

# Vedanta

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399 JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2018

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**Ramprasad, the Mystic Poet**

*Swami Ritajananda*

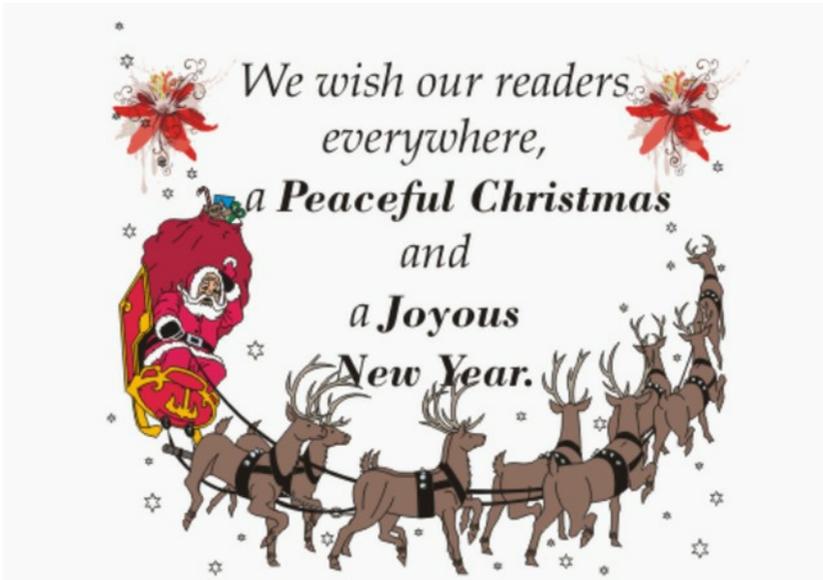
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**Is Renunciation Negative**

*Marie Louise Burke*

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### **Divine Wisdom**

**Message of Swami Akhandanandaji**

(On the occasion of the Sri Ramakrishna Centenary)

THE dawn of the New Age is breaking over the world;— the blessed day is at hand that will illumine our hearts with the glory of its effulgence. Knowingly and unknowingly, man is moving forward along the road of salvation, inspired by the Master's message of the harmony of all religions, and by his unique realization of the essential oneness of Karma (Action), Jnana (Knowledge), Bhakti (Supreme Devotion) and Yoga (Psychic Control).

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## Editorial

### Musings on Kalpataru

January 1<sup>st</sup> is a red letter day for the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna everywhere in the world. This day is important because symbolically it came to be the first day of a new spiritual life.

On this day in 1886 Sri Ramakrishna showered his unbounded grace on almost all his 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 Sri Ramakrishna came downstairs unexpectedly. Stopping near Girish in the garden Sri Ramakrishna had asked: *'Well, Girish, what have you found in me that you proclaim me before all as an incarnation of God?'*

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 intense faith with which Girish had uttered these words brought about a transformation in Sri Ramakrishna. And he went into an ecstatic state. In that state he blessed the devotees present there with his divine touch and these words: *'what more shall I say! I bless you all. Be illumined!'*

These simple words had brought about a great transformation in those whom he touched. Many had wonderful spiritual experiences such as visions of their chosen deities etc. (There were two devotees whom Sri Ramakrishna could not touch; but they were assured of his grace later.)

No doubt most of the devotees whom Sri Ramakrishna blessed had wonderful experiences. Subsequent events in their life conclusively prove that these experiences were wonderful but very temporary; they did not bring about a desired transformation in their lives. Indeed, some of their actions were unacceptable even to an ordinary devotee.

When we analyse these experiences of the devotees we find that most of the devotees were not ready to receive them. Why was that? Sri Ramakrishna used to say that the wind of God's grace is always blowing. But one need to unfurl the sail.

Unfurling the sail is the key to understand this event. God and saints may be ready to bestow their grace (they are always eager to share their experiences and Bliss with others). The receivers of grace must be ready not only to receive but also to retain. In order to be able to do this we must become fit candidates. This fitness is possible only when we are equipped with the necessary spiritual qualities.

Truthfulness, single-minded devotion to the ideal, patience and surrender to God – these are the necessary four qualities that are absolutely indispensable to success in any field of life inclusive of spiritual progress.

#### Truthfulness.

Sincerity, honesty, a right way of living, hard work, and of course speaking the truth - all these fall under the category of truthfulness. '*Shraddha*' is the Sanskrit word.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that truthfulness is the austerity of this age. He himself was an embodiment of truthfulness. Truth speaking in time leads one to Truth-seeking and ultimately to Truth which is God. Truthfulness according to Sri Ramakrishna is to make the mind and speech one (*Man mukh ek kora*).

#### Nishtha or single-minded devotion to one's ideal

It is absolutely necessary to choose one particular path suited to one's nature and stick to it. These days we come across many spiritual shoppers, who go on drifting from religion to religion, from one Guru to another in search of easy and convenient shortcuts. There is no shortcut to spiritual progress. One has to walk the hard way and all by oneself. This sticking to one ideal is called '*Nishtha*' i.e. single-minded devotion to

one's ideal. Sri Ramakrishna was very emphatic that one cannot progress in life without it.

### Patience.

Infinite patience is needed in order to make headway in any field. One must do what has to be done to the best of one's ability. That much alone is in Man's hands. The rest lies in the hands of the Lord. *"Look at the anvil of a blacksmith - how it is hammered and beaten; yet it moves not from its place. Let men learn patience and endurance from it"*.

(Sri Ramakrishna)

### Surrender to God.

Having done all that one should do, one has to surrender oneself to God. God takes care of a devotee who surrenders himself to Him totally.

" Sri Ramakrishna said:

*"Give up everything to Him, resign yourself to Him, and there will be no more trouble for you. Then you will come to know that everything is done by His will.*

*"There is no path safer and smoother than that of giving the power of attorney to God. It means resigning oneself to the will of the Almighty and having no feeling that anything is one's own.*

*"He who can resign himself to the will of the Almighty with simple faith and guileless love realises the Lord very quickly."*

Every spiritual aspirant must strive to develop these four qualities. Without these there is no hope of ever reaching the goal. With these success is inevitable.

When we are equipped with these four spiritual qualities we become fit not only to receive but to retain the grace of God. For a devotee who is fit everyday becomes a new day, a Kalpataru day.

May Sri Ramakrishna Bless us all.

## Ramprasad, the Mystic-Poet

Swami Ritajananda

It is often seen that forms of art burst forth into glorious efflorescence when fertilised by religion. Some of the finest specimens of architecture and sculpture that are found in temples and churches and the immortal hymns that were sung by mystic poets bear testimony to this power of religion to immortalize art. All the poet-saints felt their talent as *'the sacred fire that lights up the altar of the mysterious Unknown'*. They packed-their passionate longings for God in their songs. The people made these songs their own, for they found in them an *'echo of the searchings'* of their soul, of their thirst for God. Why is it that the lyrics of the *Alwars* (devotees of Vishnu ) and the *Saiva* (devotees of Shiva ) mystics and the sublime songs of Tyagaraja continue to be the unfailing sources of spiritual sustenance and inspiration to the people of South India? They poured forth not only their own emotions, but the popular emotions as well in their songs. There is a familiar yet sweet refrain in Tamil which says: *'How beautifully did those saints Appar and Sundarar sing! I shall also sing like them'*.

It is a matter for regret that even with the advancement of education and communications, the songs of Tyagaraja and the musician-saints of the South are very little known in North India, even as the songs of North Indian mystics like Ramprasad are not well-known in the South. We cannot come across a person in Bengal who cannot repeat at least a few lines of the compositions of Ramprasad. They are enjoyed equally by the pundits and peasants.

By clothing his mellow devotion in the language of the common people, Ramprasad has made his songs the property of the whole nation. Sri Ramakrishna used to go into ecstasy, whenever he began to sing in his melodious voice the out-pourings of Ramprasad.

Ramprasad's was a life completely dedicated at the feet of the Divine Mother. Halisahar or Kumarhatti is a village on the banks of the Ganges, not far from Calcutta. About two centuries ago, it was a flourishing village and it had many scholars and poets. About the year 1718 A.D. Ramprasad was born as the son of Ramrama Sen, belonging to a respectable and pious Vaidya family of the village. The grand style of their worship of the Divine Mother was well known to the neighbouring villages. Ramprasad went through the usual course of education in Bengali and Sanskrit. His father wanted that he should take up the family profession of a physician and succeed him. But the boy enjoyed the study of poetry better than medicine and the noble father allowed him to have his own way. He also studied Persian, the court language of the times. At the proper age, Ramprasad was initiated into the worship of Kali, their family deity and this kindled the spiritual fire that was latent in him. He learnt the various methods of worship prescribed in the scriptures and engaged himself in the quest of the Divine Mother in all earnestness. But he could not lead this type of life very long, due to the sudden passing away of his father. The burden of the whole family fell on him and he had to find the means for supporting it.

