

Vedanta

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Monastic Spirituality: Christian and Hindu
Swami Ranganathananda

**Moulding Our Lives with Sri Ramakrishna's
Teachings**
Swami Bhuteshananda



Divine Wisdom

MASTER: "Once a teacher was explaining to a disciple: 'God alone, and no one else, is your own.' The disciple said: 'But, revered sir, my mother, my wife, and my other relatives take very good care of me. They see nothing but darkness when I am not present. How much they love me!' The teacher said: 'There you are mistaken. I shall show you presently that nobody is your own. Take these few pills with you. When you go home, swallow them and lie down in bed. People will think you are dead, but you will remain conscious of the outside world and will see and hear everything. Then I shall visit your home.'

"The disciple followed the instructions. He swallowed the pills and lay as if unconscious in his bed. His mother, wife, and other relatives began to cry. Just then the teacher came in, in the guise of a physician, and asked the cause of their grief. When they had told him everything, he said to them: 'Here is a medicine for him. It will bring him back to life. But I must tell you one thing. This medicine must first be taken by one of his relatives and then given to him. But the relative who takes it first will die. I see his mother, his wife, and others here. Certainly one of you will volunteer to take the medicine. Then the young man will come back to life.'

"The disciple heard all this. First the physician called his mother, who was weeping and rolling on the ground in grief. He said to her: 'Mother, you don't need to weep any more. Take this medicine and your son will come to life. But you will die.' The mother took the medicine in her hand and began to think. After much reflection she said to the physician, with tears in her eyes: 'My child, I have a few more children. I have to think about them too. I am wondering what will happen to them if I die. Who will feed them and

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Is Buddha Relevant for Us (cont.)

“The world is like the curly tail of a dog” (Swami Vivekananda). External circumstances may change. But the nature of man and the world remains the same through eternity. Hence Buddha remains as relevant for us today as he was in the past and will remain so for ever. So long as man remains ignorant, so long suffering is inevitable; so long Buddha remains relevant.

Buddha divided his scheme of spiritual disciplines into three stages. He calls the first stage as *prajna* or wisdom. It consists of Right View and Right Determination. Here wisdom is more faith than realization. Right View is not the wisdom of enlightenment. This is the wisdom or indirect knowledge born of faith in a purified mind. As a result of living a *dharmic* or righteous life, faith dawns and makes us believe in the reality of the transcendental reality. Right View enables us to understand the truth of both the visible and the invisible worlds. This was discussed in our last editorial. Having obtained Right View one should make the Right Determination to avoid all evil and to lead a righteous life. This requires tremendous power of will. Perhaps we belong to the category of: “I can resist anything but temptation”. (Oscar Wilde) Most of us know intellectually what is good and right. But the difficulty arises when we try to put it into practise. The degree of a person's success in any field of life is commensurate with the degree of will-power he has attained. A strong will is needed to obtain success in anything.

Lord Buddha himself was a great exemplar of strong determination. Once he understood *samsara*, the transmigratory

truth of life, correctly, he determined to follow a way of life that would put an end to it. For six years he tried hard to attain to illumination but could not succeed. At last he made a strong determination and sat down under the *Bodhi* tree making the mighty resolution, "Let my skin, and sinews, and bones become dry, and let all the flesh and blood in my body dry up, but never from this seat will this body stir, until I have attained the supreme and absolute wisdom!" That very night, it is said, he attained *Bodhi*, illumination.

Sri Ramakrishna practised super-human austerities for the realization of the Divine Mother. He thought he may never be able to see the Divine Mother, and in his desperation decided to put an end to his life. That very moment he had the vision of the Divine Mother. In his view persons of weak will can never succeed in anything. He often used to say: "There are so many (people) who are soft like popped rice soaked in milk no strength within, no grit, soft and slippery." The *Upanishads* also declare emphatically: "This *Atman* cannot be attained by the weak." Come New Year, most of us make many resolutions. But few of us, alas, have the grit to carry them out into practice. We sincerely wish to, but we are unable to. Why is this so? Because of our past impressions, habits.

Swami Vivekananda used to say that the history of the world is nothing but the story of a few persons, of great character and tremendous will power. The essence of true education is the development of will-power. Swami Vivekananda says: "What is education? Is it book-learning? No. Is it diverse knowledge? Not even that. The training by which the current and expression of will are brought under control and become fruitful is called education." We all need this kind of education. According to Buddha after obtaining Right View one should

make a strong determination to put his teachings into practice. Through practice faith must be transformed into fact, into realization. It means many drastic changes must be made in life. Spiritual life is nothing but bringing about complete change in one's life and outlook. This transformation of the worldly old man into the spiritual new man requires tremendous courage, grit, determination, and power of the will. Many of us start our spiritual life with noble intentions. But gradually our life turns into boring routine. No joy or enthusiasm is found in it. We lose hope of advancing in spiritual life. Worse, some of us turn into embodiments of negativity. Often, our very inner dissatisfaction leads into scepticism, fault-finding, slander-mongering, and constant back-biting of others. We will be the first to raise vehement objections for any thing noble. We lose the faculty of seeing good in anything. Without a strong will there will be no joy, hope or progress in life. How do we know our will is getting stronger? Below are a few hints.

a. Only a man of good character can develop a strong will. Let us not forget that 'will' is a power of God, and the better our character the nearer we are to God. There is a misnomer that many wicked dictators we come across in history are men of strong will. Quite the contrary. The more wicked a person the weaker is his will. What appears to be a strong will is nothing but their 'egos' blown out of all proportion. That is the reason why such people always leave a trail of blood and destruction in their wake. True will power stems from God, and makes one truly great. The test of real will power lies in its ability to bring greater good to many for a long time.

b. Only a person of strong will can look upon all events of life in a positive light; such a person alone could rise

above even most daunting experiences of life. In fact the greater the opposition the stronger grows his determination and will.

c. Hope and joy would be the constant companions of a strong will.

d. Only a man of iron will can have the magnanimity to forgive and forget those who oppose and even try to destroy him (and God, in His grace, provides more than enough opposition for each sincere striving soul!)

e. Only a man of strong will can persist till the end, till the realization of God. Hence the need for the development of a strong will cannot be emphasised enough. We must do our best to make ourselves strong.

So what is the way to develop a strong will? One wishing to strengthen his will must have definite goals. No goals, nothing to strive, hence no will power; these goals must, however, be realistic and achievable. One way to increase the will power is to watch out for activities that eat away one's time and energy. Any wasteful activity is a dangerous enemy. The will is like a muscle. And like a muscle it grows strong with systematic exercise. Let those who wish to develop a strong will start with smaller goals for shorter periods of time (Let no one rush into impossible and unrealistic goals) and gradually progress toward the goal. The best way to develop a strong will, of course, is to surrender to God; for to merge one's will in God's will is to strengthen it. This surrender is achieved by following the instructions of one's teacher unwaveringly, with full faith in him. And let patience, perseverance, prayer and vigilance be one's companions and helpers in this spiritual journey. Such a way of life slowly but surely brings many a required change in one's life hastening our progress to the Ultimate Reality, *Nirvana*.

(to be continued)

Monastic Spirituality: Christian and Hindu

When Swami Ranganathananda, of the Ramakrishna Order, was on a lecture tour of the Netherlands and Belgium in 1972, he was a guest at the convent of the Carmelite Order at Amstelveen, Amsterdam. On 15th September he met the nuns of the convent in a question-answer session. Here we bring our readers an edited transcript of that session.

Drawing on his first-hand study of Christians in Latin American countries, and comparing their emotional nature with the rather dry, unemotional nature of the Anglo-Saxons, the Dutch, and the Germans, the Swami laid stress on the need of cultivating devotion to God by the European peoples. He incidentally told the group of his own long and devoted study of the New Testament and the lives, teachings, and writings of Christian saints and mystics. According to his study, the Swami said, "The two great teachings of Jesus are: 'Love thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind and with all thy soul;' and 'love thy neighbour as thyself.' Jesus concluded this statement with the further utterance: 'On these two hang all the law and all the prophets.'"

A Sister: That is what I want to ask you. You speak of two different teachings of Jesus, namely, love of God and love of man. But can we see man, can we see society, as a special extension of God?

Swami: Yes. That is the special teaching emphasized by the Hindu religion - that man is a spark of God. Then service of man becomes worship of God. This is possible only when we view man as what he really is, a spark of God, and not what he appears to our senses, as a finite, weak, often sinful, organic being. The New Testament also proclaims this truth: "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you."

Sister: That is not exactly what I meant. By putting it that

way, the human being, in my opinion, does not get his full value; the only value he has then is because of God, but he does not become a focus of value by himself.

