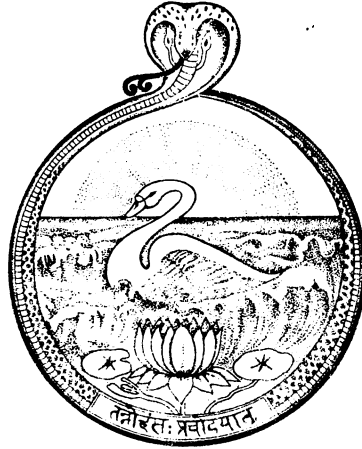


Vedanta

350 NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2009

Aspiration and Fulfilment?
Swami Sunirmalananda

Old Days at Belur Math
Swami Bhuteshananda



Divine Wisdom

M: "Sir, may I make an effort to earn more money?"

MASTER: "It is permissible to do so to maintain a religious family. You may try to increase your income, but in an honest way. The goal of life is not the earning of money, but the service of God. Money is not harmful if it is devoted to the service of God."

M: "How long should a man feel obliged to do his duty toward his wife and children?"

MASTER: "As long as they feel pinched for food and clothing. But one need not take the responsibility of a son when he is able to support himself. When the young fledgling learns to pick its own food, its mother pecks it if it comes to her for food."

M: "Sir, what is the meaning of the realization of God? What do you mean by God-vision? How does one attain it?"

MASTER: "According to the Vaishnavas the aspirants and the seers of God may be divided into different groups. These are the pravartaka, the sadhaka, the siddha, and the siddha of the siddha. He who has just set foot on the path may be called a pravartaka. He may be called a sadhaka who has for some time been practising spiritual disciplines, such as worship, japa, meditation, and the chanting of God's name and glories. He may be called a siddha who has known from his inner experience that God exists. An analogy is given in the Vedanta to explain this. The master of the house is asleep in a dark room. Someone is groping in the darkness to find him. He touches the couch and says, 'No, it is not he.' He touches the window

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ISSN 1355 - 6436

Alone but not Lonely (cont.)

Loneliness is a painful and negative state of mind. There is no one who is free from it, no one can be free from it. We all suffer from it for a shorter or longer period of time. Some philosophers consider 'aleness' as the very essence of being human. It means that being unable to be alone is to lose one's humanness itself. Even animals (pets, especially dogs when separated from their owners) are seen to suffer from loneliness! Saints alone are exceptions. They never feel lonely as they experience the presence of God at all times.

In our last editorial we discussed what loneliness is. In this editorial we will discuss the causes and effects of loneliness. Loneliness results not from one but from many causes. These causes can be roughly divided into five categories: existential, external, psychological, social and spiritual.

Existential causes

Loneliness is a constitutional element of existence. We are born and die alone. Each of us sleeps, eats, experiences pleasure and pain, health and sickness all by himself. At the most others can make conditions better or worse.

Birth, adolescence, youth, middle age, old age, and death (What *Vedanta* calls *shat vikaras*, the six changes) are inescapable realities of life. We gladly accept adolescence and youth but, inexplicably, many of us suffer from mid-life crisis. Menopause is a painful period of transition for many women. Old age affects almost all of us. Death and

bereavement can also cause loneliness. All these events also bring about some external changes in our life. But the effects of these are also usually temporary and we learn to accept them soon.

Some of us cannot escape physical and mental disability. These can, and usually do, bring about some amount of discrimination and being looked down upon. Being treated as 'different' by others often makes people feel even lonelier.

External and Social causes

Loneliness, definitely, has become a major problem of our times. In the past, families were either joint or typically larger, and very few people lived alone. Today millions live alone. Retirement and unemployment are also common causes of loneliness. To move away from one's country, family and familiar surroundings can lead to a sense of loneliness.

The stresses of modern life such as changes in employment practice, a rising divorce rate, and the fact that people easily move away to far off places, have caused many to suffer from feelings of loneliness. These actions give us much freedom. But this freedom has a negative effect. It leaves us without solid grounding in, or commitment to a family, a place or a community.

Thanks to advancement in medicine people are living longer. A new word 'Geriatrics,' i.e. the branch of medicine that focuses on health care of the elderly, has been coined. Due to modern social conditions many elderly people are forced to live in old people's homes. Though otherwise well taken care of, many of them experience intense feelings of loneliness. This is due to lack of love and affection from their families.

Psychological causes

Along with the advancements in science and technology, massive inequalities, racial and social discrimination are also on the rise. Companies are growing bigger and multi-nationals are edging out or even snuffing smaller and individual companies. This gives rise to intense competition and attempts to outdo others. Competition and success are the two great diseases of modern social life reminding us of the 'survival of the fittest.' Naturally these lead to feelings of being unwelcome, fear, sadness and failure.

Lack of purpose in one's life can also bring on feelings of loneliness. Low self-esteem, especially, when one compares oneself with (the seeming success of) one's colleagues can give rise to feelings of frustration and loneliness.

A survey of mental health problems in the USA found that social phobia was the third most common problem, after depression and alcohol dependence. People who are anxious, depressed, or trapped in addictive behaviour, may have low self-esteem and feel guilty and worthless. This can lead them to shun the company of other people and cut themselves off from their families and friends. This in turn leads to loneliness.

Fear of fear is a terrible experience! Along with other effects, anticipating the fear of loneliness can lead to deeper despair.

Spiritual Causes

The root cause of any form of loneliness can be traced to the neglect of spiritual life. What is spirituality? It is "The Flight of the Alone to the Alone," as Plotinus puts it. The inability to be alone and enjoy the company of one's own

higher Self is to be unspiritual and unhappy.

Vedanta teaches us that man's personality is trichotomous i.e., soul, mind and body. We suffer if body and mind are sick; we suffer even more if we neglect the spiritual side of our life.

In the past religion provided comfort for most people. Unfortunately the rise of science and technology has made many lose faith in God and moral values. Many of us are blissfully ignorant that neglect of spiritual life can leave us with feelings of profound emptiness and loneliness.

How do we know this is true? If we have, more or less, all that life can give us and still continue to feel empty and lonely inside ourselves, the cause is undoubtedly spiritual. If we do not lead a spiritual life, we definitely feel an emptiness in spite of having an abundance of material goods.

Effects of loneliness

Loneliness can lead to varying degrees of despair, anxiety, sadness, boredom, inability to function effectively in any given situation, etc. Loneliness and boredom are closely allied emotions. These emotions must be understood and dealt with properly. Otherwise they can lead to suicide, or all sorts of criminal activities, even to murder. Many antisocial activities, including crime, can be traced to intense feelings of boredom.

We can see from the above that there is no option but to deal with our feelings of loneliness.

The cure for loneliness will be discussed in our next editorial.

(To be continued)

Swami Dayatmananda

Aspiration and Fulfilment?

During Christmas every year, the whole world, as it were, gets busy with the Christmas tree. Real trees as well as gigantic artificial ones stand proudly with stars dangling all over, and colourful lights blinking everywhere. Then there is an army of Santa Clauses. Thousands of people, dressed as Santa Claus, inspire and rejuvenate the imagination of not only children but adults also.

As we know, there are physical realities, dream realities, mythological realities, magical realities, mystical realities, and so on. What has the Christmas Tree or Santa Claus got to do with Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ? What is the significance of Santa Claus and the Christmas Tree? These two ideas have captured the human psyche, as it were. Has this aspiration of the human psyche of a thousand years, if not more, for a Santa Claus and the wish-fulfilling Christmas tree been finally answered?

The Desire

The most essential teaching of Jesus Christ is: "The Kingdom of God is within you" (*St. Luke 17:21*). If God's Kingdom is within us, God must be within us too as a natural consequence. Further, there cannot be billions of Kingdoms of God just because there are billions of souls on earth. And then there should be trillions more, what with those supposed ETs and so on. So God is One, His Kingdom is One, and we are all One. This, then, is the fundamental point of religion. We are one.

