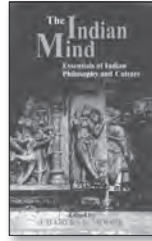
The introduction to the volume begins very tellingly with the famous song: *Mana chalo nija nicketane*; ‘O my mind, let us go home’ (1), and sets the stage for the advent of Ramakrishna by talking about the thousands-of-years old spiritual tradition of India. Following this are eight chapters, beginning with ‘Birth, Childhood and Family’ and culminating in ‘Mahasamadhi’. The second chapter ‘The Quest of the Spirit’ is a sensitive portrayal of Ramakrishna’s unique experiences, and chapter seven entitled ‘Disciples’ is a must-read.

I think this comment can apply to the entire vol-

ume. Even those who have read scores of biographies of Sri Ramakrishna will enjoy this insightful presentation. In short, a commendable attempt, in spite of the modest assertions of the author in the preface.

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**The Indian Mind:
Essentials of Indian
Philosophy and Culture**

Ed. Charles A Moore with the
assistance of Aldyth V Morris

Motilal Banarsidass, 41 UA Bungalow
Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 007.
E-mail: mlbd@vsnl.com. 2008. xvi + 458 pp.
Rs 695.

The vivid colours of the Indian subcontinent and the rich variety of its landscape get reflected in the profusion of thought that is the ‘Indian mind’. ‘A striking characteristic of Indian thought is its richness and variety,’ observes Prof. Mysore Hiriyanna. ‘There is practically no shade of speculation which it does not include.’ This trend of acceptance and assimilation has resulted in a unique Indian mindset that does not see variance or contradiction even in absolutely divergent theories. To understand and present such a complex scenario is challenging. We do owe a lot to Westerner scholars who have painstakingly collected and salvaged valuable material, studied them, and presented them systematically. Yet, prejudiced statements made by many Western researchers have also led to a lot of misunderstanding and have shown Indian thought in poor light. This book, first published in 1967, has gone a long way in shedding light on all these aspects and in projecting the true spirit of Indian thought.

The book is one of the four volumes based on papers presented at the four East-West Philosophers’ Conferences held at the University of Hawaii in 1933, 1949, 1959, and 1964. A brilliant introduction by Charles A Moore outlines the important principles of Indian thought. ‘The philosophies, the religions, and the basic cultural patterns of India have been so deeply engrained in the minds and lives of the Indian people that not even virtual slavery—politically and economically—could prevail against them.’ This is the conviction of the editor who offers an overall picture of Indian philosophy by classifying its different periods of growth into the Veda-Upanishadic, Epic, Sutra, and Scholastic periods. He emphasizes the

close relationship between philosophy and life by quoting W H Sheldon: 'In the West, we want to *know* the truth, in India they want to *be* the truth'. He also makes a list of seventeen observations that give the gist of the Indian mind.

S K Saksena points out that the Indian philosophical theories of suffering, ultimate freedom, non-attachment, the unreality of the apparent, and of moral requirements for intellectual attainments have produced convictions and beliefs which have not only altered the outlook of their believers, but have also given a different turn to their lifestyle. For instance: 'In the West, the term "practical" has referred to man's relation with his environment and to changes and alterations in it. It has not been so in India, where the term has referred to just the opposite meaning of effecting change and alteration within one's own self, where the entire effort has been concentrated on transforming the empirical ego into the pure self, or egoity itself into non-egoity or mere "thusness".'

P T Raju remarks that Indian thought lacks the breadth which Western philosophy has attained. He also opines that the sense of self-sufficiency long suited India and it has to now adapt to the rapid changes that are taking place in society.

Gunapala Piyasena Malalasekera explains the tenets of Buddhism, defined as a way of life, and calls it a philosophy of 'Thusness' (*Tathata*)—things as they actually are. It admits no Atman, individual or universal, and no eternalism whatever. The staying reality of Being is, according to Buddhism, only for one instant. From the first, it was based on negation. It has no story of creation, no Creator, no God, no First Cause, and no monotheistic idea.

