

Vedanta

371 MAY - JUNE 2013

You are the Children of Immortal Bliss
Umesh Gulati

St. Teresa
Rev. P. Johanns, S. J.



Divine Wisdom

FOR SEEKERS OF GOD Talks with Swami Shivananda

Place: Monastery at Belur—Headquarters, Ramakrishna Math and Mission, India. Time: Thursday, October 28, 1920.

In the morning, according to their custom, the monks of the monastery at Belur gathered upstairs in Swami Shivananda's room, where he was seated, looking very serious and indrawn.

Presently a monk, who had come from a branch centre a few days previously, unburdened his mind, saying : 'Maharaj, though I have been practising meditation to the best of my ability, I find hardly any joy in it. Most often I find I go through my practice as through a routine. That does not satisfy my heart nor does it give me any peace.'

Swami Shivananda said very quietly : 'Look here, my boy, peace is not such an easy thing to attain. The way to peace is very difficult—full of thorns. *"Sharp as the blade of a razor and hard to cross is the way to Self-knowledge—so the sages have described it."* These are the actual words of the illumined seers. The path is indeed extremely difficult, however easy it may seem to those who have not entered it. Great effort is required to make progress in the realm of the Spirit. But if one sincerely wants to realize God, it is certainly true that he will receive His grace. You must have read in the life of Sri Ramakrishna that even he had to go through tremendous spiritual discipline before gaining the vision of the Mother.

Spiritual efforts without sincere love for God are fruitless. Sincere love is what counts. The Master used to say that when

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Editorial

God and Suffering

*Who dares misery love
And hug the form of Death,
Dance in Destruction's dance,
To him the Mother comes.*

(Swami Vivekananda)

The ancient scriptures and seers have affirmed that out of joy was this world born, that in joy does it exist, and that unto joy will it return. But when we look around us what do we see? Nothing but unmitigated misery, endless, unbearable suffering and grief--wars, famines, pestilences, concentration camps, tsunamis, earth-quakes etc. Every student knows that history is nothing but the story of man's inhumanity to man. Some of these miseries are man-made, but a good many come to us unsought and quite unexpectedly. We are unable to explain the how and why of happenings. Even if God did exist, it becomes at times difficult to believe that He is just or merciful. No wonder many have lost their faith in God.

It is a fact that as we advance in civilisation, our miseries increase rather than decrease; as our tastes become finer, our sorrows also seem to become sharper. As our desires multiply, dissatisfaction assails us in a hundred new ways. No prophet has been honoured in his own time, says the proverb. Many examples show that suffering is almost an inevitable condition of greatness.

Naturally the question arises why should there be so much suffering in a world supposedly created by a loving and all-powerful God? Could He not have created a better world with less suffering? Is He really powerless? Or is there a meaning in all this?

The subject is vast and deep. Here we would like to take into consideration the views of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and

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Swami Vivekananda. According to Sri Ramakrishna these are the answers to the problem of evil and suffering.

1. Suffering is a natural and an integral part of the creation. According to Sri Ramakrishna both good and evil are the very fabric of creation.

Master: "In God's creation there are all sorts of things. He has created bad men as well as good men. It is He who gives us good tendencies, and it is He again who gives us evil tendencies. The world consists of the illusory duality of knowledge and ignorance. It contains knowledge and devotion, and also attachment to 'lust and gold'; righteousness and unrighteousness; good and evil."

Neighbour: "In that case we aren't responsible for our sinful actions, are we?"

Master: "Sin begets its own result. This is God's law. Won't you burn your tongue if you chew a chilli?"

2. Suffering is a great teacher and makes us saints.

Neighbour: "Why has God created wicked people?"

Master: "That is His will, His play. In His *maya* there exists *avidya* as well as *vidya*. Darkness is needed too. It reveals all the more the glory of light. There is no doubt that anger, lust, and greed are evils. Why, then, has God created them? In order to create saints. A man becomes a saint by conquering the senses. Is there anything impossible for a man who has subdued his passions? He can even realize God, through His grace.

3. Wickedness is needed to be effective and productive.

Sri Ramakrishna: "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 harsh administrator that the tenants trembled at the very mention of his name.

4. Is the world growing in goodness? Will it succeed in eliminating evil and suffering?

Swami Vivekananda says:

This world will always continue to be a mixture of good and evil. We find the vast majority of people in every country believing that there will be a time when this world will become perfect, when there will be no disease, nor death, nor unhappiness, nor wickedness. That is a very good idea, a very good motive power to inspire and uplift the ignorant; but if we think for a moment, we shall find on the very face of it that it cannot be so. How can it be, seeing that good and evil are the obverse and reverse of the same coin? How can you have good without evil at the same time? What is meant by perfection? A perfect life is a contradiction in terms.

Thus we find that wherever there is good, there must also be evil, and wherever there is evil, there must be some good, wherever there is life, death must follow as its shadow, and everyone who smiles will have to weep, and vice versa. Nor can this state of things be remedied. We may verily imagine that there will be a place where there will be only good and no evil, where we shall only smile and never weep. This is impossible in the very nature of things.

5. Evil exists in the eye of the beholder

Swami Vivekananda says: How can you see evil until there is evil in you? How can you see the thief, unless he is there, sitting in the heart of your heart? How can you see the murderer until you are yourself the murderer? Be good, and evil will vanish for you.

The world will change if we change; if we are pure, the world will become pure. The question is why I should see evil in others. I cannot see evil unless I be evil. I cannot be miserable unless I

am weak. Things that used to make me miserable when I was a child, do not do so now. The subject changed, so the object was bound to change; so says the *Vedanta*.

All through evolution you find that the conquest of nature comes by change in the subject. Apply this to religion and morality, and you will find that the conquest of evil comes by the change in the subjective alone. That is how the *Advaita* system gets its whole force, on the subjective side of man. To talk of evil and misery is nonsense, because they do not exist outside. If I am immune against all anger, I never feel angry. If I am proof against all hatred, I never feel hatred.

Nay, all life is evil. No breath can be breathed without killing some one else; not a morsel of food can be eaten without depriving some one of it. This is the law; this is philosophy. Therefore the only thing we can do is to understand that all this work against evil is more subjective than objective. The work against evil is more educational than actual, however big we may talk. This, first of all, is the idea of work against evil; and it ought to make us calmer, it ought to take fanaticism out of our blood.

6. Evil highlights the glory of the Good.

Says Swami Vivekananda: Good and evil have an equal share in moulding character, and in some instances misery is a greater teacher than happiness. In studying the great characters the world has produced, I dare say, in the vast majority of cases, it would be found that it was misery that taught more than happiness, it was poverty that taught more than wealth, it was blows that brought out their inner fire more than praise.

Many a time what we consider to be suffering may not appear to the great ones in the same light. We may pity Jesus for the crucifixion, but to him it was the logical fulfilment of a life of resignation unto the Divine Will. If he had trembled before the

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cross, the words, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do', would not have escaped from his lips.

Many times, suffering, far from being a negation of divine grace, is often the proof of it. In the case of the great ones whose character has been perfected, suffering serves to set off their golden qualities. Suffering in their case is the urge to greater manifestation of inner worth. It is as if the Lord places them in particularly distressing circumstances only to make them effectively bring out the deeper graces of their soul, for the benefit of ordinary men and women. That is why the Holy Mother said that misery is a gift of God.

It is impossible to imagine a world without grief and suffering. It is equally impossible to progress without suffering.

Be in this world as though you were a stranger or a traveller, with your clothes and shoes full of dust. Sometimes you will sit under the shade of a tree, sometimes you will walk in the desert. Be a passerby always, for this world is not your home.

It is said that when you take only one step toward Him, He advances ten steps toward you. But the complete trust is that God is always with you.

The Almighty created the angels and conferred reason upon them, and He created the beasts and conferred passion upon them, and He created human being and conferred reason and passion both upon them. He whose reason prevails over his passion is higher than the angels, and he whose passion prevails over his reason is lower than the beasts.

Prophet Muhammad

You are the Children of Immortal Bliss

Umesh Gulati

You are not Sinners

Sri Ramakrishna often got irritated when some of his devotees from Brahmo Samaj, one of the reforming sects in Hinduism and very active in Bengal, said that they were sinners. His response to that assertion always was: if you keep repeating: I am a sinner, I am a sinner, you will be certainly drowned in the worldliness. "One should have such a burning faith in God," he once said, that one can say, what? I have repeated the name of God, and can sin cling to me? How can I be a sinner any more? How can I be in bondage any more?' ... Why should one talk only about sin and hell, and such things? Say but once, 'O Lord, I have undoubtedly done wicked things, but I won't repeat them.' And have faith in His name." ¹

The idea of man being a sinner is quite foreign to the Indian culture and religion. It came to India because of the influence of Christianity on Hinduism under its famous leader of the late nineteenth century, Keshab Chandra Sen. The Brahmos believed in a formless God; worshipping God with form was idolatry to them. They also advocated the widow-remarriage in Hinduism, education of girls and a legislation banning child-marriage; all these were good indeed. But it was the Brahmos' idea that man is essentially a sinner that bothered Sri Ramakrishna the most.