The question now is: Is God's Kingdom a place of

peace, joy and bliss absolute, or one of suffering, pain and misery? This question comes because we are suffering. Naturally, God's Kingdom means peace and happiness. So all joy, bliss, peace and happiness are already within us. We are therefore "heirs to immortal bliss." If bliss is within, what makes us sorrowful and sad? Why are we suffering then? The answer given is, we have forgotten the truth that God's Kingdom is within us or, rather, we are unaware of this truth, and so we suffer.

The impulse, however, to taste a drop of that ocean of bliss is somehow *ḥ*ere the mind, and so we go on searching for joy, peace and happiness everywhere. This 'everywhere' for us is outside of us - our physical bodies. It is like the famous search of the musk deer for the source of perfume.

How do we search for happiness? Our search is in the form of seeking. Happiness, for us, is in making things of the world 'ours.' 'If I get this, I shall be happy. If I have that, I shall be full of joy.' And thus there is no end to our wants. If that one last thing we wanted in life had satisfied us, it could have been the end of all problems. But after we get that last thing; we want one more....

When we fail to get all that we desire by ordinary means, we seek 'extraordinary' means. We seek fortunetellers, astrology, lotteries, and even imaginary beings, fairies, angels, and so on. If our efforts have failed in other roads, at least these angels and fairies could help us get what we want—this is our idea.

And so we have the Santa Claus and the Christmas Tree. "Santa Claus will come and give you this, and that... Oh!!" As if the whole world will be waiting and imagining. And Christmas passes on....

The Wish-Fulfilling Tree

The 'tree' has several names in Sanskrit, and one of them is *taru*. So the Christmas Tree will be Christmas *Taru*. Our wishes and desires and flowery imaginations have a name in Sanskrit: *Kalpana*. *Kalpa* almost means the same thing. So *kalpa-taru* is the wish-fulfilling tree, the tree that gives us whatever we wish for. As we said above, whoever will not like to have such a wonderful *kalpa-taru* or the *Christmas taru*, which will bring everything to us? So the Christmas *Taru* is a physical representation of our desire for such a tree. And so we decorate millions of trees during Christmas season.

Santa Claus

Santa Claus! The giver of all that one can imagine! So we, and specially children, go on imagining that Santa Claus will bring us gifts.

First about the name. In different nations, Santa Claus has different names (I got this list from the Internet): Baba Chaghaloo (Afghanistan), Baba Dimri (Albania) Gaghant Baba (Armenia) Pere Noel (Belgium) Deda Mraz (Bosnia and Herzegovina) Papai Noel (Brazil), Dyado Koleda (Bulgaria), Viejo Pascuero ("Old Man of Christmas" Chile), Baba Noel (Iran and Iraq), Babbo Natale (Jamaica), Pai Natal and so on. Baba, Pere, Pai, Papai, Dyado, all mean FATHER. And then there are "Viejo" "Old man" also. This 'old man' brings gifts then.

Second about the history. It is known that the idea of 'Santa Claus' comes from 'St Nicholas'. St Nicholas has many sanctuaries, many churches built in his name, and many stories are told about him. But St Nicholas himself adored Jesus Christ. If $A = B$ and $B = C$, $A = C$! It is something like this: a king asked for some benefits from a saint. The saint

started praying to God. The king was astonished and said, "Oh! I asked you, o saint, and you are asking God! So instead of asking you, I shall pray directly to God!"

Santa Claus, therefore, is ideally none other than Jesus Christ, who is supposed to bring goods to us. Saints can bring good to us undoubtedly, but no true saint claims that he is greater than God or the incarnation. God is omnipresent and omnipotent. Everything comes from God. So, God is the real Santa Claus, the satisfier of our aspirations and desires.

Third about the form of Santa Claus. 'Papa, Pai, Father, Peré' or father, comes to us with a white beard, red clothes with white borders, and with gifts. The dress of Santa Claus has changed in the course of time, they say: Saint Nicholas wore Bishop's robes of the third century, and in recent times, mythology has superimposed this popular dress to him. However, that which the whole world has accepted as the symbol of benevolence is this present figure of Santa Claus. This then, is the mythological reality. Durga was not a 'physical' person, nor Shiva nor Kali. Incarnations of God have physical personalities, not these divinities. They are mythological truths - truths at a higher level of existence. It is just as we have the virtual world today.

Continuing about the form of Santa Claus, much credit, incidentally, goes to Thomas Nast who, through *Harper's Weekly*, influenced the minds of people by painting Santa Claus in the present form. When did he do that? Between 1863 and 1888. Around that time, something else was happening in another corner of the earth.

Sri Ramakrishna, "The Wish-fulfilling Tree"

It is sacred history now that on 1 January 1886, at about three in the afternoon, Sri Ramakrishna became the

'wish-fulfilling tree.' "Some thirty lay disciples were in the hall or sitting about under the trees. Sri Ramakrishna said to Girish Chandra Ghosh, 'Well Girish, what have you seen in me, that you proclaim me before everybody as an Incarnation of God?' Girish was not the man to be taken by surprise. He knelt before the Master and said with folded hands, 'What can an insignificant person like myself say about the One whose glory even sages like Vyasa and Valmiki could not adequately measure?' The Master was profoundly moved. He said: 'What more shall I say? I bless you all. Be illumined!' He fell into a spiritual mood. Hearing these words the devotees, one and all, became overwhelmed with emotion. They rushed to him and fell at his feet. He touched them all, and each received an appropriate benediction. Each of them, at the touch of the Master, experienced ineffable bliss. Some laughed, some wept, some sat down to meditate, some began to pray. Some saw light, some had visions of their Chosen Ideals, and some felt within their bodies the rush of spiritual power." This is the story of Sri Ramakrishna as the *kalpataru* or the wish-fulfilling tree. That afternoon, Ramakrishna bestowed illumination to many, spiritual experiences to many, and even blessed someone with a boon to have wealth because that man was poor and wanted money.

Of course, the incarnation is a wish-fulfilling tree all through his life - day and night. His wish, his smile, his touch, his words bring solace to the human soul. This date, however, has been specially indicated because of the seemingly 'strange' circumstances in which Ramakrishna blessed everyone present.

Amazingly, 1 January 1886, is the only date, according to the English calendar, accepted by the Ramakrishna Order to celebrate Kalpataru Day. All other celebrations are

according to the Indian Lunar Calendar. So Ramakrishna is the kalpataru, the wish-fulfilling tree.

Sri Ramakrishna generally wore white clothes with a red border [see Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, p. 159] and occasionally a black border. Sri Ramakrishna also used a cap occasionally, especially during winter. January is cold in Bengal. "Sri Ramakrishna was ready to start for Dakshineswar. He put on his woollen shawl and cap, and got into the carriage with M. and the other devotees." [see *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, chapter 18]. Sri Ramakrishna also used moleskin shawl with a red border [see *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*]. Occasionally, Sri Ramakrishna wore coat also: 'It was winter and the Master was wearing a green flannel coat with a shawl thrown over it. [*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, chapter 15]. At times he also wore yellow robes: 'After his midday meal the Master went to the Panchavati wearing a beautiful yellow robe. [*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, chapter 17]. So, Sri Ramakrishna, as the Wish-Fulfilling Tree in January 1886, wore white clothes with a red border and a cap.

Incarnation as Wish-fulfilling Tree

We have remarked before that an incarnation need not be a *kalpataru* just one day because he bestows His grace on some devotees. He is always a *kalpataru*. So Swami Saradananda, the author of the book *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play* (p. 927), writes the event on 1 January 1886 could be considered rather as the self-revelation of Sri Ramakrishna than his being the *kalpataru* or the 'wish-fulfilling tree'. What does this mean? Self-revelation in the sense of awakening the innate spirituality of the seekers as God rather than being a giver of ordinary boons. In other words, self-revelation

means Self-revelation - the revelation of the Kingdom of God within. Instead of satisfying the ordinary trifling and evanescent desires of devotees, Ramakrishna revealed to them their true nature - their blissful, eternally perfect, divine nature. This is a very important point.

The Comparison

Jesus Christ said: "The Kingdom of God is within you." He also said: "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" [*St Matthew: 6:24-34*]. In other words: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" [*St Matthew: 6:33*].

