

Vedanta

369 JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2013

Musings on the Kalpataru Day

Swami Budhananda

Life of Thomas a Kempis

Swami Atulananda





*We wish our readers
everywhere,
a Peaceful Christmas
and
a Joyous New Year.*

Divine Wisdom

MORTAL: "The night is cold, the hour is late, the world is bleak and drear;

Who is it knocking at my door?"

THE NEW YEAR: "I am Good Cheer."

MORTAL: "Your voice is strange; I know you not; in shadows dark I grope.

What seek you here?"

THE NEW YEAR: "Friend, let me in; my name is Hope."

MORTAL: "And mine is Failure; you but mock the life you seek to bless. Pass on."

THE NEW YEAR: "Nay, open wide the door; I am Success."

continued on the inside back cover

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Contents

2	Editorial
3	Sankaracharya: Life & Teachings (continued) <i>Swami Dayatmananda</i>
8	Musings on the Kalpataru Day <i>Swami Budhananda</i>
18	The Wonder of Being Cheerful(continued) <i>Swami Muktirupananda</i>
35	We Must Revive Religion <i>Prof. Arnold Toynbee, Hon. d.Litt., Litt.D., D.C.L.</i>
37	Life of Thomas a Kempis <i>Swami Atulananda</i>
42	Reality as Defined by Sankara <i>Swami Achalananda</i>
48	Programme

ISSN 1355 - 6436

Editorial

Hearty Welcome to the New Year.

“New Year’s Day is every man’s birthday.” Charles Lamb

Let us greet the New Year with joy, hope, cheer and faith. Joy because it is yet another opportunity to make better of our life. Hope because it rests firmly in the promise of the Lord and scriptures. Cheer because we are going to be better, grow more into spiritual life. Faith that we are going to reclaim our divine nature.

The Raja of Khetri once asked Swami Vivekananda: “Swamiji, what is life?” Swamiji answered: “Life is the unfoldment and development of a being under circumstances tending to press it down.”

Life is a school in which we learn who we are. This is the only lesson we need to learn; life is designed for this purpose alone. Scientists speak of evolution. Evolution of species does not end with the human body. Evolution ends only with the realization of our Divine nature.

I learnt much this past year. I know better now what I did right and when I went wrong in my life and behavior. Today is a day when I promise God and myself that I will try to become a better person, to make changes in my life in order to be more spiritual, and to improve in every way.

We should live more totally for God and his service in this new year, and leave behind our errors and the mistaken ways of the past year.

For the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna the New Year has special significance. On this day, in 1886, Sri Ramakrishna blessed his devotees with, “May your spiritual consciousness be awakened.”

This blessing of Sri Ramakrishna is for me, for you, and for all humanity. As Swami Vivekananda said; “Each soul is potentially divine. I shall not rest until each soul knows it is divine.” Let us strive to manifest a little more of our divinity.

May the New Year bring us closer to the Divine.

Sankaracharya: Life & Teachings

Swami Dayatmananda

(Continued from November - December Editorial)

Witnessing the burning body of Kumarila, Sankara rose to his feet, and with vibrant voice sang the great Hymn of Liberation:

I am neither the body, nor the mind, nor the senses.
I am beyond sin and virtue, beyond pleasure and pain.

I am Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute,
Bliss Absolute.

I am He, I am He.

For me there is neither death, nor the fear of death.

Never was I born.

I am all-pervading, I am Existence Absolute,
Knowledge Absolute, Bliss Absolute.

I am He, I am He.

I am without form or limit, beyond time and space.

I am the foundation of the universe.

I am Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute,
Bliss Absolute.

I am He, I am He.

Remembering the last words of Kumarila, Sankara now directed his steps towards Mahishmati, the city where Mandana lived. Mandana was recognized as the greatest exponent of the *Karma Kanda*, the ritualistic portion of the *Vedas*. Mandana Misra had absolute faith in *Karma Kanda* and strictly observed the elaborate rites and ceremonies prescribed in the scriptures. Mandana Misra was a great Sanskrit scholar and was held in the highest esteem. No one without erudition was permitted even to enter his house.

Sankaracharya had many a debate with eminent scholars before. Amongst these debates, the one which was of great importance was his encounter with Mandana Misra, the great disciple of Kumarila Bhatta. Mandana was a staunch protagonist of ritualism. He believed that only the strict performance of rituals as prescribed by the *Vedas* can lead to happiness here and liberation later. The *Karma Kanda* portion of the *Vedas* had much hold on Hindu religion at that time and this was largely due to the religious authorities like Kumarila Bhatta and Mandana Misra.

But according to *Advaita Vedanta*, knowledge of *Brahman* alone is the ultimate means of liberation. In order to establish the truth of Non-dualism, Sankaracharya had to meet, argue, defeat and win Mandana over. Until he defeated Mandana, Sankaracharya would not be able to establish the supremacy of Non-dualism.

Sankaracharya must have been supremely self-confident to face such an eminent scholar; for according to his own stipulation the losing party had to become the disciple of the victor. Both the contestants were well matched, and it was hard to foresee the outcome of the contest.

When Sankara arrived at his residence, Mandana Misra, after some initial hesitation, received him with due respect. Though older in years, he treated Sankara as his equal. Then, with mutual understanding the day for the debate was set.

The condition of the debate was that he who would be defeated would become the other's disciple and take up the victor's way of life.

Both sides agreed that it was necessary to appoint an umpire to give decisions, and finally to announce the victor.

Mandana Misra had married Ubhaya Bharati, a young woman as learned as he himself was. Her name was well-known all over the land. All the scholars unanimously agreed that she was the only person qualified to fill this important position. Many

believe that Ubhaya Bharati, the lady umpire, was none other than the incarnation of Saraswati, the goddess of learning. She had taken human birth to play her part on this occasion of the great debate. But for a wife to decide against her husband would have been difficult, especially after knowing the condition of the debate. However she accepted saying, “Let the gods decide.”

When the day came Sankara and Mandana, attended by their disciples and many learned scholars, met for the contest. The two Acharyas took their seats facing each other ready to debate.

Ubhaya Bharati brought two flower garlands, fresh and fragrant. Placing them around the neck of each of the two opponents, she spoke, “May the disputants strictly adhere to the rules of the debate. May the gods be propitious. May Truth prevail. The garland of the victor will remain fresh and fragrant while the garland of the conquered will wilt and wither. This shall be the sign of victory.”

The disputations started off with a solemn proclamation by both the parties, declaring the basis of their philosophies and the goals they indicate. Sankara being the challenging party, it was Mandana Misra’s privilege to open the discussion. After a short outline of the creed he defended, Mandana Misra stated his conclusions in short, concise aphorisms. Sankara countered with equally terse maxims, expressing his own belief.

Mandana: The purport of the *Vedas* is the performance of rituals whose performance alone can bring happiness here and hereafter. Hence the *Vedas* are authority to us, because they contain statements commanding or prohibiting certain actions. All other statements are mere ornaments.

Sankara: No. *Brahman* alone is the true purport of the *Vedas*. *Brahman* is the one Reality, the ever-pure, the ever-conscious. That alone is the Truth. The Universe appears to be real while we are in it, and Liberation is possible only with the Knowledge of *Brahman*.

Mandana: He who worships the gods goes to the gods.

Sankara: He who worships the *Atman* attains to the *Atman*.

Mandana: The gods are the highest, they are the source of all blessings.

Sankara: The *Atman* is beyond time and space and surpasses all the gods.

Mandana: In the sphere of the gods man enjoys supreme happiness.

Sankara: A million times greater is the happiness of him who knows the *Atman*.

Mandana: The performance of sacrifices leads to liberation.

Sankara: Not so. All actions begin and end in time. A limited cause cannot produce an unlimited effect. Self-knowledge, being beyond cause and effect, is the only means to liberation.

Thus the great debate went on and on, statement and counter-statement, the subjects, gradually, becoming more and more subtle: God, the soul, the universe, their mutual relations, creation, *Maya* - these and a thousand other questions that tax the mental capacity of the great philosophers to the utmost were debated to exhaustion.

Mandana could not withstand the onslaughts of Sankara's expositions and arguments. It is believed that the controversy went on for many days. Slowly Mandana Misra's garland began to wilt. Mandana at last, conceded his defeat. He was really convinced by the truth of Non-dualism propounded by the great Sankara. He said: "I see now that it is true, indeed, that other doctrines sink into silence when the *Vedanta* speaks, even as the yelps of a jackal are silenced when the lion roars."

Sankaracharya recognized the purity and sincerity of Mandana and with great humility bows down before his brilliant contestant, taking the dust of his feet.

