

Vedanta

360 JULY - AUGUST

Lorenzo Scupoli
Swami Nageshananda

Sannyasa and Brahmacharya
Swami Subodhananda



Divine Wisdom

NARENDRA: "What is Qualified Non-dualism?"

MASTER: "It is the theory of Ramanuja. According to this theory, Brahman, or the Absolute, is qualified by the universe and its living beings. These three—Brahman, the world, and living beings—together constitute One. Take the instance of a bel-fruit. A man wanted to know the weight of the fruit. He separated the shell, the flesh, and the seeds. But can a man get the weight by weighing only the flesh? He must weigh flesh, shell, and seeds together. At first it appears that the real thing in the fruit is the flesh, and not its seeds or shell. Then by reasoning you find that the shell, seeds, and flesh all belong to the fruit; the shell and seeds belong to the same thing that the flesh belongs to. Likewise, in spiritual discrimination one must first reason, following the method of 'Not this, not this.' God is not the universe; God is not the living beings; Brahman alone is real, and all else is unreal. Then one realizes, as with the bel-fruit, that the Reality from which we derive the notion of Brahman is the very Reality that evolves the idea of living beings and the universe. The Nitya and the Lila are the two aspects of one and the same Reality; therefore, according to Ramanuja, Brahman is qualified by the universe and the living beings. This is the theory of Qualified Non-dualism.

(To M.) "I do see God directly. What shall I reason about? I clearly see that He Himself has become everything; that He Himself has become the universe and all living beings.

"But without awakening one's own inner consciousness one cannot realize the All-pervading Consciousness. How long does a man reason? So long as he has not realized God. But mere words will not do. As for myself, I clearly see that He Himself has become everything.

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Is Buddha Relevant for Us? (cont.)

Right Action & Right Living

S*ila*, or a righteous life, is the second stage of spiritual disciplines according to Buddha. We discussed Right Speech in our last editorial. In this editorial we will be discussing Right Action and Right Livelihood.

All of us seek happiness and avoid suffering. Both these ends can be achieved only through the practice of Dharma. Part of this Dharma is Right Action and Right Living. Without Right Action and Right Living we are bound to suffer.

Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata*, knows the irony of human nature. He laments at the end of the book: "With uplifted arms I am shouting: it is from Dharma that wealth and enjoyments of life arise, and so why not follow it first? But alas, nobody listens to me!"

The natural tendency of the human mind is to tread the path of ease and avoid hardship and responsibilities.

A popular sanskrit verse puts it thus: "People are eager to get the fruit of virtuous actions but do not do virtuous actions. Nobody wants the fruit of sinful actions, but people go on committing sin with much effort."

Happiness is the very nature of every being. Buddha said that each soul is a potential Buddha, everything has a 'Buddha Nature.' Buddha's teachings are meant to help us manifest our Buddha Nature. Every action we do must help us unfold our real nature. It is in this light alone we must study, understand, and practise Buddha's teachings.

The Buddhist texts explain that *sila* has the characteristic of unifying our actions, speech and thought. Actions contrary

to *sila* lead to a state of ignorance marked by guilt, anxiety, and unhappiness. The practice of *sila* involves Right Action and Right Living.

What is Right Action?

Any action that purifies the mind and leads to the unfoldment of our real nature, and which is beneficial for all beings is Right Action. Actions could be thoughts, words or deeds. Wrong actions lead to impure and unhappy states of mind, while right actions lead to pure and happy states of mind.

Even Right Actions must be done with mindfulness, compassion, skill and good-will.

Mindfulness is to keep in mind the goal we are striving for and to do every action with awareness.

For those nurtured in the tradition of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda the word compassion may appear strange. In this context compassion is to identify oneself with others. Right Action is closely related to compassion. The importance of *karuna* or compassion in Buddhism cannot be overstated. The Sanskrit word for compassion is *karuna*. It means 'active sympathy' or the willingness to feel the pain of others and help them to the best of one's capacity. Closely related to *karuna* is *metta* (*Maitri*), 'loving kindness.' We must remember that genuine compassion is rooted in *prajna*, or 'wisdom.' Wisdom is the realization that all are potential Buddhas.

His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, writes: "According to Buddhism, compassion is an aspiration, a state of mind, wanting others to be free from suffering. Genuine compassion must have both wisdom and loving kindness."

Skill implies one-pointedness of mind and non-attachment.

And goodwill is to help others manifest their Buddha nature. According to Buddha there are five wrong and sinful actions from which we must abstain.

1. to abstain from harming sentient beings, especially to abstain from taking life and doing harm intentionally.

2. to abstain from taking what is not given, which includes stealing, robbery, fraud, deceitfulness, and dishonesty.

3. to abstain from sexual misconduct.

4. to abstain from speaking falsehood, from finding faults with others, from speaking harshly, and from spreading slanders, etc.

5. to abstain from intoxicating liquors, drugs etc.

“When a lay follower possesses five things, he lives with confidence in his house, and he will find himself in heaven as sure as if he had been carried off and put there. What are the five? He abstains from killing living beings, from taking what is not given, from misconduct in sensual desires, from speaking falsehood, and from indulging in liquor, wine, and fermented brews.”

Right Livelihood

Right livelihood means that one should live according to dharma. Part of this practice is to earn one's living in an honest, righteous way and that wealth should be earned legally and honestly, in accordance with dharma.

The Buddha mentions four specific activities that harm other beings and that one should strictly avoid. These are:

1. dealing in destructive weapons; 2. dealing in living beings (including raising animals for slaughter, slave trade and prostitution, etc.); 3. working in jobs involving the production of meat and butchery, and 4. selling intoxicants and poisons,

such as alcohol and drugs.

These precepts are not a list of commandments forced upon us. They merely describe how an enlightened being naturally lives and responds to life's challenges in this world.

The Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says: "The basis of Right Action is to do everything in mindfulness." He teaches Five Mindfulness Training Practices that help one and that correlate to the five precepts listed above. These training practices involve respecting life, being generous, avoiding sexual misconduct, speaking and listening lovingly, and eating foods conducive to both physical and mental health.

Every sincere Buddhist must take a vow to uphold the Three Pure Precepts, which help us discover our True nature. These are: To do no evil, To do good, and To help all beings in every possible way.

It is not easy in the present situation to put into practice the teachings of Buddha or for that matter the teachings of any religion. When we open our eyes and observe, we see people madly running after what Sri Ramakrishna calls 'lust and greed;' we see wars, conflicts, killings, cruelty and greed. When we look around, we see violation of almost every teaching of Buddha. We live in an environment where men and women do what they like, deliberately trouncing all the norms of ethics and morality, all in the name of freedom and human rights. In an environment polluted by impure thoughts and immoral actions it takes superhuman heroism to follow the path of dharma. And yet we must strive to the best of our ability to follow the path shown by Buddha. If we do so, the grace of the Divine is sure to help us go forward and help us manifest our Buddha Nature.

(to be continued)

Swami Dayatmananda

Lorenzo Scupoli and the Path to Spiritual Perfection

Christianity, specially the Catholic section, has to its credit many saints of great spiritual eminence. They form a “great body of witnesses to humanity's experience of God.” The illustrious names of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Teresa, St. Catherine of Siena, and many others are as familiar to the non-Christian world as to the Christian. The spiritual classics associated with them are a legacy they have left for the guidance of sincere spiritual aspirants of all religions. During their own lifetime, they were a source of spiritual wisdom, and they have become immortal by their writings.

Less known than the above mentioned saints, but no less zealous in its religious fervour and search after Truth, is another group of spiritual luminaries like Thomas a Kempis, Brother Lawrence, etc. Though not acclaimed as saints of the highest order like the former, they were real seekers of God, greatly advanced in spirituality. And they, too, have left their writings, which have come down to us as excellent guidebooks to spiritual life. These inspired writings are the heart pourings of men in whom “true perfection and religion shined,” and are greatly useful for those who desire to enrich their inner life. Lorenzo Scupoli is one among these devout seekers of God. His famous book *The Spiritual Combat*, or *Unseen Warfare* as the revised, enlarged, and more elegant Greco-Russian version is called, and his *Path to Paradise*, which contain his spiritual teachings, are widely read in the West, but less known in the East. The purpose of this article is to present to the non-Christian readers the life and teachings of Lorenzo Scupoli.

Lorenzo Scupoli, or Francesco as he was called in pre-monastic life, was born at Otranto, Italy, in 1529, and lived up to the ripe old age of eighty-one. He spent his last days at Naples, where he passed away on 28th November 1610. Not much is known about the first half of his long life. But his books reveal that he must have been deeply imbued with spiritual ideals from his very early days. At the age of forty, Scupoli entered one of the highly honoured religious orders of the time, and was ordained priest when he was forty-eight. After ordination he worked in Milan for some time. As a monk, his life was not a life of action, but he had devoted himself to intense spiritual practices with the sole aim of attaining perfection. As a spiritual guide, he was greatly popular among the people. "His own insight into divine things, his skill in teaching, and his persuasiveness of manner were the secret of his success in his ministerial work" (*The Spiritual Combat*, Methuen, London, Second Edition, p. 49).

