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Keep Swimming

Keep Swimming Two frogs fell into a deep cream bowl.

One was an optimistic soul.

But the other took the gloomy view,

"We'll drown," he lamented, without much ado. T

hen with a last despairing cry,

He flung up his legs and said "Goodbye."

Quote the other frog with a steadfast grin,

"I can't get out but I won't give in;

I'll just swim around till my strength is spent,

And then I'll die the more content."

Bravely he swam to work his scheme,

'Til his struggles began to churn the cream.

The more he swam, his legs a-flutter,

The more the cream turned into butter.

On top of the butter at last he stopped,

And out of the bowl he gaily hopped.

What is the moral? It's easily found...

If you can't hop out, keep swimming around!

Anonymous

Francis Thompson

Sri Shailendra Nath Chakravarty

To be worthy of a distinguishing name, one must be capable of taking difficult decisions, of accepting suffering, pain and conflict. Francis Thompson, the religious poet of the later nineteenth century in England, wanted to be a distinguishing name as a poet, not merely a fanciful poet, but 'the poet of the return to God', as he once said of himself. It was, indeed, an arduous task for him, because he had to suffer much in life and even pass three years in the streets of London as a destitute, in order to establish himself as a poet. His life had been one of abject poverty and misery, but it was greatly to his credit that his spirit was not broken, that he was not embittered or hardened into despair. Instead, he rubbed out the rusty stains. Thompson's deep faith in religion saved him from utter destruction and despair and united him with the Supreme Spirit, which is

God. In the beginning people misunderstood him, wrongly criticized him and did not hesitate to pelt him with verbal brickbats. But posterity has acclaimed him as a great poet and today some people look upon him, in spite of his weaknesses, as one of the chosen bards of God.

Though physically ever a shadow, Thompson was spiritually a Titan. A queer admixture of contradictions and paradoxes, he was a repository of sterling qualities. The material world did not attract him, his nostalgia was for those invisible realms which only a spiritual person could contemplate. Thompson's love of God and faith in His Will strengthened his moral courage and he accepted suffering with a calm resignation. So, there is no trace of revolt or anger in his works, instead, he sings a mighty paean of grateful thanksgiving.

Francis Thompson in his great poem *The Hound of Heaven* tells the story of his emergence from the darkness of egotism, pride, rebellion and escapism. Thompson, in this poem, perceives God as the God of Wrath at the outset and this sense of 'wrath' in God is born of a feeling of guilt in the poet. He, like an ignorant child, does not understand God's love and runs away from Him in fear:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;

I fled Him, down the arches of the years;

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears

I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

The poet's ego takes no cognizance of the Fatherhood of God at first. He, like a petulant and foolish child, thinks that if he surrenders himself to God, he will lose not only his individuality but everything in the world:

(For, though I knew His love who followed, Yet was I sore adread Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside).

Does Thompson not give vent to our common feeling about God's love in these lines cited above? The world is too much with us today and we regard it as bad taste to speak to

God, or more correctly, think of God. We, living in an age of tremendous scientific achievement, feel pride in denying God, but we do not understand that by denying God and clinging to material prosperity we run after the shadow leaving the substance behind. Moreover, psychology has given us an opportunity to live in another dimension. In the Garden of Paradise man hid from God, now he hides within himself. Now we are wont to escape from God by plunging into the unconscious self. But psychology does not, or cannot solve all the problems of our life The only solution is God. Self-analysis is good, no doubt, but it should be born of penitence and humiliation before the face of God. Thompson seems to have realized this truth when he surrenders himself unconditionally to the Hound of Heaven - the Great Pursuer, and sees God in human suffering. His ego is reduced to zero and he realizes the fact that man's misery is but the other side of God's Mercy. There is suggested, ultimately, in the following lines of Thompson's great poem, a deeply mystical and beautiful solution of the mystery of life's suffering:

Is my gloom, after all,

Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?

These lines throw light upon the chastening thought that none of the pain and sacrifice is in vain and God never closes a door, but that He opens a window. The trials and crosses, bereavements and sadnesses of life are only the shadow of His hand stretched out for an embrace.

Thompson's faith in God was so deep-rooted that neither the hidden anguish of his years at Manchester nor his physical destitution and spiritual desolation in the streets of London could subdue him. But they wrung from his soul the awful expression of what it means to be a Christian, if being a Christian still means being a follower of Christ, who lived and suffered and died, and said to everyone who would be His disciple: `Take up your cross and follow Me'. Thompson grew in the faith of the man and poet who de profundis, from the depths of an agonized but unbroken spirit in a broken body, toiled ever upwards,

With bloody clutch and feet

Clinging the painful juts of jagged faith.

(An Anthem of Earth)

Jean Cocteau once said: 'God is the only pillow of which one never tires.' Revamping Cocteau's comment we can affirm that Thompson was never tired of God and he saw in the world of objects the reflection of the Divine Object. He did not only see God's power working behind the human soul but behind the inanimate things too. His faith made him see the power of God behind all the works of Nature. To him God is the Creator, Nature the creature. God is immanent in Nature as the life-giving principle. God even works on such an ordinary thing as a snowflake like a Master-craftsman:

He hammered - he wrought me,

From curled silver vapour.

(To a Snowflake)

Nature, as Thompson looked at her, is Daughter of God, and will speak to man only if he is on good terms with God:

This Lady is God's Daughter, and she lends

Her hand but to His friends,

But to her Father's friends the hand which thou wouldst win;

Then enter in,

And here is that which shall for all make mends.

(Of Nature: Laud and Complaint)

Thompson, unlike Wordsworth or Shelley, while sitting in the beautiful surroundings of Nature hears not her words, but God's:

I sat with Nature's loveliness,

Unapparelled for me,

And her eyes of wistfulness

I could see

Means me not. The murmured meanings

Of her mouth were God's, I guess

(I Sat with Nature)

Nature, according to Thompson, fundamentally divorced from God, is ambiguous and incapable of giving any impetus to man in his spiritual life. He wrote in his essay Nature's Immortality:

'Absolute Nature lives not in our life, nor yet is lifeless, but lives in the life of God: and insofar, and so far merely, as man himself lives in that life, does he come into sympathy with Nature, and Nature with him She is God's daughter, who stretches her hand only to her Father's friends. Not Shelley, not Wordsworth himself, ever drew so close to the heart of Nature as did the Seraph of Assisi, who was close to the Heart of God.'

Thompson's whole aim in poetry was to read the meanings of heaven into the shows of earth, to make all things in the world a staircase by which he might mount up to God:

Bright juts for foothold to the climbing sight

Which else must slip from the steep infinite.

(To Stars)

He would have us see the other world everywhere clad in a divine loveliness:

The angels keep their ancient places;

Turn but a stone and start a wing.

'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces

That miss the many-splendoured thing.

(The Kingdom of God)

The age in which Thompson lived, struggled, wrote and ultimately died, was just like

that of ours today - an age of apparent smugness and complacency accompanied by a deep under-current of doubt and a sense of grave uncertainty. As opposed to many of his well-known contemporaries, he always looked for a spiritual regeneration in an unbelieving and confused age. From the first, he was an intimate of the spiritual world. Like St. Augustine, St. Francis and William Blake he saw celestial visions no common eyes have ever seen; and like them, he felt a craving for the Infinite which an ordinary man can never think of. A large portion of his poetry is the autobiography of his soul, written now in fire, now in dew. One can have more or less liking for him, read him for pleasure or duty, but his name cannot be ignored. And here lies Thompson's greatness both as a poet and as a spiritual guide.