Indians developed epistemological methods to perfection, and Dharendra Mohan Datta deals exhaustively with these. There is a rigorous and sincere attempt in the Indian mind to ascertain all possible avenues to knowledge and to evolve the different rational methods of checking and correcting knowledge, ascertaining truth in such a way that unsound philosophy may not ruin life.

Swami Nikhilananda deals with raja yoga, bhakti yoga, and jnana yoga. Concentration is the sole method to learn the secrets of both the outer and the inner worlds. Meditation is defined as the direction of attention on a stream of ideas, leading to the identity of the seeker with the object of meditation. The author has drawn heavily from the rich repertoire of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda thought to give

a practical framework of yoga.

T M P Mahadevan discusses the 'Social, Ethical, and Spiritual Values in Indian Philosophy'. He suggests that a philosophy is to be judged by its fruits; and the final fruit of philosophy is the experience of value. S Radhakrishnan stresses on the limitations of reason to understand Reality and on God being above all religious systems. Further, in India, the insistence throughout has been on inward vision and transformation, the intuitive vision of reality, which transcends the objective and formal elements giving life and meaning to the mythological beliefs and faith of a people.

It is interesting to note that the practice of right-minded Aryans was the touchstone and determining factor wherever there was doubt or controversy in the ethical, social, and political ideas of Indian lawgivers. All the lawmakers upheld the basic idea of dharma. It was ordained that, the higher the station or caste, the more serious the offence when a moral law is broken. Republics existed in India from very early times and there were *sabhas* or councils to control the affairs of certain states. C P Ramaswami Aiyar provides these and many more details in his paper.

Dhirendra Mohan Datta says that the Indians took the concept of ownership to a high plane by stating that all wealth is God's; his creatures have a right to as much as will support life; one who claims more is a thief and deserves punishment. He rightly says that state laws cannot enforce economic justice and equitable distribution of wealth, unless society is morally aroused to the sense of duty and fraternal love.

Kalidas Bhattacharyya discusses 'The Status of the Individual in Indian Metaphysics' and states that there is no one view on this. Apart from the Charvakas, all the others hold the view that every individual has a spiritual side which is more essential than his material side. He says that Indian philosophers failed to detail the relation of the liberated individual to other liberated and bound individuals. He is also of the opinion that Indian systems of thought have not adequately distinguished between cognition, action, and emotion.

The role and status of the individual in Indian religious thought, individuality and free will, the individual's right of conscience as opposed to social duties and obligations, ethics and morality that govern the individual are the issues dealt with in detail by T R V Murti, Surama Dasgupta, S K Saksena, and Tara Chand. Since they also deal with related topics there is continuity of ideas in their presentations and

also some overlappings. However, they complement each other and form a well-organized delineation of the concept of the individual.

Questions asked at the end of the sessions and the answers given by the experts have been included in the relevant chapters; they clarify certain doubts that may assail the reader too. Though the book was first published forty years ago, it remains a valuable aid for those interested in knowing about India and the richness of her tradition, about its philosophical thought and its relation to her people and culture, and to contrast these with Western thought and attitude.

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Linguistic Traditions of Kashmir

Ed. Mrinal Kaul and
Ashok Aklujkar

D K Printworld, F-52 Bali Nagar, New Delhi 110 015. E-mail: dkprintworld@usnl.net. 2008. xxxiv + 609 pp. Rs 1,250.

Kashmir, known in the ancient times as *śāradādeśa*, land of the Muse, took great strides in diverse fields of Sanskrit learning—ranging from philosophy, religion, poetics, aesthetics, dramaturgy, history, and music to grammar and linguistics. While Kashmir's contributions to philosophy, religion, poetics, and aesthetics have been studied and evaluated to a reasonable degree by reputed scholars from all over the world, its legacy in the domain of Sanskrit grammar and linguistics has not received as much attention as it deserves from experts in these disciplines. This book fills this gap to some extent.