The lovers of God are often subject to severe trials. Lorenzo Scupoli also fell a victim to a false accusation, and his community sentenced him for a few years of solitary confinement at Venice and Padua. But these trials are only like passing clouds in the lives of spiritual persons. Scupoli was found innocent, and the community restored to him the lost honour. But to Scupoli himself, the accusation was a boon from the Beloved; for it was an occasion for him to dive deep within himself and reinforce his faith in God and in His saving power. He says: "He (God) takes care to plant this heavenly seed (i.e. consciousness of one's own nothingness and conviction that all good comes from God) in the hearts of His beloved friends, urging them not to value themselves and not to rely on themselves. Sometimes He does this through the action of grace and inner illumination, or sometimes through external blows and tribulations ... not always

comprehensible to us" (*Unseen Warfare*, Faber and Faber, London, p. 82).

Scupoli was sixty when his great book *The Spiritual Combat* was first published in Italian. It was the fruit of his long solitary life. That the book underwent more than thirty editions in his own lifetime is a testimony to its popularity. Soon it was classed among the best religious classics. Scupoli died in 1610.

The Spiritual Combat and *Path to Paradise* are a record of sublime spiritual thoughts, and the reader constantly feels the presence of a genuine spiritual teacher. Besides, they reflect Scupoli's own personality. As Professor H. A. Hodges says: "In some of the pages of Scupoli, we can guess that... he is speaking from personal experience, and the trials which he had to undergo, the experiences of injustice and contempt which he had to endure seem to be visible behind the text. Something else becomes visible too: the uncomplaining patience, the sincere humility and self-abnegation, the dependence on God, the deeply rooted interior peace" (ibid. Introduction).

Scupoli was intensely practical and sincere in his approach to spiritual problems. He was well disciplined in spiritual and moral virtues, and strictly followed the rules of a monk. Scupoli's great love for silence and solitude had endowed him with the grace, clarity, and power of expression needed for spiritual writings. His life was marked by extreme poverty and intense prayer. As one of his biographers observes: "He was so great a lover of poverty that there was nothing in his room but a crucifix, a poor bedstead, a table, and a rotten chair. He was always engaged in prayer, the fruit of which may be gathered in *The Spiritual Combat*." The appeal which his instructions had in his own time has continued to this day.

Path to Spiritual Perfection

The teachings of Lorenzo Scupoli are essentially monastic in spirit; yet they decidedly contain enough guidance to men and women who are inwardly spiritual, though outwardly living a worldly life. The method of developing love of God; the manner of resisting the bodily passions; the way of checking the outgoing senses and using them rightly for spiritual progress; the mode of training memory and imagination; the method of controlling the outbursts of emotions; and the art of prayer - each one of these is beautifully and lucidly dealt with by Scupoli in his teachings.

The main theme of Scupoli's teachings is the attainment of spiritual perfection. This perfection, according to him, does not consist in "fasts, vigils, sleeping on bare earth, ... saying many prayers at home and in attending long services in church, ... solitude, seclusion, and silence" (*ibid.*, p. 77). These are only virtues that help a pilgrim in his spiritual progress. True perfection consists in coming closer to God and enjoying communion with Him and in feeling His constant presence within. The God that seems to exist far beyond, in the days of ignorance, will, on the dawn of divine knowledge, be felt within one's own heart. Scupoli calls it "Christian perfection," and considers it to be the goal of Christian life. This is the goal of other religions as well; for the final beatitude transcends all adjectives.

The attainment of this perfection involves strenuous inner struggle. Scupoli aptly calls it "spiritual combat," and the virtues needed for this combat as "weapons." To fight with the invisible foes - "the varied passions and lusts of the flesh" within oneself - is more arduous than to face the visible enemies outside. A seeker after perfection has to fight like a brave soldier armed with spiritual weapons, "The arena, the field of battle, the place where the actual fight takes place is our own hearts and all our inner

man. The time of battle is our whole life." We are reminded of the martial metaphors of the *Bhagavad Gita*: "The enemy of the jnani," "Kill the enemy, the destroyer of knowledge," "Conquer the wicked foe in the form of desire," "The sword of knowledge," etc. The *Upanishads*, too, use such expressions. All these only indicate the nature of the spiritual struggle and the qualities that are essential for success.

According to Scupoli, an aspirant in spiritual warfare has to wield four weapons: (1) Distrust of oneself, (2) Trust in God, (3) Practice, and (4) Prayer. These are the basic ideas, and these are beautifully developed in the rest of his teachings.

Scupoli lays much stress on cultivating the first two virtues, viz. distrust of oneself and trust in God. "Self-esteem," he says, "is so deeply rooted in us and so firmly enmeshed in us ... that it always hides in our heart as a subtle and imperceptible movement, even when we are sure that we do not trust ourselves and are, on the contrary, filled with complete trust in God alone" (ibid., p. 86).

Distrust of oneself does not mean lack of faith or a spirit of dependency, as it may suggest. It means attenuating the lower self, which is characterized by self-reliance, "a spiritual disease" which "closes the very door of our mind, through which alone divine grace can enter." Much of man's troubles results from too much self-reliance. Scupoli says that a man who studies himself finds that a greater part of his thoughts, words, and actions, which spring from his self-reliant nature, are either bad or sinful. "This experiment will make him understand in practice how inharmonious and weak he is in himself. And if he sincerely wishes well, this understanding will make him feel how foolish it is to expect anything good from himself or to rely on himself alone" (ibid., p. 84). Hence the need for distrust of oneself. Scupoli prescribes four ways to implant this virtue: (1) realizing one's own

nothingness; (2) asking for God's help through humble prayers; (3) being wary and fearing the enemies with whom one has to fight; and (4) being aware of one's own weakness in times of transgressions.

Along with distrust of oneself, one has to develop trust in God. Otherwise, "if we merely give up all hopes of ourselves ... without having found another support, we are certain to flee immediately from the battlefield or to be overcome and taken prisoner by enemies" (ibid., p. 85). Therefore, Scupoli emphasizes the need for "perfect trust in God and a complete confidence in Him." With these two weapons, a devout soul has to progress towards perfection, looking upon the good and bad results of all his actions as blessings from God for his own good. "Fill your inner man with the conviction," says Scupoli, "that all that befalls you and happens in you is a test and an education, ... so that, in following them, you may be worthy to receive the crown of truth, prepared for you by God's loving kindness" (ibid., p. 262). This virtue can be acquired either by asking it from God Himself, or by having faith in His protective power, wisdom, and goodness, or by constantly remembering instances where devotees were helped by the Lord in their afflictions.

But to fight valiantly, a soldier in this spiritual warfare has to possess the third weapon: practice. Because "if distrust of ourselves and trust in God, so necessary in this combat, are alone, not only shall we not have victory over ourselves, but we shall fall into many evils; and therefore, in addition to these, there is need of practice" (*The Spiritual Combat*, p. 98).

Practice chiefly lies in training the mind and the will, since all the other disciplines depend on that. The training of the mind consists in making it pure and clear. Only a clear and pure mind, possessed with discrimination, can grasp spiritual truths. A confused mind, clouded by ignorance and passions, only retards

spiritual progress. A mind devoid of discrimination is easily prejudiced by likes and dislikes, and fails to judge things in their proper perspective. So Scupoli advises that a spiritual aspirant should examine things in a detached way. He says: "Unobscured by passions, the mind then remains in a state natural to it, which is free and pure, and has the possibility to know the truth and to penetrate into the depths of a thing, where evil is often concealed under a deceptively attractive exterior and where good is sometimes hidden under a bad appearance" (ibid., p. 91).

The confusion of mind is also the result of pride, which invariably assails an aspirant's mind. When pride pervades, it is almost impossible to cure the mind of its evils. The mind then becomes fully rooted in the idea that its own judgements are correct. Scupoli points this out when he says: "Then everything is so disorganized that there is neither place nor person for applying a healing poultice."

The clarity of mind can be obtained by devout and humble prayers to the Lord, "bursting forth from the heart," and by "the continual practice of a deep and loyal consideration of things, to see whether they be good or bad, according as the Holy Spirit teaches, and not as they appear outwardly and as the world judges" (ibid., p. 99). These two roughly correspond to the *bhakti-yoga* and the *jnana-yoga* of Hinduism.

Similarly, the will needs to be properly trained so as "not to let it lean towards your own desires, but instead to lead it to be perfectly as one with the will of God." As will is the spring of all human actions, Scupoli lays much stress on its training. This will is characterized by the power that is manifested on the spiritual plane by subduing one's own will to the will of God. In order "to please Him with a pure heart," and not by the powers that one normally manifests on the physical plane. It is human nature to please itself by seeking pleasure in works, but it should

be changed by using the weapon of practice. By continued practice, the mind is directed to the single aim of pleasing the Lord. As Scupoli puts it: "The inner task which you must practise in anything you do, the task of directing your thoughts, feelings, and actions only towards pleasing God, will seem difficult at first, but will later become easy and light, if, firstly, you constantly exercise yourself in this spiritual effort, and secondly, if you constantly keep warm your yearning for God" (*Unseen Warfare*, p. 08).

