

Vedanta

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The Story of the first Hindu Temple in the West - 2

Swami Tattwamayanda

Girish Chandra Ghosh - A 'Sinner' Turned Saint

Umesh Gulati



Divine Wisdom

Illustrated Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna - 6



There Is Need for Everything

Wicked People are needed too.

At one time the tenants of an estate became unruly. The landlord had to send Golak Choudhury, who was a ruffian. He was such a hard administrator that the tenants trembled at the very mention of the name.

There is need for everything. Once Sita said to her husband: "Rama, it would be grand if every house in Ayodhya were a mansion! I find many houses are old and dilapidated." "But, my

Continued on the inside back cover

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409 SEP - OCT 2019

Contents

194	Editorial Swami Vivekananda's Moral Ideas and Ideals - 5
201	The Story of the First Hindu Temple in the West - 2 <i>Swami Tattwamayana</i>
211	Japa or Repetition of the Name of God <i>Chandra Kumari Handoo</i>
221	Girish Chandra Ghosh - A Sinner Turned Saint <i>Umesh Gulati</i>
231	Sister Nivedita and Dhruva <i>Vayu Naidu</i>
239	On Meditation <i>Swami Vivekananda</i>
240	Programme

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Swami Vivekananda's Moral Ideas and Ideals - 5

Swami Vivekananda realises the difficulty in people trying to become good and moral:

“The task before us is vast and first and foremost we must seek to control the vast mass of sunken thoughts which have become automatic with us. The evil deed is no doubt, on the conscious plane; but the cause which produced the evil deed was far beyond in the realm of the unconscious, unseen and therefore more potent.”¹

The unconscious power of good and evil manifests themselves in the rising waves of the mind (*Chitta-Vritti*). The task, therefore, before a person is, “First by proper working of the Ida and Pingala, which are the two existing ordinary currents, to control the subconscious action, and secondly to go beyond even consciousness.”²

It is obvious that the control of the subconscious is in the realm of morality and the going beyond even consciousness to the super conscious is spirituality. This control is best brought about by meditation. “Meditation is one of the great means of controlling the rising of these waves. By meditation you can make the mind subdue these waves and if you go on practising meditation for days and months and years until it has become a habit, until it will come in spite of yourself, anger and hatred will be controlled and checked.”³

These are the four royal highways to moral perfection – Swami Vivekananda's major contribution to the world's ethical thought and culture.

Society and Moral behaviour

In this world of change and multiplicity, Swamiji points out, there are two forces constantly working. One force works towards

homogeneity and the other towards diversification. Absolute homogeneity is not desirable as it would bring about a stand-still both in material and social life. Diversification is a sign of life and sameness of expression would mean death. Diversification in human society is caused by differences in expression of the latent potentialities of people at various stages of mental and spiritual evolution. This results in aggregation of powers and resources in some places and less in others which gives rise to inequalities. Our Hindu ethical thinkers did not consider these inequalities in capacities and expression of power, intelligence etc., as evils but accepted it as a necessary characteristic of an efficient social set up. As discussed earlier, we find a wonderful system was evolved by the Hindu sages, through ages of experience, to provide society with a scheme of graded morality to suit the needs of people of varying temperaments and capacities. This system of Varnas (Caste) based on the concept of *Jati* was, according to the Swami, essential for any society to survive. Stressing the need for its establishment in a true form, particularly in India. He says:

“Our society is not bad but good, only I want to be better still. Take the case of caste, in Sanskrit – *Jati* – i.e. species. Now this is the idea of freedom. So long as any species is vigorous and active it must throw our varieties. When it ceases or is stopped from breeding varieties, it dies. Now, the original idea of *Jati* was this freedom of the individual to express his nature, his Prakriti, his *Jati*, his caste; and so it remained for thousands of years. Then what was the cause of India’s downfall? The giving up of this idea of caste. As the Gita says, with the extinction of caste the world will be destroyed. The present caste is not the real *Jati*, but a hindrance to its progress. It really has prevented the free action of *Jati*, i.e. caste, variation. Any crystallised custom or privilege or hereditary class in any shape really prevents caste (*Jati*) from having its full sway; and whenever

any nation ceases to produce this immense variety, it must die. Every frozen aristocracy or privileged class is a blow to caste and is not caste. Let *Jati* have its sway; rise. This variety does not mean inequality nor any special privilege.”⁴

His ideal of caste, however, was meant for raising “all humanity slowly and gently towards the realization of the great ideal of the spiritual man (Brahmana), who is no-realistic, calm, steady, worshipful, pure and meditative.”⁵

Furthermore, according to the Swami, the division into castes was not to be strictly according to birth, lineage etc., as it is popularly misunderstood and practised. He explains, “As there are Sattva, Rajas and Tamas – one or other of these Gunas more or less – in every man, so the qualities which make a Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya or a Shudra are inherent in every man, more or less. But at times one or other of these qualities predominates in him in varying degrees and is manifested accordingly.

Take a man in his different pursuits, for example – when he is busy transacting some piece of business for profit on his own account, he is a Vaishya: when he fights to right wrongs, then the qualities of Kshatriya come out in him: and when he meditates on God, or passes his time in conversation about him he is a Brahmana. Naturally, it is quite possible for one to be changed from one caste to another.”⁶

The Swami, with his keen historical insight does not fail to point out the fact that along with this idea of caste there also comes the idea of privilege which is an evil. There is a general tendency in all societies to give more and more privileges and good things of life to those who are more capable and talented and less and less of these to those who are less endowed and weak. He speaks of four main types of privileges: “The brutal idea of privilege of the strong over

the weak, the privilege of wealth, the still subtler and more powerful privilege of intellect and spirituality “and further he says: “None can be any one, either mental, physical or spiritual: absolutely no privilege for anyone.”⁷

Thus, Vedantic ethics, as propounded by Swami Vivekananda, aims at counteracting the tendency to give various privileges to the different castes. As we have pointed out earlier, the Atman, the Absolute Being, is one only and all this multiplicity of the manifested Universe are mere apertures through which the power and glory of that one universal spirit are finding expression. On the basis of one’s capacities, which is merely a greater manifestation of the same Universal Spirit, there is no justification for any one to claim greater privileges. So, we find his ethics allows scope for the maximum development and diversification of capacities but at the same time insists on an equitable distribution of privileges.

The Swami says: “If absolute sameness of conditions be the aim of ethics, it appears impossible. Men will be born differentiated, some will have more power than others; some will have natural capacities, others not. We can never stop at that. But what can be attained is elimination of privileges. The difficulty is not that one body of men are naturally more intelligent than other, but whether this body of men, because they have the advantage of intelligence, should take away even physical enjoyment from those who do not possess that advantage... The enjoyment of advantage over another is privilege, and throughout the ages, the aim of morality has been its destruction. This is the work which tends towards sameness, towards unity, without destroying variety.”⁸

CONCLUSION

To conclude we may briefly enumerate the salient points of Swami Vivekanand’s unique theory of ethics and his major contribution to the world’s ethical thought.

As we have already discussed in the beginning, ethics, before the advent of Swamiji, can broadly be classified into two types. One which is based on religion or metaphysics and the other which is not. He has stated in very clear terms the limitations of ethical theories devoid of any metaphysical basis. Apart from man's inherent longing for freedom and infinitude because of his real nature and renunciation being the very basis of ethical life, mere ethical life proves to be inadequate because of the following reasons:

i) Except Supreme Good all the values of life are relative and a mixture of good and bad. There is no good without a concomitant evil.

ii) All moral virtues are contingent ideals e.g. kindness needs misery for its existence. Justice or forgiveness cannot exist without wrong doing.

iii) The whole world of experience consists of pairs of opposites in which contraries are inseparable and whatever good one may secure in the world by righteous acts is not an unmixed blessing. One may gain prosperity, power, beauty, health and blessing. One may gain prosperity, power, beauty, health and honour, yet one cannot get rid of the concomitant evil.

Even in those systems of ethics which were based upon religion we find morality depended either upon the commands of an extra-cosmic being, or a great personality, or the scriptures. In any case, moral in these systems were based upon some kind of obedience to some external authority with an inherent sense of freedom always being involved. Even Hindu ethics, Swamiji held, was bound by law, by the authority of the Vedas. One of the unique contributions of Swamiji is to free morality from fear of any kind and from bondage to any authority, human or divine or in the form of scriptures. He based his ethics on the 'eternal nature of man, upon

the eternal spiritual solidarity of man, already existing, already attained and not to be attained.’⁹

Further, even in Buddha’s ethical idealism which forms the core of Buddhist religion the Swami found one drawback. He says – “I preach only the Upanishads. And of the Upanishads, it is only that one idea strength. The quintessence of the Vedas and Vedanta and all lies in that world. Buddha’s teaching was non-resistance non-injury. But I think this is a better way of teaching the same thing. For behind that non-injury lay a dreadful weakness. It is weakness that conceives the idea of resistance. I do not think of punishing or escaping from a drop of sea-spray. It is nothing to me. Yet to the mosquito it would be serious. Now I would make all injury like that. Strength and fearlessness. My own ideal is that saint whom they killed in mutiny and who broke his silence, when stabbed to the heart, to say ‘And thou also art He.’”¹⁰

The Swami’s unique interpretation of the Upanishadic concept of strength and its application at different stages of human moral development forms one of the most important contributions to the world’s ethical thought.