Swami: In that case, you can love and serve man for the glory of God. According to the *Vedanta*, however, this contradiction between God and man does not arise because the God it preaches is not extra-cosmic but within man, within the cosmos. Man's true glory is not as just an organically conditioned being, but as the *Atman*, the divine Self.

Sister: Is this *Atman* the same as our deepest ego?

Swami: Yes, you can put it that way. God touches us at the deepest level of our self. That is what makes for the spiritual unity of man with man, which is the only rational sanction for our ethical sense. In the New Testament also, we have such statements of Jesus as "Are ye not the tabernacles of God?" and "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you."

Another Sister: You in India always salute each other with folded hands. Is it not painful for you to find that nobody in these countries salutes you in that way as you do in India ?

Swami: No, it does not trouble us at all; every culture has its own ways of greeting. We respect the greeting modes of other cultures, like the shaking of hands in the West. Incidentally, this shaking of hands is not a stranger to India. Our tradition tells us that it is one of its very ancient forms of greeting. There are many references in the epic, the *Mahabharata*, to this type of greeting, the *kara-sparsa*, touching the hand, as it is called in Sanskrit. There is the following beautiful verse in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, the great book of *bhakti* or love of God, which speaks of such a greeting between the universal indwelling God, Vishnu, and the first-born cosmic person, Brahma: "The supreme indwelling Lord, who is very dear to Brahma who was immersed in love and bliss on getting this sight of the Lord, was pleased to find that Brahma

was competent to be given the work of creating the world. Touching Brahma's hand with His own hand, and with a radiant smile, Vishnu, the Lord, spoke unto him"¹

In India we usually salute each other by folding the two hands. It is a salutation given to God, and given to man also because in him is God. As far as I can understand, this was the mode of greeting at the time of Jesus. Shaking hands was a later European development, like many other things: for example, changes in the dress, and the change of the unleavened bread broken at the Passover, into modern bread. Jesus and the people around him, as also those in Athens and Rome, wore clothes similar to what we still wear in India today - the upper cloth thrown over the left shoulder with the right hand free to gesticulate - just the way, as you see here, I wear my upper cloth, the *chaddar*. There were no spoons or forks: even Henry VIII of England is represented in a picture (I read somewhere) as eating with his own hands! The early western music, the Gregorian chants for example, is similar to Indian music of the past and the present. It is modern western music that, has diverged from its own old forms and styles. Take, for example, this *Vedic* chanting of a verse from the *Upanishads*, which I now chant for you, and mark its affinity with those earlier western chants: *Om, Sahanavavatu, saha nau bhunaktu, saha viryam karavavahai, tejasvinavadhitamastu, ma vidvishavahai, Om shantih, shantih, shantih* - "Om; may God protect us both, students and teacher; may He nourish us both; may we acquire energy as a result of this study; may we become illumined as a result of this study; may we not hate each other. Om; Peace, Peace, Peace!" This is a very ancient chant, maybe three or four thousand years old.

Another Sister: When you speak about God in man, I have

¹ *Srimad Bhagavatam*, II. 9. 18.

the feeling that you neglect the value of man.

Swami: On the contrary, don't you think that his value is enhanced thereby? His value rises as we rise in our estimate of him from a mere organic system to a psychical system, then to a rational being, and finally to a spiritual being, to a spark of that divine that infills and sustains the universe. God lives in us. When this truth was discovered, man revealed a new uniqueness in himself. After that discovery, mentioned in the *Upanisads*, it was difficult to view him as a mere sinner, as something finite and trivial, as a mere helpless creature. Nature has endowed him with her finest evolutionary product, with the organic capacity to transcend himself, to realize the infinite possibilities hidden within him.

As we dwell in a house, God dwells in us. By this, we are not eliminated. We remain, but underwritten by something greater. When the infinite begins to stir in us, our value is heightened, not lowered. We install God in our heart, as we install a dear one in our heart, for example, a husband installing his wife in his heart, and vice versa. That enriches the personalities of both and draws them both to each other.

When God is conceived as outside man and the universe, as extra-cosmic, man becomes reduced to nothing. Man's littleness becomes the measure of God's majesty. Much of modern western thought is a protest against this view of man upheld in Western theology and this view of an extra-cosmic God. Modern thought and modern man challenge the authority of such a God who is outside. We are living in an age of rebellion against all external authority. Kings and emperors, as much as such an extra-cosmic God, have not escaped rebellion from subjects or devotees. In a republic, sovereignty - which once centred in the king or emperor - becomes centred in the millions of men and women constituting the republic. When the authority or sanction comes from within,

and not from without, there is no more rebellion, God outside the universe will always remain a target of attack by rationalists, scientists, and humanists. These are not unspiritual people, but are often more spiritual and godly than many professed theists.

Also, if God is far away, he cannot come within the purview of the experience of man, but only of a belief in Him. The Catholic religion, like Hinduism, has produced many saints who have experienced God, not merely believed in Him; and Catholic monasticism, like Hindu and Buddhist monasticism, is based on a conviction that man can experience God, or the highest Truth, live in awareness of Him, or that Truth, and that religion does not end with a static piety, a church conformity, or subscription to a dogma. St. Augustine's experience of God, as described by him in his *Confessions*, is instructive in this connection. Says he, in a moving passage: "I asked the earth, and it answered me, 'I am not He.' ... I asked the sea and the deeps, and the living creeping things, and they answered, 'We are not thy God, seek above us.' I asked the moving air; and the whole air with his inhabitants answered, 'Anaximenes was deceived; I am not God.' I asked the heavens, sun, moon, stars - 'Nor (say they) are we the God whom thou seekest.' And I replied unto all the things which encompass the door of my flesh (the senses), 'Ye have told me of my God, that ye are not He; tell me something of Him.' And they cried out with a loud voice, 'He made us.' . . . For truth saith unto me, 'Neither heaven, nor earth, nor any other body is thy God.' ... Now to thee I speak, O my soul, thou art my better part: for thou quickenest the mass of my body, giving it life, which no body can give to a body; but thy God is even unto thee the Life of thy life."²

² St. Augustine: *Confessions*, Book X

“The Life of thy life,” *pranasya pranah* as the *Upanisads* describe God.

Another Sister: Is this the same as our deepest ego?

Swami: Yes; as the Self of our self, the universal Self behind our separate individual selves. The *Vedanta* describes God as the *antaryamin*, the inner controller. The Gita presents God as the *antaratman*, the inner Self, in whom we are all one, like the thread that runs through all the pearls in a garland, making for the unity of the separate pearls.

It is because God is our inner Self that man can experience Him, realize Him. In the New Testament, Jesus presents God in two aspects; one, as Our father which art in Heaven - outside, far away - for those who spiritually are ordinarily gifted, and can grasp reality only outside, with the senses. Hence, this prayer is done with eyes open, looking up to the far-away sky, with the faith that God is there high up in the heavens. But to those who can grasp subtle spiritual truths, who are not under the tyranny of the senses, Jesus presents God as the Kingdom of Heaven within us, God as the Self of our self, and presents the technique of His realization as inward prayer and meditation, with eyes closed, senses withdrawn, and mind composed. External rituals, sacrifices, and ceremonies constitute the worship in the former, while inner purity constitutes the one condition, in the latter, for spiritual realization. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God:” not merely believe in God, but actually realize Him.

Both the approaches are valid, but the first must lead to the second; both together constitute a complete educational method, not for just believing in a doctrine about God, but for slowly progressing towards an awareness of Him and finally realizing Him, in this very life. And the monastic life is significant, precisely because in it, one's body and mind become a laboratory for this experiment and this experience of God. Here alone does

religion become a science of God, a science of experience, a science giving out a truth which can be verified by one and all competent to do so. Many of the saints of Christianity, as also of other religions, have shown this. They realized God and communicated that realization to other human beings in words and concepts taken from other levels of knowledge and experience. "Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaketh," says the scripture; "and the hand worketh too," adds Swami Vivekananda.

That is the difference between the work of a monk or a nun or a devotee, on the one hand, and the work of a merely worldly person, on the other. Their work proceeds, respectively, from a fullness of the heart and an emptiness of the heart. The worldly man works, and seeks pleasure outside, in order to fill his heart with some joy. The spiritual person pours out the joy of his heart in work and human association. The work of a nun-nurse in a hospital, for example, bears the impress of a dedication and a fullness of joy within, which is the product of her communion with God in prayer and meditation. This is the significance of the beautiful saying of Meister Eckhart: "What we take in by contemplation, that we pour out in love." The work of a nun or a monk is not for filling the belly - God looks after it - but for proclaiming the glory of God.

Another Sister: How can God fill our bellies?

Swami: When we think least of ourselves, we are most cared for by God. He does it through the instrumentality of other persons who are also struggling to express the glory of God in their lives. When, in divine dedication, we think least of ourselves we become like little children, children of God, drawing down His care and protection.