Scupoli distinguishes will into two kinds: the higher will, or the reasonable will, and the lower will, or the sensual will, which are always at war with each other. While the higher will desires to do good, the lower tends to do evil. The unseen warfare consists in subordinating the lower will to the higher will. This can be accomplished in four ways: (1) by strong resistance; (2) by creating within oneself an aversion towards that particular evil action; (3) by fervent appeal to God; and (4) by trying "to incite and establish within yourself other corresponding feelings and dispositions. This would mean driving the passion out of your heart and replacing it by a virtue opposed to it." The last one is the most effective and excellent psychological method.

When the mind and will become thus trained, the devout person finds it easy to proceed with his spiritual practice. A soldier in spiritual warfare who wields the fourth weapon, namely, prayer, speedily progresses towards perfection.

Prayer forms the most important weapon in this unseen warfare. Through prayer, "the first three weapons are acquired and given full force, and all other blessings are obtained." Hence prayer should constantly remain within as a "natural function" of a spiritual aspirant. And it should be the "refuge in every stress and affliction of the heart." So Scupoli implores in his *Path to Paradise*: "No matter how faint-hearted and grieved you may be,

you should not abandon it until you reach a state when your will is in complete accord with the will of God, and, calmed by this, your heart is filled with courageous daring and is joyfully ready to meet, accept, and bear the very thing it feared and wished to avoid" (p.259). The will of the Lord reflects in a mind that is prayerful, and such a mind acts as a guide unto itself to follow the divine will. The presence of the Lord and His guidance is felt at every step.

According to Scupoli, the prayer can be either vocal or mental. He lays great stress on learning by heart the vocal prayers, the songs and psalms composed by great spiritual souls. Because they are "poured out of the hearts of saintly men and women, ... and the spirit of the prayer is contained in them; so, if you read them, you too will be filled with this spirit" (ibid., p. 207). But the real prayer is the mental prayer, or the "inner prayer," where the mind is turned inward and an aspirant sends out his prayers not loudly, but silently. Then "the mind sees and understands clearly what is said in words, and the heart feels what the mind thinks. This is full prayer, where the praying words and the praying thoughts are combined with praying feelings" (ibid., p. 205). Then only prayer becomes effective as a weapon in the spiritual combat. As Scupoli expresses: "Prayer can become a victorious weapon in the unseen warfare only when it becomes real, that is, when it takes root in the heart and begins to act there unceasingly" (ibid., p,220).

These various spiritual virtues are to be gradually developed according to one's capacity. The enemies often inspire an aspirant to plunge headlong in spiritual practice, just to lead him astray. Hence Scupoli's wise counsel that "a moderate and orderly mode of life, controlled by reason, which takes into account the requirements of soul and particular constitution of the body, together with its state of health, are less dangerous and

more useful for the soul and for the body.” “For the standard is not the same for every one, although one law applies to all - to keep the body subservient to the spirit” (ibid. p.197).

It is natural that, in a spiritual warfare, violations are apt to occur. But a devout person should not allow these to go deep into his heart to fill him with sorrow and despair. So Scupoli advises: “You must not aggravate your perturbation by sad thoughts about yourself, for every time you do this, you burden your soul with thousands of other fears produced by faintness of heart and sadness” (ibid. p.277). On the other hand, these transgressions serve one good purpose. In the words of Thomas a Kempis: “It is good that we have sometimes troubles and crosses; for they often make a man to enter into himself, and consider that he is here in banishment and ought not to place his trust in any worldly thing” (*The Imitation of Christ*, I. 12).

Constant watching over oneself alone will help to avoid these violations. Scupoli beautifully illustrates how even a spiritual person stumbles in practice through inadvertence. “If a man does not watch himself well, he may begin some activity with the sole purpose of pleasing the Lord, but later, little by little, introduces into it a self-interest which makes him find in it also a satisfaction of his own desires; ... he becomes so tightly bound by enjoyment of the work that, if God Himself were to hinder him in practice, ... he is filled with indignation ... and murmurs against God Himself” (*Unseen Warfare*, p.97). Also, a mind that is not watchful becomes an easy prey to laziness and negligence, which are a great hindrance in spiritual life. Laziness “gradually undermines with its poison not only the first small roots out of which virtuous habits may grow, but even those which are already deep rooted and serve as a foundation of the whole order of righteous life, ... Negligence, if it persists, insensibly wears away and destroys the very nerves of spiritual life” (ibid., p. 127).

The other great danger in the path of spiritual progress is the “spiritual dryness” that may creep into the minds of devout persons. Scupoli particularly warns against this: “Take care that on no account you give up your spiritual practices; but follow them with all your energy, however unfruitful and distasteful they may appear to you, drinking willingly the cup of bitterness, which in your dryness the loving Will of God holds forth to you” (*The Spiritual Combat*, p.277). This can be well avoided by retaining the “spiritual warmth of the heart,” which one feels in the beginning of spiritual life. This spiritual warmth is not, as it appears, a single virtue in itself, but a “fusion of mainly spiritual movements, just as a ray of light is the fusion of seven colours of the spectrum.” It is a blending of the seven virtues: “reverence, contrition (penitence), tenderness, prostrating oneself before God, worship, holy zeal, and love of God” (*ibid.*, p. 241).

Possessed of these spiritual virtues and pursued with patience and loving perseverance, the life of an earnest seeker of God will become a life of dedication to the Lord Himself. “He never prefers one activity to another, even if one is great and lofty and another petty and insignificant; but he has his will equally disposed towards either, so long as they are pleasing to God” (*ibid.*, p. 97). Indeed, it is a hard task. But Scupoli, out of his own experience, assures us: “If you are resolute, you will day by day learn to manage yourself better and better, and will soon reach a state when you will know how to preserve the peace of your spirit in all storms, both inner and outer” (*Path to Paradise*, p. 259) □

Reprinted from *Prabudhha Bharata*, March 1962

Monastic Spirituality: Christian and Hindu (cont.)

Another Sister: Is it possible for us to influence this process? Thoughts just rise in our minds without our having the power to influence the process.

Swami: Yes; they appear on their own. That is why we practise meditation and try to gain the strength to discipline the whole process. When we leave the mind to itself and its ways, it doesn't trouble us; it troubles us and rebels only when we try to discipline it. By meditating on God, we succeed in removing its rebellious nature, slowly and steadily, and eventually make it our friend in our spiritual life. In one whole hour of meditation, the state of calmness may appear hardly for a minute or two, in the beginning. Even this is a great achievement. Out of a ton of ore, we may obtain only an ounce or two of gold; but it is gold, and we are richer by that much.

Sister: That is not exactly what I mean; not just 'in meditation' but 'in life.' I want to live my inner life in the strength of my own inner resources or in the strength of God; but the life situation does disturb this process and I am helpless to avert it.

Swami: That is generally true: we take to the religious life drawn by love of God. Then we find ourselves between two initially opposing forces: those of our past tendencies, on the one side, and our newly arisen love of God on the other. You became a nun because you were attracted by the powerful magnet of God; but the magnet of the sense-world is still powerful enough to draw you away from that magnet of God, and you need meditation and prayer to resist it and draw closer and closer to God. The feeling that you belong to God is intensified during meditation, and you gain thus adequate inner spiritual resources

to order your life in your own way. That is spiritual freedom, the birthright of every human being, but a birthright rarely exercised by most.

Another Sister: People want us to help them so much that they claim all our energy. How is one to face this?

Swami: That is natural; just human. You have to respect the dictum: "Unto whom much is given, from him (or her) much shall be expected." We have to give our best, subject to our limitations. It is also true that spiritual work does not tire a person as selfish worldly work does.

Sister: I leave the convent for work at 7:30 a.m. and I return at 5:30 p.m. My attitude is: Go to work to serve God; that is also my prayer.

Swami: That is the right attitude. Through your work you are serving the Lord by bringing cheer and happiness to the people. Yours is a 24 hours a day, lifelong dedication to God, as much during work outside the Convent as during meditation and study within it. That is the true meaning of monastic life - this spiritual flooding of one's life.

Sister: Is it necessary to have the same attitude during sleep also?

Swami: When you enter into sleep with the thought of God, that sleep gets the flavour of divine absorption. A spiritual person sleeps in the lap of God. Sleep is nourishment, as eating is nourishment, and both equip us for our search for God. For a devotee of God every act bears on God only. And for all nuns like you and for all monks everywhere, the convent or the monastery becomes like a fort. You work outside for hours, but you are not able to stand the pressure of the sense-world on you; you have not yet become strong enough spiritually to stand that pressure. You then retreat into your convent and find in it the security of a fort. It is a spiritual security. This is not provided by just the building of the convent - that is only a negative factor - but by the community of the other nuns. A spiritual community provides an

environment of spiritual buoyancy to its members, a sense of cumulative spiritual strength. We need this protection when we are not spiritually strong enough. The ideal state is that you feel the same spiritual security in the market place as in the convent. Until that strength is achieved it is wise to take the help of the security of the convent; and also take steps to strengthen the spiritual atmosphere of the convent by regular spiritual practices - including spiritual study and conversation - and await the descent of the grace of God, in which alone is perfect security attained. God is described in the *Srimad Bhagavatam* of the Hindu religion as: *ahutobhayam*, “where is fear?” i.e., the state of fearlessness, and the seeker of religion is described by the same book as: “one who is proceeding towards the state of fearlessness.”