Mandana Misra, naturally, remonstrated saying, "It is for the disciple to do honour to his master. I feel proud to place myself

at the feet of the greatest philosopher and seer of this age. It is my good fortune that we have met. Henceforth I accept you as my Guru. I am ready from this moment to follow you, and carry out your behest.”

In the end, Ubhaya Bharati declared that Mandana Misra had been vanquished. Mandana Misra requested Sankara to initiate him into Sanyasa and accept his discipleship.

This victory gave a new impetus to Sankara’s spiritual conquest. Mandana Misra became a monk, a disciple of Sankaracharya and was given the name Sureswara. Later, Sureswara earned renown for himself as a great exponent of the *Vedanta* philosophy. Besides commenting on his Master’s works he wrote many books like *Naishkarmya Siddhi*, *Jivanmukti Viveka* etc., which became classics in the *Advaita-Vedanta* tradition.

Sankara resumed his journey. Mandana Misra, now Sureswaracharya, was among the disciples who accompanied him.

(to be continued)

The subtle mind leads the aspirant nearer to God, but it cannot reach God, the supreme *Atman*. Having reached this stage, the world no longer holds any charm for the aspirant; he becomes absorbed in the consciousness of God. This absorption leads to *Samadhi*, an experience which cannot be described. It is beyond is and is not. There, there is neither happiness nor misery, neither light nor darkness. All is infinite Being - inexpressible.

Swami Brahmananda

Musings on the Kalpataru Day

Swami Budhananda

January 1st is a red letter day in the calendar of the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna everywhere in the world. This day is so important not because it happens to be the first day of the new year, but because symbolically it came to be the first day of the new life.

On this day in 1886 Sri Ramakrishna showered his unbounded grace on lay devotees who had assembled at the Cossipore garden house, where the Master had been lying seriously ill with cancer in his throat. In the afternoon the Master came downstairs unexpectedly and sauntered in the garden towards the assembly of the devotees. And within a few minutes in a singular sweeping act of grace he touched each one of them with the flame of his transmuting power. This flame was ignited for the day by the redoubtable Girish. Stopping near him in the garden, Sri Ramakrishna had asked, "Well, Girish, what have you found in me that you proclaim me before all as an incarnation?" At once on his knees, with folded palms raised in adoration, and his voice charged with emotion, Girish replied, "What can an insignificant creature like me say about one whose glory even sages like Vyasa and Valmiki could not measure?" The depth charge of the intensity of faith with which Girish had uttered these words brought about a volcanic explosion from within the ocean of grace that was Sri Ramakrishna. And he went all out in divine abandon to confer on the devotees greatest blessings of life spiritual, irrespective of the consideration of competency. He spoke in these three simple sentences the greatest blessings of the most high: "What more shall I say! I bless you all. Be illumined!"

These simple words of power set afire the soul of the devotees. Forgetting their promise not to touch his feet while he was ill, they all touched his feet in salutation. Deeply moved at

this manifestation of their devotion, Sri Ramakrishna touched every one of them, as a result of which all of them had instantaneous spiritual experiences.

Sri Ramakrishna himself had said that the wind of God's grace was always blowing. One had only to unfurl the sail. Here there was no need of even unfurling the sail. The wind itself became the unfurled sail too and lapped up the soul in the empyrean heights of spiritual experiences. This was a violation of spiritual law, which God incarnate alone could indulge in!

Sri Ramakrishna himself had also said that the mother bird does not break the shell of the egg before the chick was mature enough to be born in the inclemency of the world-weather. But here we find the mother bird becoming aggressive with her compassion and breaking eggs before chicks were ready. If this is not God's soul hunger, what is this?

Now this violation of law, this aggression of compassion, if it happened only for a day, would be a dead day of bygone history. But the actions of God incarnate on earth, though they may be actions in history, are indeed accents of the Timeless in the heart of time. Even as temporal actions, they are but the manners of the Eternal.

In the 'Acts of the Apostles' in the *New Testament* there is a significant passage which says: "To whom also he showed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs. . ." (Acts, I. 3.)

God incarnate on earth, even after casting off his corporeal body, stays alive in the 'next room after his passion' that is to say in the singular acts which he had performed while alive on earth. If the wound of Christ's body was not even today bleeding in the mystic world-process, how could the mystics receive stigmata even to this day?

Sri Krishna says in the *Gita* (IV. 9): "Whosoever knows in true light, My Divine birth and action, will not be born again when he leaves his body; he will attain Me, O Arjuna."

To know the Lord's Divine birth and actions in true light would mean understanding the Lord's real nature as absolute spirit and also his embodiment in *Maya*. Here Sri Krishna gave away a great secret of self-apprehension, which the theistic religions were quick to grasp and profit by. In such religions, therefore, '*leela-smarana*' or remembrance of divine acts of God incarnate on earth is considered to be one of the most potent spiritual practices. *Srimad Bhagavatam* (XII. 4. 40) puts it categorically: "*The Jiva or the embodied soul, who is scorched by the miseries of the world, if he wants to get across the ocean of transmigratory existence, then the only way open to him is to take recourse to the remembrance of the Lord's divine actions; there is no other raft for crossing this Ocean.*"

The embodied soul can apprehend the *Nitya* or the Eternal, only in his *Leela* or divine sports as an incarnation. Hence *Bhagavatam's* emphasis on remembrance of the divine deeds. The Song Celestial of the Timeless, has been recorded in the disc of time during the *avatarana* or descent of the Lord on earth. If the aspirant can bring his power of concentration to the pointedness of a gramophone pin, and set it on the disc of "leela," the eternal music can be heard again. If one can have the Gopi-heart, the Krishna-flute can be heard on the banks of the Yamuna even today. On the banks of *Kala-kalindi*, or time that flows as Yamuna, the eternal one roams about, flute in hand.

In the calendar of the Ramakrishna tradition, January 1st is one of the most significant days, being the day of the law-breaking aggressive compassion of the Lord. If the devotees of the Lord want this aggression to continue, they must rouse in his

heart on this day, the divine 'passion' which devotees did on January 1st, 1886. If the calf strikes the udder of the mother-cow with its tender lips, how can milk help flowing again?

For the remembrance of the divine deeds of the Lord we must know as many details of those deeds as possible from all available sources. Our greatest authority in regard to the life of Sri Ramakrishna is Swami Saradananda. His magnum opus "*Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master*," is a work unexcelled in hagiography in its details, authenticity, rational expositions, interpretative deliberations and illuminating insights.

Swami Saradananda did not actually approve of the saying that Sri Ramakrishna had become *Kalpataru* on January 1st, 1886. He convincingly argued:

"Some devotees like Ramachandra have described the happening of that day as the Master's turning into the wish-fulfilling tree (Kalpataru). But, it is more reasonable, it seems to us, to call it, the self-revelation of the Master or the 'bestowal of freedom from fear' on all devotees by revealing himself. The Kalpataru, it is said, gives to all whatever good or bad they ask for. But the Master did not do so; he made clear through that event the fact of his being a God-man, and his bestowal of protection against and freedom from fear on all without the slightest discrimination."

Notwithstanding Swami Saradananda's disapproval, this great day has quietly come to prevail in the Ramakrishna world with the word '*Kalpataru*' indelibly inscribed on its forehead - and this has happened without any theological fight - and neither the sanossyasins nor the lay devotees appear to be sorry for that, in all humility we can only take this fact, as the will of the Lord. And this will of the Lord may perhaps be understood in this way: as it happened, this day was marked out specially for showering grace only on the lay devotees - as Swami Saradananda has

written, “.... it is a matter of wonder that none of the Sannyasin disciples of the Master was present there that day” - as distinguished from those who were going to become monks. And therefore it would appear that the lay disciples' nomenclature of the great deed has been providentially accepted in preference to the monastic disciples' nomenclature.

'M,' the writer of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* has not written any account of the day, proving perhaps the fact that he was absent from the scene. Swami Saradananda has quoted in *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* the fragmentary personal accounts or personal reactions of the day as given by such eye witnesses as Ramlal Chattopadhyaya and Vaikunthanath Sannyal. There is also the description of the occasion as given by another eye witness, Akshaykumar Sen, in his famous work *Ramakrishna Punthi*. Akshaykumar also used the word *Kalpataru*. These narrations of the day are more or less familiar to the readers of the Ramakrishna literature. What have become obscure and not so easily available is the narration of the day as Ramachandra Dutta saw and understood it. As he was largely responsible in introducing the word *Kalpataru* his following narration of this day will be found interesting:

“Sri Ramakrishna was brought to the Cossipur garden house for treatment. Here he stayed for eight months. It will take one a long time to narrate all the divine sports he performed in Cossipur...

“When his ailments showed no signs of abatement, some devotees would observe fasts in the name of Lord Shiva while others supplicated to the Master himself for his own recovery. When nothing proved to be of any avail, one day a few devotees submitted with folded hands: ‘Lord, why are you feigning this illness? We have tried our very best but with no effect on the

illness. We have now realized that unless you yourself deign to find the remedy, there is no other way.'