He left for Calcutta and very soon secured a place of an accountant in a zamindar's house on a monthly salary of Rs 30. His poetical temperament could hardly adjust itself to the irksome clerical duties and the mind used to play truant running away to the Beloved Mother. Finding that his devotion was manifesting itself in beautiful songs, he recorded them in the account books of the zamindar spread before him. Negligence of his work and the scribbling of songs attracted the attention of the other officers who complained to their master. Ramprasad was soon called for along

with his books. On opening the pages, the following song caught the eyes of the zamindar.

*"Appoint me your treasurer, O Mother,  
I am not the one who forgets the salt he has eaten  
(I am not ungrateful!).  
All people loot the store house of gems,  
hard to endure the sight!  
You have entrusted it to the forgetful Bhola (Siva),  
the Destroyer of demons.  
He is easily satisfied and always ready to give  
and yet you have made him your treasurer!  
He has half your body and still you pay him so-highly.  
If you be like your father I am lost;  
but if you take my father's nature I shall soon reach you!\*"   
I am only a wage less servant  
with claims on the dust of your feet.  
Prasad says, let me die in the saving grace of those feet  
that remove all curses and by which I am free from all danger."*

*\*[Kali or Uma is the daughter of Himalaya mountain, and hence her nature is said to be stony. Ramprasad often teases his Mother saying that she being the daughter of Himalaya is stony and hard-hearted, While Siva, whom Ramprasad claims as his father is easily pleased and kind to his devotees.]*

Turning a few more pages, the zamindar found that the pages were all studded with songs and the one cry of "Mother, Mother" ran through the lines of the songs. He, himself being a devotee of the Divine Mother, immediately realised the greatness of Ramprasad and calling him aside said, "Prasad, I find that you want to become the treasurer of the Divine Mother! Surely you can do so! This mean worldly job is not fit for people like you, the children of God. You are free to go home and serve Her with your poetic genius. Do not worry about your salary which will be regularly sent to your home from this office."

Ramprasad could hardly believe that the divine grace would come down upon him in such an unexpected manner and free him from the slavery of a few rupees. He returned to Halishahar and engaged himself in spiritual practices once more. Besides the regular worship, he used to offer a song of his composition every day to his deity and this song was sung (Ramprasad was an excellent singer) in the morning at the bathing ghat. Large crowds used to gather round him and enjoy his sweet music.

One day, while the Rajah of Murshidabad, Krishna Chandra, was travelling along the river, he heard these songs. Being highly impressed by their charm he asked Ramprasad to follow him and accept a place in his court. Although he had no desire to serve any one but God, he had to comply with Krishna Chandra's request and became one of his court-poets. The pompous life of the court and the sensual compositions of the poets were uncongenial to the devotional nature of Ramprasad. There he was asked to write a poem on the popular theme of "*Vidyasundari*", a love story. In this work he shines best in his prayers rather than in the presentation of sensual love. The work was not a success. But still the Rajah treated him with all honour, gave him the title of *Kaviranjan* (a delighter of poets), and after some time permitted him to return to his native place with many presents. After this he did not serve anyone else.

Now freed entirely from wage-earning duties and worldly influence, Ramprasad sought the communion of the Divine without any obstruction. From this time onwards his life was one of constant prayer and strenuous meditation. He performed all the *Tantric sadhanas* (Spiritual practices) as prescribed in the Tantras, in all their details and sank into the depths of the ocean of spiritual discipline and only in intervals of rest was he moved by the breeze of emotion to sing his songs. Little by little, the attraction for

material life faded and he renounced the world as we understand from his song:

*"No more shall I call on you O Mother!  
Endless are the sufferings you have given.  
I was a house-holder and you have made me a mendicant  
And I do not know what more you can do."*

He became a well-known figure during his life time and there are many legends which refer to his mystic experiences and visions. Once Kali is said to have taken the form of his daughter and helped him in repairing his fence and this is mentioned in the song:

*"Why do you leave the feet of the Mother, O Mind?  
Think of Shakti, you will get mukti (liberation).  
Tie yourself with Bhakti devotion).  
How unfortunate you are!  
You have eyes and still you did not see Her,  
When She, tricking Her devotee  
came in the guise of his daughter  
and mended his fence!  
He that meditates on Thee,  
O Mother, with steadfast mind wins Thee.  
Come then as his daughter and build the fence of Ramprasad."*

All devotional literature mentions the different attitudes taken by the worshipper when he approaches his chosen ideal. The attitude of self-surrender is often compared to a child, who entirely depends upon the protective love of its mother. This is the method of approach taken by Ramprasad. The intensely emotional nature of a child with its varying moods in its relation to its mother, never found better expression than in the lyrics of Ramprasad. Like a child, says Sister Nivedita, he is now grave, now gay, sometimes petulant, sometimes despairing. But in the child all this is purposeless. In Ramprasad, there is deep intensity of purpose. Every sentence he

has uttered is designed to sing the glory of his Mother. No flattery could touch a nature so unapproachable in its simplicity. For in these writings we have the spectacle of a great poet, whose genius is spent in realising the emotions of a child.

William Blake, in his own poetry, strikes a note that is nearest to his, and Blake is no means Ramprasad's peer. Robert Burns in his splendid indifference to rank, and Whitman in his glorification of common things, have points of kinship with him. But to such radiant white-heat of childlikeness, it would be impossible to find a perfect counter-part. Ramprasad was able to go deep into every feeling of a child and present them like a master artist.

*"Let me see Mother how you will escape?*

*Do not think it is as easy as snatching a banana from the hands of a child!*

*I shall so hide myself, Mother, that with all Your search You will not find me.*

*You will have to run after me like a cow after its calf.*

*Prasad says: You can play such tricks if Your son is a fool.*

*If You do not save me Mother, I tell you, Siva will be Your chastiser!"*

*The child is annoyed when his calls are not answered.*

*"Mother, I cry and yet again Mother, but you are deaf and blind!*

*While the mother lives and if the child suffers, what is the use of this mother to him?*

*Ramprasad says: Is this the mother's way?*

*Being mother to be the child's foe!*

*Day and night I muse; what further mischief You will do?*

*Perhaps You will force me to endure the pangs of birth again and again."*

Ramprasad worshipped Kali, the frightful aspect of the Divine Mother. But the terrible form never aroused the emotion of fear.

He sings:

*“Can evil ever befall a true worshipper?  
Rather in his delight he finds all things are good.  
By the power of the dread-visaged-One,  
Thy prayers are made effectual.  
Thou dost conquer both in this life and the next.  
Ramprasad, a poet and Her slave,  
is swimming in a sea of happiness.  
Can misfortune come to one, who worships?  
What care he for the dreadful things?  
He sits in the Virasana for his devotions (heroic Posture)  
and takes the name of Kali for his shield”.*

With the devotee's eyes Ramprasad perceived only the sublime beauty of the Divine. He went through all the forms of worship mentioned in the Tantric texts. But very soon he realised their hollowness.

*“From the land where there is no night has come One unto me.  
And night and day are now nothing to me.  
Ritual worship has become forever barren.  
My sleep is broken. Can I sleep anymore?  
Call it what you will—I am awake—  
Hush! I have given back sleep unto Him, whose it was.  
Sleep have I put to sleep for ever.  
The music has entered the instrument and of that mode  
I have learnt a song.  
Ah! that music is playing ever before me,  
For concentration is the great teacher thereof, Prasad says,  
Understand, O soul! These words of wisdom.”*

Ramprasad found that all places of pilgrimage are at the feet of the Mother. Thus he penned:

*“Why should I go to Benares?*

*My Mother’s lotus feet are millions and millions of holy places.*

*The books say, man dying in Benares attains Nirvana.*

*I believe it, Siva has said it.*

*But the root of all is devotion and freedom is her slave.*

*What good is there even in Nirvana?*

*Mixing water with water!*

*See, I do not care to become sugar.*

*I want to eat sugar.”*

What beautiful sentiments are packed in the last two sentences!

With a deep insight into the method of Tantric worship, he explains the symbolic expression of the outward rituals and points out the superiority of the conception of the Divine far above name and form and which can be reached by intense devotion of a pure mind.

*“Mind, why are you so anxious?*

*Utter Kali’s name and sit in meditation.*

*From all this pompous worship the mind grows proud.*

*Worship Her in secret, that none may know.*

*What is your gain from images of metal, stone or earth?*

*Fashion Her image with the stuff of your mind*

*and set it on the lotus of your heart.*

*Parched rice and plantains, how vainly do you offer these!*

*Feed Her with the nectar of your devotion*

*and satisfy your own mind.*

*Why seek to illumine Her with the lamp, lantern and candle?*

*Light the jewelled lamp of the mind,*

*Let it flash its lustre day and night.*

*Why do you bring sheep and goats for sacrifice?*

*Saying, ‘Victory to Kali, Victory to Kali!’ sacrifice the six passions.*

*Prasad says: What need is there for drums and symbols?*

*Saying ‘Victory to Kali’ clap your hands.*

*And lay your mind at Her feet.”*

By his intense *sadhanas* (austerities) he was able to realise the grandeur of the Divine form which fills 'the three worlds'. A realised person has no fear of death. "*Herald of Death, Avaunt; I am the son of the Almighty Mother. I can be the death to Death if I remember the Almighty Mother's name*", says he.