Another Sister: Is it necessary to come back to this 'fort' to gather new energy?

Swami: It is not mandatory; one seeks the security of the 'fort' when one feels the need for it.

Another Sister: When working outside one can also get inspiration.

Swami: To the spiritually strong, there is inspiration everywhere. For all others, it is necessary to gain spiritual strength from within the convent and, in that strength, go out and work in the world. Outside in the world, there is an excess of carbon dioxide, whereas, within the convent, there is more of the much needed oxygen (laughter).

Another Sister: Sometimes, while working outside, just the opposite happens.

Swami: Sri Ramakrishna gives a beautiful example: When you plant a small plant on the roadside, you put a fencing round it; otherwise, goats and sheep will eat it. But when it has grown into a strong tree, you remove the fencing; it does not need that protection any more. Then even an elephant can be tied to it. Similarly, when our spirituality is weak, we need all this protection. It will be foolhardy on our part not to avail ourselves

of it. At this stage, too much mixing with the sense-bound world will make for the dilution, and eventual loss, of that little fund of spirituality.

Another Sister: I do not agree with this.

Swami: Yes; provided you are convinced that you are strong enough.

Sister: Jesus preached and did his evangelical work in the midst of the world, for the world, and for the people.

Swami: Certainly, Jesus worked in the world and for the world. But there is a world of difference between working in the world and working in worldliness. Suppose you are working in an institution, for example, in a hospital. It is divine work, though it is work in the world. You do your work there and return to your convent. This is according to what Jesus did and said. But suppose you get into all the cocktail parties of the city, that will not be working in the world, but merging into worldliness, and also eventually losing the capacity to help the world.

Sister: Jesus came across blind and handicapped people, and he helped them. When I go out into the world and am confronted with all the misery and sadness of the people, I do feel the call of their suffering; and only in responding to it do I feel the reality of the evangelical mission.

Swami: That is wonderful; but a successful response of that type demands spiritual strength on the part of the person concerned. Only one who knows how to swim can save another who is drowning.

Sister: I see that suffering in the world outside is demanding my attention, and I must respond to it by using every means available, including the medium of the TV. I have no need to stay in this 'fort' of a convent. If the evangelical mission is real, it must make me go out into the world.

Swami: The sentiment is admirable; but one must not overlook one's limitations. Jesus was divine: he could fearlessly mix with the world, mix even with sinners, live with them, but

also redeem them. But those that are not that strong need, even while heartily responding to the call of the evangelical mission, resort to some measure of spiritual security.

Another Sister: Is there a difference between the monastic life and this kind of evangelical mission, in India?

Swami: As I described earlier, our traditional monastic background in India is largely of the contemplative type; whatever evangelical aspect it has is confined to the preaching of religion and philosophy to the householders without any reference to social service activities. Such activities were and are considered the responsibilities of the householders and their secular institutions. The monk in India is considered civically dead. But the new monasticism in India, in the wake of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, combines contemplation and social service, under the inspiration and guidance of the unifying philosophy and spirituality of the *Vedanta*, which bridges the gulf between the sacred and the secular, the inner and the outer.

Another Sister: I am amazed to hear you speak all the time as a Christian and presenting the Christian point of view; but you are an Indian and a Hindu, are you not?

Swami: When you understand the real meaning and scope of Hinduism and of the philosophy of the *Vedanta* behind it, you will not be so amazed; for the watchword of Indian philosophy, and of Hinduism, is acceptance and inclusion and not rejection and exclusion. Accordingly, Hinduism accepts Christ and Christianity and treats him as a divine incarnation, exactly as the professed Christians do, except that he is looked upon only as one of the many divine incarnations, and not as the "only begotten Son of God." The Hindu also sees fundamental harmony between the spiritual teachings of the two religions, in fact, of all religions. Differences relate only to myths and dogmas and institutional expressions. There is the Christian religion, the Christian spiritual experience, based on Jesus and his teachings, on the one side, and

the Christian church organizations, such as your Catholic, on the other. The latter is Roman and specifically western, whereas the former is specifically Christian and oriental and close to the Indian spirit. Your worship, prayer, meditation, and even some of your rituals are very much akin to those of Hinduism. The same is the case with respect to your monasticism, with its poverty and chastity. Only the third vow, that of obedience, in Christian monasticism, does not find a place in Hindu monasticism. Monasticism is essentially an Indian institution which finds manifestation in its Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist expressions. It is anathema to the mainstreams of Judaism and Islam, in fact, to most of Semitic thought. But Jesus introduced monasticism for the first time, against the powerful elements in his heritage and environment. And for the next 1,500 years, Catholic monasticism wrote a glorious chapter in the history of monasticism. But it received a set-back at the time of the Reformation, when the older elements reasserted themselves in Christianity; to this has been added a reassertion of the frankly secular Roman elements in the modern age, both forming a formidable challenge to Christian monasticism. It can face and overcome this challenge by reasserting its oriental, truly spiritual, elements, in which task it can possibly receive valuable help from the hoary Hindu philosophy and experience. Obedience does not find an important place in Indian monasticism, because it, unlike Catholicism, is not organized and centralized in a powerful Church.

Sister: Don't you think that there has to be a certain authority in a convent of a church?

Swami: Yes, there is such a need; but there is no need for a vow about it; it is an ordinary human need in a social and communal context; the members respect the person in charge and obey his directions; it is a practical need, but need not form a monastic vow, especially now when many are discarding the

centuries-long idea of a church “militant and triumphant.” The church organization, with its vow of obedience is, as I said, your Roman heritage of Christianity; it has become a little more rigid than is good for a spiritual institution. Monastic vows in India are only two, namely, poverty and chastity. No individual earning of money and keeping of bank accounts, but dependence on God. But the institution can do these things on behalf of the members. The aim of monastic life is the elimination of the little “I.” That I is consider to be one of the meanings of the Cross - in English writing, when the 'I' is cut, it becomes the sign of the Cross! Cut off this ego. Says St. Paul: “I, and yet not I, but the Christ that liveth in me.” This little I, the old man, in Christian mystical language, is dead. To achieve this state is what you are constantly attempting in the convent.

Another Sister: That seems to be too idealistic.

Swami: Yes, the ideal is high, must be high; and one must strive to achieve as much of it as one's strength permits 5%, 10%, and so on - but one should not bring the ideal, down. One achieves the full 100% of it only through the grace of God. Hard work and struggle, and dependence on God's grace - this is the way of all true spiritual life.

Another Sister: Do you use any mantras in Hinduism? What is their spiritual relevance ?

Swami: Mantras form an important element in the spiritual part of every religion; what is special about Hinduism is that it has developed a philosophy of it. In Christianity, especially in its Catholic variety, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” is one such mantra; Hinduism, however, will slightly modify it by eliminating the last two words, ‘a sinner,’ since it considers the best attitude for a spiritual seeker to adopt is that of a child of God, one in whom is “the kingdom of Heaven.” “Ave Maria” is another such mantra. In many religions, rosaries are

also used. In India you can see thousands of devotees sitting in temples; on the banks of holy rivers like the Ganga (Ganges), or in homes and reciting some mantra, with or without the rosary. They may be householders, they may be monks or nuns. Mantras are generally short; they are in Sanskrit; and most or even all of them are preceded by that holiest of the holy words or sounds, namely, *Om*, which is the sound symbol of God, the all-pervading and infinite Self of all. A short mantra is most effective. As some of the Christian saints have expressed it: "A short prayer pierceth heaven!"

Sister: What do you mean by realization or enlightenment?

Swami: It means actual experience of God; it is what is meant by that most significant saying of Jesus: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Sister: How can one reach it?

Swami: One has to keep it as one's life's goal and work towards it. Meditation, prayer, holy study, doing one's work in a spirit of service and dedication - all these impel one towards God, who is truly near man, nearest to him, but appears to him as far, far away due to his ignorance or spiritual blindness. This blindness lifts slowly by spiritual practice; often, the seeker misses his way, even backslides; a true devotee is not frightened by this. He knows that, as he is in search of God, God also is in search of him, and that one day the search will end in discovery. God has been realized by men and women in the past; He can be realized by all today also. This is also the conviction behind all spiritual striving.

Sri Ramakrishna compares this to fishing. We cast the bait, attached to the end of the line, into the lake, and wait silently and patiently. Sometimes, the fish come near the bait, even nibble at it, and we get this information from the trembling of the float on the water; but then they move away without swallowing the bait

and without being caught. But we are convinced that there are fish in the lake, that others have caught them and that even if we fail a hundred times to catch a single fish, we shall eventually succeed if we continue patiently and steadily, following the proper technique. The 'bait' represents the devotion of the spiritual seeker.