Another Sister: Do people who see God outside, and those who see God inside, complement each other, complete each other?

Swami: Each of these is limited in approach, and the insufficiency of each is made good by the other and to that extent is sufficient spiritually. But the *Vedanta* says that a comprehensive spirituality involves seeing God outside as well as inside, in work and human associations as much as in meditation and inward experience; for God is infinite and universal. This seeing God with eyes open as much as with eyes closed is the special message of Sri Ramakrishna to the modern age. Seeing God outside is possible only after seeing Him inside. It is spiritual growth within that enables one to see God outside and in one's work. Even a simple peasant or housewife can experience the divine in the midst of his or her work, if he or she has grown spiritually and become pure in heart. The only condition for the realization of God is purity of heart; and not adopting a particular profession or mode of life. These latter are mere individual preferences; but the former is universal.

Another Sister: I wish to ask something about prayer. How do we have to pray and what do we have to pray for?

Swami: Prayer belongs to various categories, depending on the level of spiritual growth of the individual. People pray for worldly blessings, for getting rid of physical and psychological ailments, for attainment of a better condition after death, for gaining ethical and spiritual values, for purity of heart for love of God. and for the vision of God. All these are prayer; but all spiritual teachers tell us that, the more one grows spiritually, the less will the prayers be for worldly things. Love of God will then become the one quest, and the virtues and graces that contribute to that love of God.

Worldly goods can be had through human effort itself, cooperative human effort. That is the aim and scope of a modern welfare state. And thanks to modern science and technology, man has the capacity everywhere to provide for everyone the

minimum needs of food, shelter, clothing and education. Many states have already achieved these for their populations. In several lectures in U.S.A., I referred to this and said: "Why do you pray every day: 'O Lord, give us this day our daily bread?' By your diligent and cooperative labour, you have plenty of bread in your country. If you have to pray at all, I said jokingly, pray for what you feel the lack of; pray every morning, for example, before leaving home: 'O Lord, give us this day our parking places for our cars!'"

Another Sister: When one has realized God, is it still possible for him or her to have problems concerning God?

Swami: No; there can be no problems then concerning God; but there can still be problems concerning his or her daily life. Realization of God will not mean an end to all problems, for example, physical illnesses. Saints can still be afflicted by diseases like cancer even; but these pertain to the body and the saint knows it and knows also how to bear them, beyond what cannot be cured by human ingenuity. Sri Ramakrishna used to express this attitude through a line in a song: "The body and its aches and pains know each other; but O mind, be immersed in the bliss (of God)!" God gives the devotee the strength to bear these crosses. Whether it is personal pains and sufferings or burdens of public work and responsibility, the devotee bears them cheerfully in the love of God; and God gives him the requisite strength. Says St. Paul: "We have taken up Thy cross. Thou hast laid it upon us, give us strength to bear it unto death." I told your Sister Ilona, who is now lying sick on the first floor, that her love of God will give her strength to bear her sickness and to recover from it. I told her an episode from the Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila, which she enjoyed immensely: Teresa had become old; she was going on an inspection of one of her convents; she had to cross a stream; when she was wading through it and had reached its

middle, the water rose steadily, due to rains in the mountains the previous night, and she felt that she might be carried away. In a mood of spiritual pique, she asked God, "Is this the way Thou treatest Thy devotee?" She heard God answering, "Yes; I sometimes test My devotees like this." At this, Teresa lovingly retorted, "Ah, that is why Thou hast few lovers!" That was a beautiful and straight and intimate retort of a real lover of God. There is no distance between God and His devotee; nothing to separate them. In this spirit of intimacy, Sri Ramakrishna assures us, we can complain to God, give retorts to Him, pray to Him - they all become the sport of love. This is the height of devotion, where God's majesty disappears and He manifests as the very embodiment of love.

Another Sister: Can we then say: When we consider God as a stranger, we also become strangers to ourselves and to each other?

Swami: Quite so. All sense of strangeness is due to a sense of distance, a sense of separateness. Love of God eliminates this distance, this separateness; and since God is the inner Self of all, intimacy with Him gives one the capacity to feel intimacy with all; and distance from Him alienates one's ego even from one's own self. It is this inner alienation that makes for alienation from other human beings - wife or husband, parents or children, between citizen and citizen. God is no stranger to any one; but we treat Him as a stranger. God is in all men, but all men are not in God, therefore man suffers - says Sri Ramakrishna. The ultimate reality of speculative philosophy becomes the intimate reality in religion.

(To be continued)

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Moulding Our Lives with Sri Ramakrishna's Teachings

One of the sayings of Sri Ramakrishna which he repeated many times, was, "I have made the mould and leave it for you, now you cast your life in that mould. I have lit the fire, now you warm up yourselves. I have cooked the food, now you sit down to eat from the dish already prepared for you." Each and every word of this saying is deeply significant. Many of us worship Sri Ramakrishna as an incarnation of God. We say many, because there may be some among us who do not look upon him as such. But everybody can accept him as a consummate man, if not an incarnation.

When God incarnates Himself, He conceals his splendour under the guise of a man. When He is born as a human being, He behaves like an ordinary man, the natural weaknesses in a man may be found in Him sometimes. Birth, death, old age and disease, these are inevitable stages in a man's life. An incarnation has to go through them. Yet we say he is God. This is known as an incarnation of God. An incarnation is a synthesis of both man and God. The natural qualities of a man are inherent in him. But when we wish to judge him by the standard of a man, we find that he rises far above the common human standard.

How we refer to such a superhuman being is not important, but we must know that we have to make our goal in life with his example. We have to build up our keen desire to walk along his path. We must receive the inspiration from him to reach the goal. We have to get the directions of the path from his life. He incarnates as a man to show us the way. Had God remained as God, the All-Controlling Power, the Omnipotent, Omnipresent

and Omniscient One, what good would it do to us? He would have remained beyond our reach. We are ordinary men. We cannot comprehend such a transcendent being. When God sees that man is becoming completely detached from Him, man is burning in the sorrows and miseries of this world, man is failing to taste the most invigorating nectar of the Lord, and finds himself in a state of utter confusion, God incarnates Himself so that man can find his way once again, make a clear conception about his Goal, and can feel the Infinite within his reach.

It does not matter much whether or not man can fully comprehend Him. There is a description in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. The moon is reflected on the water. The fishes swimming in the water consider it as another fellow aquatic animal and play with it. Similarly when God incarnates among us, He comes like man, and behaves as our playmate, our very near and dear one. We feel no diffidence with this strange man, no fear of him. We can spend our whole life with him. We do not know whether God has any need of such a human form, but we certainly need Him as an incarnation. If He never embodied Himself in such a way, man could not have any conception of God or a high spiritual life.

Someone may say, "Why? Are not these truths all written in the scriptures?" But all scriptures would appear as heaps of paper, if God never came among us as an incarnation. They could never touch our life. God comes to put life into the scriptures which then become inspiring, active, and take vivid shape to render the message of God in clear accents. When God comes as an incarnation, He illumines the *Vedas* by his splendour. The incarnation invigorates our spiritual life by his life. His spiritual power attracts us towards him, and thus gives inspiration to our life. We make progress toward our goal by making him our pole star. As a lighthouse helps a ship to sail along the right direction, an incarnation helps us to move along the right spiritual path by

providing us with his beacon. This is the purpose of the advent of God. He comes to raise a man to His supramental state, and as a means to this, He adopts a human form, and accepts all human attributes.

There is no harm if we look upon Sri Ramakrishna as a perfect man or as an incarnation of God, because the life of an incarnation is the wonderful synthesis of two aspects, of God and man. When we consider Sri Ramakrishna as a man we notice that he is not different from us in his hunger and thirst, disease and sorrow. When his nephew Akshay died he felt the anguish as if his heart were being wrung like a towel. Such is the divine play of an incarnation in which we see him as a man. We brave to build up a relation with him. We can open our mind to him. He would sympathize and guide our spiritual life. Sri Ramakrishna, the incarnation of God, thus gives us a rare opportunity to love and worship God in man and thus realize God through him.

The 150th birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna was celebrated only last year. Even now the four quarters are illumined by his radiance. His presence is still being felt by all. Quite a few among us have come in direct contact with his apostles, though not with him. Their lives have been gratified by the grace from these apostles. We feel he is still around us.

The day to day events of his life have been recorded in such a way that it has no parallel in the case of any other incarnation of God. This is unique. We can witness his life more lively, more comprehensively than the stories of mythology.

Sri Ramakrishna was a wonderful man with varied spiritual ideas. The numerous ideas which may be found in the minds of men, particularly the seekers of truth, are all reflected in the life of Sri Ramakrishna, and through him, they are becoming clarified, clearly understood. When anybody approached Sri Ramakrishna with any doubt about his spiritual

life, the Master would tell him, "Look here, I used to have similar problems and I did so and so which removed my doubts." There is no better way to encourage a seeker of Truth. He faced all the spiritual doubts in his own life, and offered the solution to them all (by his own experience). This is known as making a mould.