Even though Ramprasad speaks in the wailing tone of a child, his words emit the fire of ideals of sadhana and spiritual illumination.

Ramprasad lived most of his life in a village and it is no wonder that his poetry with a wealth of local colour and sublime simplicity should become part and parcel of the life of the villagers. The range of his ideas are wide, and the wealth of metaphor collected from the life of the agricultural people present charming pictures of the rural life of the times. The fallow fields of the farmer, who does not know how to cultivate, the damaged hut blown off by the tempest, the sinking boat overloaded with goods, the blind folded ox going round the oil-mill are some of the scenes that are most familiar even to children. Along with these, he mingled the popular legends connected with Siva and Uma, catchy to the village-folk. Although nearly two centuries have elapsed since Ramprasad left the world, his songs are sung with great devotional fervour by village folk who derive spiritual solace and inspiration from them.

Ramprasad lived and died a poet. Even to the last moment he sang the praise of the Divine Mother. It is said that he passed away in the year 1775 on the last day of Kali worship in his house. He must have been fully conscious that his last day has come as is evident from some of his songs.

*"The day is set and my life that sees this is trembling. You who are the shelter of the shelter less, World's Mother give me a place"* sings he.

The worship of the Mother was over and the image was being carried to the river for immersion, followed by Ramprasad whose mind was absorbed in ecstasy. The man carrying the image waded into the river and Ramprasad followed.

There wading in waist deep water he began to sing:  
*"Tara! Do You remember any more Mother?  
That You have kept me happy here; is it the same hereafter?  
Had Siva's words been true, I should not be beseeching You,  
O Mother!  
Delusion after delusion;  
But good omens are visible.  
If I had any other place to go, I would have never sought You.  
O Mother, You have filled me with hope, cut my bonds and lifted me up.  
Prasad says — my mind is firm and great is the power of Kali!  
Mother, my task is done and I have offered my dakshina\*."*

*(\*Dakshina means an offering)*

He repeated the last lines two or three times and in the end he shook off the mortal coil to be merged into the bosom of his beloved Mother. The final scenes of the worship of the Mother coincided with the last scene of the life of her devotee.

Although Ramprasad is said to have composed many songs, his fame mainly rests on his *Padavali* (Songs on Kali) and *Agamani* (advent songs of Sri Durga to Her parental home). His other works, excepting 'Vidyasundari' are very few in number.

He was succeeded by Kamalakanta and Neelkantha and a host of others, who followed his method, but could not attain the same prominence as Ramprasad.

The genius of poetry in one language can never be translated into another without robbing it of much of its pristine beauty. This is more so in the case of the songs of Ramprasad, who had full control over the language and whose songs abound in alliteration and puns, the charm of which does not yield to any translation. But his greatness does not rest on the artistic poetry of his songs but on the spiritual fervour which is the soul of his music.

(Reprinted from Vedanta Kesari, September, 1947-48)

## Is Renunciation Negative?

Marie Louise Burke

*(Marie Louise Burke was a member of the Vedanta Society of Northern California. In 1958 the results of her devoted and painstaking researches, extending over a period of seven years, were published in book form under the title, 'Swami Vivekananda in America: New Discoveries'.)*

One of the greatest obstacles to an understanding of Indian thought by the Western mind is the doctrine of renunciation. Despite the fact that Christ placed as much emphasis upon renunciation as have the religious teachers of India, it is a doctrine that has come to be thought of as peculiar to Indian tradition. When the average Western man comes upon it in his reading, he feels as though he has run up against something foreign and dangerous, something unsuited to his temperament—a way of life that is negative, pessimistic, somewhat abnormal, and of no practical value whatsoever—in short, 'Oriental'.

According to the Indian conception, renunciation is that way of life in which the individual endeavours to eradicate the sense of personal gratification from all his actions and thought. To this end he voluntarily abstains from sense pleasures, from the pursuit of fame, wealth and even the simple contentments of ordinary existence. His aim is to turn his mind inward to the contemplation of a reality higher than that of the phenomenal world, and to this end he throws all attachments and calculations to the winds and avoids involving himself in worldly pursuits.

Naturally enough, such a way of life is, at face value, incomprehensible to the average Western man. Religious sentiment notwithstanding, the life of renunciation amounts in his eyes to a willful and irrational rejection of all that makes life worth living. It appears obvious to him that because of some deep-rooted incapacity

to effect a proper response to the vicissitudes of civilization, the man of renunciation denies himself the compensating joys. He is like one who, because of the thorns, destroys the rose-bush. He turns morosely from beauty and love, from the warmth and drama of human relationships and from the comforts and pleasures of the senses, to embrace a sterile and monotonous existence. He crushes out in himself all the desires and ambitions which make action possible and which give meaning and zest to life, and for reasons that are mysterious and no doubt unwholesome cuts himself off from human experience in all its fascinating variations and depths. In other words, he willfully stagnates. With this view of renunciation in mind, one cannot wonder that the whole procedure is repellent to the normal man of common sense.

Many modern psychiatrists have justified the layman's instinctive recoil from renunciation by pointing out the dangers of retreating from the world of empirical reality. Such a retreat, they say, is not only motivated by a morbid sense of anxiety or guilt, but can in itself bring about further neurosis. It constitutes an escape into a world of dreams that have no bearing upon the world of fact. It is the displacement of the will to live by the will to die, and is anything but conducive to the well-rounded, integrated life.

The prevailing schools of modern Western philosophy judge the man of renunciation no less harshly. Those who renounce the world, the followers of these schools say, are not only attempting an escape from the harsh facts of empirical reality with which they cannot cope but, what is worse, they are seeking a goal which is totally unattainable and should not be even spoken of—transcendental reality. To the modern philosophers who follow in the footsteps of science such words as 'transcendental reality' are branded as meaningless. Speculation upon 'absolute truth', 'absolute knowledge' and the like is considered to be the bane of logical inquiry—sheer nonsense serving only to clutter the mind and side-track it in the

pursuit of truth. Human knowledge, these philosophers insist, is limited, whether man likes it or not, to those data which he derives through his senses and which can never give him absolute certainty in regard to anything at all. 'Absolute' is a word we can never use with good judgement, for it connotes something which can never have real meaning for us, or rather, it does not connote anything at all, for we can never touch, see, hear, smell or taste it.

It is granted among some thinkers of the present day that the individual who persists in aspiring toward 'absolute truth' may have some kind of subjective experience which he finds highly satisfactory, but, it is maintained, such experience can have no more bearing upon objective reality than can the dream of an opium-smoker. That which it reveals can never be communicated to others and can never be verified empirically.

It can make no contribution to the world's fund of knowledge and, as far as the scientific inquiry into the workings of the universe is concerned, it is of no value whatsoever. It is generally agreed among those who hold this view that man's most sensible approach to life is one in which he faces the facts of his own mental and sensory limitations and makes the best of them. If man must renounce, let him renounce the childish and retarding dream of 'certainty', and face the accident of his existence with whatever courage he can muster.

Aside from being considered psychologically unsound and philosophically illogical, the man who chooses the life of renunciation has also been branded as selfish and amoral. He not only fails to contribute actively to the collective welfare of the community, but irresponsibly withdraws even his passive support. He takes no interest in the improvement of man's life on earth, but is concerned solely with his own private, dubious and socially-useless salvation, sitting, perhaps, in some remote corner with folded hands and closed

eyes, leaving it to the rest of humanity to carry the burdens of the world.

But although the life of renunciation has received a good many condemnations, some of them shrill, none are based on an actual knowledge either of men who have renounced or of their reasons for doing so, and all of them, by stigmatizing Indian thought at the outset as 'world-and life-negating', tend to prevent further inquiry into a metaphysics that the whole world today is actually, if unconsciously, seeking with a desperate need.

Perhaps the most obvious refutation of the view that Indian philosophy is pessimistic and suffused with the will to die is the five thousand years of India's history. How so long a span of life has been possible for a people and culture whose primary purpose has been, in the words of a Western scholar, to reduce "*earthly existence to a condition of being which has no content beyond the waiting for the cessation of being*", is inexplicable. India's continuous civilization, the early days of which are found by some scholars to *be* contemporaneous with the early Sumerian, bespeaks a vitality and will to live that are unique in the history of the world. Nor has India's long history been a drab and stagnant one. It is studded with periods of tremendous creativity—golden ages during which great monarchs ruled with wisdom and benevolence, in which social life in all its aspects prospered and genius in all fields of human activity flourished. It is also a history scarred with periods of subjugation under foreign rule, times of enforced quiescence in which the cohesive social life withdrew behind the walls of the caste system and shut its doors to the intruder and in which creative vitality took the form of unshakeable endurance and fortitude.