The volume contains twenty-one essays written by distinguished scholars and acknowledged authorities on Sanskrit grammar and linguistics like George Cardona, S D Joshi, Raffaele Torella, and Ashok Aklujkar—one of the editors of the volume—who have spent their lifetime studying this subject. Three interrelated articles by Ashok Aklujkar—entitled 'Patañjali's Mahābhāṣya as a Key to Happy Kashmir', 'Gonardīya, Goṅikā-putra, Patañjali and Gonandīya', and 'Patañjali: a Kashmirian'—provide readers with valuable information about the *mahābhāṣyakāra* Patanjali: his identity and his association with Kashmir. George Cardona's essay 'Theoretical Precedents of the Kātantra', bearing, as usual, the stamp of his in-depth study in the field of Sanskrit grammar, pro-

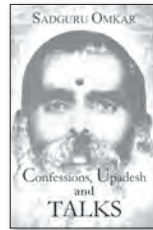
vides useful insights into the making of the 'Katantra Vyakarana' which, though created outside Kashmir, became popular with the local pandits of Kashmir. 'Three Grammatical Persons and Trika' by Bettina Bäumer and 'The Mythico-ritual Syntax of Omnipotence: on Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta's Use of Kriyā-kāraka theory to Explain Śiva's Action' by David Peter Lawrence open new vistas for the study of Sanskrit grammar vis-à-vis Shaiva metaphysics. The credit for this actually goes to the genius of the Shaiva acharyas who postulated a linkage between these two apparently divergent fields in their works. Dr Bäumer has referred to the influence of Bhartrihari, the celebrated grammarian philosopher, on Abhinavagupta. All the same, it was left to the genius of Abhinavagupta to transform Bhartrihari's grammatical notion of 'word' into a metaphysical concept, and then use it for explaining the Trika theory of *unmesa*, the unfoldment of the universe, in terms of the manifest aspects of *parāvāk*: *paśyantī*, *madhyamā*, and *vaikharī*. The essays on some of the works of Udbhata, Uvata, Kaiyata, Jayanta, Helaraja, Kudaka, Devasharman, and Ishwara Kaul add to the value of this text.

The editors of this volume deserve to be congratulated for collecting these brilliant essays on the linguistics traditions of Kashmir from scholars all over the world and arranging them into a bouquet as a tribute to the memory of Pandit Dinanatha Yaksha who served as Head Pandit, Jammu and Kashmir Research Department, Srinagar. I have no doubt that this volume will be welcomed by all those who are interested to know more about Kashmir's contribution to linguistics and grammar.

Prof. Deabrata Sen Sharma

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Confessions, Upadesh and Talks

Sadguru Omkar

Akshaya Prakashan, 208, M G House, 2 Community Centre, Wazirpur Industrial Area, Delhi 110 052. E-mail: harish@akshayaprakashan.com. 2008. xiv + 305 pp. Rs 180.

India, the land of mystics and saints, never ceases to foster the spiritual legacy of humankind. It is inspiring to read and hear, let alone see a person who has transformed his life through struggle against all that binds the soul. This certainly is no easy terrain to conquer. Claims of super-sensuous experience do not

evoke sympathetic response if they are not substantiated by a life that is full of joy, born of conviction in the higher Self. True mystics are simple and identify themselves with one and all. Their life is harmonious and instils peace in others.

Are not such persons rare? Yes, they are. But without them the world would be poorer. Hidden from public gaze, mystics are often recluses and their lives may also go unheralded. Yet, the fragrance of their realization wafts through silently, touching wearied souls and nurturing their feeble faith. This book introduces us to one such wonderful life.

The brief foreword by Sri Aurobindo, whom the author was associated with, draws our attention to the psychological nature of the book, emphasizing the courage to confess and the strength derived from spiritual experience. Most of these writings, the author reveals, had appeared in the 1920–21 numbers of the *Vedanta Kesari*, an English monthly of the Ramakrishna Order, under the pseudonym 'Le Fraille'.

From a revolutionary sentenced to a long prison term to a communist and then to a spiritual master, Nilkantha Brahmachari traversed a path that is seldom seen. His ideology of sacrificing all for the motherland expanded to include the people that make the Indian nation, and then further to the whole of humankind. That was Sadguru Omkar. Living amidst nature's beauty at Nandi Hills near Bangalore, he lived the life of a true monk, finding security in the Self, rather than in goods, commodities, and crowds of devotees. 'My ashram is a beautiful place with all the inconveniences necessary for spiritual life, but disappointing to a lover of ease and comfort', he would quip about his ashrama. 'Yes, I have needs but no desires', was another of his expressions that speak of the inner calm he had achieved. His assertion 'the absolute alone can give the true sense of security and peace' is an echo of the Upanishadic statement '*na alpe sukhamasti, bhumaiva sukham*; there is no joy in the limited, the infinite alone is joy'.