Another major contribution of the Swami is in the form of some very insightful and subtle ideas about good and evil which we have already discussed earlier. These, while leaving no scope for moral ambiguity, educates one into a practice of morality bereft of any moral prudery or moral snobbishness usually associated with some organised religious movements. These ideas endow the doer of good with sympathy, nay empathy for his less fortunate brethren who like him are travelling towards the same goal whether they are conscious of it or not. At the same time, it holds out hope and future for all – for the good to become perfect and for the less good to reach perfection through ethical discipline. He was never tired of repeating the fact that man progresses from lesser truth to higher truth and not

from error to truth. He thus dealt a death blow to the various ethical systems which harped on the conceptions of sin, hell, eternal damnation etc. which were terrorising humanity all over the world.

He pointed out that according to Vedanta, consciously or unconsciously the entire humanity, the whole universe is heading towards freedom. The goal of ethics as 'freedom' thus makes for a unitive ethical spiritual discipline with varying emphasis for different individuals at different stages of evolution.

Thus we see that Swami Vivekananda's ethics with its Vedantic background of potential divinity of the Soul, unity of all Existence : unselfishness or self-abnegation as its basis and freedom at its goal along with the stress on the relativity of good and evil and strength as a guiding faction in moral life, makes for a unique system of ethics, a contribution to the world's thought for which the entire humanity will remain indebted to him for their scope, based as they are on fundamental moral principles which are common to all human beings irrespective of their faith, creed, religion or nationality. Moreover, modern scientific society and culture with its fierce spirit of independence and universality and a strong tendency to seek a rational basis for everything, finds in Swamiji's ethics a rational system of morality based on the eternal principle of human nature – the Atman and above all a clarion call to the entire mankind to realize the immense possibilities of the same to be makers and masters of their own destiny.

References:

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2. C.W., Vol. 2, P. 35
3. C.W., Vol. 1, P. 242-243
4. C.W., Vol. 4, P. 371-373
5. C.W., Vol. 3, P. 198
6. C.W., Vol. 5, P. 377
7. C.W., Vol. 1, P. 423
8. C.W., Vol. 1., P. 435
9. C.W., Vol. 3, P. 251
10. C.W., Vol. 8, P. 267

The Story of the First Hindu Temple in the West - 2

Swami Tattwamayananda

The new building contained a magnificent auditorium, which would be well capable of seating the growing congregation, and for which the Swami designed a suitable altar that demonstrated veneration for all religions and that would later feature magnificent and inspiring portraits of Sri Ramakrishna and of Jesus Christ in Yogic posture, both painted by some of the Swami's students. In order to set the basic theme of the building as being a center for the teaching of a spiritual tradition of Indian origin, a large tower modeled after typical temples from the Swami's home province of Bengal, was installed on top of a prominent corner of the new building. The building was indeed, as the Swami proclaimed, "The first Hindu Temple in the whole Western World" and "dedicated to the cause of humanity", humanity as a whole, not just limited to a particular sect or nation. This Temple miraculously survived unscathed during the disastrous earthquake and fire that engulfed San Francisco three months after the Temple's completion and dedication.

These events were historically significant when we remember the cultural and spiritual landscape of America during this period. The country was undergoing a radical transformation in the field of religion and spirituality. New concepts and movements like Theosophy, Christian Science, and Unitarianism were becoming popular among the social elites in the United States. Higher Hinduism, or Vedanta, had just been introduced to American society by Swami Vivekananda in the World's Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 and, subsequently, through his lectures and classes. Its catholicity, rationality, and especially its open acceptance of other faith-systems were in sharp contrast to

the narrow dogmatism of the contemporary Christian church. The intellectual challenges of Darwinist, humanist, and atheistic movements, as well as the criticism of the admirers of the latest scientific discoveries, posed a great threat to exclusivist claims of established religions.

The earliest temples of North and central India belonging to the Gupta period (320-650 A.D.), the rock-cut temples of South India belonging to the periods of the Pallavas, the Chalukyas, and the Rashtrakutas, as well as the temples of Angkor Wat in Cambodia, are marvels of ancient Hindu architecture, as are the temples belonging to the Vijayanagar period and the great ancient Indian temples that exist in places like Kashi, Vrindavan, and Mathura.

From an architectural point of view the San Francisco Hindu Temple is different from both the South Indian or Dravida and Chalukya temples with their characteristic tiered vimana shrines, their axial and peripheral mandapa adjuncts, and towering gopura entrances (gates), as well as from the North Indian temples with their own distinctive features like a square plan and curvilinear towers, representing the nagara style. Also, there is no evidence to show that Swami Trigunatitananda fully adhered to the principles of temple construction as laid down in the traditional texts on Vastu Shastra like Brihat Samhita. Swami Trigunatitananda, a great traditionalist, must have performed all the rituals before the temple construction, like sanctifying the earth, Vastu puja, garbha-nyasa, etc. But, since the Temple did not have a traditional inner sanctum sanctorum like the traditional orthodox Hindu temples in India, many of the rituals were perhaps not required.

To fully appreciate the spiritual symbolism of the rituals involved in temple worship we must have some understanding

of the Hindu concept of God with form, the Law of Karma, the doctrine of re-birth and the concept of worshiping God through symbols. Swami Trigunatitananda, while answering a question as to whether one had to believe in rebirth or in any such doctrine, in order to reach the highest spiritual goal, said: "There are many faiths and religious sects in the world, which do not believe in nor care to believe in such doctrines; according to Vedantism, they, too, reach the very highest; simply go on sincerely, ardently and steadily along one's own faith, with one's own beliefs, with a view to advance to the very highest." (*Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke), Swami Trigunatita: His Life and Work (San Francisco: Vedanta Society of Northern California, 1997), 373.*)

A Spiritual Saga of Dedication and Service

Swami Trigunatitananda arrived in San Francisco on January 2, in 1903. Within a few years it became apparent to him that, in order to fulfill the mission to spread the knowledge and practice of Vedanta in this new environment, it was imperative that there should be a central and suitable facility for lectures and classes, as well as for individual instruction and practice. Swami Trigunatitananda therefore set out, in 1904, with some members of the Class, to find a suitable part of the city where such a facility, in the form of a Hindu temple, could be constructed. A location was quickly found, and, in a surprisingly short time, the temple was designed, constructed and furnished to fulfill these requirements. The construction of the temple formally began with the installation of the cornerstone August 21, 1905, and the dedication ceremony took place on January 7, 1906!

Considering the circumstances under which he was deputed by Swami Vivekananda to take up the Vedanta work in San Francisco, Swami Trigunatitananda knew it was to be a heroic task.

The reorganization of the Vedanta Society, keeping the congregation together, and carrying on the task of spreading the message of Vedanta in northern California—all these endeavors demanded exceptional organizational skills, spiritual insight, moral strength, ingenuity, drive, iron determination, and, above all, a blending of the dedicated action of a missionary and the profound spirituality of a saint.

It was remarkable that, even in the midst of Swami Trigunatitananda's active dynamism on display throughout his more than twelve years of spiritual ministration in San Francisco, there were always glimpses of his monastic humility and contemplative nature. About this builder of the Hindu Temple, one may well say what William Arthur Ward stated about an ideal teacher: "The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires." Swami Trigunatitananda's sense of dedication was an inspiring example for all those who worked with him to build the Temple.

With a permanent home of its own, the Vedanta Society, under the Swami's inspiration set itself, over the next decade, to inaugurate many and varied programs which actually were the pioneering projects that set the programs and tone for all the Vedanta Societies that were established thereafter in different parts of the Western world. But we should remember that the building of the Hindu Temple was the landmark event that set the trend for all future expansion and developments that took place in the Vedanta movement in the later decades in the Western world.

Since he had been chiefly instrumental, at Swami Vivekananda's urging, in starting a magazine in India, in the Bengali language, devoted to spreading the message of spirituality among the people, so he now felt a similar necessity for a magazine

as a helpful medium to spread spiritual ideas in his new environment. One of the members of the Vedanta Society had been a printer. With his help, the Swami procured a printing press and, writing some of the articles himself, published and distributed a periodical magazine, *The Voice of Freedom*. The press was also used to publish books to further help the spread of universal spiritual ideas. One of the first printings was M's own rendition in English of his original Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna.