So, Jesus asks those who seek worldly happiness and worldly things to look for lasting things. That was precisely what Sri Ramakrishna did that afternoon.

Pundit Shashadhar asked Sri Ramakrishna: "Does God listen to our prayers?" Sri Ramakrishna replied: "God is the Kalpataru, the Wish-fulfilling Tree. You will certainly get whatever you ask of Him. But you must pray standing near the Kalpataru. Only then will your prayer be fulfilled." 'Standing near' means 'approaching spiritually' by means of spiritual practice.

Coming back to where we began, when Jesus taught that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us, he was teaching the essence of Vedanta. This is because, Oneness of existence, Divinity of the Soul, and the Soul as the Source of all power and all glory - are the fundamental ideas of Vedanta, as taught by Ramakrishna-Sarada-Vivekananda. So what Christ

meant through this vital teaching of his was Vedanta. God is within, His kingdom is within, and He is imminent to all those who seek Him. So we are to venture inwards instead of seeking worldly glories. Ramakrishna as 'Santa Claus' on the 1 January 1886 did precisely that. Except for an individual who wanted worldly benefit, because he was not yet ready perhaps at that moment, to all others he said that their spirituality might be awakened.

Conclusion

Jesus teaches us that all that we want is within us already as the Kingdom is within. Imagine, the nothing else but the very Kingdom of Heaven! So why should we seek for trifles outside? That is the same thing that Vivekananda teaches too: "All power is within you. You can do anything and everything. Believe in that. Do not believe that you are weak. Stand up and express the divinity within you."

Sri Ramakrishna came as an answer to the aspiration of the millions seeking a Papa or Father Claus, and a Tree which fulfills all wishes. We are constantly seeking happiness and pleasures outside. Since we cannot have them all, we want a Christmas Tree, a Wish-fulfilling Tree, or a Santa Claus, to bring them to us. Such a mythical tree can be a 'reality' only by the grace of God, who comes as the Incarnation. The philosophy of both is the same: God is within, and seeking Him is the goal.

Sri Ramakrishna's self-revelation, or being the *kalpataru* during the Christmas season, comes as a fulfillment of the aspiration of the human consciousness or the human psyche for a Santa Claus and a Christmas Tree, nurtured over a thousand years. Exactly during the same season he came, and showered whatever we wanted; of course,

concentrating on the inner Kingdom rather than the external pleasures. So "Those who seek Him, will not only get Him, but everything. Those who only seek the things of the world, will lose everything." □

The scriptures speak harshly against *Maya* because she has qualified the unqualified *Brahman*. And there is another reason: God alone is real; *Maya*, by comparison, is unreal, illusory. But *Maya* is unreal only in relation to God. From man's standpoint, *Maya* is *avidya*, ignorance, which is neither real nor unreal. If you watch *Maya* carefully, you will see that she is pushing man toward God step by step. With one hand she is deluding man and with the other she is unveiling consciousness before him. She works in a balanced way, without any motive of her own. She balances both happiness and misery, both goodness and evil. Do you know the intention behind all this? To teach us. If *Maya's* purpose were to lead man astray, she would show us only one aspect, not both. But because *Maya* shows us two aspects, she simultaneously deludes and enlightens. True, she causes man much trouble and her path is very roundabout and time-consuming, but eventually it will lead one to God. After you suffer repeated blows and much torment in this world and come to understand *Maya's* ways, *Maya* won't be able to hold you any more. Then you will be released by her *sattvic* power. That is why she is called the one who makes the impossible possible.

Swami Adbhutananda

Yamuna

Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, the *Vedanta* in its aspect of qualified monism, traces its origin to the period of the *Upanishads*; at least it had gained followers at the time of the composition of the *Mahabharata*, being identical with the doctrine of *Pancharatra* mentioned in that poem. By the tenth century. A.D., however, it received a greater impetus and a newer light in the teachings of the saint Yamuna: and in the eleventh century the great teacher Ramanuja who had been influenced by Yamuna, gave a sound philosophical basis to the doctrine, making it a popular religion particularly in southern India. Yamuna and Ramanuja belong to the long line of Vaishnava saints in southern India generally known as Alvars. This is a tamil word which means "he who rules the world by his love and devotion of God." Many legends are prevalent in the south about these ancient Alvars, and all of them clearly express the ideals of love, devotion and self-surrender to God.

One of these Alvars was Natha Muni, grandfather of Yamuna, who was known to history as a great saint living in the early part of the tenth century. Born of a well known *Brahmin* family, on the death of his son he gave up the life of the world and embraced a life of renunciation. He wrote two books which are regarded as authoritative by the Sri Vaishnava, the school of qualified monism.

Yamuna, his grandson, was born in 953 A.D. At the age of twelve he became king of half the kingdom of Pandu. There is extant an interesting story of how he ascended the throne. It seems that the King of Pandu had a court pundit

who was very clever in debate. Now it was the custom of the country that whoever challenged the scholarship of the pundit and defeated him in argument would be appointed court pundit in turn. And whoever challenged the pundit and was defeated by him must pay an annual sum as tax to him. Yamuna was at that time a student of Bhashya, who had been defeated by the court pundit and was therefore obliged to pay the annual tax. It so happened that when the tax-collector appeared for the annual tax, Bhashya was absent from home and Yamuna, then a boy of twelve, felt the humiliation his teacher must bear in paying such a tax. So he himself challenged the pundit to debate. Though the king and his pundit were amazed at the child's temerity, they were obliged to accept the challenge.

As was the custom, the boy was brought to court and accorded due honor and respect. The Queen, when she saw the boy, felt sure that he would be crowned victor, for she saw that he was no ordinary child. When she confided her thoughts to the King, he laughed and jokingly offered to lay a wager against him. The Queen said, "If the boy is defeated, I promise to be the slave of your Majesty's slaves." To this the King replied, "If the boy wins, I will offer him half my kingdom."

So the boy and the pundit entered into debate. And to the surprise of all the boy defeated the pundit, who was obliged to acknowledge his defeat at the hands of a mere child. The King, paying his bet, offered Yamuna half his kingdom, and he ruled for many years at peace with all men. The news of Yamuna's elevation to the throne came to the ears of Natha Numi, his grandfather, who was then living as a *sannyasin* (monk). Fearing lest his grandson should give himself over to worldliness, he charged Nambi, his favorite

disciple, to keep watch over Yamuna and see that he did not lose himself in love of the world but that he sought the truth. When Yamuna was thirty-five years of age, and still reigning over his kingdom, Nambi appeared before him saying, "Your grandfather has left a vast treasure with me. If it is your desire to find this treasure, you must follow me, and follow me alone." So they walked together, ate together, and lived together. As King Yamuna thus associated with Nambi, he came to admire the greatness of the devotee, his love for God, his purity of conduct, and above all the peace and joy that ever shone in his countenance. And there arose in the heart of King Yamuna a mighty longing to find God and attain peace. So, living as he did close to a holy man like Nambi, the King lost all taste for the enjoyments of the world, even the desire to return to his kingdom. Then both of them retired to the temple of Sri Ranganatha. Thus Yamuna became a monk and a guru.

The ideals of all-consuming love for God and self-surrender to Him are expressed beautifully in a famous prayer written by Yamuna. He says:

"God is beyond the realm of speech and mind. He is the ground of speech and mind, and He is the ocean of mercy. How can we pray to Him or praise Him, who is worshipped and praised even by the great gods? In the ocean are drowned the high mountain and the small atom. No difference is felt by the ocean."

"My beloved. O Thou Sweet One, 'I,' and 'me,' and 'mine,' 'whatever I have' - all belong to Thee. And if I am conscious of the truth that all belongs to Thee forever then what could I offer Thee?"

"I am Thine" - this is the attitude of the devotee of *Vishitadvaita*. The Vaishnava devotees of Bengal preach

another beautiful truth: "Thou art mine."