We do not know why he practised the various religious austerities. A devotee may follow any path of *sadhana* (religious practices) to know the truth. But what was Sri Ramakrishna's necessity of performing so many varied religious practices and austerities? He had already realized God. He had no further necessity. The answer to this is that he had actualized all possible spiritual practices in his own life, and left conclusive proof thereof, so that, other seekers can get the necessary instructions. The poet Tagore wrote, "All the streams of religious practices performed by the Sadhakas have finally met in your meditation." All have gained fulfilment through his *sadhana*. Just as all the rivers flow through different routes and finally meet in the ocean, similarly various spiritual thoughts finally find their destination in the vast ocean of varied spiritual realizations in the life of Sri Ramakrishna. There was the source, as well as the confluence of all the rivers. All the spiritual attitudes were generated in his mind, and they finally reached their culmination also there. When we analyze his life we can understand this uniqueness of Sri Ramakrishna.

How many types of religious worshippers and ordinary seekers of God, assembled around Sri Ramakrishna. The young, the old, and the women, all gathered round him. All of them received full satisfaction from him. He was a child with the children, a young man with the youth, and a man of profound knowledge with the old. In him was the totality of so many wonderful ideas. That was why the author of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga (Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master)* said that the Master

was the king of ecstasies, the arbiter of all spiritual moods, and their supreme end. The life of Sri Ramakrishna thus illumines the path of God realization. His was not an ordinary, dimly flickering light. It was like a blazing sun illumining the whole world of religion with extreme brightness. Whether one was a non-dualist, a qualified non-dualist or a dualist, a *Jnani* (follower of the path of knowledge), a *Bhakta* (follower of the path of devotion) or a Yogi, everyone could find the fullest gratification in him. Vijay Krishna Goswami once said, "One could possibly find drops here and there, but here (in Sri Ramakrishna) was the full ocean itself."

If we want to reach the goal in our life through the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, we find that he welcomes all of us in the spiritual journey, however varied may be our ways. We can say without hesitation that there was never a trace of despondency in him. He never uttered a word of dejection, there is hope for all. Nobody is expelled from the Kingdom of God. Sri Ramakrishna had given assurance to each one whether one was a monk or a householder, a yogi, or a *Jnani*, rich or poor. He never excluded anyone.

His sayings are numerous. In course of explaining the various classes of men, he said that there are four types of men, namely, those bound by the fetters of the world, those who are seekers after liberation, the liberated, and the ever-free. He then described a soul-in-bondage, which is almost identical with modern man without God. A bound soul is one who never wants to know anything about God. It is in bondage but has no feeling, no pain of bondage. He is like a fish trapped in a net. It clings to the net with the net in its mouth, not knowing that the fisherman would soon drag the net along with him to the shore, and it would die. He further compared the bound soul to the filthiest worm found in the filth which would die if it is taken out from there, and kept in a nice spot. It could not bear the nicer place. Similarly

a bound soul can not bear the name of God. He loves nothing other than petty material things. This is how once he described a bound soul. One amongst his audience got frightened, and asked with great fear, "Sir, is there no way out for such a soul in bondage?" Sri Ramakrishna assured him, "Yes, there is a way." He further explained that it was the way of singing in praise of God, enjoying the company of His devotees, meditating on Him, and living in solitude. The first thing he said was, "Chant the name of God, sing in His praise." What will happen then? The mind will become purer day by day, and it will feel attracted towards Him.

Then he spoke of holy association with monks, which means association with the devotees of God who have already started their journey to God. What will be the result? Through this association people would realize how to lead a life centred on God. A holy man is one who is entirely devoted to God.

Then he suggested the need of living occasionally in solitude, where the devotee would easily retain the idea of God formed in his mind, and go on reflecting on it. There he can meditate on Him in loneliness and cogitate on what he had seen and listened to in the holy company. The continuity of this process will gradually make our mind pure.

Then he said, "What is the next stage after the mind becomes pure? God would then manifest Himself to His devotee." One who is forgetful for ever, has to be awakened with a shock, if necessary. We are in deep slumber, we have to be roused. A mother adopts any means to wake her child. When required, she even shakes the baby, at times even by pinching the child. Why does she do all these? The child is sleeping all the time. It wants to remain inactive and indifferent. Mother does not want that. She wants to play with her children. She does not want that they should be forgetful about her. She desires that the children should

be attracted towards her, should come within the world of her influence, and thus they should know how to tackle with the imminent worldly afflictions.

The Mother of the universe reincarnated Herself as Sri Ramakrishna to show the path of salvation to the afflicted souls. Sri Ramakrishna's teachings are all-embracing and all-engulfing. He never had any narrow-mindedness, bias or prejudice. There is nobody who is left out of the perview of his teachings. Those who are hated, ignored, and rejected by the society as poison, even for them there is compassion in his heart. For them, too, he gave teachings in order to take them to higher strata. Sri Ramakrishna is eager to do that. People who are ignored in the family, even the drunkard, the debauch, and all sorts of mischievous persons, are not neglected by Sri Ramakrishna. His heart bled even for them. This all-embracing, all-engulfing compassion for souls in bondage is the special characteristic of Sri Ramakrishna. Though he was holiness itself, the impure people could come near him and could leave with him the responsibility of all their misdeeds and of their salvation. He was always accepting them. He would lead the particular person to his suitable path. One of the teachings of the Master was not to disturb anybody's mood or temperamental tendencies. One should proceed to God according to his own inclination. This was easy for Sri Ramakrishna, who is the harmonizer of all ideas, the master of all ideas. That is why he could lead anybody according to his natural mood. He is the ideal of the monks as well as of the householders.

When he speaks about renunciation, he makes no compromise. He says, "My son! Nothing can be attained except through renunciation!" Wherever one may be stationed in life, there is no way out for him except through renunciation. If someone raised any doubt, "We are householders, how can we

renounce everything? This is not possible for us," immediately came the rejoinder from him, "You do not have to renounce externally, it would be sufficient for you to have inner renunciation." We must keep it in mind that he never compromised. He never said that realization was possible without renunciation. On the contrary he said, "For some renunciation must be both external and internal; but for others inner renunciation would be sufficient." And how many types of examples he furnished himself by his own life! In the life he lived, the true nature of an all-renouncing ascetic is shining brightly.

One can also find in his life examples of an ideal householder, as he lived in family with his near and dear ones. Sri Ramakrishna wanted to serve his mother so that she would not suffer. For this reason he took *sannyasa* (vow of renunciation) secretly so that his mother did not suffer mental anguish. While in Vrindaban, the Master met a lady devotee, known as Gangamayee, whose devotion impressed him and who was also greatly impressed by him. This spiritually advanced *sadhika* used to call the Master as Dulaly, in the sense that he was the embodiment of Sri Radha. The Master said, "I have a weak stomach which can not stand all types of food. If I stay here, who is going to cook for me?" She replied, "I shall cook your food." So it was decided that he would thenceforward live in Vrindaban. At this moment he remembered that his mother was living alone in the *Nahabat* in Dakshineswar. Who would look after her if he stayed at Vrindaban? So the idea was abandoned. He could not stay at Vrindaban, but returned to his mother. Is it right for a monk to have so much attachment for his mother? The reply to this is, an ascetic is not a brute. No; his heart is not a burial ground, he must have a tender heart but it must not be sold out to one person or one thing only, his heart will have no constraint, it will remain open to embrace all.

We notice in the life of Sri Ramakrishna that his love is all-embracing. He feels sorry in the sorrows of others. He feels joyful in the joy of others. Throughout his whole life what earnest efforts he made to express to all what is inexpressible, to bring all within the purview of the supreme spiritual knowledge he had realized in his own life! We must comprehend these, his life, his efforts, his teachings. If these fail to lead us in the right direction we should consider ourselves worse than the souls in bondage. If we study his life, his teachings, we see what great treasures are lying there. We should think how much of these we can put into practice. There we can get all the ingredients and provisions we need in our life. In so lucid and simple words he uncovered so many deep mysteries of religious life. He said, "If you feel attraction towards Him, if your heart weeps for Him, that would be sufficient. Nothing more would be required." To pray to him with extreme humility is the highest form of spiritual practice. If a devotee wanted to perform further spiritual practices, he would open out to him the limitless treasure of his own spiritual practices. Numerous types of *sadhana* in the paths of *Bhakti*, *Jnana*, *Tantra*, and the *Vedas*, he practised. He also called on God in the mood of *Shanta* (meditating on the Lord as Absolute *Brahman*), *Dasya* (worshipping the Lord as His servant), *Sakhya* (to consider oneself as the friend of the Lord), *Vatsalya* (to care for the Lord as one's child).