"In reply he made fun in various ways. But when the devotees persisted in their request he said, 'You have not yet been able to understand the cause of the disease. Every action bears its fruit. Good act bears good fruit and bad, bad; one has to reap the fruit according to the act. If you have had to reap the fruits of all your evil deeds and sins, your future will be terrible. But it is God's way to suffer the fruits of action; therefore all the multitude of your sins I have accepted in my hand. On the day you have given me the power of attorney, on that very day you have been freed from your accumulated sins. Unless sins are eradicated and the body is made pure, relationship with God cannot be established. In human body one has to suffer the consequences of sin. And so the disease, in my body. Through this disease in my body you have become freed of sins and whosoever will self-surrender unto me they too will be released. So it is that I am getting through the suffering for their sins too.'

"Though we all heard these words, we did not quite realise their significance. It was another example of his fun, we thought.

"In this way, Ramakrishnadeva passed his days feigning illness. Physicians of various sorts, sadhus of different types and a multifarious assortment of common people used to visit him. On some days he would saunter about in the garden like one who had no disease at all. On other days from his sore in the throat blood would come out. And the intriguing part of all this was that when the physician gave a medicine for counteracting a certain symptom, on that day that very symptom would get aggravated. His body could not stand even the Homeopathy medicine, the taking of one grain of which would throw his entire

body into convulsion. Hence the physicians would not easily venture to give him medicine.

“As mentioned above, various sorts of people used to come to him and almost everyone would return satisfied with a feeling of blessedness. And it so came about on January 1st, 1886 that he became the wish-fulfilling tree. On that day at five in the afternoon when seated on one end of the garden we were all engaged in discussing various topics we found him coming towards us. With transfixed gaze we all kept looking at his face. His entire body being covered with cloth, no other part of the body was visible but his face. That lustre and unprecedented beauty of his face that we witnessed on that day are just beyond delineation. Gradually he drew near us and raising his right hand said, ‘What more shall I tell you. May spiritual consciousness be awakened in all of you.’

“So saying he began to place his palm one by one on the chests of devotees, as a result of which everyone became mad, as it were. Whomsoever we saw before us that day we caught him and brought before the Lord and he showered his grace on all. We were all stirred to our depths with joy finding that the Lord had become the *Kalpataru*. Knowing fully well that such a day, so rare to the bound-souls, will not come again, we began to run hither and thither to seek out persons until none was left. Shouts of victory to Sri Ramakrishna continued to resound in the firmament. Incessant raining of flowers by devotees on the Lord went on and the ocean of Bliss was in deluge. All this time he was standing in ecstasy. Then coming back to the normal consciousness he returned to his room.

“Afterwards one day he quietly called this servant and asked, ‘Look here, you all say so many things about me. If all that should be true, why then is this miserable state of mine? This sore

in the throat, this diseased body - what are all these due to? Gauranga had such beauty, learning, miraculous powers - why do I not have all those powers? Why do I not have such beauty as his and such learning? And can you tell me what is the reason for my leaving Dakshineswar?’

“Hearing such questions of the Master I held his feet and said with folded palms: ‘Lord, here you are again with your waggery! Can this ever be within the capacity of the meanest of your servants to discern the cause of your actions? But if such is your behest, then remembering your feet I say, if you give me strength I will be able to tell the reason. You have made me understand that in gross body the manifestation of the *leela* can never be of the same type. Things happen according to the necessity of times. Gaurangadeva acted in the past according to the necessities of his times. In this incarnation things cannot proceed in that fashion. Lord, truth to be told, if beauty and miraculous powers were the only means for the salvation of the *Jivas*, we would have long before turned into saints. Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Gauranga, Christ - their unlimited powers, beauty and splendour have all been extolled in the scriptures. And we have been hearing all those tales since our childhood. But why has not that borne any fruit? We came to you hearing that you were a sadhu. But you alone can say how you have entered within our hearts. The place where we would fain have seated God, you have come and occupied that place. How hard we have striven to drive you out from that place so that the Supreme Lord might be seated there – we have discussed ever so much, presented your case to the pundits saying that you were God incarnate and argued with them with the intention of having our weakness destroyed by them but until now no body has been able to displace you. No body’s learning, intelligence and

dialectics have been able to disprove that. Helplessly, therefore, we have been forced to call you God.

"You have said that like the wealthy ladies who conduct their affairs from behind the screen, you too have been performing your *leelas*. Seeing your disease, your outer covering, outsiders will fly away. But the fortunate one who will receive a grain of your grace shall understand the mystery of your *leela*. Lord, you alone know whether by speaking about these few outer things you are wheedling us or settling the issue. But the question arises in my mind: is it possible for one to discern the beingness of God through such tales of separation - pangs told in regard to the *leelas* of Radha-Krishna, Rama-Sita or Gauranga? Laughing and weeping is the *leela* of man. When through such *leelas* they could be considered as God, then is not this disease of yours also the measure of your *leela*, specially when you yourself have divulged the reason for this?

"And, Lord, as to the other question, from the day you came out of Dakshineswar the fate of ordinary people has brightened up. Because of this pretext of disease thousands of men and women have had the good fortune of beholding your feet."

'Ramakrishnadeva then said, 'You are telling all this because of your faith. On hearing this from his lips I said, "Lord, enough of lengthening the talk. You are acknowledging my faith, for this I am compelled to call you God. I was a heretic, a barbarian and an arch atheist - I, to call a man God! God Himself was seeking out a little place in my heart, and forsooth now it appears that by having faith today I have installed you in the position of God! Lord, be that so, give me that strength, that power so that I can really do so. If through my faith being a man you become God, that is not your ordinary *leela*, again, Lord, God Himself has to stand before man by furnishing so many

introductions and testimonials, and do you mean to say that if a man declares another man as God people will just accept that? You may say whatever you are pleased to say and everything behoves you.

“Even then Ramakrishnadeva continued to say, ‘Do I not so much wish to stay at ease?’

I replied, ‘It is all a disappointment for us to try to answer your points. Yet I shall remind you of only one thing and then close my lips. Lord, one day in the evening standing on the western veranda of your room you said, “Whoever will come with the hankering for realization of God, for attainment of knowledge and seeking to know how he could see Him, his aspirations will be fulfilled. “Then laying stress on your words you again said, “O my men, verily his longing will be fulfilled.” Lord, will you tell me who is the man who can tell this? Who has the boldness to say so? With our ocular perception we are noticing how heretics without any spiritual practices are getting wonderfully transformed. Even after seeing all these are we to have a mistaken opinion about you? If you say so, we are just helpless. And when you refer again and again to your disease, may I ask you, one thing: Sri Radha in Brindavan, what was her terrific suffering in the tenth state of *viraha* caused by separation from Krishna? Can a single day of her suffering be borne by any *Jiva*? Because Radha performed this *nara-leela* was she ever without Krishna? You yourself have said, “*Brahman* and *shakti* are identical.” As I said this his face flushed. As soon as the symptoms of ecstasy were discernible I ended the talk.”

Reprinted from *Vedanta Kesari*, January 1961

The Wonder Of Being Cheerful

Swami Muktirupananda

In his best-selling book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, Norman Cousins to some extent enlightened the medical profession. The book is a fascinating story of how the author 'laughed his way' out of a progressive crippling illness that doctors believed irreversibly degenerative. In August 1964, with a slight fever, the author flew home from the USSR to the USA after an official visit. His fever and achiness of body rapidly worsened and within a few days he was hospitalized, unable almost to move his limbs. The doctors diagnosed *Collagen*, a systemic disease of the body's connective tissue. Asked about his chances, the doctors said frankly that recovery would require a miracle. His chances of living through it were one in five hundred. But Cousins was a courageous man. The shattering news, instead of trapping him in a state of utter despair, set him thinking and produced quite a different reaction. He was at this point taking maximum doses of pain killing drugs, *codeine*, *colchicine* and sleeping pills, but mainly *phenylbutazone* and *aspirin*, and felt 'run over by a truck' in every joint. Cousins also survived some lapses in hospital care, which should have been better. He decided to fight the adverse circumstances. First of all, he reasoned that if negative emotions wear a patient down, positive emotions must have the power to bring about salutary changes. If depression, anxiety, helplessness and stress could cause incalculable damage to body and mind, by the same token, cheerfulness, faith, love, and hope must have their reverse effects. With this positive philosophy and a determinism to buck up his optimism, Cousins took the responsibility of getting well into his own hands.