How can one reconcile the facts of Indian history with the notion that all along the Indian people have been bent on self-destruction? It is not as though India lived a double life—the one negative and pessimistic but confined to the forests, and the other vital and creative,

independently pursuing its own interests in the cities and villages. Religion, philosophy and secular life have always been interwoven in Indian culture. Like an unbroken web, India's religious and philosophical thought has always spread over the land, embracing her richest courts and lowliest villages, guiding the lives of emperor, warrior, farmer and artisan alike, imbuing all with its doctrines. And yet India survives!

The simple explanation is that the philosophy that gives vitality to the tradition of renunciation is far from being negative; it is one of the most profoundly positive and invigorating systems of thought the world has ever known: and the life of renunciation, far from being based on the will to die, is the very soul of India's will to live.

The sadhus and sannyasins—the men of renunciation, who from time immemorial have wandered homeless throughout the land teaching their philosophy from village to village, or who have dwelt in forest ashramas surrounded by disciples—are the embodiments of profound and life-giving truths, sources of vitality and goodness that have enriched the entire culture. It is little wonder that through the ages men of secular power, wealth and genius have bowed their heads before them.

Men of renunciation are not fundamentally different from the majority of human beings. Their goal is the same toward which all men, saints or sinners, strive: their search is for self-fulfilment, for truth, goodness and beauty, for freedom and unity. The human soul deeply knows its own ends and cannot be turned aside from them. Man strives incessantly for self-expansion and for unity with his environment and with other men. Indeed, the whole history of civilization might be viewed as the collective attempt of men to add to themselves the universe, to break the barriers that separate them from other living beings, to extend their power infinitely and to throw the light of knowledge into

the most minute corner of the earth and across all space so that there remains nothing beyond their control.

Individually, man attempts to enlarge his scope by adding to himself innumerable possessions; he strives to extend his influence by gaining control over other men: he seeks to perpetuate himself endlessly through progeny; he reaches for love and joy through every pleasure the senses and mind can give and he thirsts for knowledge. He would become the centre of the cosmos—eternally freed from limitation, possessing all things, knowing all things and loving and being loved by all beings. Man in his hunger would swallow the universe. He is by no means resigned to his limitations on the contrary, he is continuously fretting against them. He feels hatred toward those who threaten to hamper him, and dejection when his hope of fulfillment is dashed. The human struggle for existence is not a simple matter of keeping body and soul together: collectively and individually men are driven by an insatiable hunger—a need not for mere survival but for omnipotence.

This struggle is universal. When the man who leads a life of renunciation turns aside from wordily pursuits, he does so for precisely the same reasons that the worldly man involves himself in all manner of activities. Both are endeavouring to shake free of limitation, both are attempting to fill a hunger. The only difference is that the man of renunciation does not disparage the immensity of his need by offering it bits and scraps. He has learned once and for all that man's hunger is an infinite hunger and can be filled only by infinity. Nothing short of that will satisfy. He has long since learned the facts that Western poets bemoan: the fading of finite beauty, the cooling of the most ardent human love, the decay of power, the elusiveness of knowledge, the ennui that stifles enthusiasm, and, above all, the inevitability of death. But the man of renunciation does not brood, as the poets, in sweet melancholy upon the effects of the passage of time. Rather, in a burning rebellion of spirit he searches

for that which does not fade or crumble, that which is a match for his hunger and which will fill him to the brim forever. Far from turning away from life in a slump of pessimism, he so loves it that he searches into its inmost depth for the imperishable treasure that he is sure is there.

One of the main difficulties between Eastern and Western philosophers seems to lie in the definition of reality. In fact, most Western philosophers of today refrain from defining reality at all, for they are very frank in acknowledging that they do not know, and probably never will know, what it is. Our experience, they say, is limited to that which impinges upon consciousness through the medium of the senses, and it is the data given by sense impressions which have upon us the impact of 'reality'. But we can never say what reality is in itself it is never the same from one moment to the next it has no independent existence and, when it is analyzed, no substance.

As far as sense-knowledge goes, Indian and Western philosophers, are, on the whole, in agreement, but while the Western philosopher stops here and endeavours to make the best of a hopeless situation, the philosopher of India inquires further into the very nature of experience itself. Why does the phenomenal world, which upon analysis is found to be not real at all, *seem* so real to us? The question probes into both the fundamental nature of reality and the fundamental nature of experience. The answers given by various schools of Indian philosophy are intricate and fine to a hair's breadth and involve all the problems of metaphysics that man has puzzled over since he first attempted to explain himself to himself, but these complexities need not be entered into here.

Some of the highest schools of Indian philosophy have asserted — to put the matter simply — that the sense of reality is like a light that shines through all levels of perception, and that it is this light alone that makes for experience. Moreover, the sense of reality derives from the Real itself, which is identified with unqualified Consciousness.

It is the shining of this pure Consciousness through the medium of the mind and senses that imbues the phenomenal world with the reality it seems to have. Reality actually lies not in the form, but in the fundamental essence of experience. The beauty and joy that man intuits in the objects of his senses—the beauty and joy of *being* that seem to shine forth from all things of space and time—reside not in the form of those things themselves, but in the eternity of man's own Consciousness—the infinite, all-pervasive Self or Spirit. It is Spirit or pure Consciousness that is alone real and unchanging. It is Sat-Chit-Ananda, ultimate Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. It is Brahman, eternal and immutable.

But is not 'Spirit' one of those nonsense words so irritating to most modern thinkers? What is Spirit? Who has seen It? And who, having seen it, can tell others of It? What bearing can It have upon our knowledge of the universe? Is not Sat-Chit-Ananda—Existence without form, Consciousness without content, and Joy as an essence rather than a quality—a mere abstraction and meaningless to us who are, after all, limited to knowledge derived through the senses? The answer to this is that man is limited to sense-knowledge only in his present state. Actually, he is not merely a bundle of sensations, but is an infinitely profound being, capable of deeper and ever deeper levels of experience until at last all the media through which Consciousness shines are cast aside and Consciousness itself is known in Its pure state. That which is less dense and gross seems less real to us now only because we identify ourselves with the gross. But when the individual discovers his true identity with Spirit, Spirit is real to him; it is, in fact, *the* real.

Far from being an abstraction, *Sat-Chit-Ananda* is the very substance of all phenomena, seen now fragmented and distorted through a veil of sense perception, but capable of being known in and for Itself. To know, in this sense, is to 'be'; it is to have become at last identified with that for which we have always sought. For has not

our struggle always been toward the real, our effort always to discover not what is less real but what is more real, until reality itself is reached?

We seek that which is ultimately real without quite knowing what we do; the man of renunciation, on the other hand, seeks it consciously and persistently. To him this search is not only the sum and substance of all religions, but is the meaning of his total existence. But why, we might ask, must he renounce? Cannot sense experience lead us into the heart of existence? Can it not widen our knowledge and make our minds and hearts more subtle and sensitive to an ever richer and more profound contact with reality? To be sure, this is the hope that springs eternal. But in the final analysis, if experience teaches us anything at all, it teaches us that it is a false hope. Cultural and moral experience can lead only so far—it can lead to the recognition that in itself it is not enough, that the infinite cannot be attained through the finite no matter how refined our perception of the finite may be.

At best, it is only in rare flashes that we intuit the true state of affairs. To everyone brief moments of self-forgetfulness come when, in the contemplation of the beautiful, one seems suddenly to glimpse something beyond the world of form, some piercing beauty and joy that are indescribable in terms of sense qualities and unforgettable in their impact. In such moments one seems to come closer to pure being, and to taste reality in a deeper and far more satisfying sense than one has ever tasted it before; and one speaks of such rare and precious moments both as 'having lost oneself' and as 'having really been alive'.

What has momentarily been lost, at least in part, is the small ego, which continually refers the universe and all in it to the hard and dead shell of its own finitude—a process which ordinarily we call 'experience'. What has been discovered, or, rather, dimly, faintly intuited, is the infinite Self, the Self that is the very centre of all aliveness and independent of the innumerable forms and sensations

through which it shines. Involuntarily, accidentally, we have caught for a passing second a pale and distant glimpse of that which the man of renunciation consciously strives to know permanently and in full measure.

Renunciation, it should be noted here, is never the mere outward denial of the senses: it is the persistent attempt to focus the attention upon the essence rather than the form, to centre one's identity in the all-embracing Self rather than in the limited ego. It is always easier, however, to break old habits of thought by avoiding old haunts. It is because of this simple fact that the man who aspires toward the real turns from the world and its ways. One cannot serve God and mammon: one cannot, in other words, serve both the Self and the ego at the same time; one cannot perceive the limitless and the limited at once. Thus, if the spiritual aspirant mortifies his senses, it is never for the sake of mortification, but for the sake of learning to perceive the unalloyed source of joy. His is a positive and not a negative move; it is motivated by the conviction that beneath the world of changing form and beneath his own psycho-physical being lies the eternally real and eternally fulfilled Self.

