

Vedanta

356 NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2010

The Inspiration that is Vivekananda

Swami Swahananda

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna:

A History (continued)

Swami Chetanananda





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

Divine Wisdom

VIJAY: "Is bhakti alone sufficient for the attainment of God, for His vision?"

MASTER: "Yes, one can see God through bhakti alone. But it must be 'ripe' bhakti, prema-bhakti and raga-bhakti. When one has that bhakti, one loves God even as the mother loves the child, the child the mother, or the wife the husband."

"When one has such love and attachment for God, one doesn't feel the attraction of maya to wife, children, relatives, and friends. One retains only compassion for them. To such a man the world appears a strange land, a place where he has merely to perform his duties. It is like a man's having his real home in the country, but coming to Calcutta for work; he has to rent a house in Calcutta for the sake of his duties. When one develops love of God, one

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Is Buddha Relevant for Us? (continued)

Lord Buddha had given his teaching 2600 years ago, yet his teaching holds good for us today, and will hold good for ever. That is because the circumstances have not changed and will remain the same. The world will never change (like the curly tail of a dog!), only the individuals have a chance to learn, to change and to become better.

In the past man was in delusion, had wrong views about life, was a slave to lust, greed and anger, and in consequence suffered. The same things prevail today. So long as we remain in delusion, so long as we do not learn wisdom we too are bound to suffer.

Let us look at this: we pride ourselves that we are making progress, yet more than 100 million people died and countless numbers of people suffered due to two world wars. Even today civil wars, mass murders, oppression, terrorism, suicide bombing etc, are still going on unabated. We do not believe they are going to come to an end any time soon, and we still do not see any solution (even though the solution is there) to these problems. The latest science report says that we need two earths to support our present life style.

As a result of our present life-style, born of ignorance and delusion, there is a tremendous increase in mental illness. We can gauge this by the increase of mental hospitals and psychiatric practices.

Let us consider these statistics (from the internet): Mental illness is common and increasing in all countries. An estimated

26.2 percent of Americans aged 18 and older - about one in four adults - suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year.

When applied to the 2004 U.S. Census residential population estimate for ages 18 and older, this figure translates to 57.7 million people. In a study of 27 countries it is felt that the United States is poised to rank No. 1 globally for mental illness, researchers say.

Not so good, is it? When “progress” is supposed to result in greater health and happiness!! Mental illness is on the increase in every country because all of us follow the same style of life based on wrong views.

Now what is progress? And how do we judge it? There is, perhaps, a simple way. Let us ask ourselves, “Are we growing in goodness, wisdom and happiness (*Sat, Chit and Ananda*)?” If the answer is yes, if we are growing in happiness, wisdom and happiness, we are, undoubtedly, making progress in life. If not, there is, definitely, something wrong, an issue that needs addressing.

Buddha’s analysis of life is right because he is an enlightened soul. He said life is full of suffering, and suffering arises from *Tanha*, i.e. thirst, desire or craving for pleasure. Buddha was certainly not a pessimist, he was a realist! Let us note he did not say life is full of suffering only, he did not say one should kill all desires. Life can be joyful if we know about it, if we can desire rightly and live rightly, though many of us choose not to have a right view of life and suffer greatly as a result.

At the moment there is an economic depression. Millions have lost jobs and see no good prospect in the near future. Increasingly companies are trying to cut costs by reducing the number of their employees and increasing their work leading to stress, pressure in family relationships, etc. Even the journalists

had the good sense to identify the present economic chaos as being solely due to the greed of, not merely a few clever individuals, but of all of us.

Lust, greed, violence and hatred are manifestly visible in every part of the world. We suffer from the disease of *kama-kanchana* i.e., lust and greed, as Sri Ramakrishna, so aptly termed it.

To summarise the foregoing discussion: The belief that mankind is progressing is a myth. Suffering is on the increase both physically and mentally. The cause of this suffering is due to wrong desires arising from delusion. Delusion springs from a wrong view of life which gives birth to pain-producing feelings of lust, anger, greed, hatred, jealousy, etc. These feelings result in wrong actions like violence, wars, oppression, cruelty etc.

The solution to overcome suffering and become joyful is given by the Buddha. The solution is to have the Right View of life. It is far easier to understand the 'Right Way of Life' intellectually but much harder to practise it.

We will discuss what the Right-View is and the way to practise it in the next issue.

(*to be continued*)

Swami Dayatmananda

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna: A History (cont.)

Swami Ritajananda once wrote: “The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* begins like a novel with a little bit of description of the surroundings in picturesque language, so that the reader can visualize everything around the Master: the large property of the Dakshineswar temple with its gardens, tanks, temples, etc. If anyone desires to make a film, he will find all the directions necessary in the masterly descriptions one reads in the Gospel. The place and times, the people present, the positions they took in the room where they met, the songs, and finally every movement of Sri Ramakrishna - these are all presented so vividly that it becomes a special attraction. We have no such presentation of anyone else’s life.

“In the Gospel we find plenty of information about Sri Ramakrishna and how he lived in the world. With him there was plenty of laughter, and it was really fortunate for so many to be near him and feel that the world is really a mansion of mirth in spite of their many painful experiences. Sri Ramakrishna also talked of suffering, the suffering of others and even his own. His health was not perfect and he eventually got cancer of the throat which entailed extreme physical pain. Many who were dear to him left this world, and those who lived with him were not always kind and respectful. Yet he was above all these things. The Divine Mother was constantly near Her beloved son, answering his questions. M. ignored nothing that took place in the small room of Sri Ramakrishna. He tells us how Ramakrishna ate, how he spoke, how he imitated people and amused the

youngsters. Never trying to idolize Sri Ramakrishna, never judging his actions or his words, M. presents a picture of his Master in the most natural way possible. This makes us understand that a highly evolved spiritual person can also be a human being.”²⁶

The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is an authentic record of Ramakrishna’s life and teachings, profound and yet very simple and appealing. Moreover, Ramakrishna’s language and the expressions he used are fascinating. Many people learn Bengali so that they can read this wonderful piece of literature in its original form and get a taste of how Ramakrishna actually spoke. When we read the Gospel, its vivid descriptions help us visualize Ramakrishna as he moved through his environment. We see the places he saw and the people he came in contact with. This vivid and artistic depiction of an avatar’s life is unique. As we read the Gospel, we enjoy the holy company of the Master.

In the Gospel, festivities are always going on, with Ramakrishna at their centre. We enjoy the theatre, music, singing, dancing, humour, worship, meditation, and *samadhi*. Reading the Gospel drives away loneliness and boredom. The Gospel presents to us the divine drama of Ramakrishna with various characters representing all types of people: intellectuals, devotees, hypocrites, drunkards, householders, monks, actors, actresses, musicians, and so on.

Swami Bhajanananda once wrote: “Every great religion has its own scripture. There are several scriptures already existing in the world, including the *Vedas*, *Avesta*, *Tripitaka*, the *Bible*, and the *Koran*. Do we need one more? Yes, precisely because there are several scriptures: We need just one more to show the validity of every one of them and to establish their overall harmony. The

²⁶ *Ramakrishna Kathamrita Centenary Memorial*, 77,79

Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna compiled by M. serves this purpose admirably well.”²⁷

M.’s chronicle of Ramakrishna’s life is fascinating, in part because he himself played a vital role. Sometimes he was a silent witness to the divine drama of Ramakrishna; other times, an active participant in the play. In addition, M.’s love for the Master was extraordinary. His I-consciousness was saturated with Ramakrishna-consciousness. If this were not so, he never could have produced *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, which is unique among the world’s religious literature.

Faithfully and vividly, M. chronicled the Master’s *samadhi* and meditation, his prayer and worship, his dreams and visions, actions and devotion, purity and renunciation, singing and dancing, humour and mimicry, spiritual disciplines and pilgrimage, behaviour and psychology, religion and philosophy, and his social and scientific outlook. But most important, M. preserved Ramakrishna’s conversations with God, as well as his discussions with the people who came to him, his love and empathy for others, and his fervent concern for his devotees.