His teachings are equally applicable to all. We have to keep in mind that he is the mould for the multitude, not for one or two seekers of God only. Nobody is required to change his ideas in order to cast himself into that mould. Everyone would find in him the supreme manifestation of his individual ideas and ideals. This is the most significant characteristic in the life of Sri Ramakrishna for which we consider him as the confluence of all religions, harmonizer of all religions. Votaries of various ideas

would find in him the culmination of their individual ideal. He said, "You keep to your ideal, but you have no right to criticize the ideas of others. How little do you know about your own ideal, and yet you dare to criticize others?" He again said, "Do not limit the ideas of God. Do not say that He can be so and so and nothing else. His Ideas are infinite. Nobody can put a limit to them." Sri Ramakrishna is sympathetic to all. He is the Ideal for all. It has been particularly described in *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* that various seekers would consider him as a fellow seeker, and they would be charmed to witness the splendid manifestation of the Supreme in him, whichever path they may be following. This is his special characteristic. If someone enquires about the significant characteristic of Sri Ramakrishna, if he wants to know whether he was a *Jnani* or a *Bhakta*, a dualist, a qualified non-dualist or a non-dualist, we can straightway say that he belongs to all spiritual paths. No path has been left out by him. He is the King, the emperor in the realm of Divinity, as the author of *Lilaprasanga* said about him. He was the Master of all spiritual moods and attitudes.

Let us meditate on Sri Ramakrishna. It would be sufficient for us if we can surrender to him. Our lives will be illumined in his splendour. I pray to Sri Ramakrishna for all. Let his light remove the darkness from our lives. Let his influence attract us towards him, his affection inspire us to surrender to him. Let his advent among us be meaningful. Let our lives become full. □

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The Art and Science of Doing Work and Service (continued)

A few months before the death of Sri Ramakrishna, Narendra asked the Master to give him the boon of remaining absorbed in meditation continuously for days and to experience *nirvikalpa samadhi*, the highest realization of *Advaita Vedanta*. Hearing this request of his beloved disciple the Master said: "You are a very small-minded person. There is a state higher even than that. 'All that exists art Thou' - it is you who sing that song."¹ Sri Ramakrishna wanted his disciple to see God in the poor and the downtrodden as His veritable manifestation, and to serve them in the spirit of worship. He told Narendra to serve the Lord in man. For the Master, motiveless service of man, nay of every being, is indeed worship of the Lord Himself.

This last incident occurred on January 4, 1886 at the Cossipore Garden House where the Master spent the next and final seven months of his life. During the next few weeks, Narendra again felt an intense yearning for renunciation of this world, which to him was nothing but *Maya*, of name and form. Of course, nothing could be hidden from Sri Ramakrishna, and sensing his state of mind he told his disciples, including Narendra, that a monk needed only mental renunciation; a monk should live in the world but keep the ego of knowledge. The Master said: "Even after attaining knowledge, the *jnani* can live in the world, retaining devotion, compassion, renunciation, and such virtues. This serves him two purposes: first, the teaching of men, and second, enjoyment of divine bliss. If a *jnani* remains silent, merged in *samadhi*, then men's hearts will not be illumined.

¹ *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 936

Therefore Shankaracharya kept the 'ego of Knowledge.' And further, a jnani lives as a devotee, in the company of devotees, in order to enjoy and drink deep of the Bliss of God."²

A couple of months after that last incident Narendra made a similar request, though indirectly, in the form of a song, which went like the following:

Unsteady is water on the lotus petal
Just as unsteady is the life of man.
One moment with a *sadhu* is the boat
That takes one across the ocean of this world.

Hardly had Narendra finished these few lines, when Sri Ramakrishna told him by a sign, as he couldn't speak because of his condition: "What are you singing? That is a very insignificant attitude, a very commonplace thing (to ask for just one's own liberation).³ The Master had rightly understood that his beloved disciple was yearning for his own liberation, for, a few minutes before this Sri Ramakrishna had told him and his other devotees present that when one comes down from *samadhi*, one sees every thing is filled with God alone; no one sees anything as the world. That is, what Sri Ramakrishna called *Vijnana* or wisdom; it is a stage when one effortlessly serves all beings.

After the passing away of the Master, confiding to M, the chronicler of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Narendra said that because of his dissuasions, continued association with a holy person of the highest order like the Master, and the fact he had "tamed us by love," he (Narendra) abandoned his thought of running away from the world. Besides, the Master had also indicated to all his disciples a broad outline of the future organisation, which is known as the Ramakrishna Math and Mission today. Most importantly, he designated Narendra as the

² *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 940

³ *Idem*, 945

leader of his monastic disciples.

How far the wishes of Sri Ramakrishna were carried out is now history. The very fact that Narendra, as Swami Vivekananda, went to America to attend the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, in September 1893 and stayed there for almost three years, teaching there and also in England the eternal wisdom of *Vedanta*, tells loudly how much the wishes of the Master have been fulfilled.

Most importantly, how closely the Swami's message followed the teachings of his Master becomes only evident if one reads very diligently the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. To give just one example: shortly after returning from America, he wrote from Almora in India, to Mary Hale in America:⁴ "May I be born again and again and suffer a thousand miseries, if only I may worship the only God in whom I believe, the sum total of all souls, and above all, my God the wicked, my God the afflicted, my God the poor of all races." Not only did he give up the idea of his own liberation, he also pledged to work for the liberation of every man and woman. Therefore, when in 1897 Swami Vivekananda formally inaugurated the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in Belur, West Bengal, he incorporated these two goals: "For one's own salvation, and for the welfare of the world."

One day a young man complained to the Swami that he could not make progress in spiritual life. He said, "I sit still in meditation, shutting the door of my room, and keep my eyes closed as long as I can, but I do not find peace of mind. Can you show me the way?" "My boy," replied the Swami in a voice full of loving sympathy, "if you take my word, you will have first of all to open the door of your room and look around, instead of closing your eyes. There are hundreds of poor and helpless people

⁴ *Letters of Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkatta: Advaita Ashrama, 8th impression, 1991), 348-51

in your neighbourhood; you have to serve them to the best of your ability. You have to nurse and procure food and medicine for the sick. You will have to feed those who have nothing to eat. You will have to teach the ignorant. My advice to you is that if you want peace of mind, you shall have to serve others to the best of your ability.”⁵

In his lectures in America in 1893 on Karma Yoga, or the Yoga of Service, Swami Vivekananda expounded the insight he received in the phrase, “Serving the Lord in man” or “Serving Shiva in Jiva.” Later in India he said: “The poor and the miserable are for our salvation, so that we may serve the Lord, coming in the shape of the diseased, coming in the shape of the lunatic, the leper, and the sinner! Bold are my words; and let me repeat that it is the greatest privilege in our life that we are allowed to serve the Lord in all these shapes.”⁶ Time and again he remembered the words of Sri Ramakrishna that “religion is not for empty stomachs.” The Swami also composed a poem with the title, *To a Friend*, two stanzas of which are as follows:

“From highest *Brahman* to the yonder worm,
And to the very minutest atom,
Everywhere is the same God, the All-love,
Friend, offer mind, soul, body, at their feet.
These are His manifold forms before thee,
Rejecting them, where seekest thou for God?
He who loves all beings without distinction,
He indeed is worshipping best his God.”⁷

The above poem reiterates the unity of existence and reasserts the value of worshiping the Lord in and through service

⁵ *Vivekananda A Biography*, Swami Nikhilananda, (Kolkata, Advaita Ashrama, 234.)