Acting on his commonsense convictions plus some health tips, he immediately reduced his heavy dosages of *phenylbutazone* and *aspirin* which were producing unpleasant

side effects and impairing the function of the adrenal glands. To revitalize the body's defences he began to take heavy doses of vitamin C (*ascorbic acid*). Cousins tells us that, with the cooperation of nurses and his doctor, he also began to keep himself in a morale-boosting milieu. He watched hilarious comic films, read or had read to him funny books and stories, and tried to keep himself in the best possible mental frame. The effect, he says, of laughter and exhilaration of mood was profound. Anxiety and feeling of body pain lessened to a considerable extent. He seemed to realize the priceless wisdom in the adage, "Laughter is the best medicine". Within a few weeks he was completely off drugs and sleeping pills and could sleep well for long hours. He was up again after a few months, out on the golf course and tennis green, and returned to his journalism and piano playing. His recovery seemed almost a miracle and astounded medical circles. "I have learned," confesses Norman Cousins, "never to underestimate the capacity of the human mind and body to regenerate even when the prospects seem most wretched."

"The life-force may be the least understood force on earth. William James said that human beings tend to live too far within self-imposed limits. It is possible that these limits will recede when we respect more fully the natural drive of the human mind and body toward perfectibility and regeneration. Protecting and cherishing that natural drive may well represent the finest exercise of human freedom!"¹

The life-force which Norman Cousins speaks of is the little wave of *Prana*. Vivekananda said, "From thought down to the lowest force, everything is but the manifestation of *Prana*. ...This little wave of the *Prana* which represents our own energies, mental and physical, is nearest to us of all the waves of

the infinite ocean of *Prana*."2 *Prana* is the name of the Energy of the universe. Mind is the great instrument for using as well as wasting the *Prana*.

Placebo medicine helped draw the attention of scientists to the unusual power of the mind. The use of these dummy medicines, called placebos (usually sugar-coated milk-powder pills) perhaps goes back as far as medical history. When used in the place of actual drugs (unknowingly by the patients) in the treatment of all types of diseases and disorders, even including drug addiction, placebos very often produce all the beneficial effects of real drugs, without the side-effects. However, they have been known to produce side-effects and violent reactions too. Till now it is a great mystery how placebos do their work. Only this much is known, that placebos do indeed seem to trigger mechanisms in the body that anaesthetize pain, even of postoperative wounds, seasickness, headaches, coughs and anxiety. Other conditions affected by placebos reported by medical researchers are arthritis, blood cell count, respiratory rates, vasomotor function, peptic ulcers, hay fever, hypertension and spontaneous remission of warts. Experimenters have shown that placebos are able to activate the body's own endomorphic system, releasing 'internal morphine' - the body's own anaesthesia and suppress pain. "The most valuable physician," writes Norman Cousins, "to a patient and to a society - knows how to distinguish effectively between the large number of patients who can get well without heroic intervention and the much smaller number who can't."3

In large numbers of patients the placebo prescription instills needed confidence and triggers biochemical processes in the body. It is the robust confidence and the desire to get well that makes incredible things happen, and not mere intake of

powerful drugs. Whatever mind wishes the body translates into reality. Just so, persistent worries and anxieties do not just vanish on their own without leaving scars and wear on the organism. But robust health does not necessarily indicate intelligent and rational mind. Those who do heavy physical labour everyday often have disease-free well-muscled bodies but mostly pass through life with little mental or cultural development. The important point is, good health is an invaluable asset and should diligently be taken care of. It naturally presupposes the healthy and happy state of mind.

In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Caesar's remarks about Cassius, who was the main conspirator in the downfall and assassination of the emperor, reflect profound psychology. Caesar had heard about the conspiracy and was already wary of Cassius. Mark Antony, the trusted lieutenant of the emperor, tried to reassure him: "Fear him not, Caesar, he is not dangerous: he is a noble Roman and well given." Caesar replied:

He is a great observer, and he looks quite through
the deeds of men; he loves no plays,
As thou dost, Antony; he hears no music,
Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort
As if he mock'd himself, and scorned
his spirit
That could be moved to smile at anything
...Such men...are very dangerous.

(Act I scene II)

The man that either does not laugh or smile or love plays and music is not only an unhappy man but a sadist. His nature is destructive, and wherever he goes he spreads a pall of gloom. Happiness is the music of life, bereft of it life is a melancholy pilgrimage. The Biblical proverb says, "He that is of merry heart hath a continual feast." The merry heart not only heals the body

but blows off anguish, anxiety, tension and fatigue. A hearty laugh for a tired man works like a tonic, rejuvenating his whole system. The healing power of laughter, down the ages, has caught hold on the attention of physicians, philosophers and politicians. In the olden days, in India, every king's court was adorned by an intelligent jester (*vidushaka*). Employing his gift of wit and wisdom prudently, the jester relieved the ruler of mental stress. The king used to spend some time with his court jester revelling in fun and frolic. In the celebrated Sanskrit dramas of Kalidasa, Bana, Bhavabhuti, and others, we invariably find the interesting character of *vidushaka*, like Shakespeare's Falstaff, adding spice to the whole plot. Those who scoff at humour and laughter as signs of frivolous mind commit a grave error and miss something.

The medical profession has been taking an animated interest in the effect of laughter. In Western countries many conferences and seminars have been convened to assess its positive therapeutic value. Laughter has been called 'internal jogging'. Dr. Annette Goodheart, a psychotherapist who teaches laughter therapy, says that her entire therapy is based on the premise; "We don't laugh because we are happy; we are happy because we laugh." As Yale University experiments by Gary Schwartz and others have brought new evidence that by changing the muscle patterns of the face, one can alter the inner moods. Dr. Goodheart buttresses the same idea when she says we are happy because we laugh. Her observation on American women is still interesting. Why do women usually live eight years longer than men? American society approves of giggling and laughter among girls and women, but ridicules smiling males - says she. Is that the reason why Western clergymen put on so solemn and serious faces and avoid laughing in public? Swami Vivekananda, a child of bliss, was chided for his

infectious cheerfulness and spontaneous laughter by the guardians of the Church. "What business," thundered the Swami, "have you with clouded faces? It is terrible. If you have a clouded face do not go out that day, shut yourself up in your room. What right have you to carry this disease out into the world?"⁴ Even the Bible proverb says, "A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance; but by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken." What a dreadful life it is to keep away deliberately from mirth and joy as if they are contagious diseases!

A number of hospitals have made provision for laughing rooms. In these laughing rooms patients are helped to spill over their good humour while watching comic films, books and cartoons. Several volumes of R. K. Laxman's cartoon quips are, indeed, hazardous to depression. Albert Schweitzer, it is said, to reduce the rigours of the hot and humid climate of equatorial Africa, where his hospital was located, made use of humour therapy on his staff. This therapy worked wonders on his young doctors and nurses, invigorating their sagging spirits and taut nerves. Everyone looked forward to mealtimes at which this venerable old man would unleash waves of laughter through his amusing anecdotes and witty remarks. After meals the staff would go out refreshed and in jovial moods to attend to their duties. Dr. Schweitzer knew the prophylactic effect of mirth and music on the chemistry of the brain in addition to modern medicine. Cheerfulness, it is certain, spawns biochemical changes. How it does so is being investigated in a number of research institutions. Socrates, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila, Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and his brother disciples, Sri Ramana Maharshi and Gandhiji, to name a few, all possessed a deep sense of humour. Sri Ramakrishna outshone all of them. His sparkling wit and humour, witty stories and brilliant mime

and mimicry used to make his disciples and devotees roll on the ground bursting with laughter. Such was the magic of this king of ecstasy. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* in respect of this cheer and humour, also is a treasure. St. Francis used to call his brother friars in the Order 'Jesters of the Lord'. They all wanted to turn a smiling face to God and men.

Edison, a legendary figure in modern science, was reported to have collected juicy jokes and quips. Following his death his desk was found stuffed with magazine clippings and pieces of paper inscribed with jokes and stories. Many American presidents employed well-known humorists to spice their dull speeches with fun. Some were great humorists like Lincoln, and Lincoln himself used to rock with laughter reading Orpheus Kerr and Artemus Ward. There is an anecdote about Lincoln who was not a goodlooking person. Once a Philadelphia delegation went to meet him and they introduced one of their members: "He has been good enough to paint and present to our conference room a most beautiful portrait of yourself." President Lincoln paused a little and turning to the painter said, "I presume sir, in painting the portrait you took your idea of me from my principles and not from my person." Men of wisdom, down the centuries, have known that laughter costs nothing, instead gives much. Hilarity, fun and exhilaration obliterate national stiffness and pull down the wall that separates individuals. Comedians and humour writers like Woody Allen, Charlie Chaplin, Mark Twain, P. G. Wodehouse, Stephen Leacock, James Herriot and many others from different countries have knit mankind into one family. Laughter reminds us we are all one. "This I conceive," said Lin Yutang, the famous writer, "to be the chemical function of humour: to change the character of our thought." It is rightly said, "Laughter is the shortest distance between two people." But it has to be cultured and nurtured.