(Reprinted from Vedanta Kesari, June 1975)

Devotion and its Expressions

Swami Dayatmananda

The aim of all religions, of all Yogas, is the realisation of the Ultimate Reality. Different religions or paths are only various ways leading to this realisation. While the nature of the Ultimate Reality is variously interpreted, it is agreed that realisation or direct experience is the end or goal. Swami Vivekananda says:

"You must bear in mind that religion does not consist in talk, or doctrines, or books, but in realisation; it is not learning but being. Man must realise God, feel God, see God, talk of God. That is religion."

The realisation of God needs sadhana or spiritual practice. Sadhana in the devotional path seems easier compared with other paths. It is easy because it follows the objective path. Every path or method is easy or difficult depending on the person's bent of mind. It is easy for a person having a natural bent and difficult for one who does not have it. Though nothing is easy or difficult, still generally it is possible to mark out one method as easier than another. The object rouses the attention of a child and attracts him long before he has any idea of the subject. Man's attention is naturally directed first towards the object; it is only late in life that he learns to direct his attention within and notice

the subject. It is for this reason that the path of devotion places before the devotee an object that attracts him. This attraction seems to be spontaneous and guides the devotee further along the path. As he goes on practising the devotional disciplines his mind becomes focussed on the object of his devotion more and more until his whole mind gets occupied with it without much difficulty. In the path of devotion there is no great strain because there is no attempt to go against the grain. The instruction is to follow one's natural bent of mind until its source is reached which is the Absolute Reality, for all objects, what we call "the world", are in reality the manifestations of that One Reality only. This is why the different schools of devotion are unanimous in agreeing that the path of devotion is the most effective means to the realisation of God. Sri Ramakrishna says: "For this Kali Yuga, Naradiya-Bhakti, or communion with God by love, devotion and self-surrender as practised and preached by the Rishi Narada, is enjoined."

The devotional path lays special stress on the personality of God and regards the personal God as the Highest Reality. A devotee is expected to love God intensely to the exclusion of everything else. Devotion or Bhakti is attraction to the Absolute. Sandilya defines devotion as intense attachment to God. This attachment to God is the genuine characteristic of devotion. Narada also defines devotion as 'Parama Prema Rupa' i.e., of the nature of supreme love towards the Supreme Lord. And the nature of this supreme love is 'Anirvachaniyam', indescribable. It is like the dumb tasting nectar.

In order to gain this one-pointed devotion one must develop certain virtues. Narada advocates that a devotee must cultivate harmlessness, truthfulness, purity, compassion, faith, and other such qualities. Without the cultivation of these qualities it is impossible to attain devotion to God.

When a devotee consciously starts cultivating these virtues love for God starts manifesting spontaneously. It is like the sunlight streaming in as soon as the curtains are drawn.

Spiritual practice in the path of devotion lays emphasis on establishing special ways of adoring Him and cultivating special types of relationship with Him. Different religions stress different types of relationships. Narada, one of the greatest teachers of devotion tells us that God can be worshipped in eleven ways. This does not mean He cannot be worshipped in other ways. God can be worshipped in any number of ways; He can be

worshipped through all human relationships.

Some devotees spend all their lives adoring the Lord in one particular manner. There are others who adopt different approaches according to their mood and need. Since no man may remain in the same mood one may adopt one or more of these aspects that help him forward in his path.

These are the eleven ways:

(1) A devotee loves to chant the praises and glories of the blessed Lord. Thus Narada and Vyasa are always found delighting themselves in singing the glories of the Lord, helping to convert others to a life of spirituality and love.

(2) He loves His enchanting beauty. The Gopis of Brindavan were naturally attracted by Krishna's enchanting personal beauty, and they revelled in it.

(3) He loves to offer Him the worship of his heart. Ambarisha spent his whole life in worship, Prahlada in remembrance.

(4) He loves to meditate on His presence constantly. Brother Lawrence puts great emphasis on practising the presence of God.

(5) He loves to think of himself as His servant. Hanuman is the supreme example of service to God.

(6) He loves Him as his friend. Uddhava and Arjuna had the attitude of friendship. It is said of St Teresa of Avila that she looked upon God both as a friend and as her Beloved. Certainly God considered her as a friend. Once when she was passing through great hardship she complained of it to the Lord. He seems to have replied, 'Thus I treat my friends'. Like a flash came the retort from St Teresa, 'No wonder, you have so few friends!'

(7) He loves Him as his child. Kausalya, Devaki and Yashoda adored Him as their darling child. Many Christian women saints too had this attitude adoring baby Christ.

(8) He loves Him as his beloved. Radha, Meerabai, and Andal are supreme examples of adoring God as their Beloved.

(9) He likes to surrender himself to Him completely. Bali and Vibhishana are supreme examples of complete self-surrender to the Lord.

(10) He loves to be completely absorbed in Him. The great Rishis like Sanatkumara and Yajnavalkya immersed themselves in His bliss.

(11) He likes to feel the pangs of separation from Him. This attitude is a common characteristic of all devotees, because it is in the very nature of intense love that it cannot bear separation; and Narada has made this one of the supreme tests of devotion.

(Narada Bhakti Sutras, Sutra 82.)

Sri Ramakrishna is the supreme example of the practice of all these ways and relationships. He practised all these moods and relationships in his life and proved their validity.

Whatever may be the mood or relationship it is the intensity of one's desire, Vyakulata, that matters. As Sri Ramakrishna used to say, one realises God through intense yearning alone.

"Bhakti is supreme devotion to God. One has to do spiritual practices in order to get devotion to His lotus feet; one has to weep for Him with the intense longing of the heart. The mind should be gathered up from the different objects and concentrated exclusively on Him. He is not in the Vedas or Vedanta or in any scripture. Nothing will be achieved unless one's heart yearns for Him. One has to pray to Him with intense devotion, and practise Sadhanas. God cannot be realised so easily."

Be an Instrument of God

Swami Swahananda

Man is too afraid to surrender. He thinks he will lose something, but one never loses when he gives himself absolutely to God. Only when he is guided by God does he cease to blunder; because God then works through his hands, sees through his eyes, speaks with his tongue - and he becomes a perfect instrument in the hand of God. He is directed by God in everything. Swami Ramakrishnananda

Throughout the centuries it has been taken for granted by men of spiritual experience that life has a goal, and that goal, according to these religious teachers, is to realize God, or to realize one's own perfect nature. To achieve this goal, four major methods have been given, which are called the yogas - the paths of realization.

Each of these four yogas deals with one of the four aspects of human nature. Man has three faculties - thinking, feeling and willing, and the condition that arises when these three are in abeyance, not functioning actively, is considered to be the fourth state - the yogic condition. So these are the four possible states of the mind: the mind thinking, the mind feeling, the mind willing, and the mind in its quiescent form. Based on this view, there are four possible yogas: jnana yoga, bhakti yoga, karma yoga, and raja yoga, respectively. So in one sense, anything that connects you, joins you, to the Lord, to the Ultimate Reality, could be considered a yoga.

The first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita is entitled "Vishada Yoga", "The Yoga of Dejection." How can dejection be a yoga? Dejection pushed Arjuna into a search for the higher reality, and into surrender to the Lord. The Gita tells the story of the Kurukshetra War, in which two opposing parties were standing against each other to fight. Arjuna was a commanding general of one side, but on the other side were his own relatives and friends. So he was very much taken aback about what to do. Krishna was Arjuna's charioteer, so Arjuna asked him, "I am getting confused. What shall I do?" Then Arjuna continued, "O Lord, I am your disciple. I take refuge in you. Please guide me." In response, Krishna gave the whole teaching of the Bhagavad Gita.

The idea here is that anything that pushes a man towards, first, a deeper search, and then, deeper realization, is a yoga. You may come across varieties of "yogas", but the basic yogas are four. All other yogas can be put under one or another of these four.