Following the custom of the time in the local churches, there were three lectures every Sunday at 10:45 in the morning, at 3 in the afternoon and at 7:45 in the evening. There was a Bhagavad Gita class and a Sanskrit language class on Monday evenings, an Upanishad class on Thursday evenings, and a daily meditation class at 10 in the morning. Christmas and Sri Ramakrishna's birthday were celebrated from 6 in the morning without a break until 9 in the evening, with music, lectures, and meditations.

Later in the year 1906, Swami Prakashananda came from India to assist in all aspects of the work.

The Swami's goal was to imbue his students with the intensity and dedication to realize the highest levels of spirituality, and he inspired them to strive for this and demanded from them unrelenting effort. He strenuously rejected half-heartedness. He stressed that spiritual realization, though it is open to everyone, represents the culmination of human achievement, and demands the very highest dedication and unrelenting effort.

Swami Trigunatitananda viewed the mission to which this work had been dedicated by Swami Vivekananda, as the spread of ideas that would eventually be a great liberating force, not only in the lives of individuals, but also for all humanity, and he exemplified it by dedicating the temple itself to the cause of

humanity as a whole. The temple was therefore far more important than of merely local significance.

This is reflected in his next major project, which was to invite to this country the then President of the whole Ramakrishna Order, the Revered Swami Brahmananda, who is considered as the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna. The purpose of this visit would be to invite Swami Brahmananda to take charge of and guide the American work. To provide suitable accommodations for this distinguished guest, Swami Trigunatitananda conceived of the idea of adding an additional story to the Temple, which would consist of an apartment with all necessary facilities. This apartment would be encircled with a series of connected porches lined with flowering plants. All these facilities would provide ample residential quarters as well as a place to walk in all types of weather. For such a revered guest, it was felt that nothing would be too elaborate, and the visit would provide great impetus to the work here.

Another idea also entered into Swami Trigunatitananda's considerations at this time. He conceived the idea that the addition of this apartment as a third floor for the Temple was an excellent opportunity to add additional towers and decorations to the building to make it a magnificent symbol of universal spiritual harmony. The existing central tower was to be placed on the roof of the extended temple along with additional towers symbolic of various aspects of the Hindu tradition, plus symbols indicating the Islamic tradition and Christianity as well. The whole building would be lit up at night also and would stand as an enduring symbol of the ancient Vedic dictum regarding the basic unity that underlies the apparent multiplicity so evident on the surface of life.

A multitude of American flags was also displayed to give prominence to this symbolic structure which was well lit at night and which would be seen by the many visitors that were expected for the opening of the Panama-Pacific exposition, similar to a World's Fair, which was to open in 1915 nearby in the Marina District.

Since Swami Brahmananda later sent word that he could not leave the work in India, Swami Trigunatitananda decided to use the apartment to establish a formal monastery there. A number of men joined and further aided the work with their dedicated assistance.

Swami Trigunatitananda also founded a convent for women who wanted to devote themselves more intensely to a dedicated spiritual life.

Another pioneering work undertaken by the Swami was the establishment of a spiritual retreat in the countryside of Concord in the East Bay not far from Walnut Creek. The intention was primarily to provide a quiet and peaceful environment for spiritual practice far from the distractions of city life. Because he was aware that the long-term maintenance cost of this endeavor might be a burden in the future, he determined that a walnut orchard on the property could be used to support the endeavor. Also, it was his plan that members of the Vedanta Society would purchase plots of land and build retirement homes for themselves, and the Vedanta Society would purchase land for a temple and other society facilities. Other facilities, such as a hospital, a home for the aged, a library, etc., were contemplated. The development of this retreat was well started but was brought to a close after the Swami passed away.

Other pioneering projects included the training of members to hold lectures and classes, so that the regular work could continue even in the Swami's absence on tour or for other reasons.

Another activity consisted of regular one-month spiritual retreats held at Shanti Ashrama, which the Swami organized in a very systematic way with a rigorous schedule of classes and exercises, as well as one all-night Dhuni Fire ceremony reminiscent of the India monastic tradition.

In all the many areas in which Swami Trugunatitananda worked, he brought a depth of dedication and a concentrated intensity that in after years has continued to inspire all those who have worked along the lines he pioneered. In many ways he was ahead of his time in that the followers frequently could not appreciate his depth, foresight, and profound spiritual dedication. There was at times a distressing non-comprehension and opposition from some of his own students which gave him great sorrow, but he moved as he felt that he must, and ultimately rested secure that he had fulfilled what he had been sent here to accomplish.

The Invisible Hand of God

The universal Hindu Temple of San Francisco has a special significance in the present age which is characterized by a widespread urge for anything universal. Unity in variety is the theme for our times. This urge for universality, especially in the field of spirituality, is bound to prompt thinking people everywhere to study the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and his ideal of universal religious harmony symbolized in the universal Hindu Temple of San Francisco.

Was the building of the Hindu Temple an accident? If Swami Turiyananda had not left San Francisco in 1902 and Swami

Trigunatitananda had not arrived in 1903, probably it would never have been built. But, when we look back after more than a century, we can see that there was a divine hand and divine plan behind it.

Swami Trigunatitananda experienced this as a fact, as he revealed from time to time. On one such occasion, he said, regarding this first Hindu Temple in the West: "I shall not live to enjoy, others will come later who will enjoy." With reference to his own motivation, he boldly stated: "Believe me, believe me, if there is the least tinge of selfishness in building the temple, it will fall, but if it is the Master's work, it will stand." (*His Western Disciples, "The Work of Swami Trigunatita in the West," Prabuddha Bharata, 33, no. 3 (1928): 132.*)

And it has stood, weathering more than a century, including the catastrophic 1906 earthquake and the fire ignited by it, which was fanned by unrelenting winds to within six blocks of the Temple before suddenly being diverted by a providential reversal of wind direction.

Toward the end of his life the Swami was beset with painful physical troubles—rheumatism and Bright's disease—but, as he himself said, he held his body together by sheer force of will so that he could go on serving. In the spring of 1914, he asked a student to criticize his lecturing, and the student mentioned a slight trembling in his voice, which he attributed to the Swami's emotion in putting across his points and to ill health. The Swami tried to correct it, but when the student spoke of it again in December, he confessed that whenever he came on the platform to speak, the Divine Mother appeared to him and he had difficulty articulating.

It was at this time that his life tragically came to a close. The Swami was injured in an explosion which occurred in the auditorium on December 27, 1914, and he deliberately gave up his body on Swamiji's birthday, January 10, 1915.

A Spiritual Landmark of San Francisco

The Hindu Temple has played an important part in the activities of the Vedanta Society in San Francisco, right from the temple's initial completion one hundred fourteen years ago. Its auditorium was used throughout the year for inter-faith programs, classes, lectures, and worships. The offices in its eastern section were used for interviews, spiritual counseling, and the Society's business affairs, as well as serving as class rooms for the Sunday School. The upper floors were used as living quarters for the monastery.

This temple underwent a thorough renovation, starting in 2014, and was re-dedicated in a special worship and interfaith program in October 2016. A reinforced steel foundation was constructed. All plumbing and electricity services were renewed, the whole interior was strengthened with a system of welded steel posts and beams to resist the motions that could occur under earthquake stresses. Additional facilities for public programs, halls and classrooms were added. The weekly scriptural classes held every Friday attract a good number of spiritual seekers from the city and the Bay Area.

Japa or Repetition of the Name of God

Chandra Kumari Handoo.

The remembrance of God kept up through the repetition of His name and technically known as japa is a form of prayer popular with all Hindus. The guru formally initiates the disciple through the mantra, a word or formula in which is incorporated the name of the Lord. The mantra is not a word or phrase invented by the guru. It is said to be, "a concentrated thought of great power revealed to the rishi or the adept in spiritual practices in the hour of his profound illumination" (*Philosophy of Hindu Sadhana by Nalini Kant Brahma, p. 279*). It may also be compared to a dynamo of spirituality charged with the thought power of a succession of sadhakas (spiritual aspirants) who grew to sainthood by the repetition of that particular name. Now, reinforced by the genius of the guru, it is ready once again to awaken the latent forces of the sleeping Brahman in its newest recipient, the sincere and earnest seeker who is eager to find the promised treasure of the Self within. In ancient and modern times, men and women who have been spiritually inquisitive and persevering have put the name to the test again and again, and have satisfied themselves that the result of the practice of japa justifies all the claims made on its behalf.