Yamuna further writes: "Thou art Father, Thou art Mother, Thou art son, Thou art daughter. Thou art dear friend. Thou art Guru, Thou art supreme goal and refuge of the whole universe." And the supreme ideal is to take refuge in the Lord and surrender oneself completely to Him. This ideal of surrender was developed by Ramanuja into a philosophy. □

Reprinted from *Voice of India*, March, 1939

Meditation means complete self-abandonment. Meditation requires complete annihilation of self-consciousness. You know before a great light, lesser lights disappear; so before the effulgent glory of God, the little glory of the ego will completely vanish, as stars vanish when the sun rises. You must therefore practise the Presence of God inside you. You may say, "I cannot see Him with these eyes of mine. I cannot hear Him with these ears. How then, am I to perceive Him?" You can never perceive Him in this way. To go to the Creator you must throw aside these instruments which take you directly to the creation. You must go beyond your mind and senses, then meditation will come of itself. This is the only way to get inner vision. These senses are made for the creation, not for the creator.

Swami Ramakrishnananda

Principles for the Aspirant

The new aspirant encountering Advaita Vedanta after receiving a “Western” type of education may find that, while the ancient philosophy appeals to him or her, he has difficulty in assimilating the fundamental concepts of the Deity and hence of the nature of reality. He may then discover that there is a “reality gap” between what the established system of education has taught him and the effect it has had on his everyday life, compared with other long established systems of thought, knowledge and belief. If he has identified himself with his mind, he will be unable to step back, as it were, to compare objectively other principles and systems of thought with that which he has grown up with. In order to open his mind to fresh thought, he needs to study and assimilate some of the fundamental principles common to the ancient religions before attempting to scale the heights of perennial wisdom.

The most important element in the Indian world view is the fundamental awareness of the unity and interdependence of all creatures, things and events. This ultimate reality is indivisible, pervading all things and we are all living parts of it.

Indian thought does not believe in the supernatural: It's concept of nature is broad enough to include matter, feeling and intelligence and it relates science and religion without any unnecessary conflict. There is no abyss between the secular and the sacred as in the west. Life is one continual quest for secular knowledge and higher knowledge and both are manifestations of the divine Supreme.

The New Testament tells us that "God is a spirit and they, who worship Him must worship Him in Spirit and in Truth." However, it does not tell us very much about the Holy Spirit as the third part of the Holy Trinity. We are not told what is the nature of the Spirit, nor its functions nor its attributes. There is an element of mystery that is persistent. We are left to form our own ideas and seek our own experiences to discover what the Spirit is, its nature and its powers and its part in continuing the essential beingness of each one of us.

The word "spirit" in English has a variety of meanings including the following; the soul; a principle or purpose underlying something; self-assertion; a ghostly or haunting spectre; and a person's animating principle or intelligence. But none of these definitions would adequately cover the intended biblical meaning. The concept "spirit," as also the concept "soul" has a variety of meanings depending on the context and the intended level of communication.

The biblical command indicated above invokes the spirit on two levels; the absolute level of the Almighty and the relative level of the human devotees. The former is the impersonal God, the formless one, and the latter is the personal God represented in the form of words, symbols, images or music. The command echos the name that God gave for himself to Moses, "I am that I am" (Exodus 3: vs. 13-14). This brings together the cosmic self and the individual personal self. It signifies the oneness of all beingness that God has chosen to manifest as himself through us all as human beings. Each individual self is part of the one cosmic Self and is of the same nature.

The cosmic Being pervades all created things and has two aspects or phases: The quiescent and the active

aspects. The quiescent aspect is transcendent and is apart from his creation. It is pure consciousness in a passive phase. It manifests in the material world as creativity and truth. The active aspect is pure energy either in a formative or destructing state. It is in all forms of energy. It manifests as *Prana*, the cosmic life force.

There is ultimately only one "I am" which is the almighty, the divine Supreme who manifests his beingness through all living creatures. We cannot truly express ourselves as "I," "me" or "mine." In the unity, this becomes, "us," "our," and "we." Our individuality is subsumed into the greater Self.

The quiescent state is embodied in our human form as the essence of the masculine principle and the active state is embodied as the eternal feminine principle. We all have both the masculine and the feminine principles combined in the make-up of one's personality, whether we are aware of it or not.

The masculine principle is pure being and pure consciousness. The feminine principle is pure will (being the source of all energies). Each is a complement of the other. Together they are the whole cosmic Being and what transcends it. Though they are intellectually separable, they actually are one perfect unity.

The philosophy is that *Chit Shakti* is the energy of consciousness and is the ultimate reality behind the universe. It is masculine/feminine; as *Brahman/ Shakti*; as the impersonal/personal; as the formless/formful. The philosophy and spirituality centred in the principle of the divine Mother is based on the philosophy of *Advaita*; non-dualism. The divine Mother is the dynamic feminine counterpart of the static masculine Godhead. They are inseparable, like a flame and its heat.

Sri Ramakrishna has told us, "*Brahman* is *Shakti*; *Shakti* is *Brahman*. They are not two. They are two aspects of the same eternal reality, which is Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute."

Brahman is the impersonal absolute existence: The all-pervading transcendental reality of *Vedanta* philosophy. *Brahman* is the one, the world is the many.

Shakti is God as the mother of the cosmos; the personification of the primal energy; the power of *Brahman*.

Atman is the spirit of the individual self; the immanent aspect of the Godhead. *Atman* ultimately becomes *Brahman*.

Jiva is the individual soul; the human self.

Jivatman is *Atman* with it's coverings and accretions of body, mind, senses, etc.

Brahman is pure consciousness and *Shakti* is the formative energy of that consciousness. What appears as thought in one aspect appears as activity in the other; *Shakti* is the power in pure, unrelated consciousness. It is the absolute personified.

All life is a form of energy. Every thought we have, every action and every word is a manifestation of energy, through the mind and through the body. All energies flow, expanding, moving and changing into other forms. They cannot be contained. Whether it is electricity, water pressure, growth, decay or bodily sensations, etc., they cannot become static. Energy is change, activity, movement and growth. All activity in the material world is produced by the vibrations of energy flows.

Prana is the cosmic life force or that force that gives us life. *Ayama* means control; control of the breath. *Prana* is the mother of all forces and energies. Every part of the body can be filled with prana and it can be imparted to others who

are in need of healing. The power that heals is *prana*. It is a divine power. *Prana* is everywhere including all plants and animals. Control over *prana* can make a person the centre of attention. Others will be attracted to him or her but they will not be able to explain just why. *Prana* also devolves into other forms of energy, spiritual and material.

The human body is an embodiment of numerous energy flows. These flows include the following: Flows of feeling: Sensations, emotions, creativity, willpower. Mental flows: Thoughts, imagination, imaging (through contact), intelligence. Physical flows: Bodily functions, movement, action - voluntary or involuntary. Flows of energy: Inhalation, exhalation, emanations. Healing flows: To others and also to oneself, and observing the extent and effect of the healing. Psychic flows: Clairvoyance, psychometric sensitivity, communications from sources that we can or cannot credibly identify.

How can we discern the various flows of consciousness, feelings, thought, actions and bodily functions? Energy in movement can be observed and directed by the self through the mind. Our energy flows are responsive to conscious direction in concise words rather than to symbols. Directing *prana* is a matter of putting the flow into words and directing words into the energy flow.

All creatures and all created things emanate a force field of energy. This is *prana* and though it is subtle by nature it is detectable. One of the most used means is by "dowsing" using a pendulum or a wand. This works by linking the energy of the dowser with the energy of the object. The object is both giving and receiving the dowser's energy which is of the same nature. Relevant questions may be directed through the flow of the force field.

Each *chakra* of the spinal axis emanates a field of subtle energy which is energised by *Kundalini*, the power of the divine Mother. The associated plexus empowers a coherent psychological level, so manifesting the qualities and attributes of that level. In the Indian tradition, each *chakra* has been given a name as has each significant energy source in nature, and each is considered to have an indwelling or immanent God or Goddess. It is the force that is given the name, not the body or the material thing, just as a personality is given a name and not the physical body.