M. writes in the Gospel: “The Master was weeping and praying to the Mother. In a voice choked with emotion, he prayed to Her with tearful eyes for the welfare of the devotees: ‘Mother, may those who come to You have all their desires fulfilled. But please don’t make them give up everything at once, Mother. Well, You may do whatever You like in the end. If You keep them in the world, Mother, then please reveal Yourself to them now and then. Otherwise, how will they live? How will they be encouraged if they don’t see You once in a while?’”²⁸

²⁷ *Ramakrishna Kathamrita Centenary Memorial*, 85

²⁸ *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 381

The Invocation of The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna

According to Indian tradition, the author of a scripture is supposed to introduce the text with an invocation consisting of an auspicious verse or a salutation mantra. Following that custom, M. placed the following verse on the title page of each of the five volumes of his original Bengali Kathamrita:

"O Lord, your nectar-like words relieve the burning misery of afflicted souls. Your words, which poets have sung in verses, destroy the sins of worldly people forever. Blessed are they who hear of your vast glory. Blessed indeed are those who speak of you. How unparalleled is their bounty!"

The invocation above quoted is taken from the *Gopi-Gita* of the Bhagavata. Krishna promised to meet the gopis, the milkmaids of Vrindaban, on a full moon night in autumn. That night, the gopis came to meet Krishna on the bank of the Yamuna River, and he played affectionately with them. But he sensed that they had become proud and egotistic due to this rare privilege, so he suddenly disappeared from them. Grief-stricken, the gopis wept and prayed to him to return. The above verse is from that prayer.

Tava kathāmritam: "Your words, O Lord, are like nectar." We speak sweet words. We sometimes say, "Oh, your words are so sweet!" But having no nectar ourselves, we do not know how to speak nectar-like words. The Divine Incarnations have this nectar within and so their words are full of sweetness.

Amrita means “nectar” and also “immortality.” According to Hindu mythology, the gods and the demons churned the ocean in order to obtain nectar. After a hard struggle, they extracted a jar of it. But the gods deceived the demons and drank it all,

becoming immortal. This immortality, however, was relative: Absolute immortality comes only from the knowledge of *Brahman*. That nectar is within all beings. Jesus said, “The Kingdom of Heaven is within you.” Dive deep inside. Then you will find that nectar and attain immortality.

God is the ocean of nectar. Once Ramakrishna asked Swami Vivekananda: “Suppose there were a cup of syrup and you were a fly. Where would you sit to drink the syrup?” Vivekananda replied: “I would sit on the edge of the cup and stretch out my neck to drink it.” “Why?” Ramakrishna asked. “What’s the harm in plunging into the middle of the cup and drinking the syrup?” Vivekananda answered: “Then I would stick in the syrup and die.” “My child,” Ramakrishna said to him, “that isn’t the nature of the nectar of *Satchidananda*. It is the nectar of immortality. Man does not die from diving into it. On the contrary, he becomes immortal.”²⁹

We say that human beings are mortal, but this is not true. The body is mortal. The *Atman*, our real nature, is immortal. It is this immortality that humankind is always searching for. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* says that when Yajnavalkya offered wealth to his beloved wife, Maitreyi, she replied: “What should I do with that wealth which would not make me immortal?”³⁰ This is the bold message of *Vedanta* to modern people. If you want immortality, give up whatever you have. Christ also said the same thing: “Sell what you have and then follow me. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”

The Bengali title of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, which means “Sri Ramakrishna’s immortal (or nectar-like) words.” We hear the Gospel; we read

²⁹ *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 675

³⁰ *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 4:5:4

the Gospel; we speak about the Gospel; but we do not ‘drink’ the Gospel. It does not matter if we drink a drop, a glass, a jar, or a barrel of nectar. We will be immortal. It is not a matter of quantity, but of the substance itself. If we could actually absorb the Gospel, all our worldly desires would quickly dissipate. But it is not easy. We like to hold on to our desires: That is our problem.

Ramakrishna told this beautiful parable: “Once a fisherman’s wife was a guest in the house of a gardener who raised flowers. She came there with her empty fish-basket after selling fish in the market, and was given a place to sleep in a room where flowers were kept. But, because of the fragrance of the flowers, she couldn’t get to sleep for a long time. Her hostess saw her condition and said: ‘Hello! Why are you tossing from side to side so restlessly?’ The fisherman’s wife said: ‘I don’t know, friend. Perhaps the smell of the flowers is disturbing my sleep. Can you give me my fish-basket? Perhaps that will put me to sleep.’ The basket was brought to her. She sprinkled water on it and set it near her nose. Then she fell sound asleep and snored all night.”³¹

Worldly people like the smell of fish. They cannot stand a beautiful, divine fragrance. Mere speaking, mere talking, mere hearing won’t help us. We may repeat the word ‘wine’ a thousand times but that will not make us intoxicated. We must drink the wine. Christ said, “Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, who built his house upon a rock.”

Tapta jivanam: “Your words relieve the burning misery of worldly life.” The world is burning with misery. When we talk about life we heave a deep sigh. I remember once when I was a young student of *Vedanta* I heard a vivid description of this world.

³¹ *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 433-34

Our teacher was expounding the concept of *maya*. He said: "Do you know what this world is? A traveller was passing through a desert. The sun was scorching hot. He was dead tired, thirsty, hungry, and exhausted. He was trying to find shelter, a shady place where he could take a little rest. At last he found a place where he laid down his head and slept, not knowing that the spot was made shady by the shadow of a poisonous cobra's hood! A single hiss and one drop of poison from that cobra would finish his life. So that is this world." We do not know how the mysterious *maya* traps, binds, and enslaves us.

Human beings are tormented by desire, doubt, disease, death, passion, jealousy, hatred, and so many other things. This is truly Hell. The word of the Lord alone rescues us from this awful situation. The gospel of the Lord carries solace and succour for suffering humanity. It soothes our nerves and brings us peace and joy. Just as water extinguishes fire, the words of the Lord extinguish the burning misery caused by worldly desires and our enjoyment of them.

Kavibhir-iditam: "Poets eulogize the words of the Lord in many ways." A renaissance begins with the advent of each avatar. Many books and dramas are written, songs and music are composed, and art and sculpture are developed. Ramakrishna spoke but a few words, and Swami Vivekananda expounded that message of the harmony of religions and the divinity of human beings, spreading it throughout the world. M. recorded the Master's immortal gospel, while Girish Chandra Ghosh, the actor-dramatist, wrote several dramas that incorporated the ideas of Ramakrishna. Again, many poets composed songs based on the teachings of the Master. But Ramakrishna himself had no formal education. His knowledge came straight from God. One day he said: "If you want to understand in one sentence, come to me. If you want to understand the same thing in a thousand

words, go to Keshab.”³² Keshab Chandra Sen, the Brahmo Samaj leader, was a famous orator. It was he who first wrote about Ramakrishna in his Brahmo papers and magazines. When the Master came to know about it, he said, “Keshab, by writing about me, you want to make me famous? Don’t try. He whom Mother makes famous, becomes famous.”

Kalmasāpaham: The words of God “destroy all kinds of sins and their results.” God’s name purifies our bodies and minds. Try to visualize the world as a room freshly painted with black paint. You are there, dressed in white clothes. You may be extremely cautious, but you cannot be alert all the time. In one moment of forgetfulness, you will spoil your clothes. So it happens in this world: Desire, doubt, pride, anger, jealousy, greed, and lust are continually polluting our minds. Human beings stumble and fall, overcome by temptations. But they should not yield helplessly; they must fight. The *Atman* manifests in a human being through three powers: wisdom, will, and action. Life is a struggle. Only two groups of people do not have to struggle: the illumined and the dead. The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* helps us develop a strong discriminative faculty and protects us from weakness and temptation.

Shravana-mangalam: Anybody who hears the words of God will undoubtedly be benefited. If one eats a chili, knowingly or unknowingly, one’s tongue will burn. It can’t be helped. Similarly, these words of the Lord definitely do people good. One may think that just hearing the Gospel will not give one the flavour of it, but it will.

Shrimad: Beautiful. The words of the Lord are beautiful; they are truly enchanting and delightful. The *Gospel of Sri*

³² Suresh Chandra Datta, *Sri Sri Ramakrishnadever Upadesha* (Haramohan Publishing: Calcutta, 1968), 162

Ramakrishna draws us irresistibly to God.

Ātātam: "Vast and easily available." As we do not need to search for space and air because they surround us, so the words of God are easily accessible. Those who are spiritual aspirants get divine inebriation from the Gospel, but it comes gradually and slowly, as the Gospel reveals its truths according to the aspirant's spiritual development and understanding. The Gospel has an intoxicating effect. We may read it a thousand times, yet it remains an endless source of inspiration. There is no end to spiritual experience, and *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is a unique chronicle of the highest immeasurable realizations. Once a disciple of Holy Mother said that he had read *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* fifty times and still he was finding new light in it. The message of God is endless. An American student read the Gospel and remarked: "There is one defect in this book: it has an end."