One day when Sri Ramakrishna was speaking to some Brahmo devotees about man's duty for God realization, a Brahmo devotee interrupted him to say, 'I am a great sinner. How can I say that God is in me?' The Master was very much irritated by that question and said, 'With you it is always sin and sin! That's the Christian view, isn't it? Once a man gave me a Bible. A part

of it was read to me, and it was full of that one thing--sin and sin!' (The Gospel, 627)

The concept of sin is basic to Christianity. We find in Christianity the doctrine of 'original sin', which has its roots in the story of Adam and Eve, living happily in the Garden of Eden. God told them to eat whatever fruit, etc. they liked, but forbade them to eat the fruit of a certain tree, called the tree of knowledge. But in the midst of paradise, Satan appeared and persuaded Eve not to worry about God's command and eat the fruit of that tree of knowledge. So Eve ate half of that fruit and gave the other half to Adam to eat it also. The effect of eating that fruit from the tree of knowledge made them conscious of their nakedness, and therefore, they hid themselves behind a bush. When God appeared in the Garden of Eden, and asked Adam and Eve why they were hiding behind the bush, they told Him that they could not come out because they were naked. God then knew that they had disobeyed His command, and because of their disobedience, He banished them to the earth below; and we all, being the descendents of Adam and Eve, have inherited their sin. So like them, we are sinners too. According to the Christian belief, only Jesus Christ can save us from that original sin.

According to Hinduism, however, while people do make mistakes, they are not inherently wicked. Vedanta asserts that the essence of every one is Brahman (or Atman), which is pure, perfect, eternal and indivisible. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, each soul is potentially divine; the goal is to realize one's divinity through various spiritual disciplines. We should not, therefore, constantly dwell on sin. The way to remove sin is to think that we are pure, or rather the embodiment of purity absolute. What we think, we become, that is the law. When we forget our true nature-that we are Atman-and identify ourselves with this body-mind complex we make mistakes and commit the

so-called sins. But once we wake up to this knowledge, Self-knowledge, of who we really are, we correct that mistake.

Sri Ramakrishna illustrated this idea with a story, which he heard from Totapuri, his own guru in Advaita. Once there was a lioness that saw a herd of sheep and jumped on them. (Swami Vivekananda also used the same story at many places in his Complete Works, and it is he who uses the word 'lioness'; Sri Ramakrishna used the word, 'tigress' instead.) The lioness was pregnant, and as she jumped, she fell and died. But before dying, she gave birth to a cub. The flock of sheep raised that cub as a sheep. Like the sheep, the cub ate grass and like them bleated also. The cub, like other sheep, ran in terror when a lion attacked the flock. One day a lion, finding an opportunity seized the cub, dragged him to a lake, and showed him his reflection in water. 'Look at your face,' he told him, 'and now look at my face. Aren't we the same?' At first the cub trembled in fear, but as he continued to gaze, alternatively, his own reflection in the water, and also that of the lion's, he realized that he was not a sheep after all. Presently, the lion pushed a piece of meat into the cub's mouth, which the cub found very delicious! Then the lion gave a mighty roar, and the cub followed suit; and he was sheep no more. (The Gospel, 359-60)

The lion cub behaved like a sheep as long it thought it was a sheep. We are like that lion-cub. So long as we think that we are weak, worthless and powerless, so long we will behave like weak, worthless and powerless; so long as we think ourselves to be sinners we will behave like sinners. As Swami Vivekananda said that the remedy for weakness is not brooding over weakness, but thinking of strength.²

As we said before that 'as we think, so we become.' We might now add, 'we cannot be what we are not;' a scorpion cannot help

biting you even if you save it from drowning. The scorpion does so because biting is its nature. It follows that if we are born in sin, we can never become saints; for, to be sinful is our nature. But it is not true. That is why in our spiritual literature, we find innumerable examples of some hardened criminals being transformed into becoming saints. There is a story of Valmiki, the great poet and the author of Valmiki Ramayana (the life of Rama). Valmiki's original name was Ratnakar, better known as the king of robbers. Having come under the influence of a great saint, Narada, he was completely transformed. Having been instructed by the saint in the worship of Rama, he fell into such deep meditation that he lost all consciousness of the external world and remained in that condition even when ants built their mounds all about him. From this incident he received his name, Valmiki, which means: 'born of an ant hill'.

The point of the above story is that no one remains a 'sinner' forever. If a person is wicked today, the same person can be good tomorrow. A person's destiny can be changed in a moment; an incident, a word, a song, can propel a person toward new life. We can also illustrate this by one of the stories given by Sri Ramakrishna (The Gospel, 233). One night a fisherman went into a garden and cast his net into a lake to steal some fish. The owner saw him and surrounded him with his servants. They brought lighted torches and began to search him. In the mean time the fisherman smeared his body with ashes and sat under a tree, pretending to be a holy man. Obviously, the owner and his servants failed to find the fisherman; all they saw was a holy man, meditating under a tree. The next day the news spread that a great sage was staying in the garden. People came in droves with offerings of fruits and flowers, and sweets; some even offered him silver and copper coins. The fisherman thought that if a mere pretence could bring him so much devotion from people, how

much more honour would it bring if he were a real Sadhu (holy man). From that point on, he was no more a thief, but a Sadhu.

The Late Dr. Radhakrishnan, a well-know philosopher and a former president of India once said, 'The only difference between a saint and a sinner is that every saint had a past, and every sinner has a future.' In early years, many great souls led wicked lives, but gradually their lives were transformed, the darkness of their past was dispelled, and they became enlightened and pure. Therefore, if today we see someone who leads an evil life, we cannot give up on him, for tomorrow he could become a good person. It is because of this fundamental belief in man's innate perfection, or in the words of Swami Vivekananda, his potential divinity that hope can be found in the Hindu scriptures. In the Bhagavad-Gita Sri Krishna says: 'Even if a wicked person worships Me with one-pointed devotion, he or she must be regarded as righteous, for his resolution is right.' (The Bhagavad-Gita, 9. 30.)

In the Vivekananda literature there is a story of a great ascetic and yogi, Pavahari Baba, which literally means "Air-eating Father". Swami Vivekananda had met him during his wandering days in 1890 in Ghazipur, near Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India. Pavahari Baba had dug a hermitage underground, and his diet consisted of a handful of bitter Neem (margosa) leaves or a few pods of red pepper. He held all work to be "worship of the Lord"; and he would often give the food he had cooked, after offering it to his Chosen Deity, to the poor or wandering monks, himself refusing to eat.³

One night a thief entered his underground hermitage and tried to steal something, but the only things he found were a few brass utensils. So he tried to steal those, but suddenly Pavahari Baba woke up. Seeing him, the thief left all what he had gathered

and ran away. Pavahari Baba, taking those vessels that the thief had picked up, ran after him. Seeing him running after him the thief began to run faster, but Pavahari Baba soon caught up with him. With folded hands, he apologised and requested the thief to accept the utensils; for, his need was greater than his own.

The thief was stunned and fell at Babaji's feet and asked his forgiveness. He also requested him to accept him as his disciple, which the Babaji gladly agreed. The thief subsequently renounced the world and became a monk. While Swami Vivekananda, was wandering in Northern India, by chance he met this thief-monk of 'luminous realization', and they began to talk. The monk began to tell the Swami the story of his life. In answer to the question if the Swami knew Pavahari Baba, the Swami said that he had met Babaji, and was much attracted by him. He even wanted to take initiation from him. But a couple of visions of his Master (Sri Ramakrishna) had dissuaded him from doing so.

Then with the voice full of emotion, the monk told the Swami: 'you have heard of the thief who visited his (Babaji's) Ashrama to rob him of his few belongings; how the Babaji ran after the fleeing robber, who dropped the stolen goods in haste; and how the Babaji picked them up and, catching up with the fugitive, implored him to take them as rightfully belonging to him, saying, 'All these are yours, Narayana.'