Why most of the people suffer from moroseness, depression, insecurity, fear and so on? To opulent or poor there seems to be no escape from the net of unhappiness. Are these inevitable existential problems? Is this the final truth – that as long as one lives on this planet, one has no choice but to suffer? If the answer is affirmative then life would be a curse instead of a blessing. There are, before our eyes, shining examples of men and women, even in modern times, who have shown how to free oneself from misery and anguish. Infatuation with self-importance, undue concern for petty happenings in one's life, exaggerated self-limiting opinions, and unfettered fantasies cause much of our misery. Conceptualizing about life – that it should be like this or should not be like that, acts as a hurdle in the path to mental peace. Misery is the product of the mind. A mind educated in a lopsided way, adversely conditioned produces distress and turmoil. It is an exercise in futility to look for meaning or purpose in life in the world of objects and emotions, however sentimental. When the old ways do not pay off, people seek the help of psychotherapists to suggest some new illusions so as to find durable security in their dream-life. "The seeker," writes Sheldon Kopp, "comes in hope of finding something definite, something permanent, something unchanging upon which to depend. He is offered instead the reflection that life is just what it seems to be – a changing, ambiguous, ephemeral mixed bag. It may often be discouraging, but it is ultimately worth it, because that is all there is."⁵

Desire for prolonged life, or perennial youthfulness, or an insatiable thirst forever for pleasures is nothing but wishful thinking, childish dreaming. Mankind has, for millennia, been searching for this Golden Fleece. Everyone thinks that he would get it ultimately. Even when an inescapable aging process sets in,

sapping the organism of its vitality, even when senile dementia creeps in, and even when all dreams are shattered by the harsh realities of the world, man hangs on desperately to fleeting pleasures. He hopefully longs for medical giants to come to his rescue, to prolong his life or forestall the death of the body indefinitely. This thirst to continue is never quenched. Thomas Browne, a seventeenth century physician and author, rightly remarked: "The long habit of living indisposeth us to dying." People have as much abhorrence for talking about death as for thinking about it. The dead bodies are removed from hospitals in Western countries at dead of night so that nobody can see. People detest any inadvertent discussion about death. "These days," writes a famous biologist, Lewis Thomas:

*"the habit has become addiction: we are hooked on living; the tenacity of its grip on us, and ours on it, grows in intensity. We cannot think of giving it up, even when living loses its zest – even when we have lost the zest for zest. ...If we ever do achieve freedom from most of today's diseases, or even complete freedom from disease, we will perhaps terminate by drying out and blowing away on a light breeze, but we will still die."*⁶

Modern medical technology may put death off for longer periods. But longevity does not vouchsafe happy life. "We hanker to go on," observes Lewis Thomas, *"even in the face of plain evidence that long, long lives are not necessarily pleasurable in the kind of society we have arranged thus far. We will be lucky if we can postpone the search for new technologies for a while, until we have discovered some satisfactory things to do with the extra time."*⁷

Many therapists and doctors' succinct advice to glum-faced patients and to those in mortal fear is, "Don't take your life too seriously – it's temporary." How true the statement is! Once this idea of the body's temporal nature and rather short earthly

existence takes root in the mind, one's mental perspective changes, gets broadened and mellowed. Instead of life's being a colourless melodrama, hidden springs of joy, hitherto unknown, are unlocked. Instead of considering themselves heroes of a high tragedy, people become willing participants in life's joyful adventure. When the temporariness of life is imprinted upon the mind, one looks at his own fortunes and misfortunes and events of the world in a non-attached way. This 'new view' not only burns off all suffering but brings about a mysterious exhilaration. In fact *true living* is dying to all attachments, all yesterdays – unburdening oneself from the 'sense' of possession – 'this belongs to me; that belongs to me'. In a temporary life nothing belongs to us, including one's own body. When Narendranath first met Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar, he sang a Brahma song which sent Sri Ramakrishna into a thrill of ecstasy. The song contained in gist the philosophy of *Life*:

O my mind, go to your own abode
In the foreign land of this world
Why roam uselessly like a stranger!...

Explaining the profound idea Vivekananda said: "Work as if you were a stranger in this land, a sojourner; work incessantly, but do not bind yourselves; bondage is terrible. This world is not our habitation, it is only one of the many stages through which we are passing. ...The very reason of nature's existence is for the education of the soul; it has no other meaning; it is there because the soul must have knowledge, and through knowledge free itself."⁸ There is a Jewish Hasidic saying: "A man must have two pockets into which he can reach at one time or another according to his needs. In his right pocket he must keep the words: 'For my sake the world was created.' And in his left: I am dust and ashes."

The Wonder Of Being Cheerful

We are too egoistic to deny the high opinion of ourselves. We complain, whine and lament over why we do not get what we want, as though we fully deserve more than others. We are apt to think that we are indispensable in the world, and the world should pay us homage for what little we do for it. But the world has not satisfied any human being. Further, it is neutral, indifferent. Man is not disturbed by things or events, but by the meaning and value he attaches to them. Our wrong perceptions ensue in our half-waking and half-dreaming hypnotic state. This hypnotism has, trans-generationally, been implanted in us. Each fresh generation thinks that its elders were wrong and it would certainly find lasting happiness from snatching and squeezing this world more. Like Sisyphus, it rolls a heavy stone up the side of a mountain, and when it gets to the top the stone will roll back down again. The next generation with full enthusiasm rolls up the heavy stone again. The very realization that in a temporary life there is neither lasting pleasure nor lasting misery brings peace and wisdom. This peace and wisdom is, as it were, more manifest in animals than in men; so he would prefer to live with them, merrily said the famous poet Walt Whitman:

‘I think I could turn and live with animals,
they are so placid and self-contained;
I stand and look at them long and long.
do not sweat and whine about their
Condition;
They do not lie awake in the dark and
weep for their sins;
They do not make me sick discussing
their duty to God; Not one is dissatisfied,
not one is demented with the mania of owning
Things;

Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that
lived thousands of years ago;
Not one is respectable or unhappy over
the whole earth.⁹

Wisdom opens new vistas of life and elevates it to a state of play and fun. When life becomes fun, unnecessary dead-seriousness drops away; all whining and whimper evaporate; all crying and weeping for help vanish. Greed to grab and hoard disappear. Pleasure and pain alike lose their meaning. The whole world is seen as a vast play, vast fun. What other meaning can we ascribe to it? The whole universe is the play of the Cosmic Mind. That one truth rings out again and again in Vedanta. It says life is a play; know it and play to your heart's content. Humour and hilarity are not only in slap-sticks, comic strips or jokes, but are in every event of life. It is an artificial life where everything is planned beforehand, and everything is prearranged meticulously as in a computer program. The funniest thing of our civilization is, even we have been coached how to laugh, at what, and how long; and when to smile and when not to. Every human response is controlled and manipulated. This machine-like conditioning, limiting our lives, has sponged it out of freshness and spontaneity. Yet in spite of one's careful planning, life is full of uncertainties. It springs surprises and administers shocks to awaken us.

Young children do not search for motive or purpose for their actions. They are interested in everything they see and hear; the world is full of surprises for them. They spend hours watching the flight of butterflies, changing colours of clouds, twinkling stars, movements of birds and many other things attractive to their eyes. They never complain why they were born in a poor family, nor rejoice at the affluence of their parents. They

The Wonder Of Being Cheerful

are happy as they are, without any comparisons, ambitions or worries. To the adult eye, wrapped in its own petty sorrows, there is nothing to cause delight. It is the grown up man who puts before him a mythical goal and pours every ounce of his energy to reach it, but never succeeds. As he proceeds the goal recedes farther and farther. It is a goal of his own unsubstantial projection, a chimera.

Sri Ramakrishna tells a humorous story of a magic jar.

A barber was once given by a genie seven jars of gold. The barber opened them and found all full of gold except the last one which was only half full. A strong desire arose in the mind of the barber to fill the seventh jar also; for without it his happiness was incomplete. He put all his wife's ornaments and all his earnings into the jar, but the mysterious vessel, as before, remained unfilled. Starving himself and his family he saved money to fill the jar. At last he began to live by begging, still putting everything into the insatiable cavity. As days passed his miserable condition grew worse. The king noticed his careworn features and asked, "What is the matter with you? Have you got the seven jars?" The barber was startled by the question and he confessed everything. The king said, "Go at once and return the jars to the genie. Nobody can ever fill the mysterious jar." The barber did as the king advised and had peace.

The jar of desire to possess more and more things in order to derive happiness cannot be filled. It is only when we let go our hold that the fountain of joy gushes.