The book is arranged in three chapters, and the first has a series of three 'Confessions'. The struggle to reach the Absolute, tossing between faith and despair, the repeated prayers seeking guidance and sustenance, and the sparks of illumination—all these that poured forth from his pen at various times—make a great study. He probes into the helplessness that assails the soul, the inscrutable law of life that determines everything, and the petty notions of God that popular religion fosters—a brilliant analysis of the human mind. He writes, 'There is no pleasure

sweeter than that of the fancy. No pleasure is possible for man without the aid of fancy. Even the practical, the so called real pleasure of man are constituted of nothing else but fancy.' Again, 'Man in reality enjoys the modifications of his own mind.' How then does one get rid of all these illusions conjured up by nature and its product, the mind? 'Knowledge is the highest of all objects of experience. It is knowledge alone which finally remains with man ... and finally fulfils the object of his existence.'

We do find a rebellious attitude against accepted norms of religion in the beginning of the book. There are outbursts and strong denunciations. But all ends in harmony and peace when contradictions cease to exist for him. At times Sadguru Omkar's musings are untraditional and daring, but his teachings are always practically oriented. His interpretation of the Upanishads is direct, and the reader will find a clear exposition of the knowledge of the Atman and of sadhana in these pages. He says: 'I have not built up a big ashram, or a big following, or a big reputation or a big bank account. But I have built up a beautiful philosophy of the Atman from out of the Upanishads and sized up and streamlined by personal experience to suit the needs of modern man and acceptable even to the Communist'. His concern for the sufferings in the world and his practical approach stand out in his conversation with Mahatma Gandhi. 'The knowledge of the Self can be brought under practical psychology', he tells Gandhi. Swami Vivekananda also wanted the truths of Vedanta be made available to all.

Sadguru Omkar passed away in 1978, at the ripe old age of eighty-nine. He lived in joy and spoke of the joy of being free. This book is truly worth treasuring; well produced and with a low price tag. It will be a welcome addition to the world of spiritual literature.

Swami Atmajnananda



Jaina Studies

Ed. Colette Caillat
and Nalini Balbir

Motilal Banarsidass. 2008. xvi + 286 pp.
Rs 600.

Here are ten research papers presented at the 12th World Sanskrit Conference held at Helisinki from 13 to 18 July 2003. Although these papers formed the proceedings of the conference, they have now been published by Motilal Banarsidass for wider circulation. This effort on the part of the editors and the publishers

is commendable. In the earlier World Sanskrit Conferences there was no session devoted exclusively to Jainism; papers on Jainism were included in the section on 'Religion and Philosophy'. At Helsinki, a separate session on Jainism made it possible for scholars to examine Jainism critically as a distinct socio-religious domain.

Besides the preface by the editors, the book contains ten research papers by reputed scholars on various aspects of Jainism. Colette Caillat, who was a member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres of the Institut de France, Paris, has contributed a paper 'On the Composition of the Svetāmbara Tract *Marāṇavibhatti-/Marāṇasamāhi-Paiṇṇayam* dealing with the distinction between auspicious and inauspicious death. Caillat has surveyed other similar works in the Jain tradition—both Digambara and Shwetambara—and presented a comprehensive overview of the topic. J R Bhattacharyya's brief essay deals with 'Women in Ancient Jain Literature'. He compares the position of woman in ancient Jain literature vis-à-vis the Smṛiti literature over the centuries. Kristi Wiley examines the different views on karma as detailed in the *Prajñāpāna Sūtra*. She points out some fundamental similarities between these views. Sin Fujinaga presents the chronological development of the concepts of *dharma* and *adharma* in Jain ontology. His paper is based on the thirteenth-century text *Dravyalankara*, jointly authored by Ramachandra and Gunachandra.