Modern man has little patience; half the people don't want to observe too many disciplines. They want to make things simple. The other half, of course, want details. So

what are the fundamental ideas behind these four yogas? As we live our day-to-day lives in society, what should be our attitude? These are the questions. Spiritual life, essentially speaking, is only an attitude. The Vedantins say that practices and disciplines are all necessary and useful. They will push the mind forward - they will purify the mind. Rites and ceremonies, prayers and singing, reading and contemplation, social service and morality - all these things are classed under normal religion. The purpose of all these disciplines is to purify the mind, and in the purified mind, knowledge of the Reality dawns automatically.

In theistic language, this is put in a slightly different way. Theism accepts that there is a personal God. The Ultimate Reality may be formless, but when It is viewed from the standpoint of the world, from the standpoint of the individual, It is called Ishvara, the Lord. It is the same Reality. Sri Ramakrishna, based on his own experience, used to say that the Ultimate Reality can be both personal and impersonal. The impersonal is the ideal of the philosophers - the Absolute - but in the religious traditions, the mystical traditions of the world, great saints and sages have communed with the Divine, and experienced a sort of personal relationship. Swami Vivekananda, who was a special propounder of the Advaita or nondualistic doctrine, said that, "In spite of all this I feel there is a Mother-heart somewhere." He was trying to be as logical and as non-committal as possible. Normally the approach of the intellectual is non-committal - not to get oneself committed to any position, because direct experience is lacking. The only proof of God is experience; all other arguments are possibilities. Based on their own experience, the saints and sages say there is a personal aspect of the Reality, which is called Ishvara, or Saguna Brahman in the Vedanta philosophy - Brahman with attributes. Ishvara is not something separate from the Totality. It is the same Totality viewed from another angle, that's all. The father is only a father if he has a child; if he has no child he is not a father. If we are here, and if we are real, in that relationship we see the formless Reality as the personal God.

This is the path of bhakti yoga, the path of love or devotion, which takes for granted that there is a higher power behind this universe, and that the purpose of life is to realize Him. Vedanta comes forward and says that realizing Him is realizing the Absolute. So realize Him! By what method? There is an elaborate method. Most of the religions of the world are normally theistic, even though their personal God may have an Absolute aspect. God may be said to have a form, or He may be said to be without form,

but having "infinite good qualities" - that is, He is kind, He is just, He is loving. And what is the method of realizing him? The theistic religions say, "Love of the Lord." Bhakti means love of God, devotion to God. The great teacher Ramanuja defines bhakti as meditation coupled with love, with affection. "Snehapurvam anudhyanam" - meditation but with a little love, a little affection. A yogi may meditate without mixing in any emotion. If the Absolute is your objective, where is the scope for emotion? That is one type of meditation. A jnana yogi stresses meditation on the Reality - what It is in Its own nature. A raja yogi stresses the meditational technique - to give him some grip over the thing. But a follower of the path of bhakti yoga meditates on God with love.

Then, in bhakti yoga, other spiritual practices follow. How to express your love? The Lord is personal; we impose human sentiments on Him. So whatever I like - for instance, good clothing - I offer to the Lord, or His manifestation, or an image. If I like good food, I offer it to the Lord. The devotee's relationship with the Lord is almost like a personal relationship. A normal man has varieties of desires. He tries to connect these desires to the Lord - to the Divine. Then the desires lose their binding quality. The scriptures say that we should live in the Lord all the time, but we know that in normal life that is not possible overnight. How do we bring about such a condition? As one of Sri Ramakrishna's disciples observed, when this condition is attained - that is, when complete surrender to the Lord has come - liberation has already been achieved. The method is to practice - along with other disciplines - connecting the Lord with all our desires, and thus we gradually go beyond desires. As we contemplate the Lord, a time will come, gradually, when the desires will drop away. We will learn to assert our spiritual nature more and more. Vedanta's conclusion is that man's real nature is the Spirit, but it is mixed up with the body and mind. Vedanta asserts that to realize the Spirit, purity of the mind is necessary, and full purity can come only from a condition of desirelessness. In the early stage of spiritual life, we desire things, and God also. Connect the desires to the Lord, and gradually, the mind goes up.

The major idea in bhakti yoga is love of God. Worship, singing, praying, pilgrimage, reading, hearing about the Lord - all these are methods by which we may attain that love. Various disciplines have been described: moral and ethical disciplines, religious techniques, rites and ceremonies - and they are all useful. These are tested methods which help us to keep the mind centered around the Reality. Bhakti yogis put stress upon japa, the repetition of the name of the Lord. As Latu Maharaj said, we have not

seen God, but God's name is available to us. The names of God have been given to us by saints and sages, from their experience, and that is something tangible. If you go on repeating the name, the result will come. Lata Maharaj put it in a very simple way. He was a simple man, but a saint. "If there is a man of some name in the office, you just address your letters to him at the office. If somebody is functioning there, he will reply to you." If you try to repeat His name, the Lord will hear you if He is there. If He is not there, of course, life loses all meaning. Whether you have enjoyed a little more or a little less, if after fifty years everything vanishes, life loses all meaning, all significance. So putting trust in the Lord, repeat His name. This is a very simple direction.

The major emphasis in all the practices in the theistic circle is on thinking of the Lord, or on learning how to think of the Lord. But in the ultimate analysis, spiritual life is an attitude. What is the proof that you really love God? You remember Him, you think of Him in every situation. So the sages said that the ultimate stage, or the essence of the devotional life, is to surrender to Him. There is a famous shloka, or verse, in the Gita, which is considered by the theists to be the most important verse - the verse which really matters. In the eighteenth chapter, sixty-sixth shloka, Krishna says: "Sarva dharman parityajya mam ekam sharanam vraja." "Giving up all other dharmas, all other duties, take refuge in Me alone." Duties are good things - duty to this god, to this man, to this society - these are all good things, compared with the concerns of a bullish, animalistic man. Serving the people of society, serving the gods - this constitutes religion. But Krishna says that the final religion, the final spirituality, will be to transcend even these. This is called sharanagati, surrender. Duties are good things, but they are also binding. Because even the will to do things, according to the sages, is not under you. It is really God who prompts you. God is really the inner guide sitting in the heart of man. Every action that you do is really being done by Him. Every move that you make is being made by Him. If that attitude could be taken, then right now you would be a free soul. Of course the moral question will come - if you do bad things also, is God doing that? No religion will say that bad things are good, and that God makes you do them, but the saints give their testimony that from the person who takes the attitude that everything is done by God, gradually all the dross falls away. So if something has been done that is immoral in relation to society, in relation to the accepted norms of things, socially you will not be pardoned - you will have to pay the price. But spiritually speaking, if from the whole heart - if it is possible, of course - that attitude is taken, right now you can be free. From the Vedantic standpoint, also, it can be supported in

this sense: all good and bad things are done by the body and the mind. Realization is to know that you are not the body, not the mind. The moment you know - really know it, you are free from the pressures of the body and mind. That doesn't mean your body will not pay. Your body will have to pay. Your mind will have to pay. That by realization you will escape all suffering - that is not the idea. That is a different idea. Vedanta is not concerned with that. For that you will have to cry and weep to the Lord to pardon you, or go to the yogis, and learn to keep your mind under control. The idea of the bhakti yogi is that the Lord is sitting in the heart; He is doing everything. But we often mix-in our own ego. So, because we have still got an idea of good and bad, we ought to do whatever is good. A stage will come when we will go beyond that. And the saints say that when that stage comes, we cannot do any bad things. Sri Ramakrishna gave an example: with a sword you can cut a man. But if the sword is turned into gold, it is no longer useful for all these rough jobs. The ultimate idea behind all this is that the devotee surrenders to the Lord.