Another Sister: Is God-realization possible for everyone?

Swami: Theoretically, yes. Nature has endowed every human being, except the very mentally retarded, with the organic Capacity to search for and discover God, who is the ever-present Self of all. But all people do not utilize these capacities for this purpose; many are under strong biological pulls; many also are under wrong impressions as to what constitutes the spiritual life, or mix it up with superstition and mystery-mongering. But in the modern age, as rational ideas are growing about the vast possibilities lying hidden in every human being, men and women will understand increasingly that religion means spiritual growth, that there is a science and technique for that growth, just as there is the science and technique for man's more obvious growths in his physical and psychical dimensions, and that only his all-round growth will lead to total human fulfilment. If and when this awareness becomes universal, everyone will strive, according to his strength, to take at least his first steps on the road of spiritual growth, while some will also advance further and further on that road. Religion so understood is not of the limited ethnical variety, but is universal, according to the *Vedanta*, and none is outside its pale.

Another Sister: Are all problems solved after realization?

Swami: Yes; for the one who attains the realization. But other people may present their problems before such a one and he may treat them as his own and help the persons concerned. When a wheat cake is being fried, says Sri Ramakrishna, it makes

a sizzling noise. That sound ceases when it is fully cooked. When, however, another cake is put into the pan for frying, the sizzling sound starts again till that also gets fully cooked, and so on.

Sister: I cannot believe it. Indeed when you accept everything and when you close your eyes, there is, of course, no problem any more. That is logic.

Swami: It is not just accepting everything. When your heart is full, your problems are finished. If your idea is that you will realize God after you have solved all the problems of the world, that is never going to happen. (Laughter) There is a Sanskrit verse, which says that he who thinks he will remember God (and realize Him) after all worldly problems have been solved, is like that foolish man who says to himself that he will take his bath in the ocean after all its waves have subsided!

There is another rational consideration. It is that the world is a duality of good and evil, and will ever remain so. A perfect man there can be, but not a perfect world. But if more people become ethical and spiritual, the world will become a little better. There is a general experience of spiritual hunger today, in spite of the prevailing atheism and worldliness. The crisis in the world today is born of the very struggle to move towards a better world. We all, monks, nuns, and laymen alike, are caught up in that crisis. And if we are to make the world a little better, it is not by remaining crisis-ridden ourselves, but by resolving the crisis within ourselves and then helping the world to resolve its crisis. Nobody loves to live a tragedy, though many love to witness it on the stage or on the screen or to read about it in literature. When we live through a tragedy, we are caught up in its coils, and cannot extricate ourselves but need someone else to extricate us. But on coming out of it, we become more chastened, often more compassionate and more human. And it is only when we have the capacity to struggle through a crisis or a tragedy, that we

develop the capacity to help the world in its crisis. It is only one who knows how to swim that can save another who is drowning.

Sister: We nuns belong to the Catholic Carmelite convent; its life is its own, essentially cut off from the world and its crisis and problems. If the convent is like a boat and the world is like a sea, what is the use of the boat without the sea? The boat, to my mind, misses its function.

Swami: The boat sailing on the water is preferable to the boat capsized and sunk in the water. Your life in the convent is not unconnected with the crisis in the world around. By developing the light of spiritual awareness in yourself, you help to dispel the darkness around, and that is truly solid work for the world. A lighthouse, though stationary in one spot, does immense service to ships cruising in the sea by guiding them to the safety of the harbour. This service it cannot do if it is itself submerged in the sea. That is the meaning of the dictum of Jesus: Ye are the light of the world; but if the light is in darkness (is enveloped in darkness), how great becomes that darkness! So it is best for monks and nuns, it is best for you all here, to strive to manifest that light of God within, "the light that lighteth every soul that cometh into the world," as Saint John's Gospel beautifully puts it; and serve the world in that unique way. You have my love and best wishes. □

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Sannyasa and Brahmacharya

S*annyasa* is the renunciation of all selfish motives and desires. Before I explain what *Sannyasa* is, I should speak to you about *Brahmacharya* for unless the latter is realized, no *Sannyasa* or renunciation is possible. The observance of *Brahmacharya* requires strict regulations of one's diet, habits and thoughts. Of all the injunctions prescribed for this stage, the greatest stress is laid by the scriptures upon the complete mastery of the sexual instinct. Nothing should be sensed or acted by the aspirant which might directly or otherwise tend to arouse the animal in him or her. In this way one is directed to bring one's mind under full control. He who is not a slave to his senses and mind, but on the contrary has made them his slaves is a true Brahmacharin. All the Religions of the world preach this *Brahmacharya* and *Sannyasa*, both of which have one and the same end in view, viz., to lift the mind up from all sensual concerns towards God. When the mind reaches God it enjoys divine bliss.

This lifting-up of the mind can be brought about either by worshipping God with form or without form. Those who are devoted to God with form know him as their nearest and dearest; they enjoy his company all the moments of their lives. They play with him; they live and move-in him. Those who worship the formless God also enjoy him intensely, realizing him as the all pervading one; and thus they also live and move in him. The enjoyments of both these devotees are the same in their intensity, inasmuch as both are supersensuous. Unless a man rises above the allurements of his senses he can never be a devotee. So a devotee's mind is far away from all worldly desires. He does not

care much for his family, friends or relatives; no duties bind him to any one of them, for his mind entirely rests in and with God every moment of his life. And when he looks towards the world he does not see the world of men, but rather the world of gods, for all men, women, animals, houses, trees, sky and earth, all appear to him to be filled with divinity. Let me illustrate this by narrating to you the life of a saint, for the lives of such persons are the living and concrete examples of what I have just now said. The study of such lives are more beneficial to us than the knowledge of the abstract truths themselves; for the former clearly show to us the path which we should follow in the « journey of our life. What a great man traced out is the true path. They, as Long fellow says, “Leave foot prints on the sands of time.”

Footprints that perhaps another
Sailing over life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

When the great saint and prophet Sri Chaitanya of Nadia was travelling in Deccan he became the guest of a pious and wealthy Maharatta Brahman. This Brahman had an only child named Gopal Bhatta whom he loved very fondly. As he was a very pious man he spent most of his time in worshipping his *Ishta* and chanting the praises of God. He never turned out any guest from his doors and his chief pleasure lay in receiving *Sadhus* and *Sannyasins* as his guests, feeding them sumptuously, supplying them with clothes and hearing from them instructive lectures to edify himself. But his boy Gopal had a higher motive. He was not satisfied only to hear lectures from *Sadhus* or worship the image of God, he wanted to see the real God. With this end in view he always wanted to go to a solitary place and there devote his whole time in communion with his beloved. So when Sri

Chaitanya was his father's guest the boy was struck with the intense devotion of the Prophet, whose eyes were like two streams flowing in tears of love. He wished to be like him, to live alone and travel from place to place as a *Sannyasin* or a *Sadhu*, supporting himself by begging alms. Sri Chaitanya too seeing the goodness, purity, and devotion of the boy was very much attracted to him, so much, that he praised the child before his father saying, "Your boy will be a great devotee hereafter."

When Sri Chaitanya went away the boy's heart followed him; but he could not make out how to carry his desire into action, as his father's fondness towards him proved a great barrier. However, one day he told his father about his intention and the father fearing lest his child should leave him secretly and betake himself to a foreign land, kept a constant watch over him, without his knowledge. But where there is a will there is a way. One midnight when all were asleep, when even the guards that were especially employed to keep strict watch over him were in deep slumber, Gopal left his home and avoiding the highway took the forest path to evade detection. He had nothing with him besides the cloth which he had on. After travelling a whole day he was overpowered with hunger and being still a boy began to weep and pray to his God. A little while later, he saw an old man coming towards him, who asked why he was weeping; upon which the boy said that he was hungry and the old man immediately gave him some food to eat, caressed him and told him that as his way also lay through the forest, he would be his fellow traveller and that the forest was a very big one and it would take them several days to cross it. The boy was very grateful at this and what was more, whenever he felt hungry he was sure to find some good food and sweet words from the old man. One day he asked the old man who he was and why was he taking so much care of him. The old man at once gave out that he was the

very same individual whom he had been seeking after. At this the boy replied, "He whom I seek is not old like you but very young and beautiful, with a flute in his hand and a peacock's feather on his head. How can I believe that you are He, my own dear beloved Sri Krishna?" To his utter surprise and transport the old man was at once transformed into the most lovely youth in the world and stood smiling before him as Sri Krishna himself. Who can describe the ecstasy which Gopal was in at the time? After a while, when his transport had abated a little, Sri Krishna pointed out to him a very easy way out of the jungle and vanished on the spot, promising to meet him again in Sri Brindaban, filling the boy's mind with love and joy. It is needless to mention that a few months later Gopal reached Sri Brindaban and there spent his whole life in ecstatic communion with his beloved Sri Krishna.