"Oh yes," said the Swami, " I remember the story well. Wonderful indeed is Pavahari Baba." "Well," said the monk, and overcome with feeling, "I was that thief!" The Swami was speechless with wonder. "I saw my wickedness," went on the monk and his voice still choked in emotion, "and repenting of my ways, I adopted this life in order to gain that most priceless of all possessions, the Lord Himself." (The Life, 356)

It seems to us that later when Swami Vivekananda read the paper on Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago on

September 19, 1893, proclaiming the potential divinity of each soul, he must have had in mind this thief who had gained realization of his divine nature. For, after all, we can never be what we are not. We cannot become holy and divine if our nature is sinful. Rightly Swami Vivekananda said on that day:

"Hear ye children of immortal bliss! Even ye that reside in highest spheres! I have found the Ancient One who is beyond all darkness, all delusion: knowing Him alone you shall be saved from death over again." "Children of immortal bliss" - what a sweet, what a hopeful name - heirs of immortal bliss -yea, the Hindu refuses to call you sinners. Ye are the children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth - sinners! (The Complete Works, v.1, 11.) What a strength giving assertion! Therefore, it is now easy to understand Swamiji's assertion that the immortal Atman or the Self is the essence of every being and thing, though only human beings have the capacity to realize and manifest it.

In India people greet each other with folded hands, uttering the words like Namaste, Jai Sri Krishna, or Rama. People in every religion use the folded-hand symbol to offer prayers to their chosen deity or God. But in Hinduism alone, and in fact, in all religions that have originated from India, this symbol is used to greet people. Since this manner of greeting has become part of Indian culture, not many understand the significance of this way of greeting, yet it does say that we all are divine in human form. So when the Hindus greet in this manner they indicate the divinity of the person greeted, while manifesting their own divinity as well.

It is interesting to note how Swami Vivekananda, as Narendra, evolved from being a firm dualist and came to accept non-dualism, Advaita, which Sri Ramakrishna wanted him to believe. Of course, we are not suggesting that to be a dualist is

the same thing as a being sinner. But the point is, everyone has the capacity from evolving not only from a sinner to a saint, but also from a lower stage of dualism to the higher stage of non-dualism. Swami Saradananda's magnum opus, Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master or Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play (tr. Swami Chetanananda) mentions the way how a doubting Narendranath came to accept non-dualism by a mere touch of his Master.

Mahatma Gandhi, too, who was much inspired both by Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji, said that the chief value of Hinduism lies in holding 'that all life (not just human beings, but all sentient beings) is one, i.e. all life is coming from the One Universal Source [Brahman].' Gandhiji used to often quote Isha Upanishad's first verse, which he believed, is the essence of Hinduism. The first line of that verse is: Ishavasyam idam sarvam, meaning that 'all this that we see in this great Universe is pervaded by God,' and therefore everything is divine, God.

The potential divinity of everything, not merely human beings, indeed, is a very important feature of Hinduism. Swami Vivekananda once said: Islam says that there is no God but Allah; Vedanta says that there is nothing that is not God. So there is no division between sacred and secular; everything is sacred. Thus, spiritually speaking, all objects in nature are born equal; Hinduism thus is the embodiment of spiritual and social democracy. In other words, all of us, humans and other beings, plants and animals, rivers, oceans, mountains, and so forth, are part of one family, or as the Vedas say: 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam', which means that the whole world is one big family.

The Bhagavad-Gita, too, asserts that the Self (Atman) is immortal, which 'no weapon can cleave It; no fire can burn It, no water can wet It, no air can dry It.' (Bhagavad-Gita, 2:23) So the

Self is pure and perfect. The same truth is also emphasized in the Upanishads. Can there be any better reason to assert that we humans are not born in sin; we might make mistakes out of ignorance of our divine nature, but we are not essentially sinners, as some western religionists would have us believe.

There are some mystics in Western religions, too, that don't accept the fact of human beings being essentially born in sin; rather they accept the Vedantic view of essential divinity of human beings. One that needs special mention is Pierr Teilhard de Chardin, a French philosopher and a Jesuit priest. He said: We are not human beings having spiritual experiences, but spiritual beings with human experiences.

The point is that so long as we identify ourselves with our physical body and mind complex, we will continue to run after worldly pleasures, thinking that they alone will provide us lasting happiness. Not only that, because of this mistaken identity we become the subject of six passions: lust, anger, greed, delusion, jealousy and pride. It is these passions that make us commit sins, crime, and indulge in all kinds of ethical misconduct. The secret of living a happy life then is to know our real nature, which alone will deliver us from these passions.

There is a story of one of India's great saints, whose later name is Purandara Daasa, 'servant of the Lord Vishnu of Pandarpur' who lived in Karnataka some five hundred years ago.⁴ He was a rich man, but very miserly and stingy about giving even a pie or a cent to any one in need. That person, by one divine touch, became completely transformed. He called the people around, distributed all his wealth, including all the ornaments he owned, and taking a small bundle set out as a daasa, a servant, of the Lord and also of man, singing gloriously divine songs with philosophical and spiritual ideas to awaken humanity. What

happened to that man who was once so miserly and stingy? As Swami Ranganathananda put it: 'he had found the pearl of great price [his Atman] within himself.' So a one-time 'sinner' became a saint.

That is why Swamiji's words of courage and strength, although spoken more than one hundred years ago become relevant even today. "Children of immortal bliss"-what a sweet, what a hopeful name! Allow me to call you brethren, by that sweet name-heirs of immortal bliss-yea, the Hindu refuses to call you sinners. ..." May these words find echo in us too.

1 *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, tr. Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Ramakrishna - Vivekananda Center, 1984, p. 138.)

2 *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1991, v.2, p. 300.)

3 *The Life of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2000, v.1, 229.)

4 (Cf. Swami Ranganathananda, *Universal Message of the Bhagavad-Gita* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2000, v.1, 341.)

The knowledge of God can not be obtained by seeking, but only those who seek find it. I and Thou signify duality, and duality is an illusion, for Unity alone is Truth (al-Haqq, i.e., God). When the ego is gone, then God is His own mirror in me. He speaks with my tongue, and I have vanished. The end of knowledge is that man comes to the point where he was at the origin.

Sayings of Abu Yazid al-Bistami (died 875 AD)

SAINT TERESA

REV. P. JOHANNES, S. J.

Saint Teresa was born in France at Alencon. She was the youngest of seven children. At the age of fifteen she entered the penitential order of the Carmel and died in 1897 at the age of twenty-four. Thirty years after her death she was beatified and canonized and now passes for the greatest modern saint of the Church. Her spirituality is well known since she exposed it in her autobiography and in her letters and her daily sayings, faithfully recorded by her elder sister, Pauline.

The spirituality of Saint Teresa may be characterized by one word : a return to simplicity and directness of spiritual life. She was convinced that our life with God must be simple, natural and spontaneous and that it is we who introduce complications where there are none. Our Lord said in the Gospel that we must become like children if we wish to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Saint Teresa from this advice concluded that a soul who wishes to progress must remain, so to say, in spiritual childhood. Her doctrine is often called the doctrine of Spiritual Childhood, and it is wonderful how many souls discover that such a self-realization suits their character. In this world we can become one with God by faith, hope and charity; but it must be according to Saint Teresa the faith, hope and charity of a child. One may say that this is only an analogy, but the analogy is quite to the point.

According to Saint Teresa sanctification is an education. God wishes to educate us for the life which we shall lead with Him during all eternity. We are like ignorant and helpless babies who know nothing of what is required to lead the great life of God. One thing is sure. By nature we are selfish and on this account unfit to adapt our life to the requirements of the divine life. We depend on the grace of God, which not only must deliver us from our selfish ways but transfigure our intellect and inspire our heart. Our life with the help of grace must be fitted into the divine

life. We have therefore to co-operate with God. What will be our co-operation ? Saint Teresa thinks that the first disposition which we must take is that of total surrender to God. Let us consider the child. It is ignorant and helpless, but on that account it does not become discouraged. It refers itself to its parents whom it knows to be so fond of it that they will see to all its needs. There are many souls who become disheartened on account of their helplessness in the ways of God.

Saint Teresa tells us that this feeling of helplessness is our best disposition. We ought to love and appreciate it, for it marks the sphere of action which God has reserved to the working of His grace. The greater this sphere, the more we must count on the help of our Heavenly Father. Our helplessness is therefore but a device of God to induce us to throw us into His arms with greater trust. Many souls reason like this : I do not feel fit for sanctification, I am so weak, and so ignorant.

Therefore I cannot make sanctity the ideal of my life. But Saint Teresa tells them : It is because you feel so weak and so ignorant that you should trust that God with His grace will lift you to the plane which transcends you infinitely. We think that in order to induce God to help us we must appear before Him with great achievements. But consider again the child. Do the parents ask from the child a demonstration of its great powers ? On the contrary, it is the helplessness of the child which endears it to its parents. What must the little child do ? It must make some efforts to walk or to talk, and assume gradually the ways of the parents. All its little efforts please the parents, whatever may be their awkwardness. It is the same with God. God considers our intention to please Him, our desire to live up to our dignity of children of God. As to the success, well, He is like the parents. It is our good-will which pleases Him, however poor the expression may be in the beginning.