But still we may ask: is not his whole way of life based upon a mere speculation? How can he know that the goal which he sets for himself is humanly attainable? Is not the whole quest an impractical one? The only really satisfactory answer to this is that the goal has been attained—not once but many times. Indian sages agree wholeheartedly with the empirical philosophers of the West in their emphatic insistence upon experience as a test of truth. Just as modern Western philosophy is built upon sensory experience, so the highest systems of Indian thought are built upon mystical experience; they are never mere intellectual gymnastics. They are, on the one hand, a rational interpretation of transcendental experience and, on the other, a guide to the attainment of that experience. They serve as a bridge

between the relative and the absolute: not a bridge of words, but of very real and vital facts.

We in the Western world are at a great disadvantage in grasping the true significance of spiritual philosophy and practice, in that men of supersensory experience do not, to say the least, abound among us. Despite the fact that the teachings of Christ are available to all, and that Christianity has produced its great saints and mystics, the average Western man has little conception of what spirituality really means. This is not to say that there are not many sincere students of mysticism in the West; but it is not enough to be told by one of these who has not experienced its truth that the goal of life is the realization of the Self. Regardless of the fervour the student puts behind his own words, there is nothing in our ordinary experience that sounds a responsive note, and nothing new wakes up within us. Politely, and even hopefully, we may agree that what he says is true, but still the words seem nothing but words, and we do not want to exchange what we know of the real, however transitory and limited it may be, for a mere conception, however glorious.

But to hear the same words from one to whom the transcendental experience is a fact is an entirely different matter. When such a person speaks, his voice rings with the authority of direct knowledge, and his words have the power of awakening within us our own intuition of their truth. Spirit speaks to and awakens Spirit, just as life generates life. Were this not true, religion would become a mockery, a bundle of superstitions and wishful thinking, as it has, in fact, become in cultures where it is not an actual and transmittable power in living men. It is only because illumined men have lived and spread their influence that we can know that supersensory experience is not only attainable but transforming—that through it man becomes truly godlike. To ignore the lives and teachings of such men is to ignore man's greatest achievement and most profound experience, and

hardly bespeaks the open-mindedness of which modern thinkers boast.

The accusation of selfishness levelled against those who undertake the life of renunciation is, in large measure, due to the same lack of knowledge which brings about the charge of impracticality. The criticism is often made that he who renounces the world does so solely for the sake of his own salvation with no regard whatsoever for the rest of the world. But Buddha, whose philosophy is thought by some Western scholars to be the most negative and world-denying of all, renounced the world for the sole purpose of tracing down the basic cause of world misery that he might discover its cure. His own salvation was never a consideration. Christ was a man of renunciation: the Western world need not be told that he was not selfish. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda were men of intense renunciation and also of intense compassion. Selflessness is, of course, expected from those who are considered to be Divine Incarnations, for they came to the world solely in order to help it. But even lesser holy men and saints are known to us by virtue of their self-abnegation and power to lift others.

The fact is that there is nothing to distort or obstruct the spontaneous and beneficent action that flows from the fully enlightened individual. Having attained to that beyond which there is nothing more to desire, his motives for action are entirely pure. He cannot fear another as a possible threat to his happiness: he cannot become attached to another as a means of self-gratification. He is unconcerned with the pleasures and pains of his own psycho-physical existence, for his real life is centred in his eternal being. It is from this vantage point that he understands the true significance of all human struggle and sorrow. He knows man's real need and how to fill it. Knowing himself and all men as divine, his service to others is transformed into worship and is undertaken not with a sense of duty, but with self-forgetful reverence. He is,

in short, anything but selfish. He is the very embodiment of selflessness.

On the whole, what we really mean when we criticize the man who undertakes a life of renunciation is that we miss his participation in those worldly pursuits and interests the value of which we ourselves, in our hearts question. We are like blind and frightened men stranded on a small raft in a vast ocean. When one of our members, less blind than the others, has glimpsed land close by and strikes out alone to bring back help, we find him insane for we do not believe that help is possible; we find him lacking in the will to live, for we think he has thrown himself into the black unknown to drown: and we find him selfish because he has withdrawn his support from the group whose only comfort is in clinging together. Above all, we cannot easily forgive him, for deep within us we suspect that, in some way we do not understand, he is right.

But some day we too shall strike out for land. The life of renunciation is natural to that stage of spiritual advancement which every soul will reach in its progress toward truth. Therefore it is a life whose psychology and aims every man should understand now, for an understanding of them will give him not only a greater insight into the profundity and universality of Indian thought but a greater sympathy with those who actually live in accordance with, and thus give power to that thought.

Theirs is the life we all shall one day lead, in this birth or another—the life in which we shall acclaim our true humanity and aspire toward the full realization of our essential reality. It is a positive and abundant life, undertaken by the world's most hardy and intuitive souls. It is by their courage and aspiration that the whole world can be strengthened in hope and brought closer to the eternity of peace and certainty that we all without exception seek.

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## Notes of Conversations with Swami Saradananda

### I

Disciple: X— instructs his disciples not to practise Japa without taking bath etc. Are such observances compulsory?

Swami: The Master came to make religion easy. People were being crushed under the weight of rules and regulations. To repeat the Lord's name and to worship Him no special time and place are necessary. In whatever condition one may be, one can take His name. The Master never used to give too much importance to these external observances. As to means, whichever suits you best. If you like God with form, that will also lead you to the goal. If you like God without form, well and good; stick to it and you will progress. As to how to worship Him, or if you even doubt His very existence, then better put the question to Him thus: *"I do not know whether Thou existeth or not, whether Thou art formless or with form. Do Thou make known to me Thy real nature."* As to changing of clothes, taking bath, and other external observances, if you can observe them, well and good; if not, go on calling on Him without paying much attention to all these. The Master once sang a song to me and told me,

Assimilate any one of these ideas and you will reach the goal. The song runs as follows :

*"O Lord, Thou art my everything, the sole support of my life, the quintessence of reality. There is none else besides Thee in this world whom I can call as my own."*

*“Thou art happiness, peace, help, wealth, knowledge, intellect, and strength; Thou art the dwelling and the pleasure garden; Thou art the friend and relative.*

*“Thou art this present life, the sole refuge; Thou art the life hereafter and the heaven; Thou art the injunction of the scriptures, the Guru full of blessings, and the receptacle of infinite bliss.*

*“Thou art the way and the goal; Thou art the creator and preserver and the worshipped; Thou art the father that punishest Thy child, the loving mother, and the receptacle of infinite bliss art Thou”.*

Disciple: What do you think about astrological calculations as to auspicious and inauspicious moments?

Swami: Sri Ramakrishna used to observe these things. He believed in auspicious and inauspicious times. And because he used to observe these things we too observe them. But then, these calculations, nowadays, are not absolutely correct. There have been many changes in the position of the constellations and planets, but these calculations have not been corrected accordingly. So, nowadays, I do not observe them so much.

Disciple: The Master used to say that *Shraddha* food (food offered to manes) is harmful to Bhakti. Why is it so?

Swami: The object of food is to build a strong body and a fine intellect. Unless the body and the mind are pure it is not possible to go through spiritual practices. It is the food that is offered to God, that builds a pure body and mind. The *Shraddha* food is offered to the manes and not to God and as a result instead of building a pure mind and body it affects them otherwise. Food builds the body and the mind and according to the nature of the food it affects them also. In Chaitanya’s life we have a case where an ordinary man who happened to touch him in a state of ecstasy was also overpowered by religious emotions. He was prescribed

to take Shraddha food to get over these emotions and as a matter of fact this food did put an end to that person's ecstatic moods.

Disciple: Why is the time of an eclipse considered auspicious for the practice of Japa?

Swami: Man becomes thoughtful when such a natural phenomenon takes place. Eclipse brings a great change in the sphere of nature. At such a juncture when nature passes from one condition to another, the mind becomes calm and so the time is favourable for the practice of Japa and meditation.

Disciple: Have any realized God through mere work?

Swami: Through selfless work the mind gets purified. And when the mind becomes pure, there arise Knowledge and devotion in it. Knowledge is the very nature of the Self but being covered with ignorance it is not manifest. The object of selfless work is to remove this covering. As a matter of fact Knowledge dawns as soon as the mind becomes pure. In the Mahabharata you have the story of the chaste lady who attained Knowledge through service to her husband and through other household duties. In the Gita also you find, "*By work alone Janaka and others attained perfection.*" Not one but many attained perfection through work, for the text adds "*and others*".

Disciple: Does work here mean Japa, meditation, etc.?

Swami: No. That meaning is given by the commentators. If it were so then Sri Krishna would have asked Arjuna to ring bells and wave lights before an image of God. Instead he made him fight.