People are strange. They do not realize their own unwise thinking brings unhappiness. Instead of deriving pleasure from what he has, comparing himself with his neighbours, he derives pain from what others have. He feels miserable thinking of his neighbour's car which he does not have. That neighbour feels anguish thinking of his next neighbour who has two cars while

he has only one. And so on the chain of misery extends. Vivekananda told this funny story to illustrate.

A poor man was once able to propitiate a certain god who gave him three boons to ask along with three throws of dice. The happy man communicated this news to his wife who at once told him to cast for wealth first. To this the man said, "We both have very ugly little noses, for which people laugh at us. Let us first cast for beautiful aquiline noses." But the wife was for wealth first and so she caught hold of his hand to prevent him from throwing the dice. The man hastily snatched his hand away and threw the dice exclaiming, "Let us both have beautiful noses and nothing but noses." All at once both their bodies were covered over with many beautiful noses, but they proved such a great nuisance to them that both of them agreed to throw for the second time asking for their removal. It was done, but they also lost their own little ones by that! There was only one boon more to ask. Having lost their noses they looked uglier than before. They wanted to have two beautiful noses, but they feared to be questioned about their transformation lest they should be regarded by all to be two big fools who could not mend their circumstances even with the help of three boons. So both of them agreed to get back their ugly little noses and the dice were accordingly cast.¹⁰

All our energies, hopes and aspirations are centred in the world. Even for a moment we can't forget the world and its miasmatic bewitchments. Except in the state of deep sleep, the mind incessantly cerebrates. Even to get a few hours sound sleep has become a hard job and many have to resort to pill-popping. The world extracts its heavy price from us unless we learn to detach ourselves now and then from it. This, of course, is not through drugs and alcohol. "Drunkenness is temporary suicide," said Bertrand Russell. Workaholism too is a degenerative condition. Workaholics come under the illusion

that their work is of tremendous importance and to ignore it even for a day would bring all kinds of disasters. Such deluded ones should visit the graveyard once to see those who have lived similarly, lying there. Our doings are not so important as we naturally suppose. Our successes and failures or all other things that happen to oneself haven't any cosmic importance.

When the body is in sound health, we are no more conscious of body. When the mind is in a happy and euphoric state we are seldom aware of mind. This happens when the mind stops worrying about itself or about the world. Our minds are soaked and super-saturated with the world – its events and things, its emotions and quasi-realities. There is hardly any empty space left inside. It is like the story of the Arab's camel. Once a camel just pushed its nose through the door of the Arab's tent. The Arab at once objected to this but the camel said, "Oh, I am only putting my nose into your tent for a moment. Nothing more." But in fact it slowly pushed in its ugly head and then its whole body inside the tent. When the owner then began to vigorously protest, it said, "If you do not like my presence in your house you had better get out, but I will not."

Sri Ramakrishna unflinchingly pointed out the bane of worldly-mindedness, saying:

...The souls that are entangled, involved in worldliness, never come to their senses. They lie in the net but are not even conscious that they are entangled. If you speak of God before them, they at once leave the place. They say: "Why God now? We shall think of Him in the hour of death." But when they lie on their death-beds, they say to their wives or children: "Why have you put so many wicks in the lamp? Use only one wick. Otherwise too much oil will be burnt."

While dying they think of their wives and children, and weep, "Alas! What will happen to them after my death?"

The entangled souls repeat those very actions that make them suffer so much. They are like the camel which eats thorny bushes till the blood streams from its mouth, but still will not give them up. Such a man may have lost his son and be stricken with grief, but still he will have children year after year. He may ruin himself by his daughter's marriage but still he will go on having daughters every year. When he goes to a holy place he doesn't have any time to think of God. He almost kills himself carrying bundles for his wife... They laugh at those who think of God and meditate on Him, and call them lunatics.¹¹

Without kindling a spiritual spark or love of God in one's heart, one may try by whatever means one likes to derive happiness from the desert of the world. But without the spiritual orientation he only meets with frustration and misery. Mankind has tried again and again all the tricks history teaches, but without success. Yet, modern people may be awakening to the efficacy of the meditation or relaxation response as a great anodyne. Meditation is emptying of the mind of its contents. The contents are desires and longing for things, anxieties, stress, envy, fear, sorrows and so on. In the first two verses of the Dhammapada, Buddha says: "Mind is everything. Our life is the creation of our mind. If a man speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows him as the wheels of a cart follows the beast that draws it. If a man speaks or acts with a pure mind, joy follows him as his own shadow." The *Pancadasi*, an Advaita text enunciates: "The impure mind is that mind which is polluted by the world and the pure mind is the mind free from it." (X. 116)

Exhilaration and cheerfulness are our real nature, sorrow is superimposition of the world onto the Self. A mind which possesses nothing and is not possessed by anything is blissful.

The Wonder Of Being Cheerful

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Reprinted from *Prabuddha Bharata*, November 1990

[To the question: "Is it possible to pour *Sadhana* into another person?"] Yes. But not everyone can do that. He who has seen God and been absorbed in his bliss - he can.

Swami Shivananda

We must revive Religion

Prof. Arnold Toynbee

I would define true religion as being right belief and right feeling taking effect in right action. Without right action, right feeling and right belief have no virtue in them. By right belief I mean recognizing that (a) we human beings understand and control only a tiny fraction of the universe and (b) that there is a presence in the universe which is spiritually greater than we are and which is Absolute Reality. By right feeling I mean awe in face of the mystery of the universe and humility in the presence of Absolute Reality. By right action I mean trying to bring one's self-centred self into conformity with this spiritual presence behind the phenomena.

I have tried to put my definition in terms that hold good for the religions of the Indian family (Buddhism and Hinduism), as well as for those of the Palestinian family (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), with which we in the West are better acquainted so far.

If there were to be no religious revival, the outlook for the West, as I see it, would be unpromising. I believe our modern Western way of life is the expression of a belief in the sacredness of the personality of the individual. This high valuation of the individual personality in the West is being challenged today by communism and other totalitarian ideologies which deify the human community and maintain that the individual human being exists for the sake of the community, as the ant exists for the sake of the ant-heap and the bee for the sake of the beehive.

If this totalitarian exaltation of the community were to prevail over our liberal Western belief in the sacredness of the personality, that would, I should say, be the death of the distinctive ideal for which the West stands. If our Western ideal

is to hold its own against the challenging totalitarian ideal, it must stand on sure foundations. Its original foundations were religious. The historical origin of our Western belief in the sacredness of the human personality is the Jewish and Christian belief that human souls have an absolute value in the sight of God; and, though, in the modern age, this religious basis of our Western belief has been forgotten or even repudiated, I cannot see any other foundation on which our belief can stand.

For this reason I think the outlook for the West would be unpromising if there were to be no religious revival. In looking forward to a religious revival I do not, however, expect to see us return to our ancestral religions in the traditional forms into which they had set in the age before the beginning of the modern Western scientific movement.

Reprinted from *Vedanta for East and West*, January-February, 1956

What is meant by spiritual practice? It is nothing but an attempt to identify oneself with the one ultimate Reality, which alone exists. There is only One without a second. Perception of unity is knowledge, perception of variety is ignorance. If one can surrender oneself wholly to Him, there is real peace. The more you go towards Him, the greater is the peace. Ultimately you will have to rest in Him. Are you in fact separate from Him? You find yourself separate, because you think so; else you are nothing but He.

Swami Turiyananda

The Life of Thomas a Kempis

Swami Atulananda

Thomas a Kempis, the author of *The Imitation of Christ* was born in the year 1379 at Kempen a small, prosperous town, about forty miles north of Cologne, in a flat, fertile country along the Rhine. His family name was Haemerken but when he became a monk this dropped and he became known as Thomas of Kempen.

His parents, John and Gertrude, were of the labouring class, his father being a worker in metal. They were frugal, hard-working people, fairly well educated, with a great love for simplicity and godliness. His mother was sedulous in the education of her children, attentive to her household duties, modest and not given to much talk. She closely watched over the growth of her two children, two boys, John and Thomas, of whom John was the elder by fifteen, years. She had for a time kept a little school at Kempen, and, she was therefore able to give her sons the rudiments of education.

The training which the boys received at home from their pious parents gave them a strong religious bent of mind. John had been sent to a school at Deventer (in Holland) and in the course of time had joined a monastery near Zwolle. And now, twelve years later, when Thomas was thirteen years, old, he also expressed the desire to devote his life to the service of God and his fellow men by embracing the monastic life.

The parents would have liked to retain him by their side to be their comfort and support during their declining years. But putting aside their own interests they encouraged the boy in his holy resolutions. Offering their child to God and blessing him, they sent him on a long journey of a hundred miles to join his brother at Deventer. They never saw him again, for Thomas never returned to his native town and they died before he became famous.