The Avatar of the *Bhagavad Gita* says, "Howsoever men approach me so do I accept them." Thus we may approach the Almighty as either father or mother. *Brahman* is beyond all distinctions of gender and personality as we conceive them. Every woman is an embodiment of the universal feminine principle and can be adored as the mother Goddess in her place.

As children we generally fear our father and love our mother. We know that she is the person who embodies the quality that we most need in childhood, namely love. This quality of unconditional love is found in the female of all the species: It is innate and the mother tends to react in a responsorial mode of self-sacrifice to any danger to her young. The unconditional love of the mother conquers all fear.

Mother-love is manifested and protected through the mother-heart, which is not restricted to the feminine only but is also the prerogative of the male. Spiritual motherhood is a privilege for us all. A man may be a spiritual mother to his women folk, or *vice versa*. The mother-heart can enter into the heart and soul of the other person. It is a soul-to-soul relationship. The modes of love in the mother-heart are innate, but the range of appropriate responses to the mother is not innate in the children. They can only learn

it by example. Regrettably, it has been much distorted in the culture and in the custom of the secular consumer society. This sometimes leads to a one-sided relationship with the mother doing most of the giving and receiving little true affection. The “generation gap” can become an abyss of dismay and misunderstanding. Meaningful family relationships need to be based not only on benefit and convenience alone but also on appropriate mutual feelings and emotions. The place and the power of the mother-heart has become much devalued in societies founded on the secular model, as in the West.

If the growth and development of the individual’s feeling body has been neglected due to ignorance, bigotry or to other causes, the person’s field of awareness becomes consequently reduced. On the larger scale, when the communal feeling body becomes seriously out of balance, the society becomes degraded. Then the communal feeling body as well as the communal mental body will need serious rehabilitation and readjustment in order for the society to survive on a more humane level.

So is there such a thing as pure truth that we as humans can know? It is a state in which the free spirit can think and act and live entirely. It has qualities and attributes emanating from the cosmic being to us all; it is formless, and timeless, unmeasurable and indefinable. It is a spiritual emanation of the impersonal God, the one without form or name; the one without a second that pervades all life and energies.

The *Taittiriya Upanishad* tells us, “*Brahman* is truth, knowledge and infinity.” But where do you realize this truth? In your own self, says the *Upanishad*, “Who realizes it in the supreme cavity of one’s heart.”

A Meditation on Re-centering

The nature of the spirit is such that it is not discernible to the ordinary human senses. This makes it seem a mystery to many people. However, we can discern the qualities and powers of the spirit on one's individual level by means of contemplation and meditation. By way of an introduction to this path, we can meditate on re-centering ourselves as follows (after the normal preparation of the posture, the breathing and the place of meditation):

A meditation for re-centering oneself by repetition in *Japa* (about 10 minutes repetition on each aspect to begin with):

"Relaxing into this whole physical body space and into each part of it."

"Relaxing into this pure loving heart space."

"Relaxing into this ever-alert, discerning mind space."

"Flowing through the inner centre of awareness and perception." (Integration of thoughts, feelings and actions, without reactions)

"Subsumed into the radiant ascent of Kundalini, the Mother." (Energising each plexus of the spinal axis)

"Subsumed into the inner space of the self." (Releasing all attachments and modifications)

"Being in the inner stillness and emanating serenity." (Being restored to the imperturbable Self)

If one does not perceive anything (including feelings) in the inner space of the self, it is not because there is nothing there to perceive; it is because the powers of perception are stuck on too low a level. They are still dependant on a material level rather than on a spiritual one. Only spirit can perceive spirit. We cannot perceive the spirit through our bodily senses, but we can feel the spirit through the inner

centre of feeling. One has to let go of old mental habits of perception and judgement in order to feel the sublime qualities of the pure consciousness of the divine.

What then is the purpose of coming into the inner space of the self? It is not intended as a substitute for any established practices of meditation, but as a supplement to them. It is a preparation for the transformation into the new consciousness to which we all aspire. The purpose of this meditation is being in the inner space of the self. The purpose of being is just Being. Being is the purpose. □

Sri Ramakrishna used to say: "Never squander the energies of your mind." This means, remember God constantly. The worldly man is very careful not to squander his money, but he gives little heed to how he squanders his mind. There is nothing greater nor easier than the constant remembrance of God. Such a practice awakens the *kundalini*; the veils of *maya* are removed one after another, and a new vision opens up. Then you will see the wonderful treasure that lies hidden within you. You will unfold your own divinity.

Swami Brahmananda

Old Days at Belur Math

I have been requested to share with you my reminiscences of the old days at Belur Math. In those days (during the early twenties) the appearance of Belur Math was very much different from what you see today. In those early days, there was no embankment on the riverside. There were no temples either - neither the big temple of Sri Ramakrishna nor the smaller ones, like those of the Holy Mother and Swamiji. Our accommodation was limited. The place was not hygienic in any way. It was malaria-prone and every year, after the rains, there used to be a good number of patients down with malaria. This was an annual occurrence and we did not have qualified doctors around, nor the big dispensary that you see as you enter the Math these days. There was just an apology for a dispensary with some stock mixtures, and I do not know from where those who administered those medicines learnt the science! So, this was the health-side of the Institution in those days. Then about meals. We had practically nothing for breakfast. I say "practically" because there used to be some liquid and it was called tea. But, even that tea was not within the reach of us youngsters. There used to be puffed rice also. The Math used to get a kerosene tin full of puffed rice and that was all. Each of us would get a small cigarette tin (In those days cigarettes were sold in small tin packs and that was the Math's pulled rice measure.) full of puffed rice. A Swami, who was our accountant, would sit in the room opposite and would say, "Brother, have you taken a full tin of puffed rice?" "Full" meant not overflowing! Those who had duties early in the morning and could not come at the right time would be happy to find the vessel empty. That

was the condition of the breakfast. Our noon meal was not bad. We had enough food: I mean, rice and vegetables. The favourite dish of Bengalis (fish) was not there. Every Tuesday and Saturday some four annas worth of fish was bought for offering's sake. You can well imagine the quantity we could have. Using that quantity, something like soup was prepared. At first the elders, that is, those who were very old and not simply seniors, would get a small share. Secondly, those who were lucky to be ill on those days would get a little of that - and that too, liquid only; nothing solid would be forthcoming. That was our special item.

When we had fever, we used to be given sago-milk. A preparation of sago used to be kept in a big pot, the ones used nowadays for mass cooking. One or two glasses of milk would have been poured into it.

In the afternoon, we had the same old liquid called tea. Very few would have access to it and as for the others, they had plenty of fresh air! There was a dearth of drinking water also in those days. Before our coming to the Math (i.e., before 1920) drinking water was brought from the other side of the Ganga. *Sadhus* used to bring it by boat. There was no drinking water available at the Math. There were small ponds, but the water could not be used for drinking purpose. At night, the same story used to be repeated as in the noon. Sometimes there used to be a little quantity of milk. Who was to take that? That was the problem. Milk was usually served in a single tumbler. We used to pass on the tumbler to the next man and so the relay would go on. For the quantity was insufficient even for one tenth of the *sadhus* there. I do not call that a happy state of affairs. But that was the condition so far as food was concerned.

Luckily for us, that sort of austerity was amply

compensated by the joy that we would derive from the company of our revered elders. Usually we did not feel much the absence of these amenities. We took these difficulties for granted because we came leaving our hearth and home and it goes without saying that there must be some sort of privation. So, nobody minded these.

Regarding work, there were not many servants as you find now. There were a very small number of them who used to do the cooking and other works in the kitchen like cleaning utensils. They would not wash our plates. The rest of the work had to be done by ourselves. And, in spite of the frequent attacks of malaria, we had enough time and energy to cope up with that. Water had to be drawn from the river for everything. Water-closets were not worth the name. Just a few of these were there for so many of us - only five to be precise. We had to carry water for even these. There was a big water reservoir and we had to fill it with water carried in buckets.

We had to work in the garden. For watering the plants, water had to be drawn from the river. There was a big jar in front of the shrine store which had to be kept full for all washing purposes. When devotees would come to take prasad, they used this water for washing their hands. There was no water tap anywhere nearby.