There are two major schools among the theists of Ramanuja's sect, called the Sri Vaishnava sect, in South India. One school says, "We must do something. Man knows that he has got some freedom - he can do something. As long as we have that feeling, we must act on it! If we know that this is good and that is bad, we must do the good thing." The other school says, "No, everything is done by the Lord. Why should we plan anything? Let Him guide us." This is the old question of free will versus predetermination. A quarrel over this point is always going on. So these two schools, representing these two ideas, arose in the Ramanuja tradition. In The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, the comparison is made between the baby monkey and the baby cat. The baby monkey holds on to its mother. The mother monkey jumps from tree to tree, and the baby holds on; whereas the baby cat sits somewhere and goes on mewing and mewing. Wherever the mother takes it - sometimes, as Sri Ramakrishna says, on the nice cushioned bed of the master of the house, sometimes in the gutter - its only language is "Mew, mew." And wherever the mother puts the kitten, it remains. Similarly, a devotee surrenders to the Lord and says, "Whatever You do is alright. Thy will be done." Of course such a devotee has no right to question every now and then. He may cry and weep, of course, but still, weeping and crying, he will have to go back to the Mother, as children sometimes do. To whom else will the child go? Nowadays parents don't beat children much. Once in a while, they may give them a slap. And the child will weep, and go back to the parent again. So even if some suffering comes to you, you may cry and

weep, but you will have to go back to the Lord. He is your Father, He is your Mother, He is your inner guide. In every situation, the devotee must take recourse to Him. This school of thought goes to the extent of saying that even for spiritual practice, nothing else is necessary. Just surrender to Him.

In one system of Vaishnavism given by Vallabhacharya, it is said that the only discipline necessary is to choose the Lord - "Varanam eva sadhanam" - that's all. "O Lord, I opt for You. Now do whatever You like." Of course, the implications of this decision will come later. If you have really surrendered, then you cannot take a step without seeing whether it is the Lord's will or not. When you are still in the preliminary condition, you have only made the decision to choose Him, as was the case of Girish Ghosh as described in Sri Ramakrishna The Great Master. Girish Ghosh was a very brilliant man of those days - the 19th century. He was the first great playwright and stage manager of modern India - one of the most brilliant men Bengal had produced. But in the early stages of his life, he was given much to drinking, and other vices. Drinking was a fashion, especially in that profession, but Girish was a spiritual seeker within. He went to the one extreme, probably took a turn, and then came in touch with Sri Ramakrishna. Somehow or other, he felt that in Sri Ramakrishna, God had incarnated to bless him. And he had tremendous faith - not like our faith - sometimes we doubt, sometimes we have faith - which is not faith at all. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, "Girish's faith is one hundred and twenty - five per cent." More than a hundred per cent - so much strength of faith he had. Girish came to Ramakrishna. He knew that Ramakrishna could save him. Probably because of his previous samskaras, past impressions, the desire for liberation came to Girish - in spite of all his drinking. His mind was not at peace. He went to Ramakrishna, and asked, "What shall I do?" Ramakrishna said, "Think of the Lord twice a day," as religious teachers normally say - even though the definition of bhakti is constant remembrance of the Lord. These teachers know that thinking of the Lord twice a day is more than enough for most people - that we don't have the capacity for constant remembrance. This doesn't mean that by thinking of the Lord twice a day the person will realize God. He will realize God in time. But this practice will prepare the mind, stage by stage, for realization later. Sri Ramakrishna told Girish to think of the Lord twice a day. But Girish said, "Oh, I am such a busy man!" Girish was a type of genius. For hours and hours he could think about the topic on which he was writing. He had the capacity for dictating three different books to three writers at a time: he would dictate to one writer for two minutes; to the next, two minutes; to a third, two minutes. And in, say,

fifteen days, three books would be finished. That has been recorded - he had that type of capacity. Girish said, "I am so busy a man, I forget myself!" Ramakrishna said, "All right, at least think of the Lord before taking food." He would at least have to take food.

Still Girish hesitated, and thought inwardly, "Such a simple thing he is telling me to do. I should do it, but what if by chance I forget?" Girish knew that if he were to forget, he would be in trouble, because he would be giving his word of honour to God incarnate. So Girish kept silent. He was ashamed to tell Ramakrishna that he could not do even that much. But Ramakrishna understood Girish's mind, and said, "Oh, you may say that even that much I cannot do. Then give me the 'power of attorney'." When a child is small, and cannot manage its own property, the court appoints an attorney to look after the child's property. This is called the power of attorney. Grown-up people can also do this, but it is used more often for a child. When Ramakrishna said, "Give me the power of attorney," Girish heaved a sigh of relief and said, "Ah! That is the way out! That suits me very well. I don't have to do anything, just give power of attorney." And he gave it.

In later days Girish used to say to his brother disciples, the monks and others, "You had a limited period of doing spiritual practices, sadhana, but I have no limit. Every step I take, I have to think, 'Oh, you have given the power of attorney to him. Why should you question your fate? He never promised you that he would take you along a smooth path; if he takes you through the thorns you have no right to question it.'" Girish held to this view so much that when his five year old child died, he was weeping on one hand, but, on the other hand, he said that he had no right to weep. So these are the implications of surrendering. The major idea of this surrender is, "Accept the Lord as the guide of your life, and believe that He protects you." Of course if this idea falls in the hands of intellectuals, theologians, and philosophers, they will say that He will protect you spiritually. Physically, He may not. But the devotees believe that the Lord protects them all the time, even in the physical plane. There are hundreds of cases where real help came to devotees. Then again, of course, the intellectuals will try to understand how the help came, because they take for granted that there is no God, and try to explain away how the help comes. They will have to say that the mind, or the unknown powers a man has within him, brings the help. Many explanations will be given. But the devotees believe that the Lord is responsible.

Of course, the psychological benefit of surrender to the Lord is automatic. The spiritual explanation is that you have surrendered yourself to Him, so you become an instrument

of the Lord. He is sitting here; He is doing everything. Sri Ramakrishna used to say. "I am the machine, You are the operator of the machine." Realistically, it is so, of course. Ultimately, He is there. But that attitude has to be cultivated. Man is very egotistic by nature, so this egotism has to be lessened. All the religions try by some method or another to lessen this feeling of egotism, and later egotism itself. So, as Sri Ramakrishna used to repeat: "Naham, naham; Tuhu, Tuhu." "Not I, Not I, but Thou, but Thou." That is the attitude of a devotee, who knows his limitations, who knows his limited nature, who is still identified with his body and mind. This is the attitude of an instrument. The instrument does very good things. But the instrument doesn't think, "I have done this." The machine doesn't think that it is the doer. It is the operator of the machine to whom the credit goes. The attitude is, "I am the chariot, You are the charioteer. You use my body, as it were". Not "as it were" - "You use it." We add the "as it were" because we have not yet reached that state of mind, because we are still concerned about our ego. As Ramakrishna says, the ego is like the roots of a banyan tree. You cut down the tree, and the next day it shoots back up. Whatever amount of energy you may spend to remove the ego, again it comes up. So Ramakrishna said (he had a village way of talking), "If this rascal ego doesn't go, keep it as a servant, a servant of the Lord." You cannot be very proud as a servant. You can be proud, of course, in some sense. Devotion creates two types of emotions in the devotees: some people become calm and humble, and other people become very enthusiastic about doing the work of the Lord. There are stories of Mahavir, Hanuman, who was able to manifest much energy, because, as he declared, "I am the servant of Rama, so I must manifest energy. Whatever Rama's will is, I must do that." But the other type of devotee becomes very contemplative. This type of devotee loses all interest in activity. Both attitudes are sanctioned, if these thoughts remain behind them. Society will, of course, give credit to the man who does something, because society understands tangible things. An intangible result is more difficult for normal society to appreciate. That is how the devotional teachers put it: be an instrument of God. That attitude has to be kept whenever egotism comes. When hard feelings come, remember that it is all really the will of the Lord. If you succeed in a particular venture, don't take the credit to yourself. Give the credit to the Lord. If failure comes, then also you need not take responsibility; it is His responsibility. A servant in a house works and does many good things, but he knows that the credit is not his. The discredit is also not his. The credit and discredit go to the Master. If a good name comes, the good name goes to the master. The servant's idea is, "Whatever I am asked to do, I do." The overall responsibility is the Master's. That is the idea of being an

instrument. The instrument does everything, but only to please the Lord, or on being prompted by Him. So Krishna, in the Gita, says, "Whatever you do, offer that to Me." Then you will be free from the bad effects of all karma - and also from the good effects. Both are a bondage. In the highest condition; you are to go beyond both. Good, of course, prompts you, helps you. The mind is cleaned quicker through good actions. But, according to this attitude, whatever we do, we should offer it to the Lord, though loving devotees do not like to give bad things.