Stories that relate to the glory of the name have been woven into poetry and song, and have in course of time turned into folklore and mythology; they are the undying treasures of the Hindu race. A few of them may be of interest to the reader. In this holy tradition, a prostitute is remembered as having purified herself by teaching her parrot to repeat the name of God. Then there is the moving story of Draupadi, queen of the Pandavas and heroine of the Mahabharata, who was once pawned and lost in a

game of dice by Yudhisthira, the eldest Pandava brother, to Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas. The latter, wishing to humiliate his much-hated kinsmen, ordered his brother Duhsasana to take off the only cloth that Draupadi was wearing, the sari. Draupadi's warrior husbands, having themselves become slaves, sat with downcast eyes. Grandsire Bhishma, Dhritarashtra the king, and other elders and courtiers, fearing the wrath of Duryodhana, looked on helplessly and ashamed. Thus finding no human help near at hand, in extreme anguish Draupadi cried out, "O Govinda! You who dwell in Dwarika—O Krishna! loved by the gopis — don't you know that the Kauravas are insulting me...? Save me, O Lord, Destroyer of Sorrow! " In the twinkling of an eye the cloth increased in length till it seemed it would never end: " The arms of Duhsasana were exhausted, for the Lord had Himself become the cloth " (*Suradasa*). Or as another poet has said, " It was difficult to decide whether the woman was all sari, or the sari itself was the woman ". Such is the power of the Divine name! When uttered from the depths of one's heart it cannot but bear immediate fruit. In modern times amongst the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, there was a lonely widow known as Gopala's Mother, who lived in a room beside the Ganges and spent her time in repeating the name of Gopala. Though nothing so tragically spectacular happened to her as to Draupadi, her life-long remembrance of God was rewarded in old age by the constant vision of Gopala, the Divine Child, who lived with her night and day for two months. Her case is perfectly authentic and does not suffer from the exaggeration of devotion. She is to this day loved and honoured by the disciples and friends of the Ramakrishna Order. Another sadhu who had remarkable faith in the name of God came to Dakshineswar in those days and carried with him a book in which the solitary word "Om Rama" was written in big letters in red ink. He worshipped

this book daily with flowers and sometimes opened it and read it also. He said to Sri Ramakrishna: "What is the use of reading a large number of books? For it is from the one divine Lord that the Vedas and Puranas have come; He and His name are not separate ... That is why His name is my only companion " (*Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*, p. 536).

In the introduction to his voluminous work *Ramacharitamansa*, Tulsidas also discusses the merits of the name of God at great length. He says, "According to our understanding the *nama* (name) and *nami* (owner of the name) seem to be the same, but like master and servant they are bound together with the ties of love (meaning that the *nami*, or God, follows His name) It has been observed that form depends on name A particular form may be in the palm of your hand, but it cannot be recognised unless its name is known. But if the name of an unknown form is remembered the form lovingly enters the heart ... The name is witness of the Personal and Impersonal God and acts as an interpreter between the two Through its own inherent strength, it also keeps both under its control The knowledge of the Impersonal and Personal God is like fire; the former is like fire latent in the wood, while the latter is like lighted fire. (Both are essentially one, the difference is in the manifestation only.) Though difficult to know, both are easily realized through the name. So, I say that the name is greater than both Brahman and Rama (the Impersonal and the Personal God)" (*Bala-kanda*, 1.20—3.22).

Another poet-saint Kabir, has warned us against the complacency and self-satisfaction that may be indulged in by the mere mechanical repetition of the name. He says:

"The remembrance of God is not achieved by the revolving of beads in the hand.

By the rolling of the tongue in the mouth. Or, by the wandering of the mind in all quarters.”

He thus forcefully brings home to us the greatest problem of secular and religious education, that being the training of attention and the ability to concentrate the mind by a mere act of the will. If this is difficult to attain in our everyday life of the world, how much more it must be in the subtle sphere of spiritual life: here the outgoing and ever-shifting light of attention has to be turned inward within itself so that its diffused and flickering rays may slowly deepen into the steady glow of a spiritual fire.

Thus, as far as possible the repetition of the name must be accompanied by *dhyana* or meditation. This should be done by a conscious and deliberate effort to keep the mind fixed on the special form of the Deity who is being invoked through His name. If we are unable to focus our minds on His whole form, then we may attempt to think of His blessed feet only; or in the case of an Incarnation of God we may think of His *lila*, the incidents of His human life on earth; failing all these alternatives, the name itself may become the object of our attention. Other symbols may be employed by those who would like to conceive God as a formless all-pervading Reality such as the following: "The soul may look upon itself as a spark of the infinite, eternal Divine life and meditate accordingly. The aspirant may think of himself as a river entering and uniting itself with the ocean, the symbol of the Infinite Being. The beginner may think of Him as the infinite ocean, in which he swims unobstructed like a fish. Or, he may liken himself to a pot immersed in the ocean of God" (*"A Glimpse into Hindu Religious Symbolism"* by Swami Yatiswarananda, published in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. IV. p. 443-4).

There should be nothing forced or artificial about meditation. When we intensely desire to see someone who is near and dear to

us and from whom we have been separated for a long time, how lovingly we think of him and with what delight we dwell on the special traits of character which endear his person to us; sometimes we are so carried away by our affection for him or her that almost unconsciously we whisper the loved one's name, guarding it from the vulgar curiosity of our neighbours as if it was the dearest treasure of our heart. So lovingly and spontaneously should the name of God arise on our lips and uplift the heart in adoration and prayer. But when this is not possible due to the dryness and hardness of our hearts, we try to create such a condition by regular and constant practice of the name. We then take the help of external factors by reserving for ourselves the corner of a room, where we can sit undisturbed. Pictures, flowers and incense may further help our concentration. The restless mind is the despair of the earnest seeker, but there is one thing from which *sadhakas* of small capacity like ourselves may take heart. It is this: unless a portion of the mind, be it ever so small, is given to God, the repetition of the name becomes an impossibility. Even the most mechanical and superficial japa must come to a stop without it. "As a ship is turned from its course upon the waters so is the mind carried away by the wandering wind of the senses " (*Gita, II, 67*). And so, though we must always be careful and alert, there is no reason for us to despair.

Secondly, the formation of a habit is also a helpful factor which no *sadhaka* can ignore. In the dialogue of the *Gita*, when Arjuna says that the mind is as uncontrollable as the wind, Sri Krishna in reply says that it can be subdued by habit and dispassion. So even when we find the mind inattentive and the name dull we should persevere for the sake of creating a habit. Can we expect to give our minds whole-heartedly to God all of a sudden? We novitiates in the path of *sadhana* (spiritual disciplines) can no more expect

to jump over all the intermediate stages than can a little toddler who has just joined school, expect to write an essay or work out a mathematical problem. Our prayers would be more acceptable to God if we could cultivate the sunny-hearted attitude of the child who is happy and carefree because of his implicit faith in the guidance and protection of his mother.

Thirdly, we are painfully aware of the discrepancy between our thoughts and actions in every sphere of life and the same condition prevails during our moments of prayer also. Though this is a most deplorable human trait, we need not feel discouraged. An identity between thought, word and deed is a sign of perfection of character and can only come to those who are fully established in the consciousness of God. The struggle to control and discipline the mind goes on till the goal is reached and all those who wish to lead a religious life must be prepared to face it courageously. Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, said, "The realization of God cannot be achieved without ecstatic love (*prema bhakti*) for Him but she added." "Do you know the significance of japa and other spiritual practices? By these, the power of the sense-organs is subdued." (*Life of the Holy Mother: Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras*). She also said, "Past sins can be counteracted by meditation, japa and spiritual thought."

Many kinds of yajnas or sacrifices are mentioned in the Gita but amongst them all the Lord says that He is japa. Japa is again classified into three categories, verbal, silent and mental. At first the name is spoken and heard, then only the lips and tongue move and last of all the repetition goes on purely in the mind. The second and third are both ten times more efficacious than the preceding ones, [the reason being that the less audible and more subtle does the name become, the greater the concentration it requires; mental japa may be performed rhythmically with the breath, and when

this becomes a habit the name will go on repeating itself without effort in the subconscious mind even during sleep. If on waking the first thought that comes into the mind is the mantra, then one may know for certain that the repetition has been carried on in this manner throughout the night. The effect of such intense japa on the inner being of man is simply miraculous. It removes conflicts, unifies the emotions and brings out the latent powers of the mind. And so, apart from its religious significance the practice of God's name is of immense value from the point of view of character and integration of personality. The subconscious mind, known to be the repository of our conflicts, tensions and frustrations, is the bugbear of modern life. For nervous breakdowns and other borderline cases of mental disorder so frequently met with these days, the practice of the name is an easy preventive and cure. According to Indian psychology the subconscious is merely a storehouse of samskaras, or the impressions of past lives, and not necessarily a dark chamber where our sins are buried; it believes that emotions can be better controlled in the incipient stage than when they have matured. This it tries to do through repeated spiritual exercises like japa and meditation.