⁶ *Complete Works*, 3,247

⁷ *Complete Works*, 4, 493-96

of all beings. Most of us do not see the world as it is, which is essentially Shiva, the Lord, as the first verse of the *Isha Upanishad* mentioned above says. Instead, we see the world as we are. Supposing it is dark outside and there is a stump of a tree. A thief will mistake it for a policeman; a person who believes in ghosts, will think it to be a ghost, but a young man who has been yearning to see his girlfriend will think it to be his beloved. So, in order to see Shiva in Jiva, we must change our mindset as to who we really are. We are Shiva, the *Atman*, or the Self, which no weapon can cleave or fire burn; nor wind can dry or water wet. But these words will remain empty and meaningless unless one has realized the Self; only then can one be convinced that one indeed is the Self, Shiva, and not this body-mind complex. Then alone one can say: I am Shiva; I am Shiva, and see the same Shiva in others. For such a person serving Shiva in Jiva becomes spontaneous. When Swami Vivekananda returned home from his first US tour in January 1897, he gave an address in Rameswaram in South India, and said: "He who sees Shiva in the poor, in the weak, and in the diseased; really worships Shiva; and if he sees Shiva only in the image, his worship is preliminary. He who has served and helped one poor man seeing Shiva in him, without thinking of his caste, or creed, or race, or anything, with him Shiva is more pleased than with the man who sees Him only in temples."⁸

The Hindus say that God did not create this universe out of nothing on a certain day. Rather, the Hindu view, as Sri Ramakrishna beautifully expressed through his parables, is that God himself has become the world with all the beings and objects of nature. In his playfulness, which the Hindus call *Maya*, God has hidden himself in different masks of names and forms, labeled

⁸ *Complete Works*, 3, 142

as man or woman; white, black or brown; Hindus, Christians, or Muslims; and Americans, Arabs, British or Indians.⁹

Having been conditioned by these masks for so long, we have begun to identify ourselves with them. All conflicts, interpersonal, interreligious, interracial and also international, which have brought so much misery and suffering to humanity, are the result of this false identification with the masks that we are wearing. Both for the peace of the world and also for our own peace, we must pull these masks off and see who we really are. We will see that you and I are not we; you and I are one, the unity that is the Lord, *Atman* or Self. This realization will convince us without doubt that our service to man, nay to every being, is indeed worship of the Lord. This will also help us understand better the truth of the statement that by helping others, we really help ourselves. □

If you would find the Supreme Reality, which lies behind all these hollow unrealities, you must be wholly devoted to it. You must worship the living God with your whole heart and give up the worship of things that perish. You must feel the utter hollowness of everything but Truth, as Nachiketa did. Wealth, kingdoms, enjoyments, power were to him nothing - less than a zero. He wanted nothing but Truth and Truth was bound to come to him. You must have the same firm conviction about the hollowness of the material world and seek God with undivided devotion; then He will surely come to you.

Swami Ramakrishnananda

⁹ Master (to the devotees): "Do you know what I see right now? I see that it is God Himself who has become all this. It seems to me that all men and all other living beings are made of leather, and that it is God Himself who, dwelling inside these leather cases, moves the hands, the feet, the heads." *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 941-942

Leaves of an Ashrama 36: What is Seen Outside is Mostly Projected

When I was in my teens I turned away from religion, not to take it up again for many years. What caused me to do this was my assumption that a certain minister was failing to express in his personal life the principles he preached from the pulpit. (The word *hypocrite* formed on my lips. I know now, of course, that this was not the cause of my deception; I only seized upon it as an excuse.)

Since then I have observed others acting in the same way - devotees resigning because of some actual or fancied inadequacy on the part of a leader or other member. The pattern is similar to the one I followed: "If people here are no better than that, I'd rather not be a part of such an organization."

Now I am on the other side of the fence. I am a religious professional, in a position where my life and doings are on view. I am in a place where charges of hypocrisy could be flung at me.

I believe that anyone trying to live a spiritual life should be esteemed for the effort, even if his performance may leave something to be desired. No aspirant ever sets out to be unfaithful to his commitment. He may be weak, but he is struggling to grow strong. Naturally, moods assail him; emotions flood up to obscure his eyesight temporarily. Accidents may happen. We all know that we are entirely different personalities at, say, midnight than we are at seven o'clock in the morning. At worst, I would say that a devotee might be momentarily double-minded, but I would never again call any seeker a hypocrite - meaning someone who knowingly tries to appear spiritual while secretly being just the opposite.

In recent years, as I have tried to reform my habits and responses, I have inclined to this view: Those who are ready to say that I am not living up to what I should be - let them struggle toward the same standards and see how hard it is! In fact, I wonder if criticism of others does not reflect more upon the person making it than upon the one to whom it is directed.

Remembering this, I have sought to moderate my censure of my fellows. It seems to me that there is an inverse relationship between the amount of criticism we give and our real spiritual attainment. A man lost in God sees everyone as perfect. At the other end of the scale is the individual who, dark inside, sees the same kind of condition when he looks outside. That which we see "out there" is said to be mostly what we ourselves project.

I have seen this happen, that when a person truly advances, negative attitudes toward others lessen. Compassion widens. Knowing from experience how intensely difficult it is to be all he should be, the serious aspirant appreciates the struggles others are making. While working toward this condition, would I not be wise to be lenient in my judgment of my compatriots, as I should like my critics to be of me - or if not lenient, at least silent? □

There is no difference between the purified mind and the true Self of man. The mind is pure when it is single, that is, when it is devoted to one object. If you wish to see God, the only way is to get rid of all selfish desires and make the mind single.

Swami Ramakrishnananda

God is also Mother (continued)

Difficulties with the Father

A book about *Shakti*, the Divine Mother, written by a baptised Christian brought up in the West, who from childhood onwards has learned to pray to God as Father, has of necessity a quite "subjective," personal character. If an inner revolt takes place here, if many things are suddenly put upside down, one must look for the causes.

As far as I am concerned, I did not at all grow up in a spiritually indifferent climate, but in a "good Catholic" atmosphere, and already at the age of nine my life's aim stood clearly before my eyes: to become a monk. But after about seven years at boarding school, the light seemed suddenly to go out, the old God grew pale, and I fled into art and literature, which became a substitute religion for me; and if some years later I had not come across Eastern mysticism - Vedanta, Yoga, Zen - and certain trends within Christianity - especially Meister Eckhart - I would now probably be a convinced atheist.

An exclusively male God, who suddenly created something out of nothing, no one knew exactly why, and whose principal occupation seemed to be to get angry with what He had made - namely His creation, man in particular - all this had become difficult for me. He loved them only when they behaved themselves, namely when they complied with His standards. One had to praise Him all the time, keep Him in a good mood, be endlessly grateful for the smallest insignificant gift. All good things came exclusively from Him, were inspired by Him, while

man might attribute all negative things to himself - unless one simply attributed them to this God's opponent, the Devil.

It was above all the artist in me, who rebelled against this exclusively male moral Father God, I encountered within myself and outside myself in creation so much that had no place in this religion: the enormous complexity and polarity of existence, a mysterious sphinx-like smile, sometimes even a loud laugh, or female beauty and the intensity of Eros. What use was it to just be good and well behaved and obtain a front seat in heaven, if as a result one had not lifted even one of these mysterious veils? Was it not much more important slowly to penetrate the mystery? Why was I here? Why was anything here? Only because one day it had occurred to this God to create us? What was it to Him that we were well behaved and went to church every Sunday? And what did we get out of it? Was it only a question of fulfilling our duty and pull through all right? If we had really been created by Him out of nothing, then we were still basically purely nothing, to which powerful God these "nothings" had not added anything in the least, but who strangely enough placed great importance on this nothing parading before Him and praising Him as the Almighty.

This God had next to nothing to do with nature. He still bore the marks of the Desert God - a God, who does not like any pictures, who does not particularly treasure the feminine and makes His appearance only in history, above all in the history of His chosen people. He seems above all to be very choosy, and woe to you, the thought becomes fixed in one's mind, that you do not belong to the chosen ones, one could never satisfy this perfect Super-Ego. As a Catholic I had it perhaps easier than many Protestants, who often seem to be under even greater pressure to do well, in spite of or because of his teaching on mercy - provided of course that he is a strict believer - but the Catholic also had and

has a lot to bear, especially if he has been brain-washed by boarding school education.

I do not however want to over-dramatise these fears, which I did not in any case suffer for long. At a certain other point the attachment to this God was severed, He was no longer of interest to me. He was played out. In any case they had driven it into me that this God was never quite to be reached, that a fundamental gap would always separate us from his holiness and grandeur. I had no fear of punishments, as I no longer believed in hell, and heaven as a place of recompense offered hardly any attraction for me, as it seemed to be only a hierarchically graded boredom, in which one had continually to tell this God that He was the Almighty - which in any case He already knew. My bad deeds, for example my sensual feelings, also seemed irreparable, only some holy water was sprinkled on them through confession, but without any thorough root treatment, which at least to a limited degree would have penetrated into the depths.

But these depths were what mattered to me. First of all those depths, that ground, which the depth-psychologists like to plough up - and to a certain extent I tried to be my own psychoanalyst - but then moreover also those depths, which can no longer be "analysed," which do not appear to have any real "content." I had always mistrusted the dogmatic assertion that an unbridgeable chasm separated man from God, the creature from the Creator. More and more I found the term "God" becoming altogether suspect: as a certain person, who wants this or that, who confronts me and everything. I thought more of a transpersonal ground, out of which everything comes and which connects everything. Of a substance, that bears us, like a "democratic" Godhead, who does not make himself "Lord" all the time. If I also almost lost my belief in a personal God, I did not lose my belief in the "divine," which did not exclude

anything, which embraced everything - even me. A divinity that had no fear, "other gods" could appear beside him, who knew no jealousy, just because He was "everything." I no longer needed to believe in a divine person, who had triumphed over other gods, as the only "true" God, but I believed in a divine ground, which in its enormous wealth manifested in all persons and figures, both divine and human.