Thomas fared well during his long trek from Kempen to Deventer for the country through which he passed was inhabited by hospitable, kind-hearted peasants, who gave him food and lodging. But when he arrived at his destination he learned that John had gone to a monastery at Zwolle. The place, however, was not very far, and cheerfully he continued his journey. At last he reached the monastery, and here the two brothers met after a long time. The meeting was a happy one, for from the very beginning the brothers felt a great attraction toward each other, an attraction which warmed into a tender friendship.

John having been greatly benefited spiritually by the education he had received at Deventer, determined that his brother should have the same advantage. He, therefore, sent him with a letter of recommendation to Florentius, the saintly and scholarly Rector of the Brothers of Common Life at that city.

The revered Father, being moved with pity toward the poor but talented lad, received him very kindly, and kept him for some time in the House of the Brothers of which he was Rector. He prepared him for school, and gave him the books he stood in need of. When Thomas was ready to attend the town-school, he placed him in the house of a devout matron who showed him and other students much kindness.

When Thomas was eighteen years old, Florentius took him back to live in the house of the Brothers who offered a helping hand to poor students, providing them with food and lodging. There were then in the house some twenty priests and three lay-brothers, of whom one was the steward and did the marketing, one was in charge of the kitchen, and the third mended the clothes.

The town-school, although really an independent institution, was connected in various ways with the Brother-House. The Brothers had charge of part of the instruction, and

zealously contributed to the maintenance and advancement of the pupils.

Thomas, while still going to school, took part in the devotional exercises of the Brothers and was drawn into their pious modes of life, which filled him with admiration. Never before - so he tells us - had he seen men so devout, and so full of love towards God and their fellow-men. Living in the World, they were altogether unworldly, they were of one heart and one mind in God. What each possessed was held in common, and being content with plain food and clothing they took no thought for the morrow.

The Rector of the school was also choir-master of the church, and by his orders Thomas used to sing in the choir together with his school-fellows. He studied grammar, logic, ethics, the Holy Scriptures, and copying of manuscripts. All that he needed was provided for him by the Brothers.

In the serene and simple surroundings in the Brother-House, Thomas was happy. His room-mate was a boy of his own age, Arnold of Schoonhoven, a boy of admirable piety, and sweet amiable disposition. The boys became intimate friends and encouraged each other in holiness.

When Thomas was twenty years old he had attained to a degree of scholarship that would have enabled him to take up the specialised work of a university. But his mind was given to God; and moved by a dream and the advice of the saintly Florentius he sought admission to a newly Established monastery at Agnetenberg, near Zwolle, of which his brother was Prior.

After six years of probation, during which time he made additional studies to fit himself for the monastic life, he was professed in the seventh year, that is, he received the religious habit. In the following year he took the final vows, and in the

year 1413, when he was thirty-three years old, was ordained as priest.

At this monastery, shut in from the noise and strife of the world, Thomas A. Kempis spent practically seventy years of his long life. Occasionally his duties called him away on short journeys, but otherwise he knew only the world within the monastery walls, where he was perfectly contented. It was a life of prayer, study and labour.

The monastery stood on a solitary hill at no great distant from the town of Zwolle. At the foot of the hill flowed the little river Vechre, a stream abounding in fish. With great labour the barren hill was made fertile. The monks planted an orchard and gardens, and laid out paths and roadways. Besides these manual labours, the good monks spent many hours in their religious duties and intellectual occupations. They studied, wrote, and transcribed manuscripts which they sold to secure funds to defray their expenses.

Thomas was a skilful copyist. He transcribed the Roman Missal, a large number of mystical and devotional treatises, and the entire Bible, which took him fifteen years to accomplish. He wrote, besides "The Imitation of Christ", biographies of Groote and Florentius and nine of their disciples. He also wrote handbooks for novices and other religious treatises. He taught the young members of the monastery and was often called upon to deliver sermons.

In addition to these various occupations he wrote the chronicle of the monastery and assisted in the choir for he was an accomplished musician. He loved books, and whenever an opportunity offered he would retire to his cell to read "a little book in a little nook." But most of his spare time was spent in prayer and meditation.

The Life Thomas a Kempis

In 1425 he was made Sub-Prior of the monastery, and in 1432 Procurator. But this office was not to his liking as the outward duties connected with it distracted him too much from meditation and his more profitable labours as an author. He was soon relieved of it and re-elected as Sub-Prior. This post he resigned in 1456 and afterwards he held no particular office in the monastery.

As life passed he became more and more rapt in mystic Visions. "His cell was his Paradise, the Church or choir his Heaven, and the Word of God his food." He had given his message to the world and he was now realising this message in his own life. The only sadness that entered into his life was that one by one he saw most of his brother-monks, including his brother John, laid at rest in the little cemetery near the cloister.

In his old age he suffered from dropsy and in the year 1471, when he was ninety-two years old, he fell asleep in the Lord.

He was a man of somewhat less than average height, inclined to corpulence. His massive features had a healthy, brownish complexion. He had bright, piercing eyes, the sight of which was so good that even in his old age he did not require spectacles. He was a man of quiet, cheerful disposition, not given to argumentation or vain words, but always ready to instruct those who came to him for advice. The love of God and the happiness of unbroken fellowship with Him, was the ultimate object of all his efforts. And this object he attained to a wonderful degree. His whole being was imbued with the love of Christ, and peace and blessedness filled his heart.

Reprinted from *Prabuddha Bharata*, August 1923

Reality As defined by Sankara

Swami Achalananda

The words real and unreal are used quite frequently both in ordinary speech and in philosophical thinking and expression. It is necessary that the correct meaning of these words should be understood, particularly in the latter context, where precision of thought and expression are most essential.

For one trying to understand the Advaita Vedanta a correct idea of the meaning of reality is absolutely necessary because it is the ultimate, the infinite.

Sankara has given us a very clear exposition of this in his commentary on the sixteenth verse of the second chapter of the Bhagavadgita.

The verse is: “the unreal has no existence, the real can never cease to exist.”

In commenting on this verse, Sankara administers a shock, as it were, by telling us that *all knowledge like heat and cold that comes to us through the pramanas, is not real*. This statement leaves us amazed because the only reality that we are normally familiar with is what comes to us through the pramanas. We hear a sound, see a form or colour, feel a touch, savour a taste, smell an odour and take them as real, because they have been perceived by the only means of perception available to us. If later on we find that our perception was faulty, i.e., that it did not correspond to the fact as it was, we set down the fault as due to some defect in the apparatus or to the conditions under which the faculties were functioning. Therefore we are shocked, naturally, when we are told that knowledge arising as a result of the function of the faculties is not real.

Sankara then proceeds to tell us why it is so. Because, *such knowledge is a product and a product varies. The form etc., of the pot, defined by the eye, cannot be known as other than its cause the clay ; and is, therefore, unreal; even so all products cannot be known as other than their (substantial) cause, and are, therefore, unreal*. When we analyze the object that is perceived as the ‘pot’¹ for example, we find that it is only the clay in a particular form and having a particular name. But, if the clay is removed from the pot there is nothing left which can

be known as the pot. Therefore the pot can be known only as its substantial cause, the clay, and cannot be known as other than that. That is why the form etc., are considered unreal.

The illustration is continued. *The products like pot etc., and their substantial causes like clay, etc., are not known before their origination or after their destruction : therefore, they are unreal.* A product comes into being from a pre-existing cause ; this is its origination. After some time it is destroyed, i.e. its form, name and utility cease. The pot comes into being out of its cause, the clay. Before that origination it was not known as the pot.

After some time it is, let us say, broken. After this destruction it has neither the form of the pot nor the name of the pot nor does it serve the purpose that it served as a pot. It is no longer known as the pot. So, a product is not known as such before its origination or after its destruction.

This is true of even the cause of the pot, the clay. That also has an origination and a destruction. It originates from the combination of certain elements in a particular manner and is destroyed when that particular combination ceases.

The illustration is taken from the famous passage of the Chandogya Upanishad wherein we are told, 'The product is only a name having its origin in speech'.²

So it is said that all products are unreal because, they cannot be known as such before their origination and after their destruction.

It may be objected, *'In that case, if all products are unreal, every thing would be unreal'*. Since every thing that is known is the product of the process of knowing, if all products are unreal, there would be nothing real, or reality would be a total void without any content.

Sankara answers the objection raised by himself : *It is not so. Because, about every thing we have two concepts ; a concept of the real and a concept of the unreal. The content of a concept that does not vary is real; the content of a concept that varies is unreal. Thus the distinction between the real and the unreal is dependent on the concept. This being so, every one has two concepts about every thing ; these concepts have a common basis, content or object; but not like the ' blue*

lotus'. For example, the existent pot, the existent cloth, the existent elephant etc., Similarly in all cases.