There is a famous song by Ramprasad which Sri Ramakrishna was very fond of singing. "O mind, I ask you to serve the Mother in whatever way you like." So as the individual progresses in spiritual life, he thinks everything he does is for Mother. "When you eat, think that you are offering oblations to the Mother. Whatever you hear, think that it is Mother's name' - because Mother exists in every sound. Then Ramprasad says in great joy that Mother is everywhere present. Even when you go for a walk around the city, think that you are circumambulating the deity. Every action is to be spiritualized. How is it spiritualized? By bringing in the idea that Mother, the Lord, is sitting in the heart, and She prompts us to do everything. And then, whatever work we do, we somehow or other connect it to the Lord - by offering it, or by repeating the Lord's name. Whenever an action is done, the repetition of the name of the Lord is prescribed in these systems. That is one method. There are various methods, but a standardized method is necessary. According to different tastes and temperaments certain methods can be adopted, so that the devotee is reminded constantly that he is really being prompted by the Lord, or that he is surrendering everything to the Lord. In the earlier stage, the devotee says, "I have surrendered. O Lord, I am Thine. I am Your servant, I am Your child, I am Your attendant." Now, being a child can mean two things: an attitude of helplessness - "I am the child. I take refuge in You," and maybe an attitude of courage, also - "I am the son of such and such a big man, so I am not a small man." Both types of devotees are there, but the main idea is: "You are mine, I am Yours". This idea gradually becomes stronger and stronger.

The Advaita Vedantins come forward and say that at the last stage, a feeling of identity with the Divine will come. Strict theists don't accept that idea. They want to enjoy God. If you want enjoyment, a little separation is good. Otherwise you become one with the enjoyment. So the theists say, "No, we don't want to merge in the Lord; we want to keep a little separation." In the end, what happens, happens. But the Vedantins say that

ultimately, a complete merging comes. As Ramakrishna explains it, a master has a servant who has served him very well. The master becomes very pleased and says, "There is no difference between you and me. Come and sit by my side. You and I are the same." So the Lord can also give this unity of consciousness to a devotee. But Sri Ramakrishna used to say that we should take one attitude strongly and practice it as a discipline - combining other disciplines occasionally. The main attitude of the spiritual aspirant is to be one.

Now, in a real-life situation, how is this attitude of being an instrument of God going to help? In a normal life there are ups and downs, things are good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant - how am I to accept that? How is this practice going to benefit me in day to day living? Of course, stage by stage, spiritual progress will come. That is good. That I understand. But does it have any benefit for day to day living? The theists say, "Yes. There is a benefit," because much of our suffering is on the mental level. Suffering is only suffering if the mind accepts it. Perhaps 80% of our suffering - the yogis say 100%, but let us be modest! - is really mental. If somebody has said something unpleasant to you, you may feel hurt. But if you happen to be in a good mood, you may not feel hurt. Or, if you are very hungry and want food, in any way that a man gives you food, you will take it. But, if you are sure of your next meal, you want the food to be given with respect and love - otherwise you won't take it. It means that much of our suffering comes from our attitude. The yogis say, "Control the attitude." But the devotee says, "I don't have the strength to control my attitude. I weep to the Lord: O Lord, don't put me into trouble, or, All right, you have put me here - I shall endure it. If it is Your will that I must suffer, I will suffer." This is a type of resignation - without complaint will be better, of course - that shows that you are more established. Holy Mother says that this attitude of resignation is good, even with complaints. Somebody asked her, "I have varieties of desires. Can I pray to the Lord?" Holy Mother said, "Yes, yes. You can pray." But Ramakrishna was against all desires. He was in favour of not asking - "You are not a slave. Why should you be cowed down by your desires?" Yet Holy Mother said, "No, no - ask whatever you want." But the devotee would not leave it at that - she said, "But we have bad desires also." Holy Mother replied, "It doesn't matter. God is like our mother, like our father. God knows what is good for you and what is bad." A child asks for so many things from his mother. The mother says, "Yes, yes, I shall give it to you." But while giving, she knows what to give and what not to give. Here Ramakrishna places the stress on the technique, or the spirit of dispassion. Holy Mother places the stress on

relationship - the feeling that God is my mother, and of my mother I can ask anything - good or bad. Mother will know best - that is the idea. When a man goes into life, he strives for advancement. He makes effort, but he does not know whether he will get any result or not. Naturally he is anxious and worried, but if he can cultivate this attitude: "Oh, I am an instrument of the Lord, I am His child; let Him do whatever He likes," his mind is at peace. If he can fully follow this, there is no problem. Whatever comes, he will take it. If unpalatable things come, if the mind is not fully at peace, a little suffering may be there. But still, the major portion of the suffering has been lessened. There are many situations in which we go on worrying for nothing. Our worries don't help us. Our repentance over past mistakes doesn't help us. One of the studies I read said that forty percent of our worries are centered around past things; fifty percent around future things, and only ten percent around present things. The past is past; you can't do anything about it - unless you learn a lesson from it. The future is not yet come. Much of your energy is wasted away in only thinking - making rosy pictures or dismal pictures - and suffering. This ten percent is the real situation which you have to actually face. The moment a man surrenders to the Lord, he feels that there is a higher power behind him, which is looking after him, which has got a plan of Its own, and whatever way It takes, good or bad, ultimately it will be for his spiritual good - and the moment he has accepted the situation his mind becomes calm, quiet, peaceful. If the mind accepts any suffering, the suffering loses its sting. At least fifty percent, let us say, of the feeling of suffering, the feeling of misery, the feeling of hurt, will be lessened. The attitude of a devotee is to think of the Lord, to love Him, and to surrender to Him. If that attitude is kept up, then life becomes smooth; even daily life becomes smoother. Of course, that doesn't mean that other spiritual disciplines will not be done. Because as they say, if a mother loves a child, will she not feed it? She will feed the child, nurse the child, look after the child. Similarly, if you love God, there must be an expression of love. The expression of love will be in contemplating the Lord, repeating His name, and serving fellow men as creatures of God or children of God. These are all social and moral aspects. These will be the automatic effect of the devotee's attitude toward the Lord.

So, be an instrument of God, bearing everything that comes. The jnana yogis stress forbearance, titiksha it is called, bearing all pains without complaint. But the bhakti yogi says that everything is the gift of God; good or bad, I shall accept it. "Not I, Not I, but Thou, O Lord;" and "Whatever action I do is being prompted by You; let me consecrate these actions towards You." Consecration becomes easier if the work done is

good work. What are normally called socially good or morally good or spiritually good things, are to be cultivated.