Nandalal Jain has attempted a mathematical analysis of the traditional basic postulates of the Jain theory of *anekāntavāda*, non-absolutism. He also suggests a training programme in *anekāntic vision* and non-violence. Jainism has drawn extensively on the Ramayanas. Vimalasuri's *Paumachariyam* (1st cent.), Ravisena's *Padmcharita* (7th cent.), Swayambhudeva's *Paumachariu* (9th–10th cent.), and various other Jain Ramayanas have been studied by V M Kulkarni during the latter half of the last century. Eva De Clercq has dealt with these with an eye for passages that explain doctrinal stands. Paul Dundas has examined the *Kathakosha-prakarana* of Jineshwara Suri briefly but critically, and Jean-Pierre Osier has reviewed the stotra literature and highlighted its spiritual significance, taking Ashadhara's *Jina-sahasra-nama-stotra* as a case in point.

Nalini Balbir, the co-editor, has undertaken a brief survey of the autobiographical Jain literature of the twentieth century. Three autobiographies form the corpus of her study: those of (i) Muni Jinavijaya

(1888–1976), (ii) Aryika Jnanamati (b. 1934), and (iii) Kshullaka Ganesha Prasada Varni (1875–1961). These autobiographies go a long way in recording the socio-religious history of the modern Jain community. Nalini Balbir compares the autobiographies of these personages with those of people from other communities who had a similar life trajectory. Varni, ordained a Kshullaka—a Digambara monk who has taken minor vows—in 1947, was a highly respected figure and his work *Meri Jivan Gatha* is considered an important literary work in Hindi. Balbir is naturally more concerned with his socio-religious work.

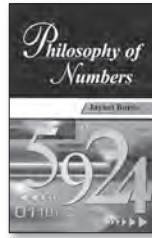
The volume is rounded off by Peter Flugel's essay 'The Unknown Loṅkā: Tradition and Cultural Unconscious'. The longest article in the volume—running to nearly a hundred pages—it deals with the teachings of Lonka (1415–89), a layman from Gujarat, who articulated 'a powerful, text-based critique of the laxity, *śīthilācāra*, of contemporary Jaina mendicants', especially rejecting 'the prevailing practice of image-worship as "uncanonical", since in his view it was predicated on violence and attachment to property'. Exhaustively documented, the article explores the currents and undercurrents shaping the historic tradition of the Jains.

Jaina Studies covers fairly large ground in the history and tradition of Jainism and should be welcomed by academic scholars interested in this field.

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Philosophy of Numbers

Jayant Burde

Munshiram Manoharlal, Post Box 5715,
54 Rani Jhansi Road, New Delhi 110 055.
2007. xii + 251 pp. Rs 575.

This book deals with the philosophical aspects of number theory with an eye to the general reader. As there is virtually no other book addressing this issue in the Indian market, this effort is laudable. However, the text has several shortcomings which need to be addressed in future editions.

First, the textbook style detracts from its value to the general reader. The text also becomes abstruse in dealing with theorems, using a non-conventional numbering system and proofs with symbols galore. At the same time, from the point of view of the specialist student in philosophy, it does not deal with

specialist student in philosophy, it does not deal with deeper philosophical issues in number theory; and for the student of number theory—who is usually not interested in philosophy of mathematics—the subject is either too elementary or obvious. So the author needs to be more clear about who he is writing for.

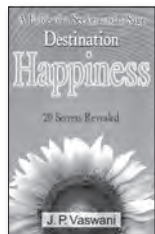
I was hoping that the book would discuss in detail some of the results of mathematical logic, such as the implications of Gödel's theorem, which is an important milestone in philosophy of mathematics and which uses the enumeration techniques of number theory. The treatment given here is rather summary. The author's claim that Fermat's last theorem is still unsolved is also surprising—Andrew Wiles and Richard Taylor supplied a proof way back in 1993–4.

The treatment of Turing's work in the Chapter Thirty—'Numbers: Reality and Mysticism'—is rather sketchy. That the author cites the opinions of Roger Penrose—who is a strong proponent of the superiority of the human mind over computers—as being decisive suggests that he has not looked into the issues of Gödel's 'incompleteness theorem', Turing's 'halting problem', and other similar results, first hand. Of course, the aesthetics of mathematics is a subject that has eluded the grasp of philosophers and mathematicians alike. So everyone has a right to wonder at the feelings of wonder expressed by the discoverers of important mathematical truths.