Hence Saint Teresa makes so much of our good desires. She does not wish us to drop any of them on account of their apparent impossibility, for they are like a continual prayer that moves God to give us by His grace what we cannot achieve by ourselves.

But does God not desire works? Of course He does. But again our works will count by the desire they embody. If we have the desire to please God, the slightest work becomes a great work, for the work only counts in so far as it is an expression to please God.

It all comes therefore to this : Have but one intention in the service of God : that to please Him. But this intention must be pure. We must try to please God for His own sake, not to please Him for our own sake or for the sake of the world. Love means the love of God for His own sake and of ourselves and the world for the sake of God.

According to Saint Teresa, we must identify ourselves with God and with ourselves and the world, as it is the plan of God. We must therefore make the will of God our own; which presupposes that we make His thought and His heart our own. We must think like God, judge like God and will like God, and thus we reach again the disposition we started from, the complete surrender to God. Hence her beautiful sayings, "I have not entered the convent to be consoled by God but to console God." She repeats that she would wish to be like the little flower which by its beauty pleases us and yet knows nothing of its own beauty. Saint Teresa would like therefore to sanctify herself for the sake of God. Why should she sanctify herself for her own sake and thus spoil her total surrender? In one of her poems she wishes to be like a scattered rose, to be thrown under the feet of Jesus and give Him some comfort and then be brushed aside. Again she envies the candle that consumes itself by giving a little light and then vanishes into nothing. All these expressions are meant to

illustrate the desire of Saint Teresa to make her surrender to God total, to be for herself in so far as she is for God.

In the last two years of her life God took away from her all the consolation of faith. She felt as if there was no eternal life and as if all the great sacrifices of her life had been useless. She felt sad but her will resolutely clung to her faith. It was a kind of martyrdom, this contradiction between her will and her heart. But she understood the meaning. She thanked God to have given her an opportunity to love Him even against her own heart and thus sacrifice it to Him.

It is on these lines that Saint Teresa tried to come in touch with God. And she did. There are very few extraordinary spiritual happenings to record in her life. But the most extraordinary happening, that of a soul which gives itself to God without any desire of return and only wishes to be nothing to herself and everything to God, took place in her soul. She could render witness to herself : I have never refused anything to God from my third year onward. With regard to Our Lord she once said : "I would like to love Him as He has never been loved." The Holy Face of Our Lord surmounted by a crown of thorns and covered with blood and tears had taught her that God was all Surrender to us. Our Lord had come to this world to give Himself to us and this great self-gift was expressed by His death on the Cross.

Really Christ was a God who wished to be nothing to Himself in this life, that He might be everything to us : the ransom for our sins, the food of our souls, the source of our divine life. The Holy Face was the book in which Saint Teresa read the great mystery of love that of a God who requires our wholesale surrender because He Himself is all Surrender to us.

(Reprinted from Prabuddha Bharata, December 1934)

Sri Ramakrishna Through Western Eyes

Swami Vidyatmananda

(The Holy Mother had a vision of Sri Ramakrishna entering the Ganges and blending with its waters and Naren sprinkling that twice sacred water all the world over Sri Ramakrishna, who was not born for India only, was the Zeitgeist and his message was framed for the West also. Swami Vidyatmananda of Centre Vedantique Ramakrishna, Gretz, France, acknowledges how Sri Ramakrishna had already initiated his mission in the West when Swamiji reached there. In a hundred subtle ways Sri Ramakrishna continues to spread his message both in the East and the West. The author traces how the Gospel of the Great Master percolated into Europe through Max Muller , Dhan Gopal Mukherjee, Tantine (Josephine MacLeod), Romain Rolland and Christopher Isherwood. He narrates how help to the Ramakrishna Movement in the West has come from utterly unexpected sources. He also draws our attention to the Concordance to the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna compiled by Katharine Whitmarsh, a niece of Josephine MacLeod. The Concordance is a great boon to all who want to make ready references to the names and incidents scattered among the pages of the voluminous Gospel)

Some fifteen years ago we answered a telephone call asking if we would receive a man named Mr. Serge Beucler, who was the editor of the Parisian magazine "*Planete*". We didn't know this man, but we had seen copies of "*Planete*"; and its two directors, Mr. Louis Pouwels and Mr. Marc de Smedt, were well known in France as journalists. We learned from Mr. Beucler that "*Planete*" was preparing a special number on Sri Ramakrishna. This was to be launched at a spectacle to be held in the main auditorium of the famous concert hall, the Salle Pleyel. Mr. Beucler asked for our participation.

Having been carrying on our work quietly at Gretz for many years, and thinking of ourselves as representing a movement rather obscure, we were amazed and intrigued. We had never made any effort to attract publicity or lure adherents. We remembered Sri Ramakrishna's advice to Girish Ghosh when a friend Girish had brought to Balaram Bose's house to meet the Master had seemed unimpressed: "Never force anyone here against his will. Nothing occurs except at the right time." Whatever people had come to the Gretz Ashrama had come either through hearing about us from others or as a result of reading Vedanta literature.

Of course we agreed to co-operate with "*Planete's* proposal, and in due course there appeared a special number of the magazine, lavishly illustrated with Ramakrishna's portraits and with photographs we had taken in India, and called "Ramakrishna, 1 'Homme et son Message" ("Ramakrishna, the Man and his Message"). On the evening of 11 March, 1970, at the Salle Pleyel occurred a gala event.

The auditorium, seating more than two thousand spectators, was filled to capacity. Swami Ritajananda spoke on Sri Ramakrishna, as did several celebrated French orators and poets.

For us who as alien voices had rendered homage to the Master in such a relatively private way for so long, this evening produced a peculiar sensation. "Our" Ramakrishna had gone public! He had become everybody's hero! Here were all these well known people in such a public fashion and before such an assorted audience singing praises to our Master! Copies of that "*Planete*" seem to have been widely distributed. For years after its publication we received inquiries from people who had read the number and were interested to learn more about Vedanta and Sri Ramakrishna.

Of course the issue went out of print after a certain time. But an interesting new development is that just now the Paris

publishing house of Courrier du Livre is in the process of bringing out as a book a revised edition of that old "*Planete*", to be called "*Ramakrishna, un Sage en Inde*".

But this is only one individual example of how Sri Ramakrishna's name and influence are spreading in the West. He is now quite well known. One remembers how in 1896 Swami Vivekananda rejoiced to hear from Professor Max Muller of Oxford that Muller had written an article on Sri Ramakrishna for the "*Nineteenth Century*". This was, as we know, soon followed by an entire book on the Master—Max Muller's "*Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings*", first issued in November, 1898. Subsequently, published in New York in 1926, there appeared "The Face of Silence" by Dhan Gopal Mukherjee. This was a poetical rendering of the Ramakrishna story by a Bengali, based on interviews the author conducted with surviving associates of the Master: a popular book by a popular author which brought Ramakrishna to a large western audience. Translations of "The Face of Silence" were soon published in several European languages.

It was Dhan Gopal Mukherjee's enthusiasm for Ramakrishna, and the enthusiasm of Tantine (Miss Josephine MacLeod), which motivated Romain Rolland to undertake his studies of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. The account of his mounting interest in what Romain Rolland called "the living tradition of Indian mysticism" is set forth in Rolland's published diaries. On 4 October 1926, Rolland recorded the first visit of Mukherjee to his home in Switzerland and of his awakening interest in Sri Ramakrishna. In the spring of 1927 Tantine came to call on Rolland and his sister several times, and the conversation was all on Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji. In a June 1927 entry in his journal Rolland wrote: "I would like to consecrate a book to Ramakrishna and Vivekananda which will make them known to the vast public of the Occident." This book,

in two volumes, as we know, came out two years later and introduced Ramakrishna and Vivekananda to a public which now heard of them for the first time.

And so publications proliferated with the passing of the years, in many countries and in many languages. One of the best and most recent was "Ramakrishna and his Disciples" by the world-renowned writer, Christopher Isherwood.

There are many other evidences of the impact of Sri Ramakrishna in the Occident, of how western eyes have become opened to him. For example, his sayings are nowadays to be found quoted as immortal utterances in books and magazines. And the fact that many modern Yoga movements—some even without a definite spiritual ideal—seem to regard Ramakrishna as their patron saint; they may not follow him closely, but they have his portrait prominently displayed in the salons where they meet. And the fact that in Holland, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain (and of course in many places in North and South America also) unorganized groups, without a teacher, without even any connection with the Ramakrishna movement, are to be found meeting under the inspiration of the poor Brahmin of Kamarpukur. And the fact that students of universities in the United States and Europe are writing masters' and doctors' theses on various features of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda-Vedanta story.