The Relevance of the Life and Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna Today

O.P. Sharma

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsadeva, the celebrated nineteenth-century sage of Dakshineswar, is widely regarded as the most appropriate manifestation of the Divine for modern times. The reason is not far to seek. In this day and age when the world is being increasingly rent asunder by religious hatred and fanaticism, Sri Ramakrishna's 'salutary and saving' message of the harmony of religions, which was based on direct perception of the ultimate Reality and not merely academic understanding, is of paramount importance. As he had successfully practised the various faiths and personally experienced the Divine Ground common to all creation - the spiritual unity that informs the plethora of phenomenal diversity (including the diversity of faiths) - he is peculiarly suited to act as our friend, guide and philosopher in the significant matter of inter-faith and intra-faith practices and understanding. "As many faiths," he had averred at the end of his sadhanas and after obtaining the final illumination attendant on each, "so many valid paths to God-realisation, or the attainment of Perfection." In his view, all religions, being suited to the varying tastes, temperaments and capacities of their respective followers, are true. God can be realised through any path, sincerely followed. "All religions are true," he maintained, adding significantly, "the only thing wrong is to believe that one's own faith is the only true one and all others are false." The unholy conviction regarding the exclusive correctness of one's own path (a religiously 'holiest of all' attitude) and the patent falsity of other faiths, gives rise to all manner of bigotry and fanaticism, the ill-effects of which we are witnessing worldwide today. Consequently, Sri Ramakrishna's first-hand 'testimony', deriving from his multi-religious practices, is, according to Aldous Huxley and several others, most authentic and of immense consequence. It was 'experiential' as well as 'expositional' (that is, he gave impressive exposition of the shastras). Says the distinguished British historian, Sir Arnold Toynbee, that despite the fact that he had not read any sacred books (nor was it possible for him to do so because he was illiterate!), the Sage's "religious activity and

experience were, in fact, comprehensive to a degree that had perhaps never before been attained by any other religious genius, in India or elsewhere." At a time when "the world has been united on the material plane by Western technology which has not only annihilated distance, but armed the peoples of the world with weapons of devastating power... at this supremely dangerous moment in human history" the only way out is the "Indian Way". This way includes "Sri Ramakrishna's testimony to the harmony of religions" and "the Emperor Ashoka's as well as Mahatma Gandhi's principle of non-violence."

So opines another eminent Western thinker and academic, Professor Floyd S. Ross of the University of Southern California. Because of the sage's all-embracing outlook and multi-religious approach, the international movement launched by his followers in his name, which has people of all faiths and denominations in it, is engaged in the laudable and significant task of promoting, "the united pilgrimage of mankind to peace and mutual understanding."

One of the methods, apart from preaching the harmony of religions, by which his followers seek to achieve their noble end, is by `active service, in a holistic spirit, of the omnipresent God in all human beings' (Shiva jnane jiva sewa) without just helping out of pity, or in a condescending manner. Naturally this is done without any consideration whatsoever of caste, creed, race, religion, nationality, sex, etc., and without any intention to alter the religious convictions of others.

It may be recalled that when Swami Vivekananda, the founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, had expressed his desire to get away from all worldly activities and entanglements and remain immersed in the bliss of nirvikalpa samadhi, his august mentor, Sri Ramakrishna, had reprimanded him for his `spiritual selfishness'. He explained to the swami that serving "the poor and the downtrodden particularly" in the right spirit, is tantamount to propitious worship of the Almighty in the temple. He even told his chosen disciple that he was disappointed with his escapist attitude and that he had expected him to become a great teacher who would confer enlightenment and liberation upon many: "I had hoped that like a big banyan tree, you would one day provide much-needed shade to weary wayfarers on the spiritual path, and here you are just thinking of your own liberation!"

The rebuke worked, and in the fullness of time, as we all know, the illustrious disciple launched the great movement of Practical Vedanta which, according to Eleanor Stark

(the gifted American author of *The Gift Unopened: A New American Revolution*), is the most appropriate 'religion', without controversy, for the modern times.

The imagery of the shady banyan tree reminds us of the great Russian artist, Dr. Nicholas De Roerich, who noted in his diary in the sandy wastes of Mongolia nearly three quarters of a century ago: "We are in the deserts of Mongolia. It was hot and dusty yesterday. From far away thunder was approaching. Some of our friends became tired from climbing up the stony holy hills of Shiret Obo. While already returning to the camp, we noticed in the distance a huge elm tree - 'karagatch' - lonely, towering amidst the surrounding endless desert. The size of the tree, its somewhat familiar outlines attracted us into its shadow. Botanical considerations led us to believe that in the wide shade of the giant there might be some interesting herbs. Soon all co-workers gathered around the two mighty stems of the karagatch. The deep, deep shadow of the tree covered over fifty feet across. The powerful tree-stems were covered with fantastic burr growths. In the rich foliage, birds were singing and the beautiful branches were stretched out in all directions, as if wishing to give shelter to all pilgrims.

"Thoughts turned to the radiant giant of India - Sri Ramakrishna. Around this glorious name there are so many respectful definitions: Sri, Bhagavan, Paramahansa - all best offerings through which the people wish to express their esteem and reverence. The consciousness of a nation knows how to bestow names of honour. And after all, above all most venerable titles, there remains over the whole world, the one great name - Ramakrishna. The personal name has already changed into a great all-national, universal concept. Who has not heard the Blessed Name! The conception of goodness and benevolence truly befits him. Except for petrified hearts, who would oppose the Good!"

The Blessed Alipia

Anna Linskaya

The Kiev Eldress in the Goloseev Forest Memorial day 30 October (died in 1988)

The following article is based on a translation by John Phillips from the Russian

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The spirit and thought of contemporary apostate culture consist in the establishment of an all-embracing image of life without God. This is a revolt against God. In the context of such a contemporary situation the Lord reveals to the world representatives of the opposite world-view, namely blessed people, who cannot live without God, such as Mother Alipia.

Holy fools are the bearers of God's grace. Their memory, just like that of their private prayers for the sinful world, passes from one generation to another. But while saints are glorified by their holy lives, holy fools arouse different feelings among those around them. The privilege of this ascetic feat is contempt for social propriety. Their actions, which at first glance appear to be unreasonable, are fascinating to many, while the breaking of religious rules embarrasses and gives rise to misunderstanding. The world does not understand the blessed ones, slanders them, and for this reason they are always passion-bearers. In their actions holy fools fulfil the commandment concerning higher selflessness: "Surrender yourself and take up your cross".

The blessed envoys of God voluntarily renounce that side of the mind by which human activity in the world is governed, in order to expand its activity for God. They are not afraid of human judgement, fearing only the breaking of God's law. The nun Alipia also went that way.

A Wandering Pilgrim

It is easy to write about the torch-bearers of faith, firmly established in the tradition of church veneration, but it is more difficult to discern righteousness in our confused times. Little is known of the life of the nun Alipia. A native of Mordovia, born, it is believed, in 1885, she was baptised Agathia. Her parents were Tikhon and Vassa Avdeev. Her father was a most pious man; in Lent he ate straw with bread. The names of her grandmothers and grandfathers were Sergei and Domna, Pavel and Evfinia. She remembered them in prayers for the dead and gave instructions to her spiritual children, saying: "Anyone who gives Communion Bread on the offertory and writes 'with relations', the prayer for them goes to the fourth generation."

She became an orphan at the age of seven, and was able to read the Psalter herself for her parents. She retained a particularly clear memory of her mother. "Today I shall fear

nothing; it is half a century that my mother has lain in the earth", she said later in life. Anyone who knew her understood that half a century was an expandable term.

While still in her youth, Agathia received the blessing to embark upon the ascetic feat of foolishness for God. In the surge of boundless love to the Saviour she gave up everything and went away as a wandering pilgrim. Wandering homeless, without comforts, fulfilling Christ's commandments, she enjoyed special gifts of grace.