Here a definition of reality has been evolved. It is the content of a concept or idea that does not vary. Also another profound insight is given that even the simplest of our ideas consists of two concepts. Anything that occurs to the mind is invariably associated with existence or being. A pot, for example, to take a very simple case, comes to the mind as, 'This is a pot'. This is what Sankara calls the 'existent pot'. Thus even the simplest concept is composed of two elements, a substantive element and a predicative element, both having the same object as their locus or content. In the 'existent pot' existence is predicated of the substantive, 'the pot'. The relation between the meanings or the contents of these words is called, 'samanadhikaranya', having the same basis, locus, object or content. But the case of these primary concepts is not the same as that of the more familiar relation, of a similar nature, conveyed by expressions like, 'blue lotus'. In this case also, blueness is predicated of the lotus and they have a common locus. But the dissimilarity is due to the fact that the reality of both the elements is of the same degree³ in the case of the 'blue lotus' and of different degrees in 'the existent pot.'

Of these two concepts, the concept of pot etc., varies, so it has been shown. But not the concept of the 'existent'. Therefore, the content of the concept, 'pot' etc., is unreal, because, it varies; not so the content of the concept of the 'existent' because it does not vary. The latter is thus real.

OBJECTION : *When the pot is lost the concept of the pot varies, along with it the concept of the existent also varies.*

ANSWER : *Not so. Because the concept of the existent is found, then, in the cloth (or other object that has not been destroyed). This concept of 'the existent' has the predicative or attributive element for its content.*

OBJECTION : *Like the concept of the existent (found in the cloth etc.), the concept of the pot is also found in other pots. Therefore, the concept of the pot is equally real.*

ANSWER : *This is not so. Because, it (the concept of the pot) is not found in the cloth etc., So it cannot be real.*

OBJECTION : *Even the concept of the existent is not found in the destroyed pot. Therefore, it is also unreal.*

ANSWER : *Not so. The concept of the existent has the predicative element for its content. As the predicative is never perceived in the absence of the substantive, what content can it have (for manifesting itself)? That is why it is not found in the case of the destroyed pot. Not because the concept of the existent is itself absent.*

OBJECTION : *The relation of, 'having a common content' is not admissible when the substantive element is absent.*

ANSWER : *Not so. It is seen in the concept of water in the mirage, wherein one of the elements is non-existent.*

In the case of the mirage, which gives rise to the concept, 'This is water', though the perceived phenomenon 'this' is present, the element 'water' is non-existent. Still the concept does arise and the words, 'this' and 'water' do have a common content. Therefore, a principle cannot be enunciated against the facts of experience. Thus the objection itself is invalid.

The Chandogya passage cited earlier as the scriptural basis on which the definition of reality was evolved, continues thus : 'mrtti-ketyeva satyam' that which is like clay is real. In this passage, referring to the various articles made of clay, which have different names and forms, it is pointed out that the varying names and forms have their origin in speech only; and that alone which is like clay, the unchanging substance, on which all names and forms are superimposed, is real. Thus the changing names and forms are excluded from the category of the real ; they are, therefore, unreal.

In the Gita, the definition of reality given in II, 16 is clarified by illustrations in the two following verses :

'Know that to be without destruction, by which all this is pervaded. No one can destroy that undiminishing entity. (This is the Atman, the Self.) These bodies of the eternal, indestructible, unmeasurable, embodied one, have an end. Therefore, O Bharata, fight.'

The bodies that are many and different and therefore vary, have an end or cease to be such and are therefore unreal. While the embodied one, the conscious principle, manifesting itself in all the bodies, is one, unvarying, eternal and therefore real.

The Chandogya passage cited earlier gives more examples of the substance which remains unchanging as the cause and is real and of the products which change and are unreal. It leads on to the one

unchanging cause of this infinite variety, seen as the universe. It tells us 'sadeva sowmya idamagra asit', 'My dear boy, in the beginning there was existence only.' 'ekameva advitiam', 'one only without a second'' (vi, 2,1). In the beginning, i.e. before the manifestation as the universe of infinite variety, the cause, basis or substance of all this was one, homogeneous, indivisible, pure existence. It goes on to the conclusion that all these creatures have their root or origin in this pure existence, have their being in it and also have that as the ultimate principle into which they merge at the end of the manifestation, 'sanmulah soumya imah sarvah prajah sadayatanah, satpratisthah' (vi, 8, 4).

That this reality is also the one indivisible principle of consciousness manifest in all beings is brought out in the Gita in XIII, 2, where the Lord says, 'Know Me as the knower of the field in all the fields'.

Reality is, again, the pure consciousness that persists through all the three states of consciousness (waking, dream and deep sleep), without being identified with the limitations of any of them. This is referred to by Sankara in the sixth verse of his Dakshinamurti-stotra, by the expression, 'pragasvapsamiti prabodha-samaye yah pratyabhijnayate', 'the one who is recognized in the state of waking, by the concept, 'Formerly I slept'.

It is the unvarying principle that remains unchanged through all the changes of state of the body also. This is brought out in verse 7 of the Dakshinamurti-stotra, by the expression, 'vyavirttasu anuvartamanam aham iti antah sphurantam sada', 'that which persists unchanged through all the changing states (of the body), and always shines inside as the 'I'.

Thus, according to Sankara, reality is the content of the unvarying concept of 'the existent' pure, absolute existence, which is also pure, absolute consciousness, the knowing principle, manifesting in every being as 'I'.

1. Two kinds of causes are accepted in Nyaya, the substantial or material cause and the efficient cause, which includes the instrumental and, and which is also called the intelligent cause. To illustrate : In the case of the pot, the clay out of which it is made is the material or substantial cause; the potter who made it is the efficient or intelligent cause, and the wheel, rod etc, used by him are the instrumental causes.

Reality As defined by Sankara

2. Speech is manifest or expressed thought; thought is unmanifest or unexpressed speech.

3 In Advaita three degrees of Reality are spoken of: (1) The apparent 'pratibhasika' which is contradicted or sublated even by the phenomenal experience ; e.g., the dream, which is contradicted on waking up or the water seen in the mirage, which is found to be non-existent on approaching. (2) The phenomenal, the reality of the work-a-day world, which is sublated only when the wisdom of the infinite Brahman is reached. (3) The absolute which is never sublated.

Reprinted from *Vedanta Kesari*, May 1977

You Are Infinite. God is true. The universe is a dream. Blessed am I that I know this moment that I shall be free all eternity . . . that I know that I am worshiping only myself; that no nature, no delusion, had any hold on me. Vanish nature from me, vanish [these] gods; vanish worship . . . vanish superstitions, for I know myself. I am the Infinite. All these—Mrs. So-and-so, Mr. So-and-so, responsibility, happiness, misery—have vanished. I am the Infinite. How can there be death for me, or birth? Whom shall I fear? I am the One. Shall I be afraid of myself? Who is to be afraid of whom? I am the one Existence. Nothing else exists. I am everything.

You are infinite. Where can you go? The sun, the moon, and the whole universe are but drops in your transcendent nature. How can you be born or die? I never was born, never will be born. I never had father or mother, friends or foes, for I am Existence, Knowledge, Bliss Absolute.

Swami Vivekananda

Programme for January - February 2013

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

Jan	1	Holy Mother's Puja	
Jan	6	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 15	Swami Dayatmananda
Jan	13	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 16	Swami Dayatmananda
Jan	20	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 17	Swami Dayatmananda
Jan	27	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 18	Swami Dayatmananda
Feb	3	Swami Vivekananda's Puja	
Feb	10	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 19	Swami Dayatmananda
Feb	17	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 20	Swami Dayatmananda
Feb	24	Day Retreat	

Holy Mother's Puja

Tuesday 1st January 2013
at Bourne End at 4:00 pm

Swami Vivekananda's Puja

Sunday 3rd January 2013
at Bourne End at 4:00 pm

Day Retreat

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

Note: Children are not allowed at the Retreat.

Please bring (vegetarian) lunch to share.

MORTAL: "But I am ill and spent with pain; too late has come your wealth. I cannot use it."

THE NEW YEAR: "Listen, friend; I am Good Health."

MORTAL: "Now, wide I fling my door. Come in, and your fair statements prove."

THE NEW YEAR: "But you must open, too, your heart, for I am Love."

Ella Wheeler Wilcox

Vedanta

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

Phone: (01628) 526464

www.vedantauk.com

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

Editor: Swami Dayatmananda

Editorial Advisers: John Phillips

£1.50

When you are able to free yourself from these deep-seated subtle desires, when the mind becomes tranquil, then only can you become deeply absorbed in real meditation. The practice of *japam* and meditation brings the aspirant to this stage.

Swami Brahmananda



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