Disciple: Did Arjuna fight without any sense of ego, as an instrument in the hands of the Lord?

Swami: Certainly. If the ego persists even after the vision of the Universal Form then what end will this vision serve? Arjuna

says, “*My delusion is destroyed and I have regained memory through Thy grace*”.

Disciple: What is the meaning of the word ‘memory’ in that verse?

Swami: Arjuna had forgotten the teachings of the scriptures and of the Guru. All those principles, adhering to which Arjuna was progressing he had forgotten, being overcome by delusion. Fear, love of relatives, and respect for his elders had given rise to this delusion. The Advaitists interpret ‘memory’ as ‘the regaining of the consciousness of his real nature’. They too have given a very fine interpretation.

When the Vaishnavas progress in their spiritual practice and reach the Advaita consciousness they avoid it and try to keep permanently a relationship with the Lord. They consider that to become one with Him is an obstacle in their way and so the moment they get a scent of this consciousness they get alert to ward it off. In fact to *Shanta-bhava*, or the peaceful devotion, which is the culmination of *Advaita Sadhan*, they give the lowest place. They develop the emotional side and direct it towards the Lord—this they think is the highest goal. From the highest pitch of emotion we have the *Madhura-bhava* or the sweet conjugal relationship with the Lord.

Disciple: What is the meaning of the verse, “*Relinquishing all Dharmas take refuge in Me alone,*” etc.?

Swami: Here *Dharma* means ritualistic works, Japa, etc. Tilak interprets it as the Dharma spoken of in the Mahabharata, viz. service to parents, guests, etc. But this is not correct, for even through such service some attained Knowledge. His interpretations of the Gita is one-sided, for he wants to show that the object of the whole Gita is to establish the path of Work.

The Gita praises highly self-effort. In this verse the Lord hints that this self-effort has a limit.

Disciple: Which is the best season for spiritual practices?

Swami: The rainy season is not suited for spiritual practices. One gets drowsy when one tries to meditate. We experienced this. In that season the restlessness of the mind increases. Winter is best suited for meditation. Those who want to meditate must take healthy and substantial food. Ghee, butter, etc. are good.

Disciple: Why is the *Kundalini* imagined to be like a snake?

Swami: I am not sure of the exact reason. Probably it is because the impressions of myriads of lives are heaped up in coils or probably it is because the upward motion of the awakened Kundalini is in a zig-zag way like that of a serpent. Describing the Kundalini the Master, in a state of ecstasy, once said, "*Have you seen the serpent?*"

Disciple: What is the nature of the meditation on the formless?

Swami: The meditation of the Lord in the *Sahasrara* which you do at the time of ceremonial worship is meditation on the formless. When you do not like any form meditate on the formless. If the meditation on the form of the Guru is more appealing at any time then better meditate on the Guru, for the Lord manifests through the Guru.

Disciple: Is mechanical repetition of the Mantra of any use?

Swami: The Tantras say that through the repetition of the Mantra realization is attained.

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## Cosmic Vision

Swami Shraddhananda

The recent spectacular achievements of science and technology in the exploration of space have roused greater interest in the heavens than at any time before. Novel adventures in regions of space remote from this old familiar earth of ours are increasingly capturing our imagination. Pascal's sense of awe at the thought of the vast celestial regions sounds childish now. A new self-confidence and courage inspire man with the hope of bridging the gulf that separates him from other worlds.

Surely this is a landmark in the history of man. Yet there is a gloomy side to the picture. In spite of man's plumbing the mysteries of the heavens with his penetrating intellect, his heart has not expanded to any appreciable degree. When questioned about the future benefits of space achievements, many of our scientists cannot but think and talk in terms of military strategy. For example, a rocket base in the moon would be an invulnerable point from which the enemy could be crushed without fear of retaliation; an artificial satellite might serve as an *'eye-in-the-sky'* for watching enemy territory, and so on. Our cosmic achievements then, are significant only if they can further our selfish interests—subjugation of the enemy, acquisition of material wealth, power, etc. Increased scientific knowledge of the heavens has not brought any widening of our moral, humanitarian or spiritual outlook. We are cosmos-minded but do not have a cosmic vision.

There was a time when the 'starry heavens' used to move the heart of man in a different way. They instilled a profound sense of wonder, joy and freedom from the petty desires and conflicts of our everyday life. Though man's knowledge of the cosmos was

extremely meagre compared with what he possesses now, he was surely richer in another type of synthetic wisdom that embraced a unity and harmony throughout the vast universe and established a spiritual kinship between himself and his surroundings, near or remote. The benefits of this wisdom could not, of course, be tabulated in terms of military strategy, but it certainly brought to man a wonderful expansion of his basic emotional and spiritual values.

Cosmic vision has been the dream of not a small number of men at various periods in the history of human thought. There seems to be something fundamental in the nature of man that inspires him to this dream. It is the dream of comprehending and contacting the infinite. We know of poets who have flown on the wings of fancy beyond our moon and sun and sung for us the music of higher spheres. We are acquainted with philosophers who based their systems of thought on the sublime speculation of an all-inclusive reality—God. We read accounts of mystics who claim to have super-sensuous experience of a mighty Divine Love pervading all creation. All these 'visions' do not, of course, possess the same degree of validity. Some are pieces of creative imagination, some are intellectual conjectures and some may be classed as individual psychic experiences with a colouring of subjectivity. Yet one fact is undeniable. These 'visions' have a special appeal to the human mind. They seem to express a powerful subconscious urge of man. Somehow man seems to feel that the vast universe over and around him is not alien to his own being. Some sort of inseparable unity must comprehend him and his entire cosmic environment. And he wants to experience this unity tangibly in knowledge and love.

We have to look to Vedanta for a rationale of this strong unitive urge of man. The Upanishads declare that the human

consciousness, below its surface manifestation in thoughts and emotions, is a deeper reality—an infinite existence-awareness-bliss, free, self-proved, unchanging. Our familiar psycho-physical personality is grounded in this true core of our being. All our knowledge and activities receive their light and power from this pure Consciousness—our true Self. Psycho-physical personalities—the egos—are many, but this basic reality, our true Self, is one undivided universal entity. All men are really brothers, nay, they are one, because they live and move in one existence—the Self.

The universe of our experience, too, according to Vedanta, has two faces: one superficial, transient and the other deeper, truer. The former is presented to the psycho-physical personality as a multiplicity of spatio-temporal objects and phenomena which change incessantly. The other face is an abiding reality unaffected by the space-time flux. In fact, it is the same infinite Existence-Consciousness below our surface personality. The true face of man and the true face of the cosmos are one. It is this underlying fundamental unity of man with his universe which is responsible for man's dreams of a Cosmic Vision. Poets, philosophers and mystics have been stirred by the intuitional feeling of this unity in different degrees.

The Upanishads declare that cosmic vision is a necessary corollary of self-knowledge. If, in the last analysis, the true Self of man is one with all existence, then it is reasonable to assume that when man discovers himself he cannot but see the cosmos as part and parcel of his own truth. Whatever is, is in him. We read in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (8.1.2-3) a question posed by the disciples:

*"In this City of Brahman (i.e., the human body), in that small mansion in the shape of a lotus (the heart), in the small inner Akasha (space) within—what is it that has to be sought and understood?"*

And the teacher replies:

*"As vast indeed is the external space, so is that space within the heart. In it indeed are contained both heaven and earth, fire and air, the sun and the moon, lightning and the stars. Whatever there is in this world and whatever is not, all that is contained in this internal space of the heart."*

By "*the space within the heart*" the Upanishad means pure consciousness—the true Self of man. So the above indicates that what we see as the vast spatio-temporal universe is contained in our true Self as a mode of consciousness. Similar utterances are abundant in almost all the Upanishads. These words should not be taken as mere figures of speech. Vedanta claims that the nature of our Self as Cosmic Consciousness is a scientific fact, true for all men, and universally verifiable by anyone who is prepared to undertake the task seriously. Each science has its own background and specific methods of research. The scientific study of the deeper strata of our consciousness, too, should naturally have its own pattern of investigation. Vedanta has clearly delineated the details of this pattern.

Cosmic vision as well-defined valid knowledge is surely much more worthy of attention than as mere rhetoric, speculation or subjective ecstasy. The latter are, no doubt, pointers to a distant truth and as such may have a certain charm and power, but the case appears to be quite different when that distant truth becomes precise knowledge without any shadow of doubt or confusion. The Upanishads unequivocally assure us that it is possible for man here and now to have a direct, clear and immediate knowledge of his Self as the total reality encompassing everything in this universe, animate or inanimate.

What happens to a man when and if such a vision enters into the texture of his mind? Does he live or die under the weight of

his knowledge? Does he move and work or become useless to society? Well, if we believe in the testimony of Vedanta we may be certain that the person enjoys a wonderfully new life and becomes a great asset to humanity.