We of the Centre Vedantique Ramakrishna at Gretz and those in other centres in the West may tend to believe that we are specially ordained to preach the message of Sri Ramakrishna and Vedanta. Agreed, we do our best, especially, it is hoped, through the example of our lives. The Ramakrishna Swamis, as Vivekananda taught them to do, very rightly propound principles in preference to personality. The actual fact is that Ramakrishna preaches himself—as in the case of "*Planete*" and the other

evidences that I have mentioned. This seems to me to be something totally new in the realm of divine messengers. In the case of Christ we hear of chosen missionaries going from village to village and from country to country preaching their master. The same in the case of Gautama Buddha and his doctrine. And certainly vigorous proselytism was the case in the expansion of Islam. But there has been little if any propagandizing on the part of devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. There are big centres in India, some patronized by individuals of considerable political or cultural influence. But not so in the Occident. Most centres in the West are small. Somehow, we do not know how, Ramakrishna is making his influence felt in the vast world outside India—making his influence felt and leading people toward God.

I shall cite another incident which may be interpreted as demonstrating that Ramakrishna is alive in a subtle way and doing his own work.

This happened at the Ramakrishna centre in Hollywood a number of years ago, before I joined; but I have heard the story recounted many times. The centre was small and poor at that time. A collection was taken after the lecture on Sunday, and how adequately Swami Prabhavananda and the two or three disciples who lived with him ate the following weekend depended very much on what the audience felt constrained to leave in the collection plate.

One day the disciple who acted as secretary came rushing in to Swami Prabhavananda and told him that there was a foreign gentleman in the reception room who claimed to be Vivekananda. What should she do with him? Obviously he was crazy and should be got rid of as quickly as possible.

"Well," said the Swami, "let me talk to him." Swami Prabhavananda went out and met the gentleman. Yes, indeed he was foreign; he spoke English with a strong Italian accent, and

that in America in those days suggested that he was a member of that enormous wave of poor and ignorant immigrants who had flooded the USA in search of a better life. It is true that the visitor spoke English badly, but in talking with him, Swami Prabhavananda saw that he was a person of culture. It soon became obvious that the secretary had made a mistake. The visitor hadn't said that he was Vivekananda; he had tried to explain that he had read and been very much impressed by Vivekananda. The man examined the books that were on sale and took a large armload, which he didn't pay for, saying he would come back and settle up later. Swami Prabhavananda recalled, in recounting the incident, how aghast he was, since the books taken comprised a substantial part of the stock of the little bookshop the Centre maintained at that time and represented quite a sum of money.

A few days later the man came back. He not only paid for the books but explained that he could see that the Centre was in a difficult situation financially; he would like to make a contribution for its continuance, a contribution which should not be spent, but instead should be invested in some security which would produce a regular income sufficient to sustain the basic needs of the Swami and the disciples who lived with him. He wrote out a check; and after the visitor's departure, when Swami Prabhavananda examined the check he was impressed not only by the amount but by the signature. This strange visitor was Prince So-and-So—a member of the Italian aristocracy. He had appeared out of nowhere and was soon to disappear.

The money was used to buy an orange grove, and the receipts from the sale of the annual orange crop gave the struggling Vedanta Society of Southern California a basic income for many years. One year it produced an especially good harvest, so that several thousand dollars could be sent to India to help purchase the Cossipore Garden House; and some years later another good

harvest helped make up the sum needed to acquire, when the time came to organize a monastic order for women, the large house on the Ganges opposite Belur Math which became the original headquarters of the Sri Sarada Math.

Finally, when with the passing of years the old orange grove was all surrounded by subdivisions, and growing oranges was no longer a profitable business in Southern California, the property was sold; and it was the gift from this visitor who had so miraculously appeared long before, which helped produce the funds necessary to pay for the beautiful Vedanta temple which in 1956 was opened in Santa Barbara—a source from which many individuals have drawn inspiration for the past thirty years.

I cite this incident to illustrate why we say that we do nothing except benefit; Ramakrishna does his own work.

Now I shall give a third example of Ramakrishna's handiwork. To contemplate its scope is to become convinced that a miraculous source of inspiration is operating.

In its complete version, the New York edition of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is a large volume running to some eleven hundred pages. It was translated by Swami Nikhilananda from M.'s original five volumes in Bengali. This book is on its way to being considered one of the most important religious works of the world.

Most devotees have read the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* from beginning to end, probably several times. Or they keep the volume on the bedside table and study a page or two nearly every night before going to sleep. Most devotees are familiar with the incidents, with what Ramakrishna counselled, with—in a general way—the numerous contemporaries who people the *Gospel*, with the Master's proverbs and parables. But try to track down a particular reference! Among the hundreds of thousands of words

in this great book, finding what you want when you want it is nearly impossible.

True, there is a short index, a glossary of Vedantic terms, and an index to first lines of songs, but these are of little help in specific cases.

Well, in the past few months something has occurred to change all that. Early in 1985 there appeared the "*Concordance to the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, New York Edition.*" This must be one of the best and most complete scriptural indexes ever devised. Its publication is a major event in the Ramakrishna chronicle. The *Concordance* is a tool capable of making the serious study of Ramakrishna's life and teaching very much easier and infinitely more profound. Untold thousands of future Ramakrishna enthusiasts will reverently thank its compiler.

The story of the development of this *Concordance* is one more example of how Sri Ramakrishna does his own work. No Vedanta centre in India or the "West could have undertaken such vast editorial effort. We remember that the first *concordance* to the Bible, brought out in 1247, was reputedly compiled by Hugo de St. Caro with the aid of five hundred monks. And yet here is this *Concordance*, issued barely fifty years after the completion of the Gospel, wonderfully well executed, all the work directed and the development costs borne by a devotee. Copies are available at fifty dollars each, not so very much more than the actual costs of paper and printing.

The *Concordance* is nearly 650 pages long, its format that of the size of typing paper. There are, arranged in double columns, seventy to eighty subject entries per page, making something like forty or fifty thousand references and cross references. Every word Sri Ramakrishna uttered, every teaching he gave, every example he used, every song he sang or listened to, every person

he addressed his remarks to may quickly be found by page number and position on the page of the New York Gospel.

There follows an appendix of Ramakrishna's religious experiences and ecstatic states, with indications as to where to find descriptions of them.

Next comes a fifty-page appendix identifying, with biographical information and an explanation of their significance in the Ramakrishna story, relatives, disciples, acquaintances, and other contemporaries of the Master. I counted more than four hundred, and the pages in the Gospel where they are mentioned are all indicated. Having this biographical dictionary at hand will enormously aid those admirers of Ramakrishna who, like me, can never seem to keep in mind exactly who is who among the many people he encountered.

There is then an appendix containing the names of all the deities, incarnations, and historical personages mentioned in the Gospel, with page numbers where they are mentioned.

Finally there is an appendix referring to Sri Ramakrishna's prayers, and finally an index to the songs and authors of songs which appear in the Gospel.

The name of the devotee who carried through this project is Miss Katharine Whitmarsh, or Prasanna. The name Whitmarsh will be found in works pertaining to Swami Vivekananda, for her family was associated with and indeed connected by marriage to Swami Vivekananda's American friends, the Leggetts. Tantine was Prasanna's aunt. Prasanna was present, aged two years, at Ridgely Manor during the "great summer" of 1899 when Swami Vivekananda was there. Prasanna recalls Vivekananda vaguely, remembers that he gave her a penny.

Prasanna's interest in Sri Ramakrishna increased with the passage of years. She came to live in Santa Barbara near the convent of the Vedanta Society and began in earnest at first for

her own use, to index the Gospel. As she says in the Preface of the *Concordance*: "It was natural, therefore, when I began my study of the Gospel that I should begin making notes of phrases and key words whose location I wanted to remember, keeping them in a special notebook. As this private index grew, it became more comprehensive and elaborate and finally had to be transferred first to 5"x7" cards and then to 3"x5" cards (some 40,000 of them). Thus one might say the *Concordance* was born in the form of notebooks, from which it went through several transitions: to cards, to typewritten 11"x17" sheets, and finally into a computer, the total process occurring over a period of some fifteen years." Further on in the Preface Prasanna gives thankful credit to the large staff of helpers (some paid workers and some devotee aides who contributed their time) who helped her. All expenses were borne by her.

The work is done now and will remain for years as a monument to the inspiration brought into the life of one devoted person by Sri Ramakrishna, Prasanna completes her Preface with these words: "The benefits of dealing with Sri Ramakrishna's words and teachings on a consistent basis are impossible to evaluate or describe, but the presence of his thought in our lives can only be an asset of the most valuable kind. All of us who have had an opportunity to participate in this work have been blessed by it, and I am grateful to be able to offer this *Concordance* to all users of the English translation of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, whoever and wherever they may be." I have not given any well-rounded survey of the impact of Ramakrishna in the West—only some anecdotal glimpses. University students are busy working on intensive and well documented investigations, and new books tracing the Master's influence in the Occident are being written. What I have done in these lines has been to bear witness to several examples of Sri Ramakrishna's growing significance that have passed before the bemused eyes of one western observer.