After studying the life of Gopal Bhatta we can clearly see that he became a man-god only because he had a strong faith and an insuperable determination in him. Simple faith and strong will are the two things necessary for the making of a true man. Our Master used to say that if we wanted to pass a thread through the eye of a needle, all the scattered fibres of the thread should be brought to a point and then alone we could make it pass through the needle's eye, otherwise if the fibres were allowed to point to all directions they would prevent the thread from passing through the eye. Similarly if we wanted to lift our mind up towards God, we must bring it back from all external things and concentrate it on one point. But how to concentrate the scattered mind? - the mind which has been given to wife and children, to the attainment of name and fame and to the pursuit of all sorts of sensual pleasures? This can be effected by faith in God or in one's own Guru.

Gopal Bhatta had a great faith in Sri Krishna and therefore it was easy for him to direct his love entirely to the most loving, kind, and beautiful shepherd boy of Sri Brindaban; even hunger and privation could not estrange his mind from the lotus feet of his Beloved. But such a faith is not ordinarily met with. Therefore for the generality of mankind faith in one's own Guru is necessary. If a man loves his Guru with his whole heart and obeys what he says, then his mind being devoted to him, will naturally shun other attractions and thus get concentrated. This faith towards one's own Guru grows gradually in strength and so it is not advisable to lay it open to vulgar criticism when it is just sprouted; for so long as the plant has not grown up sufficiently it should be hedged in to be protected from being destroyed by the cattle. When there is a little quantity of water in a pool we should not disturb it violently for then it will get muddy and be unfit for drinking, and we will have to return home thirstier than before. This our Master taught us. Therefore it is my earnest prayer to you all never to allow any indiscriminate questioning of your faith from outside, nor should you yourselves lay it bare to vulgar criticism. Faith is one's own; no one has any right to call it into question. Every man in this world has some faith or other, which to others may appear false. Let me assure you that no sincere faith can be productive of anything but what is really good. Let me repeat therefore, do not let yours or any other's faith be made a butt of unsympathetic and disrespectful questions; for doubt is death. The proverb says that faith is very near to Sri Krishna; scepticism is far away from him.

Adorn your mind with the good quality of humility, for unless you be meek and humble you can learn nothing. Our Master says that as rain water does not stand upon a high ground but always seeks the lower level, similarly those who are puffed

up with vanity cannot retain any faith in them; for faith always seeks the hearts of the humble and the meek.

There must be quarrel between different individuals and sects as long as they do not rise up to realize the highest truth. When truth shines, the darkness of ignorance and its crew of narrowness, bigotry and fanaticism which deluge the earth with murder and bloodshed, shall all vanish. "My God is the true God, your God is false," is the talk of men groping in the darkness of ignorance. Once the late Mr. Keshabchandra Sen the leader of the Brahma Samaj asked our master: "Since there is only one God how is it that there are so many sects quarrelling with one another?" To which the Bhagavan replied: "You see, my dear boy, people always quarrel over their lands, properties and sundry other things of the world, saying, 'this land is mine, and that is thine,' and in this way divide this earth in various ways by drawing lines of demarcation to distinguish their respective properties; but no one ever quarrels about the open space that is above the earth, for that belongs to none, as there can be drawn no lines on it to mark out one's property from that of another. Similarly when the mind of a man rises above all worldly concerns he can have no occasion for quarrel, for then he reaches a certain point which is the common goal of all."

When a man realizes God he cannot quarrel, but when he is below the right mark, that is, when he is distant from God, is more or less given to quarrelling. Try to rise up to that height without quarrelling, although you may have many occasions for it, and thus at last end all these disagreements by realizing universal harmony and agreement which are only to be found in God, who is both within and without you. Let us hear what a great Bengali devotee of yore named Sri Ramaprasad had ever been singing sweetly to all people. This great devotee never sat down to compose his songs but when the feeling came he sang

extempore most exquisitely beautiful songs redolent with the love celestial. These immortal songs are believed by many to have come from the Eternal Mother herself, who sat enthroned in the bosom of her child Sri Ramaprasad and prompted him to sing.

He sang: "Worship the mother, Oh my mind, in whatever way you like, never forgetting to remember the mantram which your spiritual father has given to you; know that you prostrate yourself before the holy Mother when you stretch yourself to rest; know yourself to be in deep meditation when you sleep; know that you offer oblation to the holy fire when you eat. Know that every sound you hear is the holy mantram of the mother for all the fifty letters of the alphabet are her different names. Sri Ramaprasad announces to all with great joy that the Mother Divine is in every being; and so, Oh my mind, when you walk in the streets know for certain that you are simply going round that Divine Mother." Here the song ends. Can such a man have any quarrel with any of his fellow brothers? Such a man is a true *Sannyasin*.

Once a dirty looking man entered the garden premises of the late Rani Rasmani at Dakshineswar, a village north of Calcutta. This spacious garden contains a very beautiful temple of Kali which covers a large area. The temple servants seeing the dirty and unclean man intruding into and polluting the temple grounds gathered together to turn him out after giving him a good thrashing. But our Master, who lived in that garden, seeing the man, at once found him out to be a great Yogin, a real *Sannyasin* and so he told the men not to ill treat him. They obeyed him, but looking at the dirtiness of his exterior, they did not allow him to go into the temple. After a while, standing in front of the temple, the dirty *Sadhu* began to chant the praises of the Divine Mother so sweetly that he drew tears from the eyes of all those who a few minutes ago wanted to beat him. Then seeing a dog

eating some remnants of food that were cast away, he went up to the dog, caressed him and spoke to him thus: "Why friend are you eating all alone? Won't you share your dish with me?" - and began to eat with the dog.

As he was going away from the garden a good man went up to him and asked him with joined palms, "Oh master, kindly instruct me in the mystery of true knowledge." To which the *Sadhu* replied: "My boy, when you will not find any difference between the holy water of the Ganges and the filthy water of a sewer, then alone shall you be able to comprehend what true knowledge is." A true *Sannyasin* looks upon a saint and a sinner in the same light, for he finds the same God in both of them, only in different garbs. Such a one is called a perfect man. The characteristics of a perfect man are thus summed up by Bhagavan Sankaracharya: "The perfect man has sometimes a cloth on and sometimes none; sometimes he covers his nakedness with the bark of a tree, sometimes with the skin of an animal, sometimes he dresses himself purely with a garment of knowledge. He sometimes seems to be a mad man, some times a child, sometimes a dirty being. Thus he walks abroad in the World at large, free as the morning air and fresh as the dew drop; and proclaims peace and joy to all." □

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God is also Mother (cont.)

Mary and the East

Anyone who maintains that the male creator God of the monotheist religions is only a harsh tyrant and a dry lawyer, seems in this case to have thought better of it: God is a passionate lover, who does not consider it beneath his dignity to step out and tenderly to approach his "Bride" – creation, the people of Israel, Mary, the Church and even every individual soul.

But does this tell us anything about the female-motherly side of God? It only tells us that God can fall in love with the female. One can see in this a veneration of the female, but also an indirect discrimination: the female can never herself be God, but is "Nothing," the not-God, the Other, whom God loves. It is the object that God desires. "Whether we imagine God – according to our own sex – as mainly male or female, may be left to our personal religious taste," writes Greeley; but then he again piles up the traditional examples that show us as God as a husband and a bridegroom. "The male dimension of God is very clearly worked out in the Christian religion," he continues, and probably no one will contradict him. "The female dimension of God is only just intimated, but it is placed in the background for us on the figure of Mary as a Christian inheritance." But this is precisely the beam in his own eye, which he does not see or does not want to see, for Mary reveals in the theological context, to which he still feels himself bound, not the female dimension of God, but the "female" character of creation or the chosen people or the Church. In patriarchal Christianity Mary and indeed the whole female dimension cannot stand as a "sign" for God, but at most for what God loves. Only the male Creator God is the real subject

here, and therefore only He can be the object of prayer. Mary can pray, but may not be prayed to. When Greeley writes: "In Mary we meet the female, tender, attractive, charming and fascinating side of God," he does indeed attempt to break out of the cage of patriarchal tradition, but is again and again caught up in it. Finally it leads to the position that Mary is indeed attractive to God, but is not an attractive divinity or cannot be one. Why does one then, like Greeley, write such exciting sentences as: "Mary reveals to us a seductive, enticing, exciting and extremely attractive God," if one cannot convert this in practice into a real worship? I must admit that Mary has something seductive and exciting for me, because I see through her the great Divine Mother, Mahamaya, who bewitches us with her sphinx-like smile, with whom one can fall in love, who is a completely sovereign being, the great *Shakti*, the Sovereign Ruler. The Father God of the *Bible*, on the other hand, is not exciting, but excited. He is the passionate and jealous lover, who "condescends" to fall in love with his bride. Is the latter then perhaps a partner with equal rights, can she call him to account? Jahwe continually complains that his bride, the daughter of Zion, does not want to do quite what he wants. "Therefore thus saith the Lord: Ask ye now among the heathen, who hath heard such things: the virgin of Israel hath done a very horrible thing" (Jer. 18, 13). If however Yahwe himself does something horrible, if he goes beyond his own laws and lets murder be committed, in order to "test" one of his own creatures, then it is better – as Job soon has to learn – to keep one's mouth shut than to struggle against God, the absolute master of his slaves. "Be in pain, and labour to bring forth, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in travail: for now shalt thou go forth out of the city, and thou shalt dwell in the field, and thou shalt go even to Babylon; there shalt thou be delivered; there the Lord shall redeem thee from the hand of thine enemies." (Micah 4.10).