Bhuvi grnanti ye bhuridā janāḥ: You may perform charity in various forms, but the best charity is to distribute the word of God to humanity. This final Sanskrit phrase has another meaning: Those who are spiritual seekers, those who have done spiritual practices in previous lives and also in this very life, get bliss, which is the flavour of spirituality.

Christopher Wood wrote about *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*: "It is a fascinating piece of biography, quite extraordinarily honest. And as for its being long, the truth about anyone is never dull. Try it. I don't think you will be disappointed."³³

Hundreds of people came to Ramakrishna with their questions and problems. Some came out of curiosity. Scholars came, and so did scientists, doctors, lawyers, teachers, professors,

³³ Christopher Isherwood, ed., *Vedanta for the Western World* (George Allen & Unwin Ltd.: London, 1961), 266

and students. Spiritual leaders and social reformers visited him, as did actors, actresses, dramatists, singers, and dancers. Hypocrites, drunkards, ruffians, and villains also came. The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is the firsthand account of the conversations that these various characters had with Ramakrishna. Each person can find his or her own personality reflected in a character in the Gospel.

Sitting on his wooden cot in the temple garden of Dakshineswar, Ramakrishna offered solutions to the problems of those who came to him because his own life was free from problems. Only a person whose life is free from troubles can solve another's problems. Ramakrishna also boosted the spirits of his visitors. As he himself said: "One man makes a fire and others enjoy the heat. I have cooked food for you; you need only come and eat it."

On another occasion he said: "I am the destroyer of karma. I am the French colony."³⁴ At that time India was divided among three colonial powers: British, French, and Portuguese. If a man did something wrong in British India, he could take shelter in the French colony where the British had no jurisdiction. "I am the French colony" means that whatever sins one may be guilty of, one need only take shelter in Ramakrishna to be free from fear of punishment for them. No worldly rules can bind such a person. Only a saviour has the power to protect people from the consequences of their actions.

The subject of The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is God and God alone. It is concerned with how to realize Him and nothing else. Ramakrishna frequently made this simple statement: "I know only God and nothing else." In the beginning, in the middle, and in the end of the Gospel, you will find only one thing: God.

³⁴ Udbodhan, 37:359

Ordinary people preach religion, but Divine Incarnations like Buddha, Christ, Krishna, and Ramakrishna can give religion. Religion means realization. A touch, a glance, or a word from one of the Incarnations can spark a life-altering transformation in a human being. Ramakrishna was a tremendous spiritual force that could awaken God-consciousness in an instant. He was a spiritual phenomenon! In the Gospel we find him in *samadhi* one moment, while the next he is making fun and cutting jokes. He was that prince who could travel through all seven stories of the royal palace (the seven levels of consciousness) without any restriction. Ordinary people live on the first floor and do not know what is on the other six floors.

Even Ramakrishna's jokes and frivolities were connected with God. Christopher Isherwood wrote: "Another side of Ramakrishna which seems to me important is that he had a sense of fun and that he was joyous. It is a tragic mistake that the popular idea of a good person is so often that of someone rather dull and somber, someone who rarely laughs. Whereas in actual fact it seems that the joy, the sheer pleasure even, of approaching God surpasses anything we know."³⁵ In the Gospel, M. notes in many places: "All laugh," or "Laughter."

Ramakrishna never turned anyone away. He said: "Let me be condemned to be born over and over again, even in the form of a dog, if by doing so I can be of help to a single soul. I will give up twenty thousand such bodies to help one man."³⁶

Ramakrishna's Teachings in the Gospel

The qualifications for studying *Vedanta* are extremely difficult to meet. A student of *Vedanta* should practice discrimination, renunciation, and control of the senses; and he or

³⁵ *Vedanta for the Western World*, 267

³⁶ Romain Rolland, *The Life of Ramakrishna*, 294-95

she should have a burning desire for liberation. But if you want to read *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, no qualifications are necessary; no commentator is necessary; no teacher is necessary. It is simple. Simplicity was Ramakrishna's style, so his sentences are seldom complicated. Simplicity is holiness.

Aldous Huxley wrote in the foreword to Swami Nikhilananda's translation: "What a scholastic philosopher would call the 'accidents' of Ramakrishna's life were intensely Hindu and therefore, so far as we in the West are concerned, unfamiliar and hard to understand: its 'essence,' however, was intensely mystical and therefore universal."³⁷

Though the background and plots of Ramakrishna's stories and parables are Indian in origin, they are so vivid and simple, so enchanting, that even a child can understand them. A man once came to him and asked, "Sir, how can I realize God?" Ramakrishna answered: "You may see God if your love for Him is as strong as these three attachments put together, namely, the attachment of a worldly man to the things of the world, the attachment of a mother to her child, and the attachment of a chaste and devoted wife to her husband."³⁸

Ramakrishna's stories and parables are very positive, instructive, and uplifting. He was always inspiring. His parable of the woodcutter is typical: A holy man told a poor woodcutter, "Go forward." The woodcutter took his advice, advanced further into the forest, and found a sandalwood forest. He sold the sandalwood and became very rich. Then one day he thought to himself: "That holy man told me to go forward. He did not ask me to be satisfied." So he went even further into the forest and found a copper mine. Going further still, he found a silver mine, and then a gold mine. Finally, he found a diamond mine with

³⁷ *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, vi

³⁸ *Ibid*, 83

which he became exceedingly wealthy. Ramakrishna said that there was no end to spiritual bliss, spiritual illumination.

Ramakrishna's teachings are also practical: "To meditate, you should withdraw within yourself or retire to a secluded corner or to the forest."

"Sir, I cannot go to the forest."

"All right. Meditate in the corner of a room."

"Sir, my house is full of people. I cannot get a corner of a room."

"Meditate in the inner chamber of your heart."

There are many alternatives. If you cannot do anything at all, surrender to the Lord and He will do everything for you. "Give me the power of attorney," said Ramakrishna. Only an avatar like Ramakrishna could say that. Ramakrishna gave the example of a mother cat carrying her kitten wherever she wants. The kitten completely surrenders itself.

Another beautiful metaphor that Ramakrishna used concerns three men who were curious to know what was on the other side of a high wall. The first man climbed up a ladder and found Infinite Bliss on the other side. He immediately laughed and jumped into it. The second man did the same thing. The third man also climbed up and saw what was there, but he came back down to tell others of that Infinite Bliss behind the wall, behind *maya*. That third man is Ramakrishna. In the evening when the sound of the vesper bells reverberated through the Dakshineswar temple compound, Ramakrishna would climb up onto the roof of the *kuthi* (mansion) and call out for his future devotees: "Come to me, my children! Where are you? I can't bear to live without you!"

Ramakrishna had a householder disciple, an *ishwarakoti* (godlike soul), whose name was Purna Chandra Ghosh. Long after Ramakrishna passed away, there was trouble in Purna's

family and he wanted to commit suicide. He decided to bathe first, and then pay his respects to his guru before killing himself. He took a bath, then went to the shrine and bowed down to the Master. But then he thought: "Let me read a little bit of the Kathamrita. Taking the beautiful message of the Master, I shall depart from this world." He opened the book at random and his eyes fell on this sentence: "Purna is a young devotee. The Master was thinking of his welfare." "What?" cried Purna. "The Master is thinking of me and I shall commit suicide? Impossible! He is thinking of my welfare and I am contemplating killing myself. It cannot be."³⁹ He gave up the idea and thus his life was saved. Such is the power of the words of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna!*

A Blessing from Holy Mother

Holy Mother had a great appreciation for *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. On 2 April 1905 Holy Mother, Golap-ma, and Nikunja Devi (M.'s wife) were listening to the Gospel being read. When the reading was over, Holy Mother commented: "It is not a small thing to remember the Master's words and ideas, and then write them. I wholeheartedly bless M.: Let his books spread everywhere and let all people know him."

Another day when someone was reading the Gospel, Holy Mother was listening with deep absorption. Golap-ma, Nikunja Devi, and some other women were seated there. After some time Holy Mother exclaimed: "How wonderful! How Master Mahashay kept these teachings in his mind! Did he go to the Master with paper and pencil?"