Self-knowledge brings a radical transformation in one's ideas, ideals and behaviour. All the meanness, selfishness and restlessness of one's character give place to a spontaneous magnanimity, fellow-feeling and calmness. A person no more thinks and talks in terms of his sense-bound little self. No falsehood or hatred or lust or greed can animate him. No vested interest can prevent him from acting for truth and justice. The background of his thoughts and actions is a lived experience of unity with all. His is a Cosmic personality. He has become godly, divine.

Adventures and achievements in outer space have their value, our purpose is not to minimize them. But it is up to man with his urge to explore the unknown not to forget the tremendous possibilities of an ancient science—the exploration of human consciousness. Never before has the study of this science been more needed than at the present time. Modern man, to escape from his plight, must discover a basic harmony in his own life as well as in the world in which he lives. This harmony can only be achieved if he can attain the Cosmic Vision springing from the knowledge of his own true Self.

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# Swami Vivekananda: The Message of Strength

Prof. S. S. Raghavachar

**I**t is beyond the competence of any one with no element of greatness in himself to comprehend or give fitting expression to the message of the great Swami Vivekananda. As in all Prophets and Seers there is a touch of the infinite in the Swami.

This essential message may be named the message of strength. The Swami was himself strength and vitality incarnate and imparted through his words of fire boundless power and energy.

## The nature of the strength

Physical strength was undoubtedly a part of it according to him. He demanded muscles of iron and nerves of steel in his followers.

Economic well-being constituted another essential element; poverty and economic misery moved him to passionate outbursts. Even religion loses its value if it does not emancipate the nation from economic evils.

Intellectual power was the third factor in the composition of strength. Swami Vivekananda had a distinct philosophy of Education.

Education for him meant the liberation of the inexhaustible inner potentialities of man. Acquisition of information was not for him the function of Education. The development of creative personality through concentration and character were the ideals of education for him. Learning is positive self-realization through an integrated intellect and devoted will.

Ultimately strength meant for Swami Vivekananda, the effective recovery and manifestation of the 'Atman' in man. The real element in the making of man is the Atman and Atman is the

reservoir of infinite power and splendour. Strength born of the Atman is true strength. The release of the Atman to the full glory of its expansion is the fundamental strength. This is the self de-hypnotisation that the Swami preached.

True spirituality is strength and true strength is spiritual is an equation we owe to Swami Vivekananda. He is resurrecting for us the two complimentary insights of the Upanishads: (*'Nayamatma balahinena labhyah' 'Atmana vindate vlyam'.*)

*"This Atman cannot be attained by the weak. Through the Atman one obtains strength."* This philosophy of strength has nothing in common with the glorification of mere force and violence. It is not destructive, it is power making for peace and selfless devotion to the common good.

Swami Vivekananda goes to the extent of saying that all inhumanity and selfishness are forms of weakness. *'We lie, steal, kill and commit other crimes, because we are weak'*. The strength of his conception is a tremendous ethical force, generating social harmony and inspiring heroic self-sacrifice.

#### Relevance of Swami Vivekananda today:

The evils that called forth the liberating gospel of the Swamiji are not extinct. We have not eliminated all the forms of weakness.

We are politically free. But are we emancipated from pettiness of spirit and deterioration of national character?

Are we economically, intellectually as strong as he wished?

What of spiritual strength? It is as much a need, a crying need today, as it was sixty years ago.

To return to the message of Swami Vivekananda

We have to develop strength of his conception. Swami Vivekananda has delineated for us outlines the methods to be pursued for achieving freedom and strength. They are the four yogas: Bhakti, Jnana, Karma and Raja yoga.

I venture to think the systematic formulation of these yogas in clear relief is decidedly an original contribution of Swamiji.

The scheme of the four yogas does justice to the several dimensions of human personality and Swamiji took care to see the inner logic of all the four and worked out then final co-ordination.

Jnana-yoga is philosophical reflection aiming at the discrimination of the real and the apparent. It sees the reality of the external world in the cosmic spirit, the '*Brahman*' and the reality of man in the '*Atman*' the essential Self in man. It culminates in the discovery of the identity of Brahman and Atman.

Bhakti-yoga consists in the cultivation of love and adoration towards the supreme reality and culminates in the final integration of the individual with the absolute through the power of love supreme.

Karma-yoga is ethical endeavour through dedicated action. It culminates in the achievement of impersonality and universality. This losing of the little self for the Self-universal, this consecration of individual exertion for universal life is freedom or *mukti*. Our real self is absolute, universal and cosmic; selfless activity brings into manifestation this inner reality of man and destroys the illusion of particularity.

Raja-yoga is the perfecting of the cognitive machinery so as to gain an immediate apprehension of the real and the absolute Atman. It is such apprehension that is the basis of all religions and it is the goal of all religious life. Through Raja-yoga, the Atman passes from the status of a dogma to that of a fact, and faith is

transmuted into perception. It is the scientific validation of spiritual truth. Each of these methods can be self-sufficient and can also be pursued together with the others.

There is yet another service of the Swamiji that demands adequate recognition. He was no mere revivalist simply restating the conventional theory of yogas. In his formulation, they acquire an elevation. There is creative rethinking, and the older methods of realization emerge transfigured with a new beauty and added power. Certain limitations and undesirable accretions had gathered round these in the older formulations. Swami Vivekananda purified them in his statement. They shine forth in all their natural depth and vastness of import.

Jnana-yoga, in its older formulations, was invariably coupled with *sannyasa* or renunciation. It was an old and well-established idea that the highest truth was discoverable only through the complete dedication. The principle is illustrated in the career of Bhagavan Buddha. Swami Vivekananda accepted the principle but breathed into *sannyasa* a fresh and positive meaning. It was not mere renunciation but renunciation and service. The ideal of *sannyasa* gets in his hand a profoundly humanitarian connotation. It is this interpretation that has conferred on the order of monks founded by him all the uniquely constructive character it possesses. Jnana-yoga for Swami Vivekananda is no mere contemplation in solitude and retirement but the pursuit of knowledge in and through the most ardent and dynamic social service. The welfare of the world gets welded into the very substance of the contemplative life. *Sannyasa* is thus transformed into a positive social force. The apparently negative virtue of renunciation is thus reshaped into an expansive ideal of energetic action.

Action or karma itself received an enlarged and universalized meaning in the new version of Karma-yoga. It no longer signified

ritual action or mere conformity to the conventional code of morals. The concept of one's duty, *Swadharma* was extricated from the conservative caste-dharma based on mere birth and tradition. Karma in its new significance means humanitarian action in accordance with one's aptitude and ability, and disinterestedness becomes the criterion for evaluating inherited customs and codes themselves. The spirit of dedication that should inspire social morality becomes a revolutionary force. This is a signal contribution, for as understood of old Karma-yoga might simply mean ritualism and uncomplaining submission to the existing social order. The ideas of privilege and social hierarchy are abandoned and a powerful conception of duty emerges in consequence. Society should be so shaped and reordered that the highest ideals must be capable of realization in it.

Similar is the effect of the reconstruction of Bhakti-yoga. The essence of the religion of love is sublime. But in the history of Indian religion Bhakti-yoga has tended to degenerate into fanaticism and sectarianism. Cults, theologies and narrow mythological conceptions of the Deity got blended with the Universal gospel of love. In Swami Vivekananda's formulation of devotion, *Bhakti* all its intensity is maintained but there is a liberating universality. For the first time in the history of the Bhakti movement sectarianism is transcended and the object of devout adoration is conceived in utmost catholicity of spirit. Such a release of Bhakti from its narrow moulds enhances its power and scope, for fanaticism is fundamentally a species of weakness. Further, Bhakti-yoga has a tendency to degenerate in another aspect. It easily becomes mere sentimentalism and emotionalism giving rise to the attitude of self-abasement. The object of devotion is also pictured in soft and anthropomorphic colours. Swami Vivekananda sharply reacted to these aberrations. He preached

the gospel of heroic love, which includes a triumphant faith in oneself and a readiness to adore even the most destructive manifestations of the Deity. Bhakti without the weakening self-abasement and Bhakti towards God, the terrible, is an altogether new and invigorating mode of piety. In this form Love of God becomes an irresistible species of strength and vitality.

Raja-yoga has a fine inspiration behind it and brings into spiritual life a certain method and technique. But unfortunately in its conventional setting it got mixed up with occultism and mystery-mongering and became the arena of superstitions and miracles. Attainment of supernormal powers that could be utilised even for inferior ends of life became the chief interest in Yoga. Swami Vivekananda fought down this tendency and rescued Raja-yoga from its degrading associations. He set forth its principles in all the scientific and philosophical purity and demonstrated its supreme function in practical spirituality. This spiritualization of yoga, its elevation from the realm of magic to that of science is one of his greatest services.