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God is also Mother - Brahman and Shakti (or the strange magic)

Hans Torwesten

(continued from issue 367, Sep-Oct 2012)

In Hinduism many divinities also have a female aspect, which completes them, and not a few Indian prayers call on God with the words: "You are our Father, you are our Mother!" Krishna can say: "I am the Father of this world, the Mother, the Dispenser and the Grandfather ..." (Gita IX, 17). The female aspect is partly expressed through the accompanying Shakti and partly by the fact that there is a female, motherly quality in the male God.

In contrast to the "prophetic" religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which are strongly characterised by male qualities, Hinduism, which likes to call itself the "Eternal Religion" (Sanatana Dharma), belongs to the mainly "motherly" religions - in spite of the undeniable subjection of woman over many centuries of Indian history. The reasons for this lie very deep. The female characteristic is in no way confined to the veneration of Shakti in Tantrism, in which the Divine Mother has practically been raised to the chief divinity. We must go further down into the divine ground itself, which is called Brahman in the Upanishads. Brahman is certainly not female, it is neither HE nor SHE, it is the Absolute, the Ultimate Source. Yet from this mystical ground a bridge can more easily be crossed to the female aspect of God than from a male extra-cosmic Creator God, who is worshipped as the highest Absolute and does not tolerate any other gods and certainly any goddess besides Himself. This God "makes" something out of nothing.

The mother, on the other hand, lets something become and arise, come forth and grow - not out of something else, but out of herself. Ramakrishna often compared Shakti to a spider, who spins forth the universe, her cosmic web of Maya out of herself. He also often stressed that his Divine Mother was identical to the

Brahman of the Vedas. In the Mundaka Upanishad we read: "Just as the spider spins its web and draws it in, as the plants come forth from out of the earth, as the hair grows out of the living body, so all things arise out of the Indestructible" (1, 7).

Here an almost Taoist and "motherly" feeling of being alive is expressed. Creation is in this case not a unique act of will and power, by which a male Creator God wishes to assert Himself (and whom one must then continually praise for this "accomplishment"), but a natural spontaneous happening - almost without a reason. Have we today, after all the show of strength in our Western civilization, not again become more receptive for such a position - a position that has time, without always at once interfering in everything? [S1]There is a basic trust in it that all will be well - provided we do not mess things up again.

Many psychologists will speak of regression. They will say: it is necessary that the male Creator God be removed from this ground - whether this ground be an absolute IT (Brahman) or the motherly womb of nature (Prakriti). We must however go on to ask: Where is the final point of the development? Even when we admit that the male dawning of consciousness, which always at the same time appears to be separate from the female mother ground, is a necessary stage in human - and perhaps even divine - evolution, it is not thereby implied that it represents a final high point. There is not only an unconscious and a conscious aspect, but also a super-conscious one, in which everything is fulfilled, both the male and the female. The purely natural is here transcended, but also the male urge to overcome, which goes against nature. The fulfilment is not a stiff male victory posture. Whoever stands, cannot let go, cannot relax and he is not ripe for the highest fulfilment. Relaxation does not consist of a return to chaos, but of a realisation of the transcendental ground, which transcends all the opposites. For the man, however, who has

almost always lived only in a tense state of consciousness, in a continuous anti-feeling, in a world of opposites, this transcendent super-consciousness gain appears to have female features and a certain similarity with the mother's womb. The "lower" natural aspect and the super-conscious aspect touch on one another and between them lies all the struggles and convulsions of our civilization.

There is only one place in the Upanishads, in which the formless Absolute Brahman takes on a form and speaks - and it does so as a woman. In this passage in the Kena Upanishad the mysterious nature of Brahman, which as the mysterious IT is behind all divine and human persons and defies all definitions, is emphasized in a quite humorous way. The passage reads:

"It is said that Brahman once won a victory for the gods (over the demons). Though the victory was due to Brahman, the gods became elated by it, and thought: verily this victory has been won by us. The glory of it is ours.

Brahman knew their vanity, and he appeared before them, but they did not understand who that adorable Spirit was. They said to Agni (Fire): "O Jatavedas (all-knower), find out who this adorable Spirit is." He agreed. Agni hastened to the Spirit. The Spirit asked him who he was, and Agni replied: "Verily I am Agni, the omniscient."

"What power resides in such as you?" asked the Spirit. "Why, I can burn up everything there is on earth," replied Agni. The Spirit put down a straw before him and said, "Burn it!" Agni dashed on it, but was unable to burn it. So he returned to the gods, saying, "I could not find out who that adorable Spirit is."

Then the gods said to Vayu (Wind): "O Vayu, find out who this adorable Spirit is." He agreed. Vayu hastened to the Spirit. The Spirit asked him who he was, and Vayu replied, "Verily I am Vayu, the King of air."

"What power resides in such as you?" asked the Spirit. "Why, I can blow away anything, whatever there is on earth," said Vayu. The Spirit put down a straw before him and said, "Blow that away!" Vayu dashed at it, but was unable to move it. So he returned to the gods, saying, "I could not find out who that adorable Spirit is".

Then the gods said to Indra (the chief of gods): O Maghavan, find out who this adorable Spirit is." He agreed and hastened towards the Spirit, but the Spirit disappeared from his view. And on that very spot he beheld a woman, wondrously fair - the daughter of the snowy mountain Himavat. And of Her he asked, "Who could this adorable Spirit be?" She replied: "That is Brahman - the Brahman in whose victory you have attained greatness."

Therefore, verily, these gods - Agni, Vayu and Indra - excel the other gods; for they approached the Spirit nearest, and they were the first to know Him as Brahman.

This story reminds one a little of that Indian mythological tale, in which the bewildered male gods combine their energies and enable the figure of Devi, the Great Goddess, to arise, which conquers the demonic powers. "Brahman gained victory for the gods", it says in the Upanishad - Brahman is the background power, which brings about the victory of the gods fighting in the foreground. In contrast to this mysterious Brahman the Goddess Herself does indeed appear on the field of battle as the combined power of the gods, but in spite of this intervention in the event she has the "background" in common with Brahman: she is not at all so much a clearly defined person, but the life-giving and also aggressive energy, which is in all beings, which pervades everything and holds everything together, and in this case "appears" only as a figure, while in reality she is the power that lets forth all formations and appearances from herself.

Later Vedanta philosophers have attempted to separate Brahman and the female Maya-Shakti and even to declare them to be enemies. They did not want to see the purity of a static Absolute polluted by the dynamic veiled dance of this creative energy. But we do not yet find this dualism in the Upanishads, where Brahman is something that goes beyond itself, the pulsating and living entity - although there is at the same time an eternal silence within it, into which the Yogi immerses himself.

It is precisely there, where the mysterious nature of Brahman is emphasized, where it is asked, what a strange mystery it is that a secret relationship with the "female" Maya becomes clear - with that power, which the great Vedanta philosopher Shankara, even when he unflinchingly went into battle against it, nevertheless described it as "most wonderful" and "indescribable in words". We here stand before the strange paradox, that the power, which as Maya-Shakti produces the world of manifold appearances and thus hides the transcendental ground of being, by her mysterious nature brought to despair the very male philosophers like Shankara, also thereby points to the unattainable and indescribable transcendental character of the Ground of Being.

The somewhat superficial male Creator God, who is very proud of his deeds - like the smaller gods, whom Brahman annoyed by his jokes - seems on the other hand almost banal. One feels that he cannot yet be "All", one looks for something behind Him - for the ground of Being and a power, which does not make itself the Lord, does not continually give itself airs, but which as the secret controlling energy makes the game possible in the first place. And I think that Brahman and Shakti have much in common in this regard.

Translated by John Phillips

Sankaracharya : Life And Teachings

Swami Dayatmananda

It is said that human relationships can be classified into three types: that which exists between two ignorant people, between two wise people and between a wise and an ignorant person.

The relationship that exists between an enlightened teacher and a spiritual seeker belongs to the third category. In this instance the seeker must have openness, humility and complete faith (*Shraddha*) in the Guru. Only then can spiritual transmission take place. The discipleship does not consist in mere intellectual grasp or book-learning. (Sri Ramakrishna used to say even a parrot can recite scriptures flawlessly!!) Rather it is the open heart full of humility and faith that is capable of receiving and retaining the grace of God or Guru. And grace comes in the form of right understanding of the Truth which alone can lead to the realization of God or Self. Totakacharya's life illustrates this fact.

Totakacharya

Sri Sankara, the greatest expounder of Advaita Vedanta, is reputed to have lived between 788 and 820 A.D.

Totakacharya was one of the four eminent disciples of Sankaracharya. Totaka's pre-monastic name was Giri. Unfortunately very little is known about the life of Giri. All that we know is that he exemplified in his life the spirit of service and dedication to his Guru.