I need hardly mention that the religious traditions of the East helped me a great deal in this new understanding, both theoretically through their books of wisdom and holy scriptures, and also practically through the practice of meditation. When I reached the high point of my personal crisis I had a decisive *ground-experience*, and since then I know *that I can never fall out of the divine ground*. Anyone who has had such an experience often starts to laugh and perhaps also to dance - and even today I consider such a releasing laugh as the beginning of real religion, or more precisely spiritual life. We do not need any spectacular visions and hearing of voices, but just such a ground experience, in which we completely expose ourselves, in which we give up everything, including ourselves in the first place, in which we slowly empty ourselves on the floor, in which we no longer theorise and act a part, in which we no longer find ourselves "interesting," in which the audience on the ceiling, who so often look down on us, is no longer there. It is a descent into complete darkness, into the ground - and not least of all to the Mother.

Of course a simple replacement of the Father deity by the Mother deity did not take place. If God transcends all opposites, including male and female, father and mother, then he must be expressed on the relative plane by both aspects. The complete denial of the father aspect would be just as crazy as the previous complete suppression of the female aspect in God. The only thing is that general considerations of reason do not help much in this

case, as it is a question of ways of personal development - which however are symptomatic of our times - and these ways are necessarily dialectic: if one comes into the foreground, the other disappears for a time into the background. One does not realize the divine by working out well thought out but meaningless views on one's writing desk, devising philosophies of life. But if one goes astray and then finds the path again, in that one goes one's zigzag way, *living* one's search. God is basically not interested in us having a "correct" opinion of Himself, but in our getting up out of our comfortable chair and proceeding on our way.

In my case the path to the Mother led through the impersonal Ground. How could I address God as Thou, if I did not know who *I* was?! I had to get to the bottom of the whole of creation, sink right down into this Ground, in order to have only a slight awareness of my real being. I was impressed by the Indian teaching of the *Atman*, the real "Self," which stands behind the small individual I and connects us all, finally also me and God. In traditional Christianity I had never come across this teaching, and only when I discovered mystics such as Eckhart, did I find the Western confirmation in a fine sweeping formulation for what had already become an inner certainty for me and which is repeatedly expressed in the *Upanishad* texts: "My *Atman* is smaller than a grain of paddy, than a barleycorn, than a mustard seed, than a grain of millet grain or than the kernel of a grain of millet. This my *Atman* residing in (the lotus of) the heart is greater than the earth, greater than the sky, greater than heaven, greater than all these worlds.¹ Did a priest in the church ever say this to me? How seldom is the heart expanded by the words of a priest, how often is it made to feel so small?

¹ *Chandogya Upanishad* III, 14

One knows the objections: this feeling of being one with the Divine Self only gives rise to an euphoria of the ego, and this leads us away from the true God, whose greatness we shall only recognize when we are aware of our absolute insignificance.

One can of course not deny that in many pseudo-mystical schools there is some inflation of the ego in the name of spirituality. I also concede that the feeling of absolute insignificance can bring us closer to the true Ground. We have already said that the mystical experience of the Ground is only possible, if one divests oneself of everything and hold nothing at all back. But this also means renunciation of this poor-sinner consciousness, which so many seem to like. It means renunciation of the "I" that could still stand before or next to God. The grain of wheat must die, if it wants to produce so much fruit. The *Atman* is the infinitely great, only because it is the infinitely small.

Anyone who intuitively grasps the greatness of the *Atman*, his real Self, will not be a megalomaniac. In my case a miracle suddenly happened. I could once more bow down before God. Yes, while I formerly made at most a quick genuflection, I now touched the floor with my forehead. An inner blockage seemed to be removed. The defiant and somewhat adolescent boy, who no longer wanted to bow down before the divine Father, who hated nothing more than this allegedly omniscient Father's eye, was blown away. Then I knew that this eye was also in me as the eternal "witness," which could never be made the object. And I no longer felt myself to be a worm, who crept around on the earth and caused God's displeasure, but one with the Self of all beings. There was only one consciousness, only one seeing, and this consciousness was not the private possession of any powerful divine person, who watched over everything from above, but a general possession, even if most people did not know it.

I therefore suddenly felt myself free - also free again to bow down before God. And for purely psychological reasons one can understand that God the Father remained in the background. It was more the sons of God, before whom I bowed down: the incarnations of God in whom the divine was manifested: Christ, but also Krishna, Buddha and Ramakrishna. They seemed to me to be more rounded off than the purely Father God, they already pointed to the unity of earth and heaven, they filled the gap between transcendence and immanence and also often radiated almost female charm, in which the divine mercy and grace was manifested. Did they not also point to the feminine-motherly dimension of God - also indeed through their incarnation, their becoming flesh, which without the motherly root would be impossible? "The primal origin of the universe is the Mother of all things," says Lao Tse. "If one knows the Mother, one also knows the Sons. Knowing the Sons, while remaining in contact with the Mother, releases one from the fear of death."

And I of course once again approached the statues and pictures of the Madonna, with which I as a Catholic was familiar. I did not worry about justifying my veneration, I did not get into a muddle about hair-splitting distinctions between "veneration" and "worship," which Catholics so love, when they defend their cult of Mary before Protestants. I did not so much venerate an human being, who had risen to divine status, as the divine that mercifully manifested in Mary.

(to be continued)

Discipleship

Lecture delivered in San Francisco, on March 29, 1900

My subject is "Discipleship." I do not know how you will take what I have to say. It will be rather difficult for you to accept it - the ideals of teachers and disciples in this country vary so much from those in ours. An old proverb of India comes to my mind: "There are hundreds of thousands of teachers, but it is hard to find one disciple." It seems to be true. The one important thing in the attainment of spirituality is the attitude of the pupil. When the right attitude is there, illumination comes easily. What does the disciple need in order to receive the truth? The great sages say that to attain truth takes but the twinkling of an eye - it is just a question of knowing - the dream breaks. How long does it take? In a second the dream is gone. When the illusion vanishes, how long does it take? Just the twinkling of an eye. When I know the truth, nothing happens except that the falsehood vanishes away: I took the rope for the snake, and now I see it is the rope. It is only a question of half a second and the whole thing is done. "Thou art That." Thou art the Reality. How long does it take to know this? If we are God and always have been so, not to know this is most astonishing. To know this is the only natural thing. It should not take ages to find out what we have always been and what we now are. Yet it seems difficult to realise this self-evident truth. Ages and ages pass before we begin to catch a faint glimpse of it. God is life; God is truth. We write about this; we feel in our inmost heart that this is so, that everything else than God is nothing - here today, gone tomorrow. And yet most of us remain the same all through life.

We cling to untruth, and we turn our back upon truth. We do not want to attain truth. We do not want anyone to break our dream. You see, the teachers are not wanted. Who wants to learn? But if anyone wants to realise the truth and overcome illusion, if he wants to receive the truth from a teacher, he must be a true disciple. It is not easy to be a disciple; great preparations are necessary; many conditions have to be fulfilled. Four principal conditions are laid down by the *Vedantists*. The first condition is that the student who wants to know the truth must give up all desires for gain in this world or in the life to come. The truth is not what we see. What we see is not truth as long as any desire creeps into the mind. God is true, and the world is not true. So long as there is in the heart the least desire for the world, truth will not come. Let the world fall to ruin around my ears: I do not care. So with the next life; I do not care to go to heaven. What is heaven? Only the continuation of this earth. We would be better and the little foolish dreams we are dreaming would break sooner if there were no heaven, no continuation of this silly life on earth. By going to heaven we only prolong the miserable illusions. What do you gain in heaven? You become gods, drink nectar, and get rheumatism. There is less misery there than on earth, but also less truth. The very rich can understand truth much less than the poorer people. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." The rich man has no time to think of anything beyond his wealth and power, his comforts and indulgences. The rich rarely become religious. Why? Because they think, if they become religious, they will have no more fun in life. In the same way, there is very little chance to become spiritual in heaven; there is too much comfort and enjoyment there - the dwellers in heaven are disinclined to give up their fun. They say there will be no more weeping in heaven. I do not trust the man who never weeps; he has a big

block of granite where the heart should be. It is evident that the heavenly people have not much sympathy. There are vast masses of them over there, and we are miserable creatures suffering in this horrible place. They could pull us all out of it; but they do not. They do not weep. There is no sorrow or misery there; therefore they do not care for anyone's misery. They drink their nectar, dances go on; beautiful wives and all that. Going beyond these things, the disciple should say, "I do not care for anything in this life nor for all the heavens that have ever existed - I do not care to go to any of them. I do not want the sense-life in any form - this identification of myself with the body - as I feel now, 'I am this body - this huge mass of flesh.' This is what I feel I am. I refuse to believe that."