The book could have been improved if, instead of going into details of well-known mathematical systems, it had taken up serious philosophical issues. The author could also have highlighted the Indian contributions—especially that of Ramanujan—to the field of number theory.

Swami Sarvottamananda

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Belur



Destination Happiness

J P Vaswani

Sterling Paperbacks, A-59, Okhla Industrial Area, Phase II, New Delhi 110 020.
2007. 355 pp. Rs 250.

Bringing out a beautiful view of the landscape of life through interesting anecdotes and sayings, Dada Vaswani shows us countless ways to find the happiness which eludes us. Making others happy by appreciation and forgiveness with an uncluttered mind could radically change our world for the better. Describing twenty

steps to happiness in a gripping and enlightening style, Dada Vaswani tells us that happiness is not something to be pursued externally but is a treasure to be cherished internally. For anyone willing to be happy, here is an easy guide.

PB



Sakshi's Payel

Nileen Putatunda

Writers Workshop, 162/92 Lake Gardens, Kolkata 700 045. E-mail: profsky@cal.vsnl.net.in. 2006. 69 pp. Rs 120.

The dedication to Eric Liddell is significant. He had won the gold medal in the 400 metres run at the 1924 Paris Olympics. There have been hundreds of Olympic gold medallists, but Liddell we remember because of the famous film on his life, *Chariots of Fire*. Liddell's had been a life of self-sacrifice as a soldier of Christ in war-torn China and his idealism has touched Nileen Putatunda who comes directly in the line of Indian culture, flagging off with a poem reminding us of Krishna's flute.

Apart from wishing to emulate Liddell in the Olympics, having graduated from St Stephen's, our young poet is part of the 'Stephanisation' that has been going on in Indian writing in English. If Amitav and Upamanyu prefer fiction, Nileen is for poetry. Avoiding crack-jawed versification, he settles for prose paragraphs touched by the stardust of poesy. In poem after poem questions confront us, and we have no answers. Even the romantic touch cannot avoid the query that is always wriggling under the surface thoughts: Is your soul as bewitching? / Or is your face / Hiding beneath its alluring veneer, / A rusty spirit? / A creaking mind? / Pride?

Legends like Ekalavya and Arjuna squeeze themselves into Nileen's statements, while a stint at the Vidyasagar Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences at New Delhi makes the poet recall Sri Aurobindo and Trailanga Swami. Mini-poems too are plentiful here, but they are mere affectations, no more. Nileen is still at the threshold. There is more to poetry than mere dexterity with the language. If he channelizes his emotions into something deeper, he would feel certain of his hold on earth. Then would Sakshi's Payel echo Shiva's 'dance celestial'.

Dr Prema Nandakumar

Researcher and Literary Critic
Srirangam

REPORTS

News from Branch Centres

Sri Nitish Kumar, Chief Minister of Bihar, Sri Uday Chowdhury, Speaker, Bihar Legislative Assembly, and several other dignitaries attended Durga Puja celebrations at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Patna**, on 7 October 2008, Mahashtami day.

On 19 November Konda Lakshman Bapuji Universal Foundation, Hyderabad, presented to the Vivekananda Health Centre of **Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad**, the 'Dr Konda Shakunthala Devi Medical and Health Services Excellence Award', comprising a memento, a citation, and one lakh rupees. The Vivekananda Health Centre was started in 1981 as a homeopathy dispensary run by the math. At present it has grown into a big general outpatient dispensary providing care under the following heads: general medicine and surgery, obstetrics and gynaecology, paediatrics, ENT, dermatology, ophthalmology, dentistry, cardiology, orthopaedics, psychiatry, and urology, as also Ayurveda and Homeopathy. A team of around 60 highly qualified doctors are rendering their services voluntarily. Medical, paramedical, and diagnostic services are provided daily to an average of

Vivekananda Health Centre's reception



400 to 500 patients. On Sundays, the centre conducts free medical camps in rural areas through its mobile unit with the help of devoted doctors and volunteers.