You see lights and fans almost everywhere nowadays. But, in those days we had no electricity. We could not even dream of such facilities. In fact, we had a sort of allergy to fans and lights. We did not like them. No one grudged them either. We had come here of our own choice; we knew that the condition would be such. So, no one complained.

There were not many cots; nor many beds were available. In front of Swamiji's temple, the first floor of

Premananda Memorial was built by then. That was of some help to us. On the ground floor was the dispensary. One of the rooms was meant for medicine store, another for the doctor and compounder, and a third one was for general use. In that room there were only two seats. You may wonder, but in the Math building three or four elderly monks used to stay in a single small room. Swami Suddhananda, the seniormost, was one of them. Five people lived in the small room next to the staircase. Opposite to Jnan Maharaj's room there is another room which accommodated four monks. Since Jnan Maharaj (a brahmacharin disciple of Swamiji) was a constant figure in one of the rooms it was known as his room. That was the manner in which we lived. When there were more Swamis in addition to those already accommodated in various rooms, they had to stay in the visitors' room. A mat was spread and these *sadhus* would happily lie down there. There was one big mosquito net for all. Even as people used to go in and out of it, the mosquitoes also had the freedom to go in and out!

For every paltry purchase, you had to walk at least a mile away; either to Bally or to Calcutta. I was working in the shrine store for some time. Fruits for offering to Sri Ramakrishna had to be bought from Calcutta. We had to carry the load in a basket all the way and the weight was not negligible. From Calcutta to the steamer's ghat, you had to carry the load. Fortunately there were steamer services between Belur and Calcutta in those days. If not to Calcutta, you would have to go to Bally or Salkia where you had to be satisfied with poor quality fruits only.

All around the Math campus there was waterlogged and marshy land covered with weeds. None dared go there even in broad daylight for fear of snakes. The land was

uneven. Only after some years of our occupation it was levelled to be used as a kitchen garden. We had a few cows. The biggest of them was extremely unmanageable. Usually she would not attack us. But there was no guarantee that she would not at times. And she was absolutely dry. The little milk that we would get from one or two good cows was used for offerings, and the remaining portion was for old and sick monks.

Some of us liked to study. During daytime there was plenty of work. We could study only at night. But, where were the lights for that? Three or four lanterns were there but they could not be spared for personal use. One lamp was hung in the corridor of the Ganga-side of the Math building, if anybody had to go to the toilet, he had to use that lantern. On the steps leading to Swamiji's room there was another. This was needed so as not to have difficulty in negotiating the steps. Swami Omkarananda, one of the senior monks, now no more, was very studious. He needed light badly for his studies but would not get it. I would therefore collect little bits of candles that were used in the shrine room. These bits could not be used any further. But he would use them as far as he could, but then, there was no grudging for all that. In spite of these difficulties there were monks who were very studious.

The elders used to teach us about making good use of the facilities we had. There was a good Sanskrit scholar. We could not get a second one of the same calibre after he left. This was the only special facility we had. Swami Suddhananda was very kind and would encourage us to study the scriptures in spite of all the difficulties. We had the good fortune of studying under him. Thus, there was great encouragement for studies, though the facilities were less.

I now come to the brighter side of the picture. Early in the morning, that is, at four o'clock, when the shrine would open, Mahapurush Maharaj himself would walk up the stairs with his *asana* and sit there in meditation. We too used to sit with him. He would not get up till about 5:30 a.m. We would also meditate thus. However, it was not a forced meditation. We liked it, particularly in the presence of Mahapurush Maharaj. That gave us a rare spiritual environment which we could not get anywhere else. Naturally we liked it. Those who had some duties to attend to in the early morning used to leave early and the others would meditate longer till the tea-bell rang. The bell reminded you that you were to attend to your duties; for most of us the other meaning was not there.

Before we began our duties, we used to go to Mahapurush Maharaj's room and bow down to him. He would sit there as we could go one by one. He would talk a few words now and then; about the health of some who were not well, about the work that was to be done, etc. The monk in charge of the stores then was generally asked about what offering would be there to offer to Sri Ramakrishna that day. The monk would answer and Mahapurush Maharaj would suggest something at times. In this manner, Revered Mahapurush Maharaj would get information of each department from the respective monks in charge when they came to make *pranam*.

There was a doctor. Mahapurushji would ask the doctor about the condition of the patients. He would also enquire about the ailing people in the neighbourhood. For the people of the neighbourhood had no other source of help when they fell ill. Belur Math's dispensary with its big bottles of stocked mixtures was the only place that provided medical

help to them even when resources for the monks themselves were meagre. The doctor attending the dispensary was very kind-hearted. He would meet the requirements somehow.

After our *pranams* to him, Mahapurush Maharaj would go out for a stroll. The compound was not so big as it is now. It was just up to the street on the riverside where the old gate was situated. Near the gate there was a tank and next to it a cowshed. He would see the cows and exchange a few words with the Swami or Brahmacharin attending to the cows. He liked the cows much and those who attended to the cows were also dear to him. He would then go to the garden. It was just a small garden. He would thereafter go to the courtyard in front of the Math office and sit there for sometime, observing those engaged in dressing vegetables. After that he would go to his room, when I would get the opportunity of serving him a little more intimately. It was not a regular opportunity; but when I got it I used to massage him under the doctor's advice. At such occasions, I had the opportunity of personal talk with him also.

I shall tell you about one day. In those days we would find Mahapurush Maharaj always in a meditative mood. This mood with which he started the day practically continued throughout the day. While walking he was in that mood; while sitting he was also in that mood. That particular day while he was strolling in the courtyard, he stood still there at the courtyard for sometime with open eyes. One of our Swamis came and bowed down to him. At that exact moment, Mahapurush Maharaj started moving forward. Naturally he stumbled and he fell, and had some sprain in his wrist. He scolded the Swami and returned to his room. I started massaging him in his room. There was none else. He said, "I scolded the monk, but it was not his fault. How could

he know I was not seeing anything at that time!" With open eyes and yet not seeing anything at all! That was the state in which he was, and we do not have such experience even after hours of meditation. Similar incidents happened now and then and kept us mentally and spiritually alert in spite of the busy preoccupations.

Mahapurush Maharaj was always the great spiritual influence in the Math, the centre of attraction. He always used to encourage us to study the scriptures. When we started studying the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad* under Swami Suddhananda, Mahapurush Maharaj himself used to come and sit with us. He brought a set of the *Upanisads* for himself. He would come and sit as if he was one of us. The result was that we felt very much embarrassed. With a great Swami like him sitting beside us we could not feel at ease after all, during our discussions. He realized this and stopped coming to the class after a few days. But everyday we had to go and report to him what we had studied in the class. The day's lesson had to be thus repeated to him everyday. Usually Swami Omkarananda used to do that, and when he was not there I had to do the task. Hence, before I entered his room I had to recapitulate and reproduce the lesson. Thus there was such a loving relationship among us that we always felt at ease in his company.

He never behaved like a teacher giving training to us, as I told you. The training came to us even without our knowing. And it came from a person who never felt that he was giving any training. In this manner our training continued. It was not for any specified period. It depended on the luck of the person. As for instance, it was my good luck that I was allowed to live here for considerably longer periods. There was so much shortage of workers in all the

centres. Sometimes we were sent to relief centres and that without any previous notice. I must tell you what happened in 1926. The relief work had to be started at Midnapore. We were given only half an hour's notice to be ready. We were to start within half an hour so that we could catch the earliest tram; otherwise we would be late. Within that half an hour we had to finish our bath and meal, pack up our things and run to the railway station. There were no vehicles to take us to the station, that luxury was unthinkable. We somehow managed to reach the station in time.

We were there for months engaged in relief activities. At any time, wherever there was any necessity some of us, particularly myself and another who is no more, had to fill up the gap. This was particularly true of us because it was considered that we did not have much work; much work according to those standards. We felt our work was very heavy, but not too heavy as not to be helpful in other respects.