Thus in all his reaffirmations Swami Vivekananda purified and perfected what he revived. There is both conservation and enrichment in all his versions of older principles. Presented in this fashion his gospel of strength and the methods of attaining it become the philosophy of New Vedanta combining the essential wisdom of the ancients with the rational and humanitarian temper of the best in modern thought. It is difficult to believe that we as individuals and as a nation can achieve anything of consequence without living up to the glorious heritage of Swami Vivekananda.

May his spirit guide us.

## A Preface to the Imitation of Christ

Swami Vivekananda

**T**he Imitation of Christ is a cherished treasure of the Christian world. This great book was written by a Roman Catholic monk. “Written” perhaps is not the proper word. It would be more appropriate to say that each letter of the book is marked deep with the heart’s blood of the great soul who had renounced all for his love of Christ.

That great soul whose words, living and burning, have cast such a spell for the last four hundred years over the hearts of myriads of men and women; whose influence today remains as strong as ever and is destined to endure for all time to come; before whose genius and sadhana hundreds of crowned heads have bent down in reverence; and before whose matchless purity the jarring sectaries of Christendom whose name is legion have sunk their differences of centuries in common veneration to a common principle — that great soul, strange to say, has not thought fit to put his name to a book such as this.

Yet there is nothing strange here after all, for why should he? Is it possible for one who totally renounced all earthly joys and despised the desire for the bauble fame as so much dirt and filth—is it possible for such a soul to care for that paltry thing, a mere author’s name? Posterity, however, has guessed that the author was Thomas a Kempis, a Roman Catholic monk. How far the guess is true is known only to God. But be he who he may, that he deserves the world’s adoration is a truth that can be gainsaid by none.

We happen to be the subjects of a Christian Government now. Through its favour it has been our lot to meet Christians of so many sects, native as well as foreign. How startling the divergence between their profession and practice! Here stands the Christian missionary preaching: “*Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. Take no thought of the morrow*” — and then busy soon after making his pile and framing his budget for ten years in advance! There he says that he follows him who ‘*hath not where to lay his head*’, glibly talking of the glorious sacrifice and burning

renunciation of the Master, but in practice going about like a gay bridegroom, fully enjoying all the comforts the world can bestow!

Look where we may, a true Christian nowhere do we see. The ugly impression left on our mind by the ultra-luxurious, insolent, despotic, barouche-and-brougham-driving Christians of the Protestant sects will be completely removed if we once read this great book with the attention it deserves.

All wise men think alike. The reader, while reading this book, will hear the echo of the Bhagavad-Geeta over and over again. Like the Bhagavad-Geeta it says: '*Give up all dharmas and follow Me*'. The spirit of humility, the panting of the distressed soul, the best expression of *dasya bhakti* (devotion as a servant) will be found imprinted on every line of this great book and the reader's heart will be profoundly stirred by the author's thoughts of burning renunciation, marvellous surrender and deep sense of dependence on the will of God.

To those of my countrymen, who under the influence of blind bigotry may seek to belittle this book because it is the work of a Christian, I shall quote only one aphorism of *Vaisheshika Darsana* and say nothing more.

The aphorism is this: "The teachings of *siddha purushas* (perfected souls) have a probative force and this is technically known as *sabda pramana*" (verbal evidence).

If in ancient times Greek astronomers like Yavanacharya could have been so highly esteemed by our Aryan ancestors, then it is incredible that this work of the lion of devotees will fail to be appreciated by my countrymen.

Be that as it may, we shall place the Bengali translation of this book before our readers seriatim. We trust that the readers of Bengal will spend at least one hundredth part of the time they waste over cart-loads of trashy novels and dramas.

I have tried to make the translation as literal as possible, but I cannot say how far I have succeeded. The allusions to the Bible in several passages are given in the foot-notes.

## Leaves from an Ashrama: 60

### Adoration on a Cold Night

Swami Vidyatmananda

I had for a long time wanted to visit Santiago de Compostela, that holy city in northwestern Spain where the purported remains of St. James, disciple of Jesus, have been venerated since the ninth century. I had often visualized, with nostalgia, the great pilgrimages of the past, all through the Middle Ages, when hundreds of thousands of Christian believers every year made their way down through France, across the hazardous Pyrenees, and a thousand kilometres farther to the shrine. A half-year's journey on foot, which only a fraction completed, some turning back, some dying of exhaustion or perils on the route. One who reached Santiago and lived to tell the tale was almost revered as a Christian equivalent of a *jivanmukta* — released while living.

And so I retraced the Way of St. James in a rented car. But how to recapture the ardour, the excited anticipation, of those men and women of the Age of Faith? I conscientiously stopped to see the chapels, monasteries, and hospices — or what is left of them — constructed to minister to the physical and spiritual needs of the pilgrims along the Way.

Santiago itself proved to be a city of noble architecture and noble memories. I prayed in the crypt before the silver casket reputed to contain the relics of the Disciple, and enjoyed the immemorial privilege of climbing up behind the high altar to embrace, from the back, the cathedral's 'deity' — a *gold-and-jewel-encrusted* image of St. James. But nothing moved me. It was merely tourism touched with a bit of religious sentiment.

Only one site on the whole trip stood out for me as retaining the spirit of other times, to make the pilgrimage a success. Approaching Santiago, where Galicia commences, there is a pass of 1,100 metres,

the last and severest test before the goal. Perched on the summit is El Cebrero — a handful of primitive houses and an ancient church and rest-house. Snow was still on the ground when I reached this point in mid April. El Cebrero is the location of a reputed miracle which has attracted pilgrims to the Way of St. James, and to this forlorn place, since the thirteenth century.

It happened long ago during a bitter winter. A monk had been assigned to El Cebrero to celebrate the Mass should any pilgrims arrive. He hoped fervently that on this particular blizzardy night none would appear, as he was reluctant to leave his fireside and go to the icy church to conduct a ceremony whose significance seemed open to question in such unaccommodating weather. But no, there arrived a wayfarer. Unenthusiastically the monk went to do his duty. As the story goes, while he performed the ritual a light filled the church, and the monk, enraptured, saw the bread changed into actual flesh and the wine into veritable blood. (*The vessels used on the altar at the moment when the miracle took place were preserved in a crystal case presented by Queen Isabel I in the fifteenth century, and are still to be seen.*) And the monk heard the voice of Christ say, 'It is I who has come to hear mass this night.'

'Yes,' I thought, 'something is still to be felt here. An event may well have occurred meant to signal all who hear of it that one remains faithful to one's commitments no matter what climatic conditions life offers.' Some words pronounced at Kurukshetra\* came back to me with renewed meaning:

*'Make all your acts as offering to Me; if you set your heart upon Me thus you will come into my Being.'*

*\*Kurukshetra: The Battlefield where the events of the Bhagavad-Gita were enacted.*

## Programme for January - February 2018

Sunday discourses begin at the  
Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, Bourne End at 4:30 p.m.  
Tel: 01628 526464 www.vedantauk.com

Jan	1	Swami Vivekananda's Puja	
Jan	7	Jnana Yoga 27	Swami Dayatmananda
Jan	14	Jnana Yoga 28	Swami Dayatmananda
Jan	21	Jnana Yoga 29	Swami Dayatmananda
Jan	28	Jnana Yoga 30	Swami Dayatmananda
Feb	4	Jnana Yoga 31	Swami Dayatmananda
Feb	11	Jnana Yoga 32	Swami Dayatmananda
Feb	18	Sri Ramakrishna Puja	
Feb	25	Crest Jewel of Discrimination 19	Swami Shivarupananda

### Swami Vivekananda Puja

**At Bourne End at 10:30 a.m.**  
**Talk at 4:30 p.m.**

### Sri Ramakrishna Puja

**At Bourne End at 10:30 a.m.**  
**Talk at 4:30 p.m.**

continued from the front cover

The day is not far off when all lands and seas shall witness the establishment of a universal kingdom of peace, and when in loving response to the call of the Master, all nations and peoples, in one glorious confederation joining, shall sing with jubilant acclaim, yea, with no heat of strife and no passion of controversy, the Master's message, "As many faiths, so many paths."

Then the full meridian light of the Master's advent will light up this world of ours, and that song will ring from end to end and the sons and daughters of men will stand side by side under the banner of the New Age in spiritual comradeship.

May the citizens of the world on this blessed day understand the meaning of the Master's coming, and be hallowed. This and this alone is my fervent prayer.

Peace, peace, peace unto all!

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Not to blame, not to strike, to live restrained under the law and to dwell on the highest thought, this is the teaching of the Awakened.

—Buddha.

Put on armour that will harm no one, let thy coat of mail be that of understanding, and convert thine enemies to friends. Fight with valour, but with no weapon except the word of God. —Guru Nanak.

The wise man's freedom from grievance is because he will not regard grievances as such. —Laotze.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. —Jesus the Christ.

Find God; purity, holiness, all else will come. Seek the Highest, always the Highest, for in the Highest is eternal bliss. —Swami Vivekananda.



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