The world and the heavens, all these are bound up with the senses. You do not care for the earth if you do not have any senses. Heaven also is the world. Earth, heaven, and all that is between have but one name - earth. Therefore the disciple, knowing the past and the present and thinking of the future, knowing what prosperity means, what happiness means, gives up all these and seeks to know the truth and truth alone. This is the first condition.

The second condition is that the disciple must be able to control the internal and the external senses and must be established in several other spiritual virtues. The external senses are the visible organs situated in different parts of the body; the internal senses are intangible. We have the external eyes, ears, nose, and so on; and we have the corresponding internal senses. We are continually at the beck and call of both these groups of senses. Corresponding to the senses are sense-objects. If any sense-objects are near by, the senses compel us to perceive them; we have no choice or independence. There is the big nose. A little fragrance is there; I have to smell it. If there were a bad odour, I

would say to myself, "Do not smell it;" but nature says, "Smell," and I smell it. Just think what we have become! We have bound ourselves. I have eyes. Anything going on, good or bad, I must see. It is the same with hearing. If anyone speaks unpleasantly to me, I must hear it. My sense of hearing compels me to do so, and how miserable I feel! Curse or praise - man has got to hear. I have seen many deaf people who do not usually hear, but anything about themselves they always hear! All these senses, external and internal, must be under the disciple's control. By hard practice he has to arrive at the stage where he can assert his mind against the senses, against the commands of nature. He should be able to say to his mind, "You are mine; I order you, do not see or hear anything," and the mind will not see or hear anything - no form or sound will react on the mind. In that state the mind has become free of the domination of the senses, has become separated from them. No longer is it attached to the senses and the body. The external things cannot order the mind now; the mind refuses to attach itself to them. Beautiful fragrance is there. The disciple says to the mind, "Do not smell," and the mind does not perceive the fragrance. When you have arrived at that point, you are just beginning to be a disciple. That is why when everybody says, "I know the truth", I say, "If you know the truth, you must have self-control; and if you have control of yourself, show it by controlling these organs."

Next, the mind must be made to quiet down. It is rushing about. Just as I sit down to meditate, all the vilest subjects in the world come up. The whole thing is nauseating. Why should the mind think thoughts I do not want it to think? I am as it were a slave to the mind. No spiritual knowledge is possible so long as the mind is restless and out of control. The disciple has to learn to control the mind. Yes, it is the function of the mind to think. But it must not think if the disciple does not want it to; it must

stop thinking when he commands it to. To qualify as a disciple, this state of the mind is very necessary. Also, the disciple must have great power of endurance. Life seems comfortable; and you find the mind behaves well when everything is going well with you. But if something goes wrong, your mind loses its balance. That is not good. Bear all evil and misery without one murmur of hurt, without one thought of unhappiness, resistance, remedy, or retaliation. That is true endurance; and that you must acquire. Good and evil there always are in the world. Many forget there is any evil - at least they try to forget; and when evil comes upon them, they are overwhelmed by it and feel bitter. There are others who deny that there is any evil at all and consider everything good. That also is a weakness; that also proceeds from a fear of evil. If something is evil-smelling, why sprinkle it with rose water and call it fragrant? Yes, there are good and evil in the world - God has put evil in the world. But you do not have to whitewash Him. Why there is evil is none of your business. Please have faith and keep quiet.

When my Master, Sri Ramakrishna fell ill, a Brahmin suggested to him that he apply his tremendous mental power to cure himself. He said that if my Master would only concentrate his mind on the diseased part of the body, it would heal. Sri Ramakrishna answered, "What! Bring down the mind that I've given to God to this little body!" He refused to think of body and illness. His mind was continually conscious of God; it was dedicated to Him utterly. He would not use it for any other purpose. This craving for health, wealth, long life, and the like - the so-called good - is nothing but an illusion. To devote the mind to them in order to secure them only strengthens the delusion. We have these dreams and illusions in life, and we want to have more of them in the life to come, in heaven. More and more illusion. Resist not evil. Face it! You are higher than evil. There is

this misery in the world - it has to be suffered by someone. You cannot act without making evil for somebody. And when you seek worldly good, you only avoid an evil which must be suffered by somebody else. Everyone is trying to put it on someone else's shoulders. The disciple says, "Let the miseries of the world come to me; I shall endure them all. Let others go free." Remember the man on the cross. He could have brought legions of angels to victory; but he did not resist. He pitied those who crucified him. He endured every humiliation and suffering. He took the burden of all upon himself: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Such is true endurance. How very high he was above this life, so high that we cannot understand it, we slaves! No sooner does a man slap me in the face than my hand hits back: bang, it goes! How can I understand the greatness and blessedness of the Glorified One? How can I see the glory of it? But I will not drag the ideal down. I feel I am the body, resisting evil. If I get a headache, I go all over the world to have it cured; I drink two thousand bottles of medicine. How can I understand these marvellous minds?

I can see the ideal, but how much of that ideal? None of this consciousness of the body, of the little self, of its pleasures and pains, its hurts and comforts, none of these can reach that atmosphere. By thinking only of the spirit and keeping the mind out of matter all the time, I can catch a glimpse of that ideal. Material thought and forms of the sense-world have no place in that ideal. Take them off and put the mind upon the spirit. Forget your life and death, your pains and pleasures, your name and fame, and realise that you are neither body nor mind but the pure spirit. When I say "I," I mean this spirit. Close your eyes and see what picture appears when you think of your "I." Is it the picture of your body that comes, or of your mental nature? If so, you have not realised your true "I" yet. The time will come, however, when

as soon as you say "I" you will see the universe, the Infinite Being. Then you will have realised your true Self and found that you are infinite. That is the truth: you are the spirit, you are not matter. There is such a thing as illusion - in it one thing is taken for another: matter is taken for spirit, this body for soul. That is the tremendous illusion. It has to go.

(to be continued)

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You have renounced everything and pledged your life to God. But remember, it is very difficult to lead a pure and unsullied life. You may think it is easy, but let me tell you, it is like walking on the sharp edge of a razor. Perfect continence is the sole condition of success in spiritual life, but it is difficult, even impossible, to practice absolute purity without love and faith in God. The world is full of temptations which arouse passions; every day you will see ninety-nine percent of the people rushing in mad pursuit after sensual pleasures. Your mind is in constant danger of becoming contaminated; therefore, you must engage your mind in thinking good thoughts, studying good books, and discussing uplifting subjects. You must spend your time in worship of God, in service to holy men, and in contemplation. This is the only way to mould your character.

Swami Brahmananda

Programme for March & April 2011

Sunday discourses begin after a brief period of meditation.

At the

Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, Bourne End at 4:30 pm

Tel: 01628 526464 - www.vedantauk.com

Mar	6	Sri Ramakrishna's Puja	
Mar	13	Imitation of Christ 13	Swami Shivarupananda
Mar	20	Selection from the Upanishads 14	Swami Dayatmananda
Mar	27	Selection from the Upanishads 15	Swami Dayatmananda
Apr	3	Selection from the Upanishads 16	Swami Dayatmananda
Apr	10	Selection from the Upanishads 17	Swami Dayatmananda
Apr	17	Imitation of Christ 14	Swami Shivarupananda
Apr	24	Day Retreat	

Sri Ramakrishna's Puja

Sunday 6 March
at Bourne End at 4:00 pm

Day Retreat

With Swami Dayatmananda and Swami Shivarupananda at
the Vedanta Centre, Bourne End, on 24 April
from 10:00 am until 7:00 pm

Note: Children are not allowed at the Retreat.

Please bring (vegetarian) lunch to share.

Vedanta Study Circle in Cheshire Area

April 17 at 11:00 am

The Universal Message of the Bhagavad Gita

Swami Dayatmananda

For information contact Mr Aswani (tel: 01625 527075)

between 9:30 pm - 10:30 pm

look after them?' The physician next called the wife and handed the medicine to her. She had been weeping bitterly too. With the medicine in her hand she also began to reflect. She had heard that she would die from the effect of the medicine. At last, with tears in her eyes, she said: 'He has met his fate. If I die, what will happen to my young children? Who will keep them alive? How can I take the medicine?' In the meantime the disciple had got over the effect of the pills. He was now convinced that nobody was really his own. He jumped out of bed and left the place with his teacher. The guru said to him, 'There is only one whom you may call your own, and that is God.'

"Therefore a man should act in such a way that he may have bhakti for the Lotus Feet of God and love God as his very own. You see this world around you. It exists for you only for a couple of days. There is nothing to it."

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, October 11, 1884

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A yogi must avoid the two extremes of luxury and austerity. He must not fast, nor torture his flesh. He who does so, says the Gita, cannot be a yogi: He who fasts, he who keeps awake, he who sleeps much, he who works too much, he who does not work, none of these can be a yogi.

Swami Vivekananda



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