To be able to utter or hear the name of God at one's dying moment is also looked upon as an act of great purity. No sooner than we wash away our impurities through the name than some latent evil tendency of our past lives comes to the surface and causes a lapse in our thought and conduct. Thus, throughout human life good and evil struggle for ascendancy, until by force of spiritual practice enhanced by devotion, we are able to live and move in God exclusively. But in the case of the dying man, having uttered the name of God, death prevents him from sinning any further. The scriptures say that such good fortune does not happen by accident ; the thought that has been predominant in life comes

to the mind at the time of death; and also, because death may come upon us unawares, we must always try to keep up the remembrance of God at all moments of life.

But for the satisfaction of our own intellectual curiosity we might still ask why our devotional literature is so full of praise for the *nama-sakti*, or the power of the name. In reply to this question we must fall back on a branch of ancient wisdom known in Sanskrit as the philosophy of *nama* and *rupa*, name and form, or word and its meaning. The idea is that thought, name and form cannot be separated, for whenever a thought arises in the mind it has a counter-part in a word (name) and form. As for instance each human body is a form and behind each body is its name. If we think of a friend of ours, his name and form arise almost simultaneously. If we see the form we think of the name, or if the name of the person is mentioned an image of the form arises automatically in the mind. Thoughts are like waves in the lake of the mind and the name and form are the internal and external sides of the same wave. This is the way the human mind functions. There is a general idea amongst other religions as well as in Hinduism that the world was created from the Word. There is a deep meaning in this statement. The Absolute, Formless God, thought and willed before He created, so creation is said to come out of that idea or word. The Word here is a symbol of the cosmic consciousness and is known in Sanskrit as Sabda-Brahman; when meditated upon the latent meaning of the Word or name unfolds itself as it must have done in the case of the sadhu who worshipped the name and whose example we have quoted above.

Thus name, form and thought are three degrees of existence of the same Reality. Thought is the manifesting power, name is the fine state and form its gross one. All three of them are found together and the theory of *nama-sakti* is built upon the basis of

this philosophy. As an able writer has said, "The Hindus attempted to realize the subtle form through the gross one, and to reach illumination by generating the corresponding vibration ... *Chit* and *sabda*, illumination and vibration, represent two parallel aspects, the subtle and gross forms, of the same thing... The external things and their shapes are materialized forms of vibrations, and in them the *chit* becomes more latent and hidden. In *nada* or vibration, the *chit* is not so materialized but retains much of its fluidity, and it is because of this fact that it is easier to awaken the *chit* element in and through vibration (*nada*) than through external things and forms. *Nada* is intermediate between *chit* and *jada* (inanimate), being neither so solid as external things nor so fine and absolutely immaterial as *chit*. The utility and efficacy of *nada sadhana* cannot be over-estimated" (*Philosophy of Hindu Sadhana* by Nalini Kant Brahma, p. 281).

In a book called *Surya Namaskars* written by the Raja Saheb of Aundh, the author has laid great emphasis on the physiological effect of sound. He has tried to show how the vibration emanating from the *Pranava* (Om) and *bija* syllables (mystic sounds) influences the internal organs and helps in curing and preventing various physical ailments. In this connection it is also interesting to note that modern medical science has also developed a theory of sound therapy. An electrical instrument of great scientific precision, called ultra-sonic, which cannot be heard by the human ear, is applied to the affected parts of the body; it produces a sound on the internal tissues which helps to cure many diseases such as arthritis, neuralgia, sciatica and others.

Thus sound, word or name seems to work in many fields. But from the devotional point of view, such detailed analysis and explanation is hardly necessary. Sri Ramakrishna quotes Chaitanya Deva as having said, " The name of God has very great

sanctity. It may not produce an immediate result but one day it must bear fruit. It is like a seed that has been left on the cornice of a building. After many days the house crumbles, and the seed falls on the earth, germinates and at last bears fruit" (*Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 70). The devotee looks upon God not only as a conscious Being but as the principle of consciousness itself, so for him the philosophy of japa is very simple and easy to understand. To some extent we human beings even with our limited minds are aware of the power of thought. If we think of someone with constancy and love, we naturally get a response from the person concerned. It may be in the form of a letter, a gesture of goodwill or a more enduring tie of friendship or affection. From this analogy it would be logical to assume that the response from God would be a thousand times greater than man. Sri Ramakrishna says that He hears the footfall of even an ant, and not a leaf falls from the tree without His knowledge. He is not a stranger to us that we should call on Him in vain. If He is the Creator, we are His children; if He is the ocean, we are the waves. He is the "Goal, the Supporter, the Lord, the Witness, the Abode, the Refuge, the Friend" (*Gita*, IX.18). So, is it a matter of surprise that He should respond to our call? Whether we approach Him from the devotional point of view or the intellectual one, the problem is very simple. The experiment of the name requires neither wealth nor learning. It is a means as well as an end. All that we have to do is to accept it as a working hypothesis; it will reveal its power and glory to us more convincingly and conclusively than all the arguments, analogies or illustrations from saintly lives taken from the different traditions all over the world.

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Girish Chandra Ghosh - A 'Sinner' Turned Saint

Umesh Gulati

During the lifetime of Sri Ramakrishna very few, mostly his monastic disciples like Swami Vivekananda, and some householders like Girish Chandra Ghosh, recognized and accepted him as an incarnation of God. There was, indeed, a lot of commonality between these two disciples. While Sri Ramakrishna himself chose Narendra, later to be known as Swami Vivekananda, as the leader of his monastic disciples, who was to spread his message in India and abroad, he also saw in Girish Ghosh a unique household disciple that would revive the Hindu cultural heritage.

About Narendra the Master once said: "You all see this boy ... Narendra and people of his type belong to the class of ever-free... Narendra excels in singing, playing on instruments, study and everything. ..."1

Much the same way Girish Ghosh, though 19 years older than Swamiji, was a man of diverse talents. Swami Chetanananda, the head of the Vedanta Society of St. Louis in America, wrote Girish's biography.² In his 'Biographical Introduction' Christopher Isherwood says that Girish was a person of great animal vitality, strength, ingenuity, force, drive, and indeed genius—a protean kind of talent. He was a poet, a dramatist, an actor, and he threw himself into everything with the utmost vitality. It was a function, an aspect, of this vitality that he was exceedingly sensual; he had considerable sex life, which was much discussed by every body around him; and he drank enormously, took opium, and so forth.

...On the positive side, he [Girish Ghosh] was enormously productive. He started immediately to revive from the dead the dramatic life of Bengal. He began to write plays, both devotional

in the most classic sense and written in a sort of Shakespearean style, and historical, and contemporary plays on life in the 19th century, which was written in a kind of modern dialect. ... In these plays he often played ... several parts [and assumed different roles], and before long, during his thirties or forties, he acquired a theatre, the Star Theatre, which exists to this day in Calcutta. ... This was the situation at the time when he met Ramakrishna. (*Ibid.* 12-13)

Girish, in an article, which he wrote later in life, described his state of mind before he met Sri Ramakrishna. In his 1989 book, *They Lived With God*, the author in a chapter on Girish Ghosh, says: "After all, what glory is there in making a good man good? Buddha, Christ, Sri Ramakrishna, and other God-men paid special attention to the fallen, the downtrodden, and the destitute. ... They transformed sinners into saints. Girish Chandra Ghosh is just such an example of the transforming power of Sri Ramakrishna."³

Girish was born to pious parents on February 28, 1844. He inherited from his father a sharp intellect and pragmatic approach to life, and from his mother a love for literature and love for God. But it was his grandmother who introduced him to a rich heritage of India's epics and mythology. Once she was describing an episode from the *Bhagavatam* in which Krishna's uncle, Akrura, was sent to bring Krishna to Vrindaban. Krishna's playmates, both boys and girls, would not let him go and began to cry without any effect. Girish listened to this story with rapt attention with tearful eyes.

Like Isherwood, Swami Chetanananda also comments on Girish's writing talent. He says, "He was a prodigious writer and produced seventy-nine works, including dramas, satires, and musicals. In addition, he wrote many short stories, articles, poems,

and songs. His dramas dealt primarily with religious, social, historical, mythological, and patriotic subjects. His innovative spirit had a lasting effect on theatre in Bengal—in fact, he became known as the father of the Bengali theatre.” (*Ibid.*, 284-85)

Girish was also the moving force behind establishing several theatres in Calcutta, including the Minerva, the Star and others. He was himself a superb and versatile actor. Once he played five different roles in the same play, a true Bohemian, indeed! His acting looked so real and natural that it sometime stunned the audience. Once in a scene Girish was abusing a woman. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, a famous literary figure and philanthropist of the time, was in the audience. He became so stirred up by the vividness of the portrayal that he took off his slipper and threw it at the actor. ... Girish picked it up and placed it on his head. Bowing to the audience, he declared that he had never received a more gratifying tribute! (*Ibid.* 287)

That brings us to Girish’s meeting Sri Ramakrishna. He met Sri Ramakrishna around 1880 or 1881 at the house of one of the latter’s devotees; after that he met the Master on September 21, 1884; Sri Ramakrishna and some of his devotees had come to the Star Theatre to see a play by Girish Ghosh about the life of Chaitanya. Girish himself was strolling in the outer compound of the theatre when a member from Ramakrishna’s party came to him and said: The Master has come to see your play. If you will give him a free pass, that will be very kind; otherwise we’ll buy him a ticket.” Girish answered that Ramakrishna need not pay for the seat, but others would have to. ... Girish ... then led them all upstairs to box. ... When Ramakrishna was asked later how he had liked it [the play], he answered, ‘*I found the representation the same as the real.*’ (*Emphasis is ours, Ibid.* 269.)