Where the motherly and the mother giving birth is degraded almost sadistically to the object, can it not at the same time receive divine honour. The eagerness that is so admired in this God, also has too much of a desire for possession in it, that we could speak of pure "love."

In this regard Christianity certainly indicates a step forward. We are no longer concerned here with a limited God, who "wants" this or that, but with an inner divine life, with several divine persons, as a result of which something of a dialogue takes place in God: there is question and answer. God is no longer the solitary male, who has a desire for something outside himself, but the object of love is itself taken into God. We are suddenly concerned with a divine ground, which opens up and blooms forth into a personal self-love. The female, it is true, still continues to be held at a distance from this divine sphere, but through the incarnation of the Logos (which was soon identified with the "Wisdom" of the Old Testament) and through the Holy Ghost there are yet contacts with the female, to which we will have to refer later. At least in such an atmosphere Mary could be raised to the throne of the "Theotokos", the "God-bearer", a title she took over from Isis and, as is well known, led to passionate arguments in the Church. And in the late middle ages, in the context of the courtly love movement, she would rise to the "High Lady," who is in no way just a bride, that God desires and to whom he descends, and also not just the "Mother" of God, but herself the Lady, even goddess, who graciously receives from on high the prayers of her ardent admirers.

Much about Mary that originates from Christian writers awakens conflicting impressions. One either goes too far or not far enough. There are glorifications that border on the laughable, and then in spite of all the wordy praises one has not the courage to grant the female a place in the divine transcendence. The whole

gigantic theological machinery is engaged to raise Mary from the swamp of the created, natural world of the original sin, with often quite arbitrary declarations, and an at least equally great effort is then employed to keep the one who has been so raised up away from the divine throne. In the dogmatisation of her “immaculate conception” she was praised in the following terms by Pope Pius IX: “More beautiful than beauty, more gracious than grace, holier than holiness, the only holy one(!), the purest in body and soul, going beyond all perfection and virginity, the sole perfect receptacle of all the grace of the Holy Spirit, more exalted – apart from God – than all beings, even more exalted than the cherubim and seraphim ..., so that neither human nor angelic tongues are sufficient to praise her.”

Whom should such hymns of praise help? If one is really convinced that God is also Mother, then one no longer needs to take refuge in such extravagances, which have their origin after all in a bad conscience – and on the other hand because one necessarily has for religious fanatical and patriotic reasons to celebrate one’s “goddess” as the greatest and the highest. A Bengali devotee of the “Holy Mother” Sarada Devi – who in the Ramakrishna “cult” perhaps takes the place of Mary – in spite of the often flowery and effusive oriental language, would be embarrassed to shower such superlatives on the “Mother;” he would on the other hand regard it as the most natural thing in the world to see in Sarada Devi the embodiment of the Divine Mother, who in his eyes has brought forth this whole universe.

One can of course to a certain extent respect the Catholic emotions that lie behind such hymns of praise, because religion is after all, especially when it is national and popular, primarily a matter of the heart and not the head. But when many church leaders have cleverly used their heads to exploit the people’s emotions for their own purposes, then it must be at least just as

legitimate, to use the intellect to reveal the inner connections in this case. The cult of Mary must not service to provide the people with an outlet for subconscious yearnings and otherwise leave everything as it was. The lever must in this case be inserted under the whole system, which is almost exclusively male-orientated. A baroque dogma theatre with ascensions cannot in the long run hide from us the fact that men have held and are holding the cords, by means of which Mary is taken up to heaven and the female half of mankind is still bound here on earth.

One can also have a very personal relationship to Mary, one can burn with love for her, without all the time pointing out that she is the most pure, most beautiful and quite incomparable. Basically a lot is made in this case out of little biographical knowledge. If we see her as the embodiment of the eternal Divine Mother, comparisons are in any case superfluous, because the Mother is always the purest and most beautiful, irrespective of whether she appears as Sita or as Mary. If one however concentrates above all on the human person Mary, one opens the door to competitive thinking and if one becomes set on seeing in her the purest and greatest of all women, one calls forth a "why" – and has to take refuge in the most adventurous suppositions in order to justify one's assertions. Greeley, for instance, says: If we do not know much about the mother, we still know something about the son. "We know his courage, his insight, his wisdom, his extraordinary poetic language... Consequently the mother of Jesus was most likely a very courageous, pious, wise and charming woman." It almost sounds like childish contrariness when Greeley adds: "No one can take the Mother of God away from us."

I do not know whether a Buddhist has ever had the idea of going back in this way from Buddha to his mother Maya. Such stop-gap solutions can only work in a religion that is continually

plagued by the stress of having to set up their founder and also his mother as unique and unrepeatable. If one stresses this uniqueness so much and also tries to support it biographically, one awakes in the person with other beliefs only negative feelings and encourages him to look for some dark spot. Perhaps Mary was not at all so courageous? In Mark's gospel we read that Jesus was considered to be mad by his own family: "He is beside himself!" (Mark 3, 21). They want to take him out of circulation and bring him home. Mary is at first in this regard in no way excluded, even she does not at first fully understand the new life of her son who is filled with the Holy Spirit. And is this so surprising? Ramakrishna's mother also thought at first that her ecstatic son was "possessed," although her attention had through numerous spiritual experiences been drawn to her son's "divine" nature. In the lives of the great *avatars* and also the "*Shaktis*" we again and again come across human shortcomings; this belongs to their *Maya* play. Yet these weaknesses are nothing in comparison with the enormous treasure of the divine Ground, which they all in various ways express. If one sees them in their fullness, there no jealousy and no thought of competition can arise. One is happy with everything in their lives, which inspires us, and does not dwell for long over any shortcoming. The biographical element is therefore not to be overemphasised, because each of these figures soon outgrows himself or herself. Mary for example, although we cannot separate her from the Jewish girl Miriam, has taken on her own life and has become a receptacle and a channel of God's motherly love. Moreover in the West she was and is almost the only point at which the natural worship of the female-motherly aspect can start. But the subject we are dealing with in this book is not exhausted by her.

The cult of Mary is not a motherly religion, but the female ornament in a distinctly fatherly religion. As C.G. Jung stressed,

the male aims at perfection – with a strong leaning towards one-sidedness and exclusiveness – while the female strives more for completeness. If the female is permitted in a male religion, as for instance in the Catholic Church, then it is only in such a way that it does not call into question the basic tendencies of the male. Mary could never be presented as the embodiment of totality in Christianity. She radiates only purity, goodness and love. This “only,” this one-sidedness, has great advantages, but also disadvantages which are not to be ignored. Mary has nothing thrilling like the Indian *Shakti*, one cannot “wrestle” with her. In many ways Jahwe has even greater similarity with the Indian *Shakti* concept than Mary. Anyone who extols her purity as the triumph of Christian ennoblement often forgets what has to be paid for this exclusiveness: the condemnation of everything sensual, the disparagement of Eros, the suspicion of everything female and irrational – attitudes that experienced their tragic highpoint in the obsessive belief in witches. Anyone who with turned up nose turns aside from the religion of “delight in creation” (as Walter Schubart called it), with a shudder turns his back on the sensual representations on some Indian temple walls, should also think of the blazing pyres in the burning of witches, which represent the reverse side of Christian “purity” and unfortunately were not extinguished by any miracle of Mary, however much Mary has otherwise decided battles. The exclusive stress on purity led to a split in the female, to an unholy dualism: here was the chaste virgin, there the frantically dancing witch, who in most cases was only the shadow of a completely inhibited male psyche, which was now projected on to the female.

We therefore do not need to transform Mary into Aphrodite, just as we must not make the “pure” female figures of Hinduism such as Sita and Sarada into symbols of sensuality or demonic powers. Each figure, even Mary, is exactly what she

is and needs no rounding off and completion – as long as we are clear in our minds that she only embodies an aspect and that what she does not embody also belongs to reality and does not necessarily have to be demonised. If some people project their own conceptions on to her, one cannot blame Mary for that – and she has doubtless often been misused and is still misused: as a militant political far right leader of a “Blue Army,” as a pale blue sign of a childish-regressive devotional ideology; as a coat-of-arms of an arch-conservative Catholicism, for which Pius XII was the last valid Pope; as a cover for the gagging and repression of women. Under her broad mantle there is so much room, and she should not be blamed for everything that finds its way in there.