What was the time we used to get for our study? After meals a little rest, and then I had to read along with some Brahmacharins who were almost of my age. I had to pull them out of their beds and collect them together and study the *Gita* or some such book. Then we studied for ourselves. In the afternoon, we had some two and half hours for studies. At 3 p.m. there was to be reading for all people in the visitors' room, and some discussion used to follow occasionally. Great stress was given to meditation in those days. After evening *Arati*, till the *Bhog* (food offering) bell rung, we had to meditate. After that, if there was time and light, we could read. We were all very close to one another, like a very closely knit family. □

Reprinted from *Prabuddha Bharata*, September 1992

Leaves of an Ashrama 32: Kindness as
Akin to Godliness

I have been trying to understand, and I may have learned a lesson - if I can only remember it. I was rereading Gerald Heard's¹ wonderful article in *Vedanta for Modern Man* on Kindness. The point he makes is that kindness is not kindness unless it is unlimited. Anything less than pure compassion is a commercial transaction.

Now this is the great thing I've seen in the guru. His open-door policy, his acceptance of the just and the unjust, the psychologically attractive and the psychologically not-so-promising. And of course, there's no other way to help or reform anybody. You must love him first before he can learn from you.

We see all this. We know that it is true. Yet how do we act so often? Exclusive and unkind. One has such a sense of being invaded by others. We're not even kind to people we supposedly love. The defensive tone heard so often in the talk of wives and husbands. The leave-me-alone furies of parents and children! The way we have of registering an early disapproval, and thus bringing out the worst in so many of our associates. To be really kind is to see everyone as one's own as God does. He understands everything so well that there are no insiders and outsiders with Him. Everybody's name is in His address book. Sri Sarada Devi gives us an example of such a feeling of kinship in her famous words: "There are no strangers; the whole world is no different from yourself. Remember, everyone is your own."

¹ Gerald Heard (1880-1971). British-American writer on scientific-religious topics.

I see how wrong I am. What can I do about it? The guru once said that the mark of the teacher is to see everything from the standpoint of the student. Might not this be the attitude of the karma yogin, too? To try to deal with everyone in terms of his need, not your own convenience. Perhaps if one practiced this as a conscious offering to God the pain that comes from others' invasions could be turned into an austerity, an accepted discipline, and finally the whole problem would disappear.

It's like asking a favor. Not to ask a favor, to say you don't want to trouble the other, to be always self-sufficient; this is really a discourtesy. It shows that you want to keep the other at arm's length. The guru actually asks people for things he wants or pretends to want not for his own sake but for their sake. "The way to make a devotee is to get him to perform some service." This is apparently the purpose of the oriental tradition of the teacher permitting personal attentions. By receiving something, he permits grace to flow within the person giving it. Now we grasp Jesus's gesture: Anoint my feet, not because I can't anoint them myself, or even because they need anointing, but because to give the service does so much for you. It releases love which helps you.

Being kind to others by asking them for favors is of course a technique recommended as "good business" by practitioners of the Dale Carnegie school of human relations. That approach strikes me as merely utilitarian, self-serving. But to practice kindness hoping for nothing in return, or to bring out the best in another, is to act as God acts and introduce a little of Godlike atmosphere into the world - let me learn to do it for these reasons. □

Indian Thought and Carmelite Spirituality
The Raja Yoga of Saint John of the Cross (cont.)

The action of the Dark Night bears first of all on what St. John of the Cross calls "the two interior corporeal senses," namely imagination and fantasy, which yoga calls *samkalpa* and *vikalpa*. St. John of the Cross continues:

"The one produces a kind of imperfect reasoning; the other forms the image which conforms to the object represented. . . . Meditation is the work of these two faculties, since it is a discursive act built upon forms, figures, and images fashioned by the senses, as when we imagine Christ crucified or bound to a column, or at one of the stations of the cross; or God seated on a throne in resplendent majesty; or when we imagine the glory of heaven to be an incomparable light, or picturing any other human or divine thing. Now the soul will have to cast out all these imaginings and leave the senses in darkness if she wishes to attain union with the divine." (AMC, Bk. II. Ch. 12, 3)

Here we come to the matter of meditation and concentration, a subject explored in great detail by yogins. Patanjali speaks of diverse objects of meditation which have as their purpose rendering the mind capable of intense concentration. The fifty-first verse of the first chapter explains the method of training for *samadhi* "without seed" (*nirbija-samadhi*). The disciple does not touch his goal until he has destroyed any attachment to all categories of concentration and meditation. As soon as the control of *samkalpas* and *vikalpas* is complete, no kind of representation is any longer produced.

St. John of the Cross accords permission to use certain

representations and meditations to those who are not yet initiated into a higher level of spiritual life. This is in order to "enkindle bit by bit their love and feed their souls by means of the senses. But they must learn to do without representations and not stay at that stage; for if they did, they would never arrive at their goal, which has no connection with those means which have to be left behind... Those means are like the steps of a staircase. They are only the means for climbing up... We should not think that the Divine Being 'is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man.'" (Acts 17:29)

(AMC. Bk. II, Ch. 12, 5)

In this manner St. John of the Cross speaks to beginners who after having used representations, become attached to them and do not try to go beyond them. They cry out in despair. "If all this is only the means, where and when will we enjoy the goal?" Then the saint speaks of a degree of spiritual life during which they must apply themselves to discursive prayer by means of representations, images, forms, and figures (of which we have spoken); for we must not give them up sooner or later than the spirit requires. "They must be left behind at just the right time so that they will not hinder the soul in her journey to God. It is equally necessary not to abandon imaginative meditation before the proper time, lest there be a regression... For although the apprehensions of these faculties do not serve as proximate means of union for those who are proficient, they serve nevertheless for beginners as a distant means for disposing and preparing their spirit; they serve equally to void their sense of all base, material, worldly and natural forms of images." (AMC, Bk II, Ch. 13, 1)

All these remarks prove the depth of St. John's under-

standing of spiritual life. In India, the yogi uses the method of concentration and meditation to turn the mind away from worldly matters. Since the wandering mind cannot suspend its imagination and fantasies, at least he let them have some sort of spiritual content. Sri Ramana Maharshi once told us this anecdote: "The agitated and undisciplined mind can be compared with an elephant's trunk which is always in motion, breaking branch after branch of the tree to which he is attached. In order to prevent him from doing too much damage, a chain is put on his trunk. Immediately the animal begins to play with his chain. The same thing happens when imagination and fantasy are distracted by a spiritual subject. The movement of the elephant's trunk does not stop; its imagination is the same as before, but the subterfuge of the chain makes it possible to limit the damage."

St John of the Cross gives a detailed description which indicates to the soul that the moment has come to abandon discursive meditation with its representations and images.

"The soul finds that it has become impossible to meditate; one no longer finds pleasure or sweetness in meditating but only dryness.

"The soul no longer experiences any wish to apply imagination or the senses to any exterior or interior object of meditation; not that the imaginative faculty ceases to function, but that there is no longer any desire to apply it to those objects intentionally."

Our author tells us that the final sign is the most certain. "The soul finds pleasure in being alone with God in loving awareness of Him.

"In this state the faculties (intellect, memory, will) are inactive; the soul enjoys an interior peace in that 'general, loving knowledge of God' of which we have already spoken."

(summarised from AMC, Bk. II, Ch. 13, 2-4)

After having recognised these three signs simultaneously, the soul can quite safely abandon discursive meditation and enter into contemplation. However, St. John of the Cross insists that one must be careful here not to confuse tepidity and lack of concentration with the first sign. The soul must discover the second sign in herself, experiencing no desire to be concerned with anything other than God. But that is still not enough: she must be possessed by the desire to be alone with God. In fact, if the soul has no more inclination to meditate and experiences no attraction for anything else, "this state could proceed from melancholia or some other mood coming from the heart or the head and the soul might let herself relax in the charm of that torpor." When these three signs are distinctly and simultaneously present in the soul, the soul discovers that the preliminary exercises in meditation were only "the shell of spiritual life."