We may point out that Sri Ramakrishna once said that only a jeweller can rightly assess the value of the diamond, neither an egg-plant seller nor a cloth merchant. (*The Gospel*, 760); in the same way, no one but a great actor can determine the quality of other actors like Girish. Ramakrishna himself was a born actor! To illustrate, Gadadhar, the boyhood name of Sri Ramakrishna, was just nine years old when on the Shivaratri night a dramatic performance was arranged at his native village of Kamarpukur. The principal actor, who was to play the part of Shiva, suddenly fell ill, and Gadadhar was persuaded to act in his place. While friends were dressing him for the role of Shiva--smearing his body with ashes ... the boy appeared to become absent-minded. ... He looked the living image of Shiva. The audience loudly applauded what it took to be his skill as an actor, but it was soon discovered that he was really lost in meditation. ... The people felt blessed as by a vision of Shiva Himself. ... (*Ibid.*, 5.) In other words, what Sri Ramakrishna said to Girish about the performance was quite authentic.

Girish again met the Master at the house of Balaram Babu, who was a great devotee of the latter. Girish was always longing to find a guru, although he obstinately refused to believe that any human being could stand in that relation to another. "What is a guru?" he now asked the Master. Sri Ramakrishna answered: "*He is like procurer. A procurer arranges for the union of the lover with his mistress. In the same way, a guru arranges the meeting between the individual soul and his beloved, the Divine Spirit.*" (*Emphasis is ours.*) Then he Ramakrishna added: *You need not worry. Your guru has already been chosen. (Emphasis is ours)"* ⁴

What a language the Master used to describe the role of a Guru! It went with the lifestyle of Girish, the person who asked the

question. Besides, we must also note that no one but Sri Ramakrishna would unite a person like Girish with the Divine Spirit, because He (the Master) Himself was the divinity incarnate. In fact, the Master had recognized in Girish a great potential of reforming himself by acting and producing divine characters. So as they began to talk about the theatre and so on, Girish rather got embarrassed to hear the Master's praises of what the former had done, and said in a very rude manner: "I don't care about the play and Chaitanya. I just wrote the play to make money." But Sri Ramakrishna ignored this and said, "You know, whatever you say, you do know something. There is something in you that recognizes the God-like."

As said before that Buddha, Christ, Sri Ramakrishna, and other God-men paid special attention to the fallen, the downtrodden, and the destitute. ... They transformed sinners into saints. Girish Chandra Ghosh is just such an example of the transforming power of Sri Ramakrishna. The turn that Ramakrishna gave to Girish's life is epitomized in a conversation that took place between them on December 14, 1884.⁵ The Master had gone that day to the Star Theatre to see a play about the life of Prahlad. M., Baburam, Narayan, and other devotees were with him. The Master was seated in a box, talking with Girish.

Master (Smiling): "Ah! You have written nice plays."

Girish: "But, sir, how little I assimilate! I just write."

Master: "No, you assimilate a great deal. The other day I said to you that no one could sketch a divine character unless he had love of God in his heart. ...

Girish: "How did you like the performance?"

Master: "I found it was God Himself who was acting the different parts. [Was it not Girish himself often acted those parts?]

Those who played the female parts seemed to me the direct embodiments of the Blissful Mother, and the cowherd boys of Goloka the embodiments of Narayana Himself. ...”

Girish; “Sir, I am not really doing anything. Why should I bother about the work at all?”

Master. “No, work is good. When the ground is well cultivated and cleared of stones and pebbles, whatever you plant will grow. But one should work without personal motive. ...

Master: “Have faith in the Divine Mother and you will attain everything.

Girish: “But I am a sinner.”

Master: The wretch who constantly harps on sin becomes a sinner.”

Girish: “Sir, the very ground where I used to sit would become unholy.”

Master: “How can you say that? Suppose a light is brought into a room that has been dark a thousand years; does it illumine the room little by little, or all in a flash?”

Girish: “Then you have blessed me.”

Master: “If you sincerely believe it. What more shall I say?

After the theatre, the actresses, following Girish’s instructions, came to the room to salute Sri Ramakrishna. They bowed before him, touching the ground with their foreheads. The devotees noticed that some of the actresses in saluting the Master touched his feet. He said to them tenderly, “Please don’t do that, mother!” (*Ibid.* 683) After the actresses had left the room, Sri Ramakrishna said to the devotees, “It is all (meaning actresses) He [God], only in different forms.” As Swami Vivekananda said, “Men are taught from childhood that they are weak and sinners. Let positive, strong

helpful thoughts enter into their brains ... Lay yourself open to these thoughts, and not to weakening and paralysing ones. ... " (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, v.2, 87.*) So, instead of saying that we are sinners, we should rather remind ourselves that we are the Self (Atman), ever pure, nay, the embodiment of purity absolute. What we think or do, so we become, that is the law.

It follows that if we are born in sin, we can never become saints; for, to be sinful would be our nature. But it is not so. That is why in our spiritual literature, we find innumerable examples of some hardened criminals being transformed into becoming saints. Girish Ghosh like all human beings was an embodiment of Atman, which is pure and perfect, couldn't be a sinner. Indeed, it was his great fortune that he met Sri Ramakrishna who showed him how to correct those mistakes.

That is exactly what Sri Ramakrishna had been telling Girish not to think of himself to be a "sinner". Girish, indeed, was doing a great job not only for the entertainment and enlightenment of the audience in his theatre, but also for himself by producing such holy characters like Chaitanya and Prahlad, the roles played by women!

One day, Girish was very depressed for leading an sensuous and indulgent life, he came to realize that the only way for him was to completely surrender to the Master, which he did. So, he asked him for instruction as to what he should do from then on. 'Do just what you are doing now', said Sri Ramakrishna. 'Hold on to God with one hand and to the world with the other. Think of God at least in the morning and evening'. But Girish realized that his life was so irregular, it would be hard to follow that discipline. Sri Ramakrishna provided him other options, but Girish could not commit to any one of them. In an exalted mood the Master said,

"All right, give me your *power of attorney*. Henceforth I shall take full responsibility for you. You won't have to do anything at all." (*Ibid.*)

Girish was relieved, for he understood that Sri Ramakrishna had relieved him of all responsibility for his spiritual well-being and made him free. But as Swami Chetanananda points out that Girish did not realize that complete self-surrender, not to speak of the faith that Girish had in the Master's compassion for him, is more binding than the observance of strict disciplines. In fact he made himself Sri Ramakrishna's slave! One day, soon after this Girish remarked in Sri Ramakrishna's presence, "I shall do this." "No, no!" the Master corrected him. "You must not speak in that egotistic manner. You should say, 'God willing, I shall do it.'" Girish understood that and from then on he tried to give up all idea of personal responsibility and surrendered himself to the Divine Will. His mind began to dwell constantly on Sri Ramakrishna. This unconscious meditation in time chastened his turbulent spirit.⁶

Besides, Sri Ramakrishna's love for Girish was as intense as it was for Narendra (Swamiji). For, he would praise Narendra as profusely before others and feed him as does a mother to her child. In the same way, he would show similar acts of love for Girish. According to Swami Chetanananda, Sri Ramakrishna would often visit Girish's theatre and bring him sweets. Once the Master fed Girish with his own hands. "... But now, when I [Girish] remember how these lips of mine touched many impure lips, and how Sri Ramakrishna fed me, touching them with his holy hand, I am overwhelmed with emotion and say to myself, "Did this actually happen? Or was it a dream?" (*Ibid.*276.)