Giri came from a poor Brahmin family. He joined Sankaracharya in Sringeri. The Master too recognized the potentiality of Giri and accepted him as his dear disciple. He had great reverence for his Guru. Giri had no interest in his life except to serve the great Master. He neglected even his teachings and discourses and lost himself in the service of his

Master. He firmly believed that the Guru's Grace alone can help one cross the ocean of worldliness to the safe shore of Self-realization.

(The devotees of Sri Ramakrishna may recall the faith and service of '*Latu*', later known as Swami Adbhutananda. Pleased with his devoted service, Sri Ramakrishna prophesized that *Vedantic* truths would come out of the mouth of *Latu*!)

Giri distinguished himself by his selfless service, rendering all menial service to his Master. He used to sweep, clean the utensils and wash the Master's clothes, and serve his Guru in every way.

Before coming to Sankaracharya Giri was already invested with the sacred thread and had been initiated into the daily routine to be followed by a Brahmin boy, but did not have much formal education. He paid more importance to the service of his Guru and was rather indifferent to the classes conducted regularly by Sankaracharya. After finishing his duties he used to attend the classes and listen attentively to the Master's erudite expositions.

One day, as usual, Sankaracharya had taken his seat along with his other disciples but sat silent as if he was expecting someone to come and join the group. After some time, one of his disciples became impatient and asked the Master the reason for not starting the class. The Acharya replied that he was waiting for Giri. The disciple seems to have exclaimed smugly that there was the wall in place of Giri! The Master must have been surely pained at this arrogance and discourteous reference to Giri, but nevertheless waited for his arrival and calmly replied: 'But he listens attentively.' The disciples failed to grasp the meaning of the Master's words and were looking at each other's faces.

Sankaracharya decided to teach his students that a mere intellectual comprehension of the scriptural teachings was only of secondary importance and that a right attitude, faith, humility and reverence were necessary in order to realize the Self. He silently blessed the absent Giri with complete Self-knowledge. A feeling of compassion enveloped the heart of Giri, soaking it with his Master's grace and blessings.

It was said that Giri was at that time washing the Master's clothes in the river Tunga. All of a sudden he felt a divine flash of illumination. (This surely reminds us of how Sri Ramakrishna's grace made the meditating Narendranath enter into *Nirvikalpa Samadhi*.) This made Giri experience his Self instantly. While others might need several births to realize this truth, Giri was able to reach this state of realization in an instant by the grace of his Guru.

The pure mind of Giri, full of humility, faith and devotion, awoke to Self-knowledge. After collecting his Master's clothes, Giri came to the Master and prostrated at his feet. Gratitude at the extraordinary grace of his Guru, who bestowed upon him divine knowledge, made Giri spontaneously burst into praise. He hymned Sri Sankara in eight verses (*Totakashtaka*) in *Totaka* metre, with each verse ending, with the refrain: "*bhava sankara desika me saranam.*" ('O Great Guru, may you be my only refuge!') This hymn, composed in the most difficult *Totaka* metre, earned him the name of Totakacharya.

The Master's other disciples were astounded at this miraculous change in Giri. They marvelled at the deep meaning of the verses that burst out of the mere servant boy who could not even speak a sentence correctly in Sanskrit until a few moments ago. They observed the glow of spiritual enlightenment on the face of Giri. It did not take long for them

to understand that he had the rare privilege of obtaining the Master's grace.

Being great people, the disciples had no hesitation in acknowledging Giri's greatness. Sankaracharya placed his hands on Giri's head and blessed him. He then advised the students on the importance of *Shraddhaa*, without which no amount of book learning would be of any avail. He exhorted them to develop *Shraddhaa*, saying that through faith alone everything could be achieved. He reminded them of the intense faith that possessed the famed *Nachiketas* of the *Katha Upanishat*. Blessing all the disciples, the Acharya continued the lessons.

Soon after on an auspicious day, he initiated Giri into the holy order of sannyasa. He was given the name Totaka after the hymn he sang which happened to be in the Totaka rhyme.

Later, Totakacharya was appointed the first head of the Jyotir Math, near the present Badrinath, Himalayas (in northern India; one of the four monasteries established by Sri Sankara in India).

Later on Totakacharya seemed to have composed another work by name – *Srutisarasamuddharanam* (Extracting the Essence of the scriptures), which embodied the quintessence of Vedanta.

One day, Rabia was seen running, carrying fire in one hand and water in the other. They asked her the meaning of her action and where she was going. She replied, "I am going to light afire in Paradise and pour water in Hell, so that both veils (hindrances to the true vision of God) completely disappear.

Rabia

Sheikh Fariduddin Attar

M. Hafiz Syed

Sheikh Fariduddin Attar was born probably in 513 A.H. There is a great difference of opinion about the exact date of his birth. It is safer to assume that he was born in 627 A.H. as chronicled in Nafahatul Uns. His birth place was Kadkan, a village near Nishapur and hence he was generally called Nishapuri.

The name Attar signifies one who deals in perfumes or drugs. The poet's father had followed this profession and the son succeeded to his business. He was particularly attached to his mother who was a great source of satisfaction and inspiration to him. His father having died when he was a little boy he inherited his strong leanings to the religious life from his mother. In addition to his trade in the sale of perfume he had a sort of a pharmacy where he prescribed medicines to the ailing patients. His clinic was so popular that he had to treat not less than five hundred patients in a day and it was in the midst of this pre-occupation that he found time to compose some of his poems.

Almost all the memoirs of saints are agreed that he had a long span of life and became a martyr at the hands of a Tartar. The story of his martyrdom is pathetic. During the onslaught of Tartars he was caught by a soldier and he was about to be put to death when a passerby implored the soldier not to put him to death but to release him on a ransom of ten thousand asharfis. The Sheikh said to the soldier, "take care and do not sell me away for this amount. My life is more valuable than this amount." Thus they passed on. They met another man who was a grass cutter and offered his release for a sheaf of grass. On this Sheikh remarked, "make me over to him for this bargain as I am much less valuable than this sheaf of grass." The Tartar

soldier not taking the Sheikh seriously thought he was jesting and was so enraged that he beheaded Attar.

The story of his complete renunciation of worldly affairs is rather touching. During his early days he owned a druggist shop where he was so busily engaged in dispensing medicine one day that when a Faqir (a Muslim Saint) called on him and begged for some alms, the Sheikh paid no attention to him as he was too busy with his own affairs and could not reply to the mendicant who caustically remarked, "How will you give up your life when you are so deeply engrossed in your business?" The Sheikh in a piqued mood retorted, "I shall give up my ghost as you would do." The Fakir once again said, "You would not follow my way." Having uttered these words he laid himself down with bowl of alms under his head and repeating the Kalema (Prayer), "There is no god but God", breathed his last. This incident touched Sheikh's heart so deeply that he gave away in charity all that his shop contained and from that moment onward he lived like a Darvesh.

As a man of great renunciation and detachment he spent several years in the company of a saint named Sheikh Ruknuddin Akaf. Thereafter he visited the sacred places like Mecca and Medina etc., and associated himself with several saintly people. At the end of his travel he had been himself initiated by Sheikh Mejajuddin Baghdadi and was recognised as one of the greatest saints of his time.

He occupied such a high position in the spiritual realm that the prince of mystics Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi acknowledged him repeatedly as his guide and spiritual leader. His name has been mentioned several times in the famous Masnavi.

He had to his credit quite a number of books both in prose and poetry. Some of his outstanding books are Asrar Noma, Diwan,

Pond Nama, Manteq-ut-tair which has recently been translated into English under the caption of ' Conference of birds'.

In the course of his travels Attar made acquaintance of a large number of men of God, Sufi mystics; and for thirty-nine years he occupied himself in collecting the verses and sayings of Sufi saints and gathering information about their lives and spiritual practices so that he was reputed to have more knowledge of the mysticism of Islam and the Sufis themselves than any author of his time. At the end of his life Attar was living in complete seclusion and was accessible to none but those who sought his spiritual guidance.

His biographers have recorded of him that he was submerged in devotion of the knowledge of God and plunged in the immediate experience of the Divine. Thus he came to the end of mystic's quest which in other words is nothing short of the annihilation of personal self in the consciousness of the Divine, when a human soul becomes one with the Eternal Self.

Attar's tomb was outside the gate of Shadbakh, the original shrine over it later fell into ruins, but the Amir Ali Sheikh restored it and built a beautiful monument over the grave.

Attar's Teachings.

Mysticism, according to Attar is a constant awareness of the all pervading Presence of God, but it seeks to go farther still; it aims at a direct experience of the One Reality. The mystics claim that this is possible because the soul is itself divine in origin; only the real can know the Reality, and only those who have acquired divine qualities can comprehend God.