At this point a particularly difficult stage of spiritual life begins. The man devoted to spiritual life holds firm in his loving attention to God and preserves peace in his mind when he cannot meditate; it even seems to him that he is doing nothing. The life of the disciple at this moment begins a long period of strong tension. Discursive meditation accompanied by images and representations no longer attract him, but he has not yet reached infused contemplation. He has barely that general knowledge which we have studied already at length.

The aspirant is protected from natural and supernatural dangers thanks to the discipline which Faith (the Church, the Guru) has imposed on him. One of the dangers which the *sadhaka* meets on his way, yoga warns us, and which threatens to check his progress, is certainly

the attraction which supernatural experiences can exert on his mind. How many people have we met, in India or in Europe, who think they have reached a very advanced stage because they have visions! For St. John of the Cross their sole value is the following: "When the soul is thus prepared by this natural exercise, God customarily enlightens and spiritualises her further by some supernatural visions which we here call imaginary and which, as we have already said, produce a great fruition in the spirit, gradually raising her above grossness and very slowly perfecting her." (AMC, Bk II, Ch. 17, 4)

Here the help of the director of conscience becomes all-important. He must establish beyond doubt which of the soul's experiences can rightly be accepted and which must be rejected. St. John of the Cross begins his explanation of this subject by considering some of the difficulties a director of conscience must confront in his relationship with the disciple. He says first of all, "I understand how difficult it is to explain how the spirit of the disciple is formed in a secret and intimate manner on the model of his spiritual master... One cannot explain anything concerning the disciple without explaining what concerns the master. Thus if the spiritual father is inclined towards visions he cannot fail unconsciously to impress the same inclination onto his disciple." And if the disciple has the same inclination, he will hold the visions in all the greater esteem.

When the confessor does not have the necessary prudence to turn his disciple away from those visions, he communicates the signs by which the good and bad visions are recognised and risks throwing the soul into all sorts of dangers and preoccupations. But there is more. Certain directors, noting that some souls are able to

communicate with God, use them, asking them to reveal certain secrets; and those souls obey, thinking it licit to beg revelations this way. If God hearkens to their request, they become confident and imagine that God is happy about that - which is not true. Their acts and beliefs follow those revelations, and they become attached to that way of dealing with God. However, if it happens that the facts do not correspond to the revelations they are amazed and ask themselves whether the revelations come from God or not, for, according to them, the revelation would have to be realised the way they imagined it. "And that is a great illusion, for the revelations or Words of God do not always verify what men imagine." St. John of the Cross concludes by saying that God does not like that process, and he shows his irritation: "What is certainly the best thing to do is to get those souls prudently to flee from such supernatural communications, and habituate them, as we have said, to seek purity in spiritual poverty and the darkness of faith, for that is the way which leads to union with God."

In reading the following lines, we think we hear an echo of Shankara. St. John of the Cross tells us: "For those who wish to follow our advice we propose accepting supernatural communications if they conform to reason and to the teachings of the Gospel. In that case, those communications are accepted, not because they come by revelation, but because they conform to reason, leaving aside the question of revelation."

(to be continued)

Reprinted from *Vedanta for East and West*, May-June 1991

Book Review

Girish Chandra Ghosh: A Bohemian Devotee of Sri Ramakrishna

by Swami Chetanananda

Published by the Vedanta Society of St Louis, \$ 29.95

Girish Chandra Ghosh was a Bengali playwright and actor, who became a great devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. His biography by Swami Chetanananda first of all describes Girish's early life from 1844 to 1879, including his initial period of employment as an accountant. As he was becoming involved in supporting several theatres in Calcutta as an actor, he resigned from his post as an accountant in 1879 to focus his attention exclusively on the theatre.

After becoming the manager of the Great National Theatre, he soon began to write plays as well as acting. Among his plays was one he wrote in 1884 entitled *Chaitanya Lila* (The Divine Play of Chaitanya), which dramatised the early life of the great 15th century saint of Bengal.

The first time Girish saw Ramakrishna was when he went to visit the house of an attorney who lived in his neighbourhood. He found Ramakrishna sitting in a high spiritual mood and apparently almost unaware of his surroundings. Girish thought: "What a fake. He's putting on airs."

A few days after this, Ramakrishna and some of the devotees visited the Star Theatre to see Girish's play about Chaitanya. Girish welcomed Ramakrishna with a bow, which Ramakrishna returned. Three days later Girish again encountered Ramakrishna and then began a relationship

which developed into that of guru and disciple. It was an extraordinary relationship. Girish was what we would nowadays call an alcoholic and also a frequent visitor to the Calcutta brothels, but he was extremely truthful. Ramakrishna accepted him as he was. Under Ramakrishna's guidance Girish changed from being a "bohemian" to become a saintly person.

Swami Chetanananda described Girish's life in detail, including his conversations with Ramakrishna, stories about his encounters with Ramakrishna and his relations with the monastic disciples and Holy Mother. The Swami must have done an enormous amount of reasearch to gather all this material together. He also describes Girish's contribution to the development of modern Bengali theatre and summarizes some of his most influential plays, revealing Ramakrishna's direct influence.

From this biography it emerges that the most attractive facets of Girish's character are his regard for truth, his faith, courage and manliness. He does not hesitate to tell Ramakrishna, "I am a sinner," and without hesitation give him his "power of attorney," which he lives up to in spite of all difficulties.

Altogether, this is a valuable addition to the books that Swami Chetanananda has already written about Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples. It throws light on the versatility of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual genius. Like Jesus Christ he did not come into the world just for the benefit of the righteous, but also to save sinners. □

John Phillips

Vedanta

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Programme for Nov and Dec 2009

Sunday discourses begin after a brief period of meditation.

At the

Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, Bourne End at 4:30 pm

Tel: 01628 526464

Nov 1	Katha Upanishad 6	Swami Shivarupananda
Nov 8	Katha Upanishad 7	Swami Shivarupananda
Nov 15	Katha Upanishad 8	Swami Shivarupananda
Nov 22	Day Retreat	
Nov 29	Katha Upanishad 9	Swami Shivarupananda
Dec 6	Holy Mother's Puja	
Dec 13	What is Hinduism? 28	Swami Dayatmananda
Dec 20	No Talk	
Dec 24	Christmas Eve	
Dec 27	No talk	

Day Retreat

With Swami Dayatmananda and Swami Shivarupananda at
the Vedanta Centre, Bourne End, on 22 November
from 10:00 am until 7:00 pm

Note: Children are not allowed at the Retreat.

Please bring (vegetarian) lunch to share.

Holy Mother's Puja

Sunday 6 December at Bourne End at 4:00 pm

Christmas Eve Celebration

Thursday 24 December at Bourne End at 5:00 pm

Swami Vivekananda's Puja

Friday 1 January 2010 at Bourne End at 4:00 pm

continued from the inside front cover

and says, 'No, it is not he.' He touches the door and says, 'No, it is not he.' This is known in the Vedanta as the process of 'Neti, neti', 'Not this, not this'. At last his hand touches the master's body and he exclaims, 'Here he is!' In other words, he is now conscious of the 'existence' of the master. He has found him, but he doesn't yet know him intimately.

"There is another type, known as the siddha of the siddha, the 'supremely perfect'. It is quite a different thing when one talks to the master intimately, when one knows God very intimately through love and devotion. A siddha has undoubtedly attained God, but the 'supremely perfect' has known God very intimately.

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, August 24, 1882.

Vedanta

is a bi-monthly magazine published, since 1951,
by the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, Bourne End,
Buckinghamshire SL8 5LF, U.K.

Phone: (01628) 526464.

Subscription rate for 6 issues: £9 or \$17.50 post free.

Editor: Swami Dayatmananda

*Assistant Editors: Swami Shivarupananda,
Swami Chidakarananda*

Editorial Advisers:

*Swami Swahananda, Hollywood;
John Phillips*

£1.50

That Self-existent One is far removed from the organs. The organs or instruments see outwards, but the self-existing One, the Self, is seen inwards. You must remember the qualification that is required: the desire to know this Self by turning the eyes inwards.

Swami Vivekananda



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