Going on foot from one holy place to another, she attended every service. This brought down a great blessing on the pilgrim. She did not concern herself about food and clothing, she sought the truth and the kingdom of heaven, and all this was added unto her in accordance with the Saviour's promise. Good fortune accompanied her everywhere.

Once she went to Chernigov. She attended vespers, but they did not let her spend the night in the church. Then members of the household came running to the churchwarden: his daughter had been overcome by fumes from the stove. Everyone ran and she followed them. They rushed into the house - the child was unconscious. Agathia called upon Saint Theodosius. She had holy water in a flask with which she wiped the little girl's face and made the sign of the cross. The child breathed a sigh of relief. Then they gave shelter to the pilgrim and welcomed her. She prepared for Communion and went on. In every monastery she prayed to the great elders, she prayed for forgiveness for the sins of Russia at every holy place.

Ferocious persecution advanced through the Orthodox land, the blood of the righteous marked the holy places. The "Acatistus to the Russian martyrs of this Century" calls the Ukraine the "Granary of grain and granary of holy martyrs". In the south, "near Odessa", she also had to suffer to gain the heavenly crown. Evil men wanted to turn her away from the ascetic feat she had begun - they threw her, a prisoner, into a cell with criminals. She said to them: "Do not come near me!" - and they did not dare approach. The warder came to the peephole and froze in wonder: the prisoner was standing: she was making the sign of the cross, and above her head was a halo. The young man's heart missed a beat. He threw back the bolt, ran into the cell and put his head against her shawl, so that the radiance might come down on to him.

Priests languished in torture-chambers. They were taken for torture with no return.

Three remained: an old archpriest, his son, and Agathia. "In the morning we shall not be among the living, let us celebrate for ourselves the office for the dead" said the old man. "And for me?" Agathia asked. "You will get away", the priest comforted her.

Agathia's life was already weighed in the balance. She was assigned her future role, so at an appointed hour she secretly went out to a vineyard. It was cordoned off and guarded, but along the planted vines she crawled, under the wattle fences. Towards morning she found she was near the sea. For a long time she wandered among the cliffs and rocks and finally escaped pursuit.

God-Protected Kiev

All roads lead to Rome, and in Russia to Kiev, the first capital of Orthodoxy, where the illumined fathers performed their ascetic feats. Pilgrims were from ancient times climbing over the holy hills of Kiev. Our grandfathers and great grandfathers went with staff in hand and shoulder-pack, fulfilling their desire at the moment when in the distance they saw church domes shining on the steep hill - the caves stronghold in its snow white perimeter, the third principality of the Immaculate Sovereign Lady!

The wandering pilgrim Agathia arrived in Kiev not long before the last war. They say that during the occupation they released people from the concentration camps. They guarded them with dogs, but she was small and unnoticed.

Many blessed souls chose God-protected Kiev as the place for their ascetic feats. The elders of the Monastery of the Caves did not always give them the usual obedience. They blessed the Dimeev holy fool Natalia Ivanovna, for instance, to have three thresholds in life: into the cell, the church and the tomb. Our wandering pilgrim Agathia also became a "monastery nun" and all her life maintained her devotion to the holy fathers of the Monastery of the Caves. Her spiritual father, Archimandrite Kronid, the superior of The Monastery of the Caves, conferred the lesser schema on Agathia with the name of Alipia, after the first Russian woman icon painter. She became the guardian angel of the Goloseev eldress in monasticism and transmitted to her the power of "restoring souls corroded by the rust of sin", setting up the image of God in those near her.

The Monastery of the Caves

Her spiritual father blessed Alipia to perform an ascetic feat in a hollow tree in

accordance with the example of the ancient ascetics. The blessed Theophil had a covenanted tree in the Goloseev grove containing a glimmering lamp. The Lord assigned the nun Alipia to such a spiritual station.

From the Zachatev church, steps lead down to the well of the blessed Theodosius. Overgrown with centuries-old trees, the slope reminds one of the labyrinths, where the caves monastery monks hid in underground cells. Here there stood a gigantic oak, in the hollow of which Mother Alipia undertook her ascetic feat. Enduring hunger and cold for the sake of Christ, she told her beads, hiding in the narrow hollow of the tree.

She had nothing of her own. Father Kronid came, bringing a mantle full of rusks. He poured them out by the hollow tree and went away - he was strict, he did not show indulgence. If the task was hard, he ordered the recitation forty times of "Living in the help of the Highest."

When Archimandrite Kronid went to his rest, Schema monk Damian took Alipia out of the hollow tree. He permitted Alipia to move nearer to the people. Then Alipia settled in a cave and lived on charity. "Just as snow covers you, it is cold, your teeth chatter", Alipia remembers. "You go to the monks, one gives you a small loaf, another chases you out." When it was freezing Schema Abbot Agapit put her out into the entrance hall, "Have you warmed yourself? Now go and save your soul." - and she went away. She broke her leg, but the divine power cured her. Was it then that the Heavenly Father revealed to her the secret of preparing the miraculous ointment, with which so many sufferers were later to be treated?

The Lord's trials are especially severe for those who love Him. They once again put Mother in prison. The Goloseev diamond was skilfully cut, as a result of which it sparkled in the dark. Captivity aged her, but did not bow her to the ground. She sang "Our Father", and her fellow prisoners took up the chant so she was placed in solitary confinement. She refused to work at Easter - a toothless mouth was a souvenir of this. There is no greater glory than sharing dishonour with Jesus Christ!

Finally they released her. She had not spent a year in the monastery, when they expelled the monks from the obstinate Monastery of the Caves. When this happened, a woman wept under the walls. "Do not weep, sister" the fathers comforted her - "They are taking us all to one place. We shall pray to God there." They thought they were

being taken to prison, but it turned out differently. They went out into the world to preach, some for the sake of Christ, some to the parishes.

Goloseev Seclusion

The Goloseev forest stretches out at the edge of the city of Kiev. Metropolitan Peter (Mogila) once built his country house there in this fascinatingly beautiful place. From that time on Goloseev became the country residence of the Kiev hierarchs. Besides being a summer residence, it is a place for monastery fish farming, beekeeping and in its own way constitutes the monastery's farmstead. Four kilometres away is the Kitaev hermitage, founded in the twelfth century by Prince Andrei Bogolyubski at the request of China. The hills surrounding the monastery are honeycombed with labyrinths like the Monastery of the Caves. They served as refuges for the ancient monks from the Batyev massacre.

Both hermitages are characterised by peacefulness and their patriarchal character. For this reason ascetics chose them for spiritual exercises. Schema priest Parthenii of Kiev spoke as follows about the Goloseev seclusion: "Here the spirit of our blessed fathers of the Monastery of the Caves is to be found, and if there is joy on earth, it is in the silence of the wilderness. People separate us from God, the hermitage draws us nearer to Him."

The nun Alipia, the spiritual successor of the glorious pillars of the Goloseev elders, went her life's way in this place of prayer. She settled in Demeevka, not far from the Church of the Assumption. Little boys used to tease her, throwing stones at her, but she bore it all and kept quiet, teaching those who had eyes, how the inglorious is turned into the glory of God. She did not seek rights, but heavenly truth. She never had a passport.

She often acted allegorically, which had a meaning understood by few. With a countenance that was not Russian, she spoke with a foreign accent. She referred to women in the masculine. This was attributed to her Mordovian pronunciation, but it could also have been a caprice of holy foolishness. She wore a plush blouse and a child's bonnet. On her back hung a bag of sand, as a result of which she appeared hunchbacked. On her chest was a huge bunch of keys representing the sins of her spiritual children, which she bore on herself, hanging a new key as a sign when necessary. In her last years she carried chains, which ate into her body. She called her spiritual children "little girls", "little sisters" or "little siblings". Birth in the Lord is higher than in the flesh.