In the spring of 1885, Sri Ramakrishna was diagnosed with a fatal cancer of the throat. In October-November of that year, he was moved from Dakshineswar to Shyampukur, in Kolkata, in order to be conveniently closer to the doctors' offices. November 6th of that year was the day of the worship of the Divine Mother Kali. On the prodding of the Master nearly thirty people assembled in his room. Girish described that event: "Sri Ramakrishna sat down to perform the worship, surrounded by flowers, ... articles of worship. Suddenly he ... Said: "It is the Divine Mother's day. One should sit and meditate like this." I do not know what took hold of me at that point. I rushed forward and, chanting "Jai Sri Ramakrishna", offered flowers at his feet. The others in the room did the same. Sri Ramakrishna immediately went into samadhi, his hands assuming gestures symbolizing fearlessness and the bestowal of boons". (*Ibid.* 280 - 281)

As Sri Ramakrishna's health continued to deteriorate, his devotees brought him outside the city, to the Cossipore garden house on December 11, where the air was more pleasant. On January 1, 1886, the Master felt strong enough to take a walk in the garden. It was holiday, and many devotees had come from Calcutta to visit the Master that afternoon. He began walking slowly through the garden, and the devotees followed him. Suddenly Sri Ramakrishna said to Girish, 'Well, Girish, what have you found in me that you proclaim me before all as an Avatara (Incarnation)? Falling to his knees before the Master and saluting him with folded hands, Girish responded with great emotion: 'Who am I to speak of him? Even the sages like Vyasa and Valmiki could find no words to measure his glory!'

The Master was deeply moved. He blessed Girish and the assembled devotees, saying: "What more need I tell you? I bless

you all. Be illumined!" Then he went into samadhi and began to bless the devotees, touching them one by one. With each touch he instilled spiritual awakening in their hearts. The devotees cries of "Jai Ramakrishna" resounded in all directions as one by one they bowed down to him. Some senior devotees like Ramachandra Datta had said that on that day the Master became the 'Kalapataru', the wish-fulfilling tree.

Girish died in 1912, after many ups and downs of fortune; a nobly battered figure, steadfast to the end in his devotion to Sri Ramakrishna. One curious result of their association, according to Isherwood, "is that, today, Ramakrishna's picture is to be found hanging backstage nearly in every theatre in Calcutta. The actors bow to it before they make their entrances. By giving their approval to Girish's art and encouraging him to continue practising it, Ramakrishna became, as it were, the patron saint of the drama in Bengal." ⁷

Jai Ramakrishna.

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- 3 Swami Chetanananda, They Lived with God, 261.
- 4 Christopher Isherwood, Ramakrishna and His Disciples, Hollywood, CA, 1965, 250.
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Sister Nivedita and Dhruva

Vayu Naidu

In returning to Sister Nivedita's reimagining the Cradle Tales of Hinduism, this article returns to her symbolic and literal reference to the cradle. Sister Nivedita was specific about this title.

The literal reference may have marked the audience – the infant in the cradle. But the act of telling the tale is participatory, and a three-way participation. The infant in the cradle, the mother or grandmother who tells the tale, and the imagination of the individual *atma* that receives the tale.

The symbolic reference to the cradle unravels the cradle of civilisation; the principles and practise of the soul or *atma* of a society. Sister Nivedita was illustrating in these tales, the mindful integration of the yoga, revelations and utterances of the rishis, the Upanishadic truths manifesting at diverse levels across generations and trades and gender.

From the multiple philosophical systems, Sister Nivedita was clearly seeking connectedness among them. Her intention was to find an alliance between the expansiveness of Vedantic thought and being, the macrocosm, and the personal relationship with god, the microcosm. In other words drawing attention to the seeming tension between Vedanta and Bhakti. How did she set about doing this in the interaction between adult and child?

Here, we look at how she tells the story of Dhruva, as an exploration of space – external and internal.

Method – Tale as Transposition of Idea:

In her training as a teacher in the Froebel method, she may have nurtured behaviour, encouraged creativity, enabled personality

development through learning and emotive sequences. But it was not until Swami Vivekananda saw in her the seeker, that she encountered the potential of the soul stuff. As her guru, Swami Vivekananda channelled the process of seeking to manifest it in the vast work she accomplished. Here, we are looking at her writing in English. She makes use of her context: the Indian Tale telling tradition. However, she distinctively transposes the palimpsest of meaning from Upanishadic truths, Puranic sources or mythopoeic chronicles of India's history, using the structure of the folk tale and burgeoning the realms of English.

Her first step toward the passage to India's heart as it was in the time of Swami Vivekananda, the direct disciples, and colonial rule, was to enter the realms of the Hindu folk tale where all India participated; non-literate and literate. The folk tale was a paradigm that welcomed the shakti of the gods into their clay modelled anthropomorphic bodies during festivals. Music and song was an essential repertoire of the village Storyteller weaving the origin of the worship, raising awareness across all generations and trades that participated in making the deity's arrival a festival, as puja continues to do so.

It was so with Ramanavami, Krishnajayanti, Vinayaka Chaturthi, Durga Puja, Deepavali to name very few of pan Indian deities and their festivals. There were then, as is now, multiple regional and rural local guardian deities who are manifestations of the spirit of the Hindu pantheon, that are worshipped through festivals that mark the time of sowing and reaping the harvest in agricultural cycles. There are folk tales spun to make sense of the sun, moon, stars and the concept of Time. There are fasts maintained on the ekadasi, or eleventh day of the fortnightly lunar cycle to heighten contemplation. All this participation from diverse

activities was and is, devotional practice of installing, remembrance, and salutation of the divine. As the clay bodies of the gods are immersed in the river, soulfully the Hindu awareness of the One in All and everything is an experience of reality. This fulfilment is the foundation of the non-literate imagination; people imbued with a greater sense of 'knowing by being.'

The folk tale was also a paradigm for the literate, scholar, and used to illustrate a point in debate powerfully, or polemically.

Sister Nivedita acknowledges her source as the generosity of the oral folk tale from which she garnered the totality of the story through all elements that a village Storyteller employed; including the silences between long narrative episodes, gestures, and song.

The Story of Dhruva – a myth of the Pole Star:

It is evident that the folk tale can be a handy tool for exposition. It makes even astronomy accessible. Sister Nivedita places this myth of the Pole star in a stand-alone section of *Tales of the Devotees* following the *Cycle of Krishna*. The tale marks the macrocosmic relevance of the Pole star:

The poetry of the world is full of the similes devised by poets to suggest the midnight sky...

For the fact that seems most deeply to have impressed the Hindu mind, was not the appearance of the starry dome, so much as the perfect steadiness in it, of the Polar Star! Wonderful star! The only point in all the heavens that stayed unmoved, while round it came and went the busy worlds. And this stillness moreover must have characterised it from the very beginning of things. It was never for the Pole Star to learn its quietude. It came by no degrees to its proper place. Rather has it been faithful and at rest since the very birth of time. Surely in all the world of men there could be nothing like this unswerving, unerring from

beginning to end, the witness of movement, itself immutable. Unless indeed we might imagine that some child in his heart had found the Goal, and remained thenceforth, silent, absorbed and stirless, from eternity to eternity, through all the ages of man.

She opens with the allusion of the generic folk tale about making sense of the universe – and the night sky is often when Storytellers gathered the folk to tell their tales pointing at the luminous bodies above, engaging wonderment. She points and signals the Polar Star, the universal fixed point for sailors navigating the seas, explorers, travellers, seekers to find a direction when caught in the unknown. Following the preamble, she states her premise *it came by no degrees to its proper place...the witness of movement, itself immutable*. We hear the indelible and edifying Yogas of Swami Vivekananda. She draws from his teaching to make the point about steadfastness, and constancy before embarking on the tale. It concentrates the listener and reader on the frame and intention of this tale among the selection of tales of devotees, rather than a tale with relevance to astronomy. This is a tale for seekers of the spiritual goal

The child born and named Dhruva belongs to royalty. In spite of his lineage, he cannot be the heir, because of his father's second queen who has sealed his fate by ensuring that her son will inherit the kingdom. Dhruva's mother senses the increasing hostility from the second queen toward her new-born child and repairs to a forest.

It was a humble cottage... built of grey mud, and thatched with brown palm-leaves. In front was a deep verandah...[the] queen could rest and receive her village friends. The occasional visits of holy men, on their way through the forest to distant shrines, become the great events of their woodside life...A great peace entered gradually into the heart of Suniti, the Queen. Thus, under

the calm influence, the child Dhruva would linger, towards sunset, near the lotus-ponds, dreaming of the beauty of the great flowers that rocked to and fro with every movement of the waters, yielding but untouched... as if the gods had passed that way across the waters and left them blossoming in their footsteps.

Sister Nivedita builds the ambient peace with the image of the lotus ponds that characteristically flow into the references of the lotus recalling its spiritual significance of the flower that rocks with the ripple of the water 'yielding but untouched'; like the yogi who through the practise of yoga lives amidst multiple experiences, witnesses, but is not rocked by the movement of turbulent emotions, the reassuring instruction given by Sri Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Every lotus blossoming with the footsteps of the gods could only suggest the illumination of the great Self within the human self. She is drawing the seeker as devotee into the tale where there is the all-pervasive presence of Vishnu.