Nikunja Devi: "No, Mother. He would write these things from his memory."

Holy Mother: "What a powerful brain he has! He wrote

³⁹ Swami Abhayananda, *Swamijir Padaprante* (Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Pitha: Belur Math, 1972), 37.

all these things from memory."

Golap-ma: "Naren also had a powerful mind."

Holy Mother: "He had a different kind of power - for lecturing, writing books, and so on. M. has another kind of power. (Addressing Nikunja Devi) My daughter, give your husband more milk (which is supposed to increase mental power). May he attain more power. Ah, what a great service he is giving to the world!"

The reading continued: "The Master said to Mani: 'You are all my relatives.'"

Holy Mother commented: "Of course, everyone is in his inner circle."

Another section was read: "Keshab was coughing."

To this, the crazy aunt (Radhu's mother) said, "Why did M. write such a thing?" Holy Mother replied with a smile: "What do you know? It has a purpose."

The reader was reading a passage about the Master's ecstasy: "M. was thinking: Is the Master describing his own state?"

Holy Mother commented: "Yes, M.'s thinking was correct." After a while Holy Mother said to Nikunja Devi: "My daughter, tell your husband that I am blessing him wholeheartedly."⁴⁰

Appreciations

M. tried to hide himself in the pages of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by using several pseudonyms, such as Mani, Master, Mohinimohan, a Devotee, a Servant, an Englishman, and so on; but readers quickly discovered him. While intending to make his guru well known, he became famous himself. Truly, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* made M. immortal. Here we present a few

⁴⁰ Swami Prabhananda, *Amritarup Ramakrishna* (Udbodhan Office: Calcutta, 1991), 201-202

appreciations of his great work.

Swami Premananda wrote to M. on 28 September 1897: "Two copies of your Gospel are just at hand, also a p.c. (post card). I am just going to send one copy to Swami Vivekananda. How are you doing now? We are very anxious to see you and hear from you 'the Gospel of our Lord,' so carefully kept by yourself. Not only I, but all of us, especially our boys - *sannyasins* and *brahmacharins* - are anxious to have your holy company and hear from your Gospel."⁴¹

Girish Chandra Ghosh wrote on 22 March 1909: "If my humble opinion goes for anything I not only fully endorse the opinion of the great Swami Vivekananda but add in a loud voice that the Kathamrita has been my very existence during my protracted illness for the last three years.... You deserve the gratitude of the whole human race to the end of days."⁴²

Swami Ramakrishnananda wrote on 27 October 1904: "You have left the whole of humanity in debt by publishing these invaluable pages fraught with the best wisdom of the greatest avatar of God."⁴³

In December 1897 Satish Chandra Mukhopadhyay wrote in the journal *Dawn*: "We are extremely thankful to our friend M., whom we may introduce to the reader as an unassuming gentleman of high spiritual attainments, and a devoted servant of his Lord and Master, Sri Ramakrishna, for having given us an opportunity of presenting to our readers what we may most appropriately call 'A Modern Gospel' - which breathes throughout a deep catholicity in reference to all forms of religious discipline and is therefore at war with not one of them."⁴⁴

⁴¹ *Jivan Darshan*, 344

⁴² *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, 3:viii

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3:viii

⁴⁴ *Samakalin*, 2:302

Mr. N. Ghosh wrote in the *Indian Nation* on 19 May 1902: "Ramakrishna Kathamrita by M. (Part I) is a work of singular value and interest. He has done a kind of work which no Bengalee had ever done before, which so far as we are aware no native of India had ever done. It has been done only once in history namely by Boswell.... What a treasure would it have been to the world if all the sayings of Sri Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, Nanak, and Chaitanya could have been thus preserved."⁴⁵

Nagendra Nath Gupta, who personally knew Ramakrishna, wrote in *Ramakrishna-Vivekananda* in 1933: "The Gospel of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa is a record taken at first hand. The words were taken down as they came fresh from the lips of the Master. They were frequently read over to him and he suggested alterations and corrections. There is no room for imagination or exaggeration in anything that concerns Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. Much about the earlier prophets is wrapped in uncertainty and speculation. There are no real likenesses of Buddha, Christ, and Chaitanya. Ramakrishna's photographs are available everywhere. His spoken words are available to all almost just as he uttered them."⁴⁶

The *Brahmavadin* published a review in April 1902: "The life of no prophet has ever been written in the way in which M. has done it in the book under review. Even Boswell's life of Johnson falls into shade before this magnificent record of the Paramahamsa's sayings and doings during the last two years of his life. To the student of psychology and psychic research these conversations are of immense value. They give us a peep into the workings of an extraordinary mind which has risen above the din and incessant devouring activity of this work-a-day world to the eternal presence of the music of the higher spheres. They point

⁴⁵ Ibid., 3:viii

⁴⁶ *Samakalin Bharatvarsha*, 2:306

out how a God-man who has attained spiritual oneness and realized universal harmony becomes the interpreter of God to man. The dialogues of Socrates resemble to some extent these conversations but without the sublime and tranquil ecstasies of the oriental saint.”⁴⁷

Romain Rolland wrote to M.: “The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is valuable for it is the faithful account by M. of the discourses with the Master, either his own or those which he actually heard for the next four years. Their exactitude is almost stenographic. The book containing the conversations (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*) recalls at every turn the setting and the atmosphere. Thanks for having disseminated the radiance of the beautiful smile of your Master.”⁴⁸

Aldous Huxley wrote in his foreword to *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*: “M., as the author modestly styles himself, was peculiarly qualified for his task. To a reverent love for his Master, to a deep and experiential knowledge of that master’s teaching, he added a prodigious memory for the small happenings of each day and a happy gift for recording them in an interesting and realistic way. Making good use of his natural gifts and of the circumstances in which he found himself, M. produced a book unique, so far as my knowledge goes, in the literature of hagiography. No other saint has had so able and indefatigable a Boswell. Never have the small events of a contemplative’s daily life been described with such a wealth of intimate detail. Never have the casual and unstudied utterances of a great religious teacher been set down with so minute a fidelity.”⁴⁹

Muhammad Daud Rahbar, a writer and professor of Boston University, wrote: “I have read some delightful portions

⁴⁷ *Amritarup Ramakrishna*, 184

⁴⁸ *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, (1st edition), 5:iv

⁴⁹ *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, v

of the one-thousand-page *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. This marvellous volume has extraordinary revelations. Immediately one recognizes a cherishable friend in Sri Ramakrishna. His open, passionate, and transparent devotion humbles and chastens us. He is no common mortal. He is a man of phenomenal gifts. His presence is a haven. His conversations, recorded abundantly in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by his disciple M., are charming, inspired. Their literary merit is due to the inspired goodness of Sri Ramakrishna.”⁵⁰

Christopher Isherwood: “M. shows us Ramakrishna by day and by night, chiefly at Dakshineswar but also at the houses of Balaram and other devotees, on river-boats with Keshab Sen, or driving in a carriage through the streets. Usually, there are quite a lot of people present: disciples, householder devotees and casual visitors. Naturally, they tend to ask Ramakrishna the same questions and so Ramakrishna’s answers often repeat or paraphrase themselves. M. records these repetitions, as well as the words of all the songs Ramakrishna sings. A newcomer to the Gospel may find this tiresome at first. But, if he reads the book straight through from beginning to end, instead of merely dipping into it, he will probably agree that it is these very repetitions which give the narrative its continuity and its sense of life actually being lived from day to day. In any case, a teacher who never repeats himself is a creation of art and editorship rather than a live being!

“The most important function of Ramakrishna as a teacher was available to householder devotee and monastic disciple alike. Both had the opportunity of watching him in the silence of *samadhi*, in the incoherent mutterings of ecstasy, in the radiant joy of devotional dancing and song. And it was in these

⁵⁰ Swami Lokeswarananda, ed., *World Thinkers on Ramakrishna-Vivekananda* (Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture: Calcutta, 1992), 13

manifestations that even some casual visitors to Dakshineswar caught a glimpse of Ramakrishna's true nature. To those who were not utterly insensitive, this was a demonstration, more convincing than the Master's most eloquent words, of the reality of God's presence.