She occupied a little narrow room with a low lintel which contained a divan and paper icons. By the window was a hanging cupboard with simple aluminium pots and pans and in the corner was a stove. At the entrance was a tiny antechamber; there Mother kept a cock, stored benches, bottles and conserves. The bed was piled up almost to the ceiling with mountains of sacks, bags and worn out clothes, all rolled up and tied up in enormous bundles. Mother would look through these "garlands", moving her lips in concentration, offering up a prayer for someone's lost soul. There was a small space at the side, where it was just possible to sit and there she sometimes dozed. She never slept at night. Until dawn she made numberless bows, remembering the health and passing of the elders, her spiritual children, acquaintances, and benefactors. In this way she lived, fixing her gaze on the Higher Reality of existence.

With regard to the untidiness in Mother's cell, she was the tidiest of all. She wore white garments, but the dirt of living did not attach itself to her, L.A. Cherednichenko reported. "Once in early spring I ardently wanted to help Mother with something; to sweep away the snow, to bring water and firewood, to tidy up in the cell, or offer to wash linen. Mother looked at me and said: 'I am clean. I have not washed the whole winter and have not washed the linen, but I am quite clean.' She raised her skirt and showed her linen petticoat, which was as white as snow; but yet she stoked the stove herself, cleaned out the ashes, brought firewood and water, swept away the snow and tidied up in the cell."

Before the Chernobyl explosion in 1985 she cried out for some days: "Father, fire is not necessary. Why fire? Quell it for the sake of the animals, for the sake of the little children". She poured out water saying: "Girls, the earth is burning". As the sun was setting in the west she prayed: "Mother of God, deliver us from gas". Alipia saved her city, protecting it by prayer from destruction. She went round it as though she were making a solemn procession. Was she not that righteous person, for whose sake the Lord saved the city of Kiev from the cloud of radiation, sending it in another direction?

Before the Chernobyl tragedy a group of close admirers gathered in the Goloseev forest. Now, when Mother openly started to perform her ascetic feat, a lot of people poured into the cell. Out of an abundance of love and conserving the secrets she contemplated, she was truly an eldress. The understanding gradually came to people that Mother Alipia was one of the glorious company of ascetics of the Russian Land, whose word one had to

listen to and whose blessing one had to take. In this way her community service began.

Take, Eat ...

Living among the people, Mother was no less solitary than ascetics in hermitages. Her soul, which was devoted to the vow of divine foolishness, was a closed book for others. Not having obedience to anything on earth, she fed on the manna of the Holy Spirit, which she communicated to people through food and drink, fulfilling her obedience to the Lord.

She never ate alone and at first sat for weeks fasting, waiting for people to visit her. In her last years wooden tables were standing in the street. Every day a group of ten to fifteen people gathered, and on holidays there were more. The porridge increased according to the number of people present.

The process of feeding is not so insignificant as it appears - it is a mystical act, by means of which a person receives a vitally important thing. Everything eaten by man is a gift from above and it should be consecrated by prayer. If he sees in the food something beautiful, prepared in the Lord's heavenly dining-halls, a feeling of tranquillity, of being at peace with himself, will arise. If at the time of eating a man is full of dark thoughts, later he will feel irritation and have a rejecting view of things.

Not long before the Chernobyl catastrophe Mother Alipia began to offer French Cahors red wine on the table, as though indicating where to look for medicine against the destruction poured into the air. The famous Goloseev dining facility, where the blessed Mother regaled the people of Kiev with church food, was protected from the white death.

For the eldress it was important who brought the food, whose hands touched the food and from whose heart it was offered. She did not accept it from everyone.

Before eating there was a general prayer. "You have to calm yourself with the spirit", the mistress of the little house used to say. Get down on your knees. Sing in your strongest voice: "I believe", "Our Father", "God have mercy on me". Make the sign of the cross over the table. "Now eat!". Then she herself would lie on the bench and rest. She served big portions, and everyone had to eat it all up without fail. "I can help you to as much as you can get through", Mother seemed to say, and people with very serious

diseases were healed at her table ...

Bearing one another's burdens

Mother accepted everyone even fornicators, liars and thieves, but she did not tolerate deceit. Spiritually slovenly people also came to her, sickly sweet and sugary in their conversation. This cast a shadow on the mistress of the house, but Mother did not chase them away.

She knew that one must not put a penance on people, time itself is a heavy penance. The relationship with people must be one of love and forgiveness, otherwise we lose power, we lose energy.

Elena Badyanova remembers: "When you are next to a prodigy, you literally do not notice it. It seems that is how it should be. She saw the person close to her not on the outside, but on the inside. What a good habit she had of blessing those leaving with bread! ... Her bright, slightly childish, knowing smile has remained in my soul forever. I particularly remember the period from 1983 to 1984, when I was threatened with exclusion from technical college for a poem that was of interest to the State. At the difficult moment I, as always, went to Mother Alipia for advice. She heard me out and asked with a simple-hearted smile: "And the KGB, what is that, some sort of swearword?" Then, after a pause, she said: "No, you will not go to prison". My heart began to palpitate. "Now, recite your prayer", Mother suggested. Incredulously I asked her: "Do you mean the poem?" "Yes", she answered.

"Most Holy Mother of God, I pray to Thee,

Thou comfortest me and drivest away my sorrows.

Before my only hope I stand.

Of her kindness and generosity I sing.

Take away my sorrows, take them away,

So that they are bitter and far away,

Flying away in a dark cloud from the earth,

Lifted off from my wretched soul.

With Thy hands take away my sorrow

And establish peace in my heart ...

"Lowering her head, Mother listened attentively. It all took place in her little summer garden. The monks from the Florovsky monastery came to wash the dishes. Mother Alipia lay down on the grass by a raspberry bush and told me to lie down. I lay down beside her. She closed her eyes as though to sleep. They had already washed the dishes and were looking at us in astonishment and waiting.

"At that time I could not know that Mother had predicted a long illness for me. As a result of that illness all my nerves were shattered and I lay for several months in hospital, separated from my close relatives and from the church. Only then did I understand. In answer to my prayer Mother performed a miracle, which protected me from the coming menace, helped me to finish my studies, avoid prison, and get well again." (to be continued)

Book Review

Ramakrishna and Christ

by Paul Hourihan

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Over the years and centuries to come there will appear, no doubt, many books about Sri Ramakrishna. This volume is one such. They may be written by scholars, theologians or ordinary devotees and seekers like most of us. The author of the present book was a scholar of English literature in Canada and taught many courses on mysticism there. He was also a student of Vedanta philosophy for most of his adult life until his passing away.

The book takes the reader through the events in the life of Sri Ramakrishna, at the same time drawing parallels with events in the life of Christ. The author offers the reader many of his own ideas about why such things happened - the psychology and possible divine purpose behind them. Some of these ideas will appear contentious to many - for example, that Mary Magdalene was in fact the intimate consort of Jesus, or the suggestion that Sri Ramakrishna was drawn to the Divine Mother because his earthly mother lacked spirituality.

However, Paul Hourihan draws on a wealth of references taken from his life-long study of mystical traditions, and clearly, he has pondered and meditated deeply on the events in the lives of both Sri Ramakrishna and Christ. Should one be alarmed if his conclusions vary from one's own? No doubt the perceptions and shades of understanding of each of us will differ perhaps more than we imagine. It is also inevitable, when considering the reasons behind events that are way beyond our level of understanding, that we will each fall far short of the truth. Yet, acknowledging this, we all continue to strive towards that truth, holding these events and ideals before us. Sri Ramakrishna himself, it must be remembered, is the greatest champion of the fact that we all have our own unique path to God.

So, though this book may not be everyone's cup of tea, it will no doubt contribute in some way to the growing interest in a most remarkable human being.

Eve Wright