

Vedanta

368 NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2012

New Atheism and Religion

Swami Sunirmalananda

The Wonder of Being Cheerful

Swami Muktirupananda



Divine Wisdom

MASTER: "Reasoning is one of the paths; it is the path of the Vedantists. But there is another path, the path of bhakti. If a bhakta, weeps longingly for the Knowledge of Brahman, he receives that as well. These are the two paths: jnana and bhakti.

"One may attain the Knowledge of Brahman by either path. Some retain bhakti even after realizing Brahman, in order to teach humanity. An Incarnation of God is one of these.

"A man cannot easily get rid of the ego and the consciousness that the body is the soul. It becomes possible only when, through the grace of God, he attains samadhi - nirvikalpa samadhi, jada samadhi.

"The ego of the Incarnations returns to them when they come down from the plane of samadhi; but then it is the 'ego of Knowledge' or the 'ego of Devotion'. Through the 'ego of Knowledge' they teach men. Sankaracharya kept the 'ego of Knowledge.'

"Through the 'ego of Devotion' Chaitanyadeva tasted divine love and enjoyed the company of the devotees. He talked about God and chanted His name.

"Since one cannot easily get rid of the ego, a bhakta does not explain away the states of waking, dream, and deep sleep. He accepts all the states. Further, he accepts the three Gunas - sattva, rajas, and tamas. A bhakta sees that God alone has become the twenty-four cosmic principles, the universe, and all living beings. He also sees that God

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Shankaracharya: Life & Teachings (continued)

Meeting with Vyasadeva

Sankaracharya was spending his time joyfully at the Badarikashrama teaching, meditating and writing commentaries on scriptures. Many great scholars used to come to argue with him or clarify their doubts. Many of them became convinced of his non-dualistic teachings.

Gradually, Sankara's reputation spread far and wide. One of the greatest commentaries Sankara wrote was on *Brahma-Sutras* composed by the sage Vedavyasa. He was held to be the greatest intellect of his time. He was told that a commentary had been written on the *Vedanta* scriptures, and that the *Vedas* were being expounded according to the highest interpretation ever vouchsafed to man, and all this was done by a boy who was then only sixteen years old.

Vyasa wanted to test Sankaracharya. He therefore came disguised as an old Brahmin to Sankaracharya's Ashrama. Sankara, rising from his seat, received him with great kindness and courtesy. Out of respect for his old age, he offered the venerable visitor his own seat. Vyasa, however, preferred to sit amongst the disciples, and he begged Sankara to continue his discourse.

Now, as Sankara proceeded, the old Brahmin began to ply him with many subtle questions. Sankara soon realized that he was pitched against a superior intellect, in no way inferior to his own. It turned into a hot debate. Neither gave in to the other, the arguments went on for a long time. Sankara was amazed to see this old man with such a prodigious intellect.

At long last Sankara understood that the old Brahmin was none other than Vyasa himself, come in disguise to test him. Overjoyed, he bowed low before the Brahmin, and humbly took the dust of his feet.

Vyasa also was highly pleased with Sankaracharya. He said: I bless you. When you were born, the life allotted you was only eight years. When you took Sanyasa, eight more years were added to it. Now I allot another sixteen years to you. Go and establish your doctrine over the whole of India. You will proclaim the highest truth, and thousands of spiritual men will profit by your teaching. Then Vyasa disappeared from sight.

Vyasa's parting words filled Sankara's heart with confidence and hope for the future. He felt that the time had come to extend his work. He decided to travel to the four corners of India preaching his message of *Advaita Vedanta*.

Travels and meeting with Kumarila Bhatta

Sankara spent the rest of his life in travelling and preaching and was crowned with overwhelming success. During his travels he had to meet many a mighty opponent and in the end all Sankara's opponents had to bow down before his gigantic intellect and spiritual insight. They willingly became his earnest followers.

During his travels, Sankara and his party came to the Ashrama of one Kumarila Bhatta, a man of vast erudition and impeccable character. He was an advocate of the *Karma Kanda*, the ritualistic portion of the *Vedas*. He believed that sacrificial offerings performed according to strict scriptural rules, and with a pure heart, lead man to both happiness and liberation.

Kumarila was a preceptor of wide influence, honoured and respected by all. He had a very large following, and had

established many Ashramas that were under the charge of scholarly disciples.

At the time of Kumarila, Buddhism was a very popular religion. It had had its day, but was now in decline. Buddhism was riddled with innumerable immoral practices, and in the name of religion many practitioners at that time became corrupt and immoral.

Kumarila's appearance at this time was a great blessing, for he learned the secrets of Buddhism and was instrumental in defeating the powerful monks and re-establishing the path of ritualism taught in the *Vedas*. The purpose of rituals taught in the earlier portion of the *Vedas* is to make the hearts of men pure and to gradually turn their attention towards the realization of God. But as it happens, in course of time, even this path of ritualism became corrupt. People performed rituals blindly without understanding the true purport of the *Vedas*.

It was now left to Sankara to build on the foundations laid by Kumarila, and to introduce a higher interpretation