On 24 November Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, laid the foundation stone for the proposed multipurpose building at the Gangail Road sub-centre of **Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Viveknagar**; and on 28 November he laid the foundation stone for a proposed temple at the math complex.



Lt Governor Tejindra Khanna (centre) at the RK Mission, New Delhi

On 8 November **Ramakrishna Mission, New Delhi**, held a public meeting presided over by Sri Tejindra Khanna, Lieutenant Governor of Delhi, in connection with the platinum jubilee of its TB clinic. The clinic has been a pioneer in the field of serving TB patients in Delhi since 1933. At present it has the unique distinction of being the only NGO in the country to head a district—Karol Bagh district—where the TB control programme run by the state government functions under the clinic's aegis.



Sri Gopal Krishna Gandhi offering flowers to Swamiji's portrait

On 13 November Sri Gopal Krishna Gandhi, Governor of West Bengal, visited the **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Purulia**, on the occasion of the concluding phase of its golden jubilee, and unveiled a portrait of Swami Vivekananda.

Relief


Flood Relief • Several centres of the Ramakrishna Mission conducted post-flood relief work in areas badly damaged. The following is a summary of these activities. In Bihar—**Patna** centre distributed 2,254 saris, 2,254 dhotis, 4,508 blankets, 225,400 halogen tablets, and 2,254 utensil sets (each set containing 5 steel plates, 5 steel mugs, 5 steel spoons, 1 steel ladle, 2 aluminium pots, and other items) to 2,254 families belonging to 7 villages of Chattapur block in Supaul district during the month of November. In Uttar Pradesh—**Lucknow** centre treated 3,050 flood-affected patients belonging to 8 villages of Bakshi-Ka-Talab Tehsil in Lucknow district in the month of October. In West Bengal—**Belgharia** centre distributed 4,289 saris, 4,322 dhotis, 1,647 pants, 1,619 shirts, 2,967 children's garments, 4,426 blankets, 342 sweaters, among other items to 4,426 families belonging to 20 villages of Amarshi I and Patashpur I and II blocks in Purba Medinipur district last month.

Winter Relief • During the month of November 656 blankets were distributed to needy people through the following centres: **Belgharia**, 106; **Coimbatore Mission**, 350; **Shyamla Tal**, 200. **Baranagar Math** distributed 165 woollen shawls and **Narainpur** centre 600 sweaters among poor and tribal students.

Distress Relief • The following centres provided various items to needy people in their respective areas. **Baranagar Math**: 265 saris, 50 dhotis, and 124 sets of pants and shirts; **Belgharia**: 134 saris and 92 dhotis; **Cooch Behar**: 207 saris, 47 dhotis, 1 rickshaw, and 1 cycle.

Pilgrimage Service • On 9 November, the sacred occasion of *Jugal Parikrama*, **Vrindaban** centre served drinking water and *batasa* to about 10,000 devotees, and also conducted a medical camp in which 690 patients were treated.

Free Eye Camps

Free eye camps are regularly conducted by many centres of the Ramakrishna Mission. A cumulative report is given in the table below, covering the period from 1 December 2007 to 30 November 2008. A total of 27,368 patients were treated and 6,904 free cataract surgeries were performed. 

Centre	Patients Treated	Surgeries Performed
Asansol ¹	62	29
Baranagar Math	100	50
Belgaum ^{1 2}	695	215
Chandigarh ¹	240	29
Chapra	49	14
Chengalpattu	137	7
Garbeta ¹	669	73
Jamshedpur ¹	356	114
Kamarpukur	370	161
Limbdi	546	67
Lucknow	10,215	2,154
Madurai ¹	213	0
Medinipur	328	92
Mumbai ¹	826	110
Muzaffarpur	522	101
Narainpur	239	151
Patna	728	438
Porbandar	1,003	154
Rajkot	977	218
Ranchi Sanatorium	180	64
Sargachhi	804	147
Silchar ^{1 2}	2,018	335
Ulsoor	5,659	2,096
Vadodara	292	37
Visakhapatnam	140	48
Total	27,368	6,904

¹ Includes data for November 2007

² Includes data for October 2007