Concerning the nature of the Godhead, Attar says, that the Divine Essence is beyond human conception, and all that men say of God is but the result of their own imaginary ideas of Him for He is Incomparable and therefore Unknowable and

Incomprehensible by the human reason, which knows little enough about itself and how then can it hope to know the Ineffable Essence.

He is a hidden treasure and the visible world is a means whereby we may discover Him.

Those who take pains really to understand the true nature of the Universe will find that God is the underlying power behind it. What we call good or evil are both from Him. Therefore nothing should be regarded as evil, for everything comes from Him. Therefore everything is good.

Attar was deeply convinced that man is made in the image of God and that the human soul is derived from the Divine Essence. Man is in truth the only reality in the Universe or else he is unreal for he alone has divinity hidden in Him. Attar held that there is a great possibility hidden in man. His soul is capable of highest progress. He was capable of attaining the light of Lights. All else, according to Attar, was perishable but the human soul is immortal and shall abide for ever in God.

On the path of spiritual realisation, according to Attar, the greatest obstacle is one's desire for name, fame and high position. Some people undergo severe austerities and lead a pious life with the sole object of winning people's goodwill, approbation, applause and respect. This tendency is detrimental to the life of an aspirant.

The greatest emphasis laid down by Attar was on full detachment from all worldly pursuits.

Love of worldly things is disastrous for leading a spiritual life. Attar's view was that a neophyte, however sinful and morally degraded he may have been, should not lose heart but depend on God's mercy and grace to forgive him and transform his moral life.

Whatever may be one's mode of worship God judges him from his inner motive and purity of heart and not from the outer profession and action. Attar finally believed that every devout Muslim should scrupulously and punctiliously observe injunctions and prohibitions laid down by the religion of Islam. He should not move even by hair's breadth from the laws of spiritual discipline laid down by the Prophet of Islam. Therein lies his security and success in his spiritual aspiration.

(Reprinted from Vedanta Kesari, May 1959-60)

*If you could get rid
Of yourself just once,
The secret of secrets
Would open to you.
The face of the unknown,
Hidden beyond the universe
Would appear on the
Mirror of your perception.*

*If in thirst you drink water from a cup, you see God in it.
Those who are not in love with God will see only their own
faces in it.*

*First He pampered me with a hundred favours,
Then He melted me with the fires of sorrows.
After He sealed me with the seal of Love,
I became Him.
Then, He threw my self out of me.*

Sayings of Rumi (1207-1273)

Vital Questions on Religion Answered

Swami Prabhavananda

Q. How much freedom of the will do we have?

A. In one sense, freedom of the will is a misnomer. We act according to our nature, our character. We have created tendencies and habits which force us to will in a certain way. Yet each one of us can choose to follow these tendencies and habits or to struggle against them. This freedom of choice reflects the freedom of the Atman, the indwelling Spirit. Take, for instance, an alcoholic. He has created the habit of drinking, and therefore, he wills to drink. But something within him says, "No, I must overcome this weakness." That is the freedom of the Atman asserting itself.

Even the most sinful among us can hear this voice of the Atman and one day they will listen to its promptings. Sri Krishna says in the Gita:

Though a man be soiled
With the sins of a lifetime,
Let him but love me,
Rightly resolved,
In utter devotion:
I see no sinner,
That man is holy.
Holiness soon
Shall refashion his nature
To peace eternal.

Q. Why does one have to be dissatisfied with the world in order to be interested in religion?

A. We have a Hindu saying: "Where Rama is, there is no worldly craving; and where worldly craving exists, Rama is not." Jesus expressed the same truth in the Sermon on the Mount: "Ye cannot serve God and mammon." God is a very jealous God. He wants you to give your whole heart to him

and him alone—then only will he reveal himself to you. But if you can't do that, do a little. Give your heart to God a little, and let love grow.

Q. If we can't face our faults but know we have them, aren't we being untruthful in a way?

A. Why do you have to face your faults? Forget them, and move toward the Lord. Chant his name and meditate. By dwelling on your faults you can't eliminate them. Move toward God; move toward the light, and darkness will leave you. As you approach closer to the Lord, your faults will drop away.

Q. What constitutes the difference between "thinking about God" and meditating on him? Is it a degree of intensity?

A. "Thinking about God" gradually leads one to meditation. Meditation is the state when the mind flows continuously toward God. There is a consciousness of the presence of God. Meditation, in fact, is next to samadhi. It is a state attained through practice of purity of heart and concentration upon God. To quote the Bhagavad-Gita: "The light of a lamp does not flicker in a windless place." That is the simile which describes a yogi of one-pointed mind, one who meditates on the Atman. When, through the practice of yoga, the mind ceases its restless movements and becomes still, the Atman is realized.

Q. I have read that one's thought at death determines the road he is to travel in the hereafter; therefore, God-rememberedness is vitally important at this time. Yet, what of legitimate things or an intense pain that might keep one's mind from God at this moment?

A. It is the thought most prevalent during a person's lifetime that comes to him at the moment of death, regardless of drugs, pain, or any other abnormal condition. That is why the Gita tells us to think of Him constantly.

"At the hour of death, when a man leaves his body, he must depart with his consciousness absorbed in me. Then he will be united with me. Be certain of that. Whatever a man remembers at the last, when he is leaving the body, will be realized by him in the hereafter; because that will be what his mind has most constantly dwelt on, during this life."

Q. It has been said that a jivanmukta [illuminated soul], if he wishes, can emerge from union with Brahman to help man. Can this union be severed by the jivanmukta at will? Whose will is it?

A. A man attains illumined knowledge of God, the supreme identity, in nirvakalpa samadhi. As a general rule, most of those who attain nirvakalpa give up the body forever. Only a few come back from this samadhi to help mankind. But they bring with them a sense of ego or individuality; otherwise, who would there be to teach whom? However, their ego is not the same as the ego of the unilluminated man. Sri Ramakrishna used to call it the "ego of knowledge." Their ego has been compared to a burnt rope; it has the form of a rope, but does not bind.

Q. What or who is responsible for the mistaken identification of Brahman with prakriti [material of the universe]?

A. You have stated your question almost the way Shankara stated his: "Whose is the ignorance?" His answer was: "He who asks—his is the ignorance." It almost appears as though he were trying to avoid the question. But the implication is this: the Atman is ever-free and perfect; the ego, the little self, is the product of ignorance. Only when the awakening comes, the awakening that "I am in ignorance, I do not know the Reality," does one begin to struggle to attain the divine Self.

(Reprinted from VEDANTA AND THE WEST, May-June 1966)

Programme for May - June 2013

Sunday discourses begin after a brief period of meditation,
at the

Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, Bourne End at 4:30 pm

Tel: 01628 526464 - www.vedantauk.com

May	5	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 25	Swami Dayatmananda
May	12	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 26	Swami Dayatmananda
May	19	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 27	Swami Dayatmananda
May	26	Day Retreat	
Jun	2	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 28	Swami Dayatmananda
Jun	9	Essentials of Inner Life	Swami Shivarupananda
Jun	16	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 29	Swami Dayatmananda
Jun	23	No Talk	
Jun	30	The Ideal of Spiritual Perfection	Swami Shivarupananda

Day Retreat

With Swami Dayatmananda and Swami Shivarupananda
at the Vedanta Centre, Bourne End, on 26th May
from 10:00 am until 7:00 pm

Note: Children are not allowed at the Retreat.
Please bring (vegetarian) lunch to share.

There will be no talks during July - August

Sri Krishna's Puja

Sunday 25th August 2013
at Bourne End at 4:00 pm

the three attachments—that of a devoted wife for her husband, of a mother for her child, and of a miser for his wealth—become one, then one realizes God. If anyone feels the same intense longing as would result if these three attachments were united, only then does he have God-vision. Sincere love brings God-realization and in that alone is genuine peace and joy.

'Of course, without the grace of God one cannot have such love overnight, and that is why regular practice is necessary. One should cry to God, laying bare the heart. *"O Lord, be merciful to me. I am an ordinary man. How can I hope to realize Thee unless Thou vouchsafest to appear before me? Have mercy on me, O Lord; have mercy on this weak being!"*

Pray this way to Him every day. The more you cry to Him the more your mind will be cleansed. The Lord will reveal Himself to the pure transparent mind.

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What kind of person should be carefully watched, and not associated with? It is the one who is angry and carries grudges. When a few words are told, he becomes angry, swears and retorts angrily, showing anger and displeasure like a festered sore touched by a clod or stone, would ooze much pus. Or like a heap of rotting wood in a monastery when hit with a clod or stone would give a hissing sound. Or like a heap of dung when hit with a clod or stone would give an evil smell. This one should be carefully watched, not associated with, because he may scold, rebuke and do marked harm.

The Buddha