The tale moves to Dhruva at seven years of age asks to see his father. His mother startled, but understanding his quest, sends him with the protection of a guard. When the boy arrives at the king's palace, his father is overjoyed at the prospect that his son has endeavoured to seek him and come of his own accord. The instant rise of an emotion of filial love is cut through by the jealous second queen who arrives at a moment when the child is on the lap of his father who is sitting on the throne. Dhruva as a child watches how his father is tethered like a captive animal to the taunts of promises of inheritances by the queen. Watching a king fall prey to his own weaknesses, marks Dhruva indelibly. Without interrupting, he takes leave of his father in the courtesy that his mother the Queen Suniti has taught him; touching the feet of his father and kissing the steps of the throne.

On returning at night, his mother's fears are founded in seeing a buoyant child that he was when he went out earlier that day in search of his father who has now become a heart broken stranger to childhood. Dhruva does ask her: "*Mother! Is there anyone in the world who is **stronger** than my father?*"

Sister Nivedita as the Storyteller has prepared us and is now drawing the listener's inner eye to the avatar of Vishnu as Lord Krishna in the tradition of the devotee and the divine soul as beloved. Suniti responds to Dhruva, "O yes, my child, the Lotus-Eyed!"

Dhruva said little more. A voice seemed to be sounding in his heart. It was so loud that sometimes he wondered if his mother did not hear it. From far far away in the depths of the forest it called, "*Come to me! Come to me!*" and he knew that it was the voice of the Lotus-Eyed, in whom was all strength. ... "*O Lotus-eyed, I leave my mother to Thee!*" he said in his heart. Then he stole quietly out, and stood on the verandah, looking at the forest.

He had never been allowed to go even a little way into the forest alone, and now he was going down to its very heart. But it must be right, for he could hear the voice calling, "*Come to me!*" louder than ever. "*O Lotus-Eyed, I give myself to Thee!*" ... He was barefooted, but the thorns were nothing. He had been weary, but that was all forgotten. On and on without resting, he went seeking the Lotus-Eyed.

This is not solely tale-telling lyricism. The passage above does not indicate a form. It indicates an inner calling, the way a Seeker begins the odyssey to Brahman. The signalling pathways of Swami Vivekananda's exposition of yoga are alluded to, as well as the *neti-neti* (*not this - not this*) test of Vedanta in deciphering the difference between delusion and the true call and the way. The

delusions are represented in each animal form that appears before the boy as he is seeking, until the real Guru appears:

Then came one with great fiery eyes, and hot breath, and swinging tail. Dhruva did not know who it was. He went up to him eagerly. *"Are you the Lotus-Eyed?"* he asked. And the tiger slunk away ashamed. Next came something with heavy footsteps and deep dark fur. *"Are you the Lotus-Eyed?"* he asked Dhruva. And the bear, too slunk away ashamed. Still the child heard the voice of the Lotus-Eyed in his heart, saying *"Come! Come!"* And he waited. All at once, out of the darkness of the forest there appeared before him a holy man, whose name was Narada.

"Hail, Blessed One, Lord of the Worlds! Hail!" [Narada uttered]. And he said if his [Dhruva's] whole thought could fasten without wavering, in perfect steadiness, on the words he spoke, he would find the Lotus-Eyed, without a doubt.

For deep in his own heart Dhruva had found the Lotus-Eyed, and he had come to rest for ever.

The tale concludes on the steadfastness of Dhruva concentrating on the sacred text and was given the Pole Star for his home as Dhruva-Loka.

The folk tale engages through the archetype of a rite of passage; a child's recognition of identity. It is a chronicle of a historical incident when a boy born a prince is tricked by fate of his birth right. In seeking to find his father, the boy is also wanting to disclose his filial love that is partly nurtured by his mother. The tale reaches its climax in the boy witnessing weakness. He saw his father, the king, in the clutches of emotional entanglement as it were – of recognising the fault that trapped him and to which he had the key to set himself free, but even as an adult and a king did not have strength to do so. The boy Dhruva makes his choice, even

at that tender age. The pivot of the story is that Dhruva's choice is to find That which is steadfast as Strength, unswerving, unerring from beginning to end, the witness of movement, itself immutable.

In the form of the folk tale explaining natural phenomenon, the story is a palimpsest of astronomy, poetry, history as an exploration of external space. It is also a deeply interior exploration of spiritual space. The external circumstances collide to make the internal odyssey more intense and varied in determining the atman's immutable space.

This tale was shared in a HM Prison service project in 1999. A young, drug-inmate, who when told the tale, identified himself with Dhruva's plight and was struck that there could be a search for strength, that there is a space for the steadfast and that there is a practice by which the constant can be attained through stillness. It was good to observe that he began a rehabilitation programme, and wrote his own story based on the Dhruva story. He identified with the sense of abandon he himself had felt when his father left him as a little boy. The myth and the intention of Sister Nivedita's telling, touches the contemporary listener and imbues them with faith.

It begins with the particular of Bhakti Yoga, and through a discerning struggle offers a discipline toward the expansiveness of Vedanta. In a folk tale she transposes, in English, the time-tested Hindu tradition of opening a profound truth to be poured at the mouth of a cradle.

The Reality of the constant is best expressed in Sri Ramakrishna's own words from the Gospel:

"He who was Rama and Krishna is now, in this body, Ramakrishna".

On Meditation

Swami Vivekananda

Meditation is the focusing of the mind on some object. If the mind acquires concentration on one object, it can be so concentrated on any object whatsoever. First, the practice of meditation has to proceed with some one object before the mind...I think, the practice of meditation even with some trifling external object leads to mental concentration. But it is true that the mind very easily attains calmness when one practises meditation with anything on which one's mind is most apt to settle down. (CW.6.486)

Meditation has been laid stress upon by all religions. The meditative state of mind is declared by the Yogis to be the highest state in which the mind exists. When the mind is studying the external object, it gets identified with it, loses itself. To use the simile of the old Indian philosopher: the soul of man is like a piece of crystal, but it takes the colour of whatever is near it. Whatever the soul touches . it has to take its colour. That is the difficulty. That constitutes the bondage. The colour is so strong, the crystal forgets itself and identifies itself with the colour. Suppose a red flower is near the crystal and the crystal takes the colour and forgets itself, thinks it is red. We have taken the colour of the body and have forgotten what we are. All the difficulties that follow come from that one dead body. All our fears, all worries, anxieties, troubles, mistakes, weakness, evil, are from that one great blunder -- that we are bodies. This is the ordinary person. It is the person taking the colour of the flower near to it. We are no more bodies than the crystal is the red flower. This is what I mean by meditation -- the soul trying to stand upon itself. That state must surely be the healthiest state of the soul, when it is thinking of itself, residing in its own glory. The practice of meditation is pursued. The crystal knows what it is, takes it own colour. It is meditation that brings us nearer to truth than anything else. (CW. 4.227)

Programme for September - October 2019

Sunday discourses begin after a brief period of meditation.

At the

Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, Bourne End at 4:30 pm

Sep 1	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 40	Swami Sarvasthananda
Sep 8	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 41	Swami Sarvasthananda
Sep 15	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 42	Swami Sarvasthananda
Sep 22	Swami Bhuteshananda's Class Talks on Jnana Yoga	Swami Tripurananda
Sep 29	Day Retreat	
Oct 6	Durga Puja	
Oct 13	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 43	Swami Sarvasthananda
Oct 20	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 44	Swami Sarvasthananda
Oct 27	Day Retreat	

Durga Puja

Sunday 6th October
at Bourne End at 4:15 pm

Day Retreat

With Swami Sarvasthananda and Swami Tripurananda
at the Vedanta Centre, Bourne End, on September 29th and
October 27th

from 10:00 am until 7:00 pm

Note: Children are not allowed at the Retreat.

Fortnightly Saturday Class - Message of the Upanishads - Ancient Solutions for Modern Problems - by Swami Sarvasthananda

Sep 28 (Saturday)

Oct 5 and 19 (Saturday)

Time 4:00 p.m to 5:30 p.m

Venue: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,
4A Castletown Road, London W14 9HE

continued from the front cover

dear," said Rama, "If all the houses were beautiful ones, what would the masons do?" God has created all kinds of things. He has created good trees and poisonous plants and weeds as well. Among the animals there are good, bad, and all kinds of creatures - tigers, lions, snakes, and so on.

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The greatest help to spiritual life is meditation (Dhyana). In meditation we divest ourselves of all material conditions and feel our divine nature. We do not depend upon any external help in meditation. The touch of the soul can paint the brightest colour even in the dingiest places; it can cast a fragrance over the vilest thing; it can make the wicked divine -- and all enmity, all selfishness is effaced. The less the thought of the body, the better. For it is the body that drags us down. It is attachment, identification, which makes us miserable. That is the secret: To think that I am the spirit and not the body, and that the whole of this universe with all its relations, with all its good and all its evil, is but as a series of paintings -- scenes on a canvas -- of which I am the witness.

- Swami Vivekananda



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