Anyone, however, who also wants to pray to God as Mother, and wants to live with this belief that God also has a female dimension, cannot, as I already said, alone be satisfied with the worship of Mary. Even if we, after we have “plundered” Asia’s extensive spiritual treasury, return and subsequently read so much into Mary, we soon reach a limit and I think we should respect this limit, we should not alienate the cult of Mary. Greeley attempts, in order to make Mary “everything,” to raise her also to the “protector of the sexual play in each living and ever renewing relationship between man and woman.” It is worth recognising that a Catholic does to propagate any bitter enmity against the body, but I consider it a bit exaggerated and a bit too “chic.” One cannot with a few elegant formulations reverse two thousand years of Christian moral history. The fact that Mary, just like any other figure in whom the divine is expressed, can be a symbol of “renewal,” is obvious, and I should also not like to doubt that human renewal can very well also be enacted in the sign of Eros. Yet the Mary “symbol” has already been assigned to other things, it cannot represent a side of life, which one has for two thousand years very carefully erased from her picture.

She cannot, like the Indian *Shakti*, become the embodiment of the totality of all being. In spite of many similarities we are here treading on quite other ground – a ground which for most Western people is so shaky, that she quickly withdraw to their trusted field, where the Devil is still the Devil and God is still God.

(to be continued)

Ordinarily we know only the surface waves of our mind. But through Yoga practice we learn to go deeper. By watching and studying our own minds we dive below the surface consciousness, and observe what is going on there. Many *samskaras* - latent desires and tendencies - are stored up there, waiting for an opportunity to express themselves. These we can discover before they rise to the surface. This is very important, for once a thought has come to the surface it is extremely difficult to control. But at an early stage, before it has fully developed and gathered strength, it is easy to manipulate. This is called “seeing our thoughts in seed form.” The seed is easily destroyed, but when it has germinated and grown into a big strong tree, it requires great strength and effort to hew it down. So we must crush our desires in their early, undeveloped stages. Yogis can do this. They keep down undesirable thoughts in the germ state by smothering them beneath thoughts of an opposite nature. Thus they conquer all evil tendencies: hatred with love, anger with kindness, and so on.

Swami Turiyananda

Book Review

Mahendra Nath Gupta (M.) The Recorder of "The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna."

Author: Swami Chetanananda

Published by: Vedanta Society of St.Louis, 205 S. Skinker Blvd.,
St. Louis, MO6305, USA

Price: US\$29.95 Hard Back

This book is not so much a biography as a re-interpretation of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Most of the book follows M's spiritual progress as reflected in his encounters with Sri Ramakrishna and recorded in his diaries. A great deal is quoted straight from the Gospel.

Of the book's 45 chapters, the first 24 follow M's life, while the remaining 21 are the reminiscences of various people who met M. There are other reminiscences incorporated in the narrative, the most comprehensive being that of Swami Nitiatmananda in Chapter 23. This swami recorded M's talks from 1923 to 1932 in sixteen volumes, and they were published in Bengali under the name *Srima Darshan*. The author uses much of this swami's contact with M. as the basis of the narrative which joins together verbatim extracts.

Swami Chetanananda has drawn upon a great deal of archival material, most of which is in the Bengali language and inaccessible to non-Bengali readers. He has carefully translated it into American English in order to compile this comprehensive biography.

It is a bulky book, approaching six hundred pages. It has an author's Preface followed by a Prologue. At the back are twelve

pages of reference notes, plus an Index and four Appendices, these being: 1 - Correspondence of Romain Rolland with M (this includes some interesting information about the composers of some of Sri Ramakrishna's favourite songs); 2 - A brief history of M's house; 3 - M's family tree; and 4 - A chronology of M's life.

The first two chapters: Early Life; and, As a Householder and School Teacher; are necessarily short because M. was always unwilling to talk about himself: "It is useless to record those things" he said (p.17). So there is just a brief factual outline. After that the story really starts. M meets Sri Ramakrishna and records everything in his diary. Subsequently, long after the death of Sri Ramakrishna, M used his diaries as the basis of his *Kathamrita* (words of nectar), later translated into English as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*.

The Chapter headings give a good general idea of the story as it progresses. They are: Ch.3: First Meetings with Ramakrishna. This chapter deals with M's first four memorable meetings with the Master. Ch.4: The Guru and the Disciple. Ch.5: With Ramakrishna in Various Places (such as on a boat trip, at the circus, at a festival, etc.) Ch.6: Christmas Vacation with Ramakrishna (though the word 'vacation' is hardly appropriate. M had decided to spend time at Dakshinmeswar doing as much *sadhana* as he could, in the company of his guru. He stayed at the temple compound from Dec.14th 1883 to Jan.4th 1884. The corresponding sections in the Gospel are entitled "With the Devotees at Dakshineswar (II)." Ch.7: Two New Entries from M's Diary. This is a strange chapter. Other people - not M. - have tried to create articles based on diary entries. Ch.8: The Stage for Ramakrishna's Divine Play. This is all about the temple complex at Dakshineswar. Ch.9: Service to the Master. Ch.10: Ramakrishna's Love for M. Ch.11: Last Days with Ramakrishna, - deals with the Master's protracted illness and his subsequent

staying at Shamapukur and, ultimately, at Cossipore. Ch.12: After Ramakrishna's Passing Away. Ch.13: M. at the Baranagore Math. Ch.14: Some Early Drafts of Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita. Ch.15: *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna: A History*. This chapter contains a detailed analysis by the swami of the 'Invocation' at the commencement of the Gospel. Ch.16: The Centenary of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Ch.17: Pilgrimage and Austerities. Ch.18: Holy Mother and M. This chapter deals with the close relationship which was formed with Sharada Ma after the Master's demise. Ch.19: M. and Swami Vivekananda. Here Swamiji's teachings are compared with those of his Master. Ch.20: An Ideal Householder Devotee. Ch.21: The Morton Institution - contains reminiscences by an ex-pupil of M. and gives M's guidelines for education. Ch.22: M. as a Guide at Dakshineswar and Cossipore. Here M. takes a visitor to his old haunts and recalls the events that occurred in different places. Also he gives a long list of places for a devotee to visit: 45 places in Calcutta and its suburbs, plus another 23 for farther afield. Ch.23: What Ramakrishna Taught. On p. 397 M. tells of a spiritual experience he had while visiting Kamarpukur during the Master's lifetime. Ch.24: From Death to Immortality.

This is the conclusion of the first part of the book. There follow 21 reminiscences. These are all very interesting and give a picture of M. as a tranquil sage living a devout life among earnest devotees. Some of the reminiscences come from well-known people, such as Paul Brunton and Paramahansa Yogananda, but others are less well-known. The writer would have appreciated some brief notes on their identities. The reader is referred to *Srima Samipe* by Swami Chetanananda, Udbodhan 1996, in most cases. The first contribution from Swami Satprakashananda is taken from *Sri Ramakrishna's Life and Message*

in the Present Age - Vedanta Society: St.Louis, 1976. It is assumed that this swami was the founder of the St.Louis Centre.

The book has numerous illustrations of people, places and things. One notable photograph shows M. as an old man in his seventies, thought to be taken in 1931. There is a photograph of M's ten diaries, and there are also seven reproductions of M's original diary entries - mostly written in Bengali.

The artist, Diane Marshall, has made an attractive and distinctive dust cover. She has taken the well-known black-and-white photograph of M. and placed him kneeling among his diaries, against a back-drop of a coloured picture of Chaitanya devotees, while the back cover shows the bel tree at Dakshineswar where the original photograph of M. was taken.

People acquainted with the Gospel will enjoy this book. Others may find it an excellent introduction to the teachings as well as being a "Good read."

The whole of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is one long love story. Swami Chetanananda says at the beginning of the third chapter, that M. enjoyed divine bliss for four-and-a-half years, and then shared it with others for another fifty years. Thanks to all the devotees who have contributed to the existence of the Gospel in many different languages, the whole world can vicariously enjoy divine bliss for all time to come.

Thank you, Swami Chetanananda, for your new book. It is really appreciated.

E. B. Mack

Programme for July - August 2011

Sri Krishna's Puja 21 August

**There will be no discourses during the months of
July and August**

continued from the front cover

The inner consciousness must be awakened through the grace of God. Through this awakening a man goes into samadhi. He often forgets that he has a body. He gets rid of his attachment to 'woman and gold' and does not enjoy any talk unless it is about God. Worldly talk gives him pain. Through the awakening of the inner consciousness one realizes the All-pervading Consciousness."

The discussion came to a close. Sri Ramakrishna said to M.: "I have observed that a man acquires one kind of knowledge about God through reasoning and another kind through meditation; but he acquires a third kind of knowledge about God when God reveals Himself to him, His devotee. If God Himself reveals to His devotee the nature of Divine Incarnation- how He plays in human form-, then the devotee doesn't have to reason about the problem or need an explanation. Do you know what it is like? Suppose a man is in a dark room. He goes on rubbing a match against a match-box and all of a sudden light comes. Likewise, if God gives us this flash of divine light, all our doubts are destroyed. Can one ever know God by mere reasoning?"

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, March 11, 1885

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We want to lead mankind to the place where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Koran; yet this has to be done by harmonising the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran. Mankind ought to be taught that religions are but the varied expressions of The Religion, which is Oneness, so that each may choose the path that suits him best.

Swami Vivekananda



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