"The service M. has rendered us and future generations can hardly be exaggerated. Even the vainest of authors might well have been humbled, finding himself entrusted with such a task. M. was the least vain. M. embodies Ramakrishna's ideal of the householder devotee."⁵¹

Sarala Devi (later Pravrajika Bharatiprana) recalled: "Revered M. presented me a copy of the Kathamrita and asked me to read it. He also told me that he would give me other volumes in the future if I liked them. He later gave me the other three volumes. Seeing my set of the Kathamrita, the Holy Mother remarked: 'M. is very fond of Sarala and he has presented her his wonderful books. Well, Sarala, please read a little to me from them.' I used to read the Kathamrita to the Mother. She would listen very attentively and joyfully tell us the stories of olden days. Recounting the stories of the Master in Dakshineswar, the Mother said: 'M. is so clever that he has recorded the Master's words just as they were. Truly, the Master would speak in that way. Now he is publishing those teachings in book form. Thus so many people are able to know of the Master. I also heard so many things from the Master. I would have recorded them if I had known that these teachings would be published. Well, my child, who could guess that such things would happen.'" ⁵²

(concluded)

⁵¹ Swami Nikhilananda, ed., Vivekananda: Yogas and other works (Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre: New York, 1953), 708

⁵² Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 6:64

Advaita Vedanta (Non Duality) and Modern Physics

The two Levels of Knowledge

The *Mundaka Upanishad* speaks of two levels of knowledge: "Two kinds of knowledge must be known - so say the knowers of *Brahman* - the higher and the lower. In it, the lower is the *Rigveda*, the *Yajurveda*, the *Samaveda*, the *Atharvaveda*, phonetics, ritual, grammar, etymology, metre and astronomy; but the higher is that by which the imperishable is understood. That which is invisible, unseizable, without lineage, without colour, without eye or ears, without hands or feet, eternal, pervading, omnipresent, very subtle - that is the unfailing, that the wise see as the source of beings."²⁶

The lower knowledge is that which we acquire in the particular culture into which we are born, brought up and educated. This knowledge is expressible in language. Language is an interpretation of our experience, using the sensations of sound and sight and the faculties of our bodies to give it verbal and visual expression; as well as involving our minds in terms of memory and intelligence for internal and external communication. If the *Upanishads* had been written more recently, the sciences would no doubt have been included in the lower knowledge list.

The higher knowledge is of an altogether different kind, mostly beyond expression in language, except negatively as 'not this, not this.' This higher knowledge is both immanent to those who experience it, and transcendent, in that it acts as the fundamental basis, the ground of being, as well as the height of human understanding. It is summarized by the phrase *Sat, chit, ananda* (Being, Knowledge, Bliss absolute).

²⁶ *Mundaka Upanishad*, 1.1.4-6

The Science of Physics

Physics has developed as a science to explain the material basis of the universe, including our planet and of all insentient objects and sentient beings. It is also the basis of natural phenomena and the associated sciences of chemistry, geology, biology, etc.

Mathematics is an essential tool in the science of physics. Mathematics is a special language which is used to explain the fundamental relationships of the world, because to express these in ordinary language would be too cumbersome for our intellects. Great minds have developed mathematics in parallel with physics. Those who understand the developments, marvel at the intellects which have laboured to produce these amazing formulae, mostly after long periods of search and cogitation.

Science develops by a process of recording and communicating the interpretation of natural phenomena; by argument and counter-argument with colleagues in the same field, involving much human emotion and competition for the leading role at any particular time. The advantage of this competition is to act as an incentive for progress. The disadvantage is that it forces the participants into fixed positions requiring defensive arguments, thus slowing the desirable progress. The immense effort involved, with the associated reputation of the author, causes belittling of those who disagree with a favoured theory. In other words, the pursuit of science is human, all too human.

Modern Physics

This started at the beginning of the 20th century with Einstein's Special Theory and later General Theory of Relativity. These theories showed that space and time were related or

relative to each other and Isaac Newton's concepts of independent absolute space and time was erroneous. These Newtonian concepts of the cosmos are deeply embedded in our thinking and it is very difficult to visualize their successor, curved space-time. The concept that nothing can move faster than the speed of light, forms an essential part of Relativity.

Around the same period, the atomic theory of matter was developed, showing that matter consisted of atoms. There are 92 elements, each containing a central nucleus, surrounded by orbiting electrons. Soon this was investigated further and sub-atomic particles were discovered. Experiments with these particles revealed that their energy was in distinct packets, the minimum of which was called a 'quantum.' The studies of the behaviour of these particles led to the development of Quantum Theory.

Quantum Theory clashed with Relativity (called classical physics) and these two theories have never been satisfactorily reconciled. But on a practical level, Quantum Theory has been an unmitigated success. The whole of modern electronics, e.g. television, computers, automation, satellite communication etc. depend on Quantum Theory. These have completely changed the modern world.

The Theoretical Implications of Quantum Theory

Most physicists do not discuss these implications, sticking to the Copenhagen Interpretation, which confines itself to the mathematical interpretation of the observed facts; without trying to explain the philosophical implications. A minority of physicists have however tried to interpret the theory. The implications are as follows:

1. *Determinism*: The classical theory is deterministic, i.e. if all simultaneous parameters of the cosmos or its parts are known,

its future behaviour could be determined. Quantum Theory is based on degrees of probability, therefore it is indeterminate. It also states that if one aspect is determined, this will prevent the determination of another aspect; therefore the simultaneous determination of all parameters is an impossibility.

2. *Location*: The classical theory postulates that an object occupies space which can be located. Quantum Theory says that when not observed, an object does not exist and does not occupy a space.

3. *Interrelationship*: Classical theory says that for one object to affect another, the effect to pass from one to the other, cannot be faster than the speed of light. Quantum Theory says that all objects are interrelated and the effect of one upon another can be instantaneous, being independent of location.

4. *Relationship*: Classical theory states that the observer stands outside and apart from the observed object. Quantum Theory says that the observer is an essential part of the observed and that nothing can exist without an observer who creates the object.

5. *Complementarity*: Classical theory says that an object can be either a wave (extended in space) or a particle (confined in space). Quantum Theory says that the object can be both and simultaneously in two places.

6. *Consciousness*: Classical theory is based on the existence of 'matter.' Quantum theory is based on observation, which determines the outcome of an experiment.

7. *Correspondence*: Quantum Theory states that classical theory is a special case of Quantum Theory. Whilst Quantum Theory is correct, to discuss it and its implications, it is necessary to use the language of classical theory.

The Relevance of Advaita Vedanta

The higher knowledge, presented in *Advaita Vedanta*, states that consciousness is primary and that the world, of which we are a part, is nothing other than a manifestation of consciousness. Each of the above implications of Quantum Theory, fits in with *advaita*, which treats the world and its objects as an appearance in consciousness.

Because we as individuals have been cultured to consider ourselves as independent bodies, living in an independently existing universe, we cannot quickly adopt the position of *advaita*. Much reflection is needed to change from the 'classical' or culturally acquired view. The authors of Quantum Theory realized that whilst classical physics theory could mostly be expressed in ordinary language, this expression was not possible for Quantum Theory, whose language was confined to the practical applications. The same relationship, as already mentioned, applies to the lower and higher levels of knowledge, as defined in the *Upanishads*. The higher level can only be experienced, as it transcends language. Language is part of the lower level and can only be used as a pointer to the higher level. □

Readers of this article, who are interested in more information on the topic of classical versus quantum physics, are referred to a book written by two physicists (who are not *vedantins*):

Quantum Enigma: The Spooky Interaction of Mind and Matter. Bruce Rosenblum and Fred Kuttner. First published in the UK in 2007 by Gerald Duckworth, London. ISBN 978 07156 3654 I

The Inspiration that is Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda's ideas have been seen through various eyes, and new light has been thrown upon these ideas. In one sense Swamiji is inexhaustible. It can be argued that Swamiji's core message is that man is the *Atman*, *Atman* is perfection, and perfection defies all types of limitations.

"I Shall Not Cease to Inspire"

The first thing about Swamiji that strikes us is his importance in inspiring us. His teachings are there of course, but his life is also there. He has left behind an organization, a circle of devotees, to put into practice the ideas he gave. And a great man is more a principle than a person. But still, to my mind, his most important contribution is the inspiration he creates.

I remember, and this is the experience of many people, that when we were young there was a Bengali volume, a second volume of Swamiji's letters, which was very inspiring. Now it has been included in the larger compilation, *Letters of Swami Vivekananda*. The letters written between 1890 and 1902 are of a more inspiring type, when Swamiji was trying to energize people to do things. Romain Rolland has described Swamiji as "energy personified, and action was his message to man." So when you read his books you get thrilled, as do some of the famous writers, thinkers and singers, but you also feel that inspiration comes in your own life.

I was in Madras for more than twelve years in the 1950s and 60s. The president of the Tamil Writers' Association became my friend. And being inspired by us, he began to read the

Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda. Early one morning, he came to the Math to meet me. That was not the time monks met visitors, but still I had to come out. He said, "Swami, I could not contain myself. Last night I was reading Swamiji till twelve o'clock; then suddenly the inspiration came, by reading his works, that I must do something. But what to do at midnight? So I settled with my pen and wrote two stories in one night." The reason he was so impressed was that for the previous two years he could not write a book or any stories for that matter, because he was constructing a building. That building took up all his energies, all his attention. There was no creativity left in him to write anything.

So that is the important idea, that in whatever way you are going, Swamiji's inspiration can help you in that particular way. Not that you will necessarily turn traditionally spiritual overnight, but you will be inspired, and when inspired things will happen. And that, according to Swamiji, is the real fulfillment of life: to manifest the perfection we have in us. How it is manifested and how much it is manifested, only by that, will it be judged whether our life is successful or not.

So the major idea is, Swamiji is an inspirer of people, especially the young people. When we remember his inspiring words, we feel energized, enthused; all the blood boils, as it were, to do something. What things will come? Much will be determined by the composition of our mind. Inspiration doesn't always express itself in the same way. We have the classical example of the *Ramayana* stories. Three brothers, Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Vibhishana, practiced hard austerities. That was considered to be the major method by which strength, power and wisdom were acquired. Because Ravana was of the *rajasic* (activity) type, his mental composition was predominantly active. He became a king and wielded power in the three worlds, but he also became a tyrant. Kumbhakarna was a lazy man, so by his

austerity his laziness increased, though it was probably a covetable laziness to some extent. He could alternately sleep for six months and eat for six months! We may smile at this, but remember, eighty per cent of our activities centre around these two: having good sleep and good food to attain our security in these two. Twenty per cent of our activities may involve something more than these two things. Vibhishana was of the *sattvic* (serene) type and had spiritual attainment, realization of God. The idea is that spirituality can give you inspiration, but your mental composition must be all right.

Need for Purification of Mind

Swamiji's major prescription is service. He used to say that renunciation and service are the national ideals of India. Why national ideals, these are the ideals of the whole world. I was at one time the editor of the *Vedanta Kesari* in Madras. My predecessor was Swami Budhananda, who was a good thinker. At one time he filled up the journal with quotations he had collected for two years from the *Mahabharata* and other books to prove that a householder is a greater renouncer than a *sannyasin*. Why? If I am a monk and I have got a headache, I can go to sleep. I need not care for the world. But if I am a mother and my child comes home, in spite of my headache, in spite of my illness, I shall have to get up and look after the child. Now, unconsciously that mother has acquired the quality of a yogi - self-control, control of the emotions and demands of the body, by working for the child.

Along with receiving inspiration, it is very important to purify our minds as much as possible. The method of achieving purification is contemplation of the pure. The lives of Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Swamiji and others can purify us, but it is also important to do some unselfish action.

True Worship

Swamiji's prescription is to purify yourself, and then, to be useful to society, to work for others. Spiritual work is all right, but if you work for others, at least something substantial will remain. When Swamiji went to Rameswaram, he said in his lecture in the Shiva temple that if we go to the temple with fruits and flowers but forget that God is there, the whole thing is a waste. Of course, some result will be there inasmuch as it is a discipline; it is not a hundred per cent waste, but still a waste. But if we go to a sick man and give a little medicine, or go to an ignorant man and give a little knowledge, if we remember God is in him, we get the full benefit of worship. But even if we forget the god in him, still, our action has a social benefit. It involves the practice of unselfishness. The more unselfishness increases, the more purity will come. Impurity is self-consideration. In all our affairs we normally equate things from our own standpoint. Unselfishness is ignoring oneself.

I remember one thinker's very beautiful definition of humility. We know what humility is, but his was a very unique way of explaining it. Humility is the capacity to praise your adversary. Very difficult indeed! To praise one's adversary, to say that he has got good qualities, is wonderful. It requires us to think a little deeper. When we can do this, it means that complete egolessness has come. We are then able to appreciate goodness elsewhere, or find goodness in somebody else.

Self-manifestation

Swamiji's idea is that we will be much more successful if we can purify ourselves, make the mind ready for results, ready for the manifestation of our hidden powers. As *vedantists* we should believe that nothing comes from outside. All the capacities

are already within. They are to be brought out. Instead of self-development, our word is self-manifestation. The *Atman* is all perfect, it manifests itself in a limited way. Unknown areas are there in human nature in which the Spirit can manifest. In the world's oldest book, the *Rig Veda*, it is said that God covered the entire universe, but transcended it by ten fingers more, meaning that He is not finished with the universe, He is something more also. This means that a puny creature like a man or a woman has the same perfection God has; it is a question of difference of manifestation. And in innumerable ways we can manifest the Spirit in ourselves. When I first came to America, years ago, two women had been declared Generals of the US Army, for the first time in history. There had been queens and fighters, but not Generals. That means that an ordinary creature like a man or woman has unknown, undiscovered, unmanifested areas. So that is why Swamiji advised us to every day think of ourselves as the *Atman* and manifest the power of the Spirit.

Assert Yourself

One writer spoke of "prayer without tears." Prayer, normally, is asking. *Vedanta* says, instead of weeping and crying, assert. You have got the power within you. Assert it. The theistic idea is that God has got the power, and that we ask God, "Please, God, give me something." But instead of that, assert. Assertion is a better psychological technique. If we say, "I have got a headache, I have got a headache; O Lord, do something for me," the subconscious absorbs the idea headache, headache, headache. So instead of producing health, more unhealthiness will be produced. On the other hand, *Vedanta* will ask you to say, "I am pure, I am illumined, I am healthy." You may argue, "I am not healthy; I have a headache." But, really speaking, you don't have a headache. *Vedanta* pushes you to the question, "Who are you?"

That is one of the inquiries *Vedanta* asks us to make. Some groups don't go into philosophy, religion, *pujas* and *bhajans* they use straight questioning.

Who are you? Analyze, analyze, analyze. *Vedanta* asserts, "I am not the body, not the mind, but the Spirit." The moment you say, "I am healthy, I am healthy," you are identifying with your Spirit nature. When you say, "I have got a headache, I have got a headache," who has got the headache? The body, of course. Or, you may feel bad mentally, but you have already argued that you are not the body, not the mind, so you are not suffering. When you say "I am healthy," you are telling the greater truth, the higher truth, the more enduring truth. Truth that is more enduring is real truth. Temporary truth is no truth.

The materialists came forward and said, "No, we don't accept this. How do you know that this is so? Our studies don't reveal the Spirit." The *vedantists* explained, "We don't know your method of physical analysis or logical process, but we can realize the Truth by our special method of inspiration, or intuition, by what is called direct experience, realization. These are the different terms used by different schools to describe the ultimate understanding of one's real nature. This method may not be accepted by the materialists but that does not matter, for according to them it cannot be known by their methods. As you know, it is one of the limitations of the sciences that they cannot know the Infinite. This is not evident to ordinary people, but the ultimate nature of everything is revealed to the realized soul.

Swamiji asserted that man is Divinity in human form. When he went to America, he told the people, "You are not sinners. It is a sin to call you so." Very dramatic words! And by the by, it would be a very good idea, especially for you young people, to memorize fifty of these inspiring sayings of Swamiji. Through your whole life they will be useful.

Swamiji's method was to bring out the positive side. If somebody denounces me and then gives me advice, half the time I am not going to accept it even if he is right.

So when Swamiji said this, he was speaking to Americans, who were immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Europe, who had either been persecuted religiously or went to America because of famine or for a better livelihood. They found that the country was theirs for the taking. Soon there were ranches and fields, ten, twenty miles long. To such a person, if you say, "You are a sinner; you are hopeless," he is not going to believe it. For religion's sake he may grudgingly agree, but he is not going to really accept it. Swamiji said, "No, you are the all-powerful Spirit." That appealed to the pioneering Americans. That is one reason why Swamiji became so successful. He inspired. He touched the real core of the people's lives. He told them, "You are something grand, something infinite, something unlimited." That is the special idea Swamiji tried to inject in the Western context.

Serving the Manifested *Atman*

Normally, commentators translate the word *atmarama* as "one who finds bliss in the Self." But is it bliss in the Self with closed eyes or open eyes? Sri Ramakrishna is seen in both ways. In his commentary on the *Narada Bhakti Sutras*, Swami Tyagishananda explains that the effect of seeing the *Atman* everywhere is service of men and other creatures. So a man of illumination can do both: he may go within or serve the manifested *Atman*. Once you have realized, you are free; what do you want to do? The scholarly swami is telling us that the normal, natural course of a man of illumination will be to serve others. It is a very beautiful way of putting Swamiji's idea.

This is an important idea in the Indian context. Swamiji stressed this idea of service, because India needs service. Even

after more than fifty years of independence, people are starving, they are ignorant, there has not been much improvement. Of course, they say forty per cent of Indians belong to the middle class, and that is why America has got interested in India. But, still, in the larger community, people are not free from hunger and insecurity, so some manifestation of energy is necessary. The Ramakrishna Mission immediately attracted the attention of society because of pinpointing this idea of serving society and doing it.

Nowadays, the question of relevance is often brought up. In what way, as a person or as a principle manifesting ideas, is Swamiji relevant? He is significantly relevant in two ways. Man must continually be made aware that he has got infinite possibilities. If he knows and believes that he has got possibilities, new avenues will open up. The method will be to serve others. That way, society will be benefited, the individual will be benefited. Thus, stage by stage a practitioner will go towards higher realization, which is the ultimate goal of life.

Everything Positive, Nothing Negative

Swamiji's special prescription is that all of us should have an ideal. His famous saying is, "If a man with an ideal makes a thousand mistakes, I am sure, the man without an ideal will make fifty thousand. Therefore, it is better to have an ideal." Swamiji always tried to improve people, not by showing their defects, but by showing their merits. In one of his famous letters he says, "No negative, all positive, affirmative. I am, God is, everything is in me. I will manifest health, purity, knowledge, whatever I want."

But that has to be done by asserting the positive aspect of ourselves, by thinking of our divine nature. If I lack strength, I think of the *Atman* as full of strength. If I lack courage, I think of

the *Atman* as full of courage. That is the method. There is another famous saying of his: "But, says the *vedantin*, being reminded of weakness does not help much; give strength, and strength does not come by thinking of weakness all the time. The remedy for weakness is not brooding over weakness, but thinking of strength. Teach men of the strength that is already within them."

That is why, even for India his prescription is to think of strength, not weakness. In one context Swamiji denounces India, but his major thrust is, "Love India, honor India, respect India." The idea is that you must develop that love for your own country. Not only for your country, ultimately you will have to embrace the whole world, but not by ignoring your country. Now the present world is being ruled by nationalism, and everywhere the nationalistic states are lionized. But, transcending nationalism, we must also recognize the universal idea to make the entire world our own.

These are a few ideas from Swamiji. We can take up Swamiji from any angle and try to show that a particular idea of his is useful for the betterment of the individual, of society and of the world at large. That is the special purpose of a religious teacher, a teacher who is an inspirer. "Awakener of souls" is the term often used for Swamiji. Let us be inspired by him; let us try to build our lives and also dedicate them for the good of others. □

The difference between a man and a brute mainly lies in this: a brute never wants to have his place changed as long as he gets food and shelter, while a man, a true man, is always attempting to get higher and higher. Incessant yearning for higher ideals is the characteristic of a true man.

Swami Ramakrishnananda

Fruits of Spiritual Practice (cont.)

One great saint said that when undesirable thoughts began to appear, he would stop them, even in the seed form, before they came to the surface. One learns the art of doing these things. One becomes forgiving. One develops love for one and all. Not all at once. One might not be engaged in social welfare activities, but that does not mean one has no sympathy for others. Don't think those who are engaged in social welfare activities and make a loud noise, all have feelings for people. Even as in religious life, some of those who start with idealism afterwards become hardhearted. But in religious life one is struggling against that. One is cautious. One feels good thoughts coming, but one finds that harmful thoughts also come. One becomes patient and forgiving.

But don't judge a religious person only by these things. You want to see the list of virtues which it is said will be visible in the life of a saint; and if by that list you find that a certain person is not a saint, you think he is good for nothing, he has not developed spirituality. It might be that he has cleared the plate of his mind of many shortcomings, but a dark spot remains somewhere, and he is struggling with that. This is the way one grows. All the while one is growing.

A spiritual aspirant might not himself be aware that he is growing. It is very difficult for a person to find that he is growing, because he is struggling, he is in the thick of the fight. But those who are highly developed spiritually can watch and find how that struggling person is growing. It is said that sometimes a person who is passing through the worst period of spiritual

struggle might be experiencing the highest thing. Through that struggle one is acquiring strength.

But spiritual life will not be all "dark night of the soul." As I said, one will get joy also. Sometimes the mind will be very calm. Interest will develop into love for God, genuine love. The pity is that one has to pass through changes. The only remedy is perseverance. Those who really want to develop their spiritual life will stick to the struggle, because it is their life. What else will they do? They have to stick to it. But it is not all a dismal fight. It is not a hopeless task. At a period it might seem hopeless, but those who know, or those who get advice from persons experienced in spiritual life, expect that various obstacles will come. Laziness will come. False understanding will come. You may think you are having spiritual experiences when it is all imagination.

Those who come with sentimental aspirations at once will say that their *kundalini* has risen to this or that *chakra* (centre of consciousness). Once when I was in Seattle with the Swami in charge of our Center there, he wanted to buy something for me. At the store I was waiting while he was shopping, when a salesman came to me and said that he was the disciple of a certain yogi. I said I had heard that that yogi was no more alive. Well, he got his instruction from some disciple of a disciple of that yogi. That was all right. But then he began to talk about his *kundalini*, saying that after practicing for three or four months his *kundalini* had risen to this *chakra* and that *chakra*, I looked at him and wondered if he was out of his mind. Really, I was alarmed about him. He was such a nice person. I was worried about him. But if one shows the least disbelief, such persons are hurt. They are so sure they are getting realizations.

When there is sentimentality, that means one's understanding has not become clear, one's reasoning faculty has

not become sharp. It is extremely necessary that your reasoning, thinking capacity be very sharp; otherwise you will be deluded. Patanjali's yoga book warns that we may be seeing wrong things, we may be mistakenly thinking that we are getting spiritual experiences. Some persons have visions. But you cannot always trust visions. A vision is tested by its aftereffect, by the transformation it brings about in your character. A vision might be simply a dream, an imagination, a fantasy. When you meditate, you are in another world, the thought world. Many fantasies come and go. You might be thinking those fantasies are visions. But they are not. If a vision does not change your life, if it does not give you inner strength, it is not a true vision.

But some visions are true. Even if they do not change one's life completely, their memory gives one strength. I have heard from some persons - thoroughly reliable persons - who had true visions. They said that when a real vision comes, it is a splendid joy, an intense joy. It comes all of a sudden, unexpectedly. A great soul told me that when he was having spiritual problems, passing through a crisis, all of a sudden a vision came. Its effect lasted. But even he told me that it was a phase. One gets a vision, but the spiritual struggle goes on. However, it is not the same struggle. One has got strength now; one's faith has increased. So there are true visions, but not all visions are true. Beware of that. What you think is a vision might be your imagination.

Some persons have visions, some do not. Because you do not get visions, that does not mean that you are not progressing. In one English book on mysticism, there is a nice distinction: imaginary vision and intellectual vision. In an intellectual vision you do not see any form. Your understanding becomes clearer, your perception becomes very clear and strong. It is like getting the result after doing a mathematical calculation. When one gets the result, one knows at once that it is the truth, the correct result.

In the same way, in spiritual life, you may get a very clear insight into some particular idea; you feel sure you have understood it. That makes a great impact on you. This is also a kind of spiritual experience. Sometimes an experience of this type is much better than an ordinary vision. What happens as a result of true spiritual experience is that your conviction grows. Visions are secondary; the important thing is conviction. That gives you strength. You may have a vision which gives you joy for the time being - great joy, perhaps - but afterwards it is just a memory. That memory may give a little stimulus, but it does not necessarily give strength. What you want is strength and conviction. Real conviction is as good as realization. One feels so clearly the truth of a thing. When these experiences come, you begin to feel more and more that you are not the body, you are not the mind. You are separate from them.

Behind this world which you see with your senses, there is another world which is much more real. In this world everything is changing, everything is unreliable, including man's own mind. Swami Vivekananda once said that everyone is irresponsible. Only those persons who have known the Truth are responsible; everyone else is irresponsible. One does not know what one will do. But when there is conviction about the reality of the Spirit, one grows. The mind comes under greater and greater control. Inner strength comes. The important thing is that inner strength must come. Gradually one begins to feel that one is not the body or the mind, that one is something else. What that is, one cannot define, but one is sure that it is much more real than the body and the mind.

When one can clearly see that the mind is unstable, unreliable, one gets an idea of something beyond the mind. Sometimes one gets a glimpse of that. Sometimes when the mind is under control to a great extent, one sees the reality of that thing

more clearly. These experiences give one strength. Even a saint might say that he has not achieved anything, that he is still struggling. We might think, "How is it that even this man who has been struggling for so many years says he has not achieved anything?" He has surely got something. But he counts that as nothing. He wants more.

In this way one grows until one reaches a state where one sees, one feels that the whole world is non-existent. Only oneself and God exist. Two things exist. One has become almost zero. I say almost zero, for otherwise one could not see two. That is a great state in spiritual life. Afterwards the two vanishes and only one remains, as in the quotation I gave at the beginning. The highest state cannot be described. It is neither, 'is' nor 'is not,' 'Is' or 'is not' you perceive with your mind, but at that time one's self has become lost in the eternity. Or, in terms of dualism, in terms of devotion, one's love for God has become so great that one has lost oneself in God.

When we compare the saints of different religions, we find that they all say the same thing, though in different ways. One Sufi saint describing what happens in spiritual life said that, when you begin, God is far away. We imagine God is somewhere in heaven, in some geographical area, where we will enjoy the afterlife. One feels God is far away. But why should God be far away? God is everywhere. When one progresses, one feels God has come nearer and nearer. Still, one thinks of God, one loves God, as a separate entity. The worshipper and the object of worship are different. But when love for God becomes intense, one's separate existence vanishes. That is called the highest state. That is called Oneness, the ultimate reality, where nothing exists except supreme joy.

How do we know that that joy exists? Those rare persons who come to the ordinary level after realizing the highest state,

say that it was great joy. Sometimes people from outside can see that a knower of Truth has so much joy in him. Many persons witnessed this in Ramakrishna's life. Sometimes he would be in what is called *samadhi*, the transcendental state. His eyelids would not move; even if someone touched his eyeball, there was no response. To all intents and purposes the body was dead. His doctor, who was atheistic (though a very good man), found that his heartbeat stopped during his *samadhi*. But people would find great joy beaming through his face. M., the author of *The Gospel of Sri RamaKrishna*, when he first saw the Master in *samadhi*, thought it was strange that, though he was altogether oblivious of the surroundings, great joy was beaming through his face, coming through his apparently dead, inactive eyes. That joy is so great, Ramakrishna would say, that it cannot be expressed in words. The *Narada Bhakti Sutras*, a classic book on devotion, gives the simile of the dumb man who tasted something very sweet. He could not express his experience. Even we cannot express it. About a sweet food, we can say only that it tastes sweet; more than that we cannot express. But over and above that, a dumb man cannot talk at all. In the same way, one cannot say anything about the experience of the highest Truth. Ramakrishna would say that everything has been defiled except the knowledge of *Brahman*. Defiled means that it has been uttered with the lips.

How do we know that what is experienced in that state is real, and not a hallucination? We know that it is a reality from the life and teachings of persons who have had that experience, from the words of wisdom that fall from their lips. Ramakrishna had no book learning, but his wisdom put to silence scholars, philosophers, leaders of society. When he would speak, they would sit silently and drink in every word that fell from his lips. That is what happens. This experience is a reality. In our ignorance, we might say that there is no truth in religious

experience. What can you say to one who is ignorant? If such a person would go to Ramakrishna, or any saint, he might simply smile and not answer. He would not care to give any answer unless he felt pity, or he felt there were spiritual potentialities in that person.

But in our spiritual life, struggle is a part of the path we take. And if we follow the path, it is up to us how far we can go. Everyone who makes the attempt is certain to get something. Wherever there is real spiritual hunger, it will be appeased, and one will be satisfied. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled." The words are so appropriate, so accurate. If one has spiritual hunger, one will be filled. Spiritual hunger is more important than physical hunger. Those who struggle for their spiritual life, those who do spiritual practice and continue it, are sure to get something. Simply because you have tried for a period with care or carelessness and not got the result does not mean that others will not get it. To what extent, to what degree one will get it depends on one's potentialities, one's assiduity, one's perseverance.

A great saint whom I knew said once (though not directly to me) that in worldly life you find that many persons fail in many things. One is not sure of success. But in spiritual life, he said, there is not a single instance of a person who sincerely tried and did not get any result. If one tries, one will surely get something. But to get results, we cannot practice parenthetically, as M. would say. M. was a literary man: when giving advice, he used very accurate expressions. You cannot have spiritual life parenthetically - within brackets or between two dashes. We cannot busy ourselves with worldly things and do spiritual practice parenthetically. You cannot have religion, as Swami Vivekananda said, like an oriental vase to decorate your table. If you have it as a decoration, it will remain a decoration. Not even

that: it will dry up. Cut flowers and they will dry up tomorrow or the next day.

Describing the different stages of spiritual life, Buddha said that first comes the practice of ethical virtues, then faith, then energy. But that energy is of a different kind. When you have faith, your energy becomes different. You assert your claim. "Why should Truth be denied to me?" Conviction has arisen. It is not simply a dreamy idea. From that conviction comes energy. Ramakrishna used to say to the Divine Mother, "Thou didst reveal Thyself to Ramprasad, so why not to me?" This is how one prays when energy comes. Then afterwards comes concentration, then comes wisdom. These are the higher stages. But just as in ordinary life we find our level, in spiritual life also, according to our struggle, according to the intensity of our spiritual practice, we shall find our level. But no one will go hungry if he has real hunger. One will get one's fruits at the right time. The greater the hunger, the greater the fulfillment. That is how it works in spiritual life. □

You may use your beads as a help to concentration. The need for not letting the beads 'go hungry' is for the purpose of getting into the habit and lessening the distraction of the mind while counting them. All this is necessary to create yearning for God. When yearning comes, the vision of God will not be far off. He will reveal himself to you and fill your heart with infinite joy and bliss.

Swami Saradananda

Programme for November & December 2010

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

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|-----|----|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| Nov | 7 | Imitation of Christ 10 | Swami Shivarupananda |
| Nov | 14 | Selection from the Upanishads 5 | Swami Dayatmananda |
| Nov | 21 | Selection from the Upanishads 6 | Swami Dayatmananda |
| Nov | 28 | Day Retreat | |
| Dec | 5 | Imitation of Christ 11 | Swami Shivarupananda |
| Dec | 12 | Selection from the Upanishads 7 | Swami Dayatmananda |
| Dec | 19 | Selection from the Upanishads 8 | Swami Dayatmananda |
| Dec | 24 | Christmas Eve | |
| Dec | 26 | No Talk | |

Day Retreat

With Swami Dayatmananda and Swami Shivarupananda at the

Vedanta Centre, Bourne End, on 28 November

from 10:00 am until 7:00 pm

Note: Children are not allowed at the Retreat.

Please bring (vegetarian) lunch to share.

Chrismas Eve Celebration Friday 24 December

at Bourne End at 5:00 pm

Holy Mother's Puja 2011 Saturday 1 January

at Bourne End at 4:00 pm

Vedanta

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completely gets rid of one's attachment to the world and worldly wisdom.

"One cannot see God if one has even the slightest trace of worldliness. Match-sticks, if damp, won't strike fire though you rub a thousand of them against the match-box. You only waste a heap of sticks. The mind soaked in worldliness is such a damp match-stick. Once Sri Radha said to her friends that she saw Krishna everywhere—both within and without. The friends answered: 'Why, we don't see Him at all. Are you delirious?' Radha said, 'Friends, paint your eyes with the collyrium of divine love, and then you will see Him.'

"If the devotee but once feels this attachment and ecstatic love for God, this mature devotion and longing, then he sees God in both His aspects, with form and without form."

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, December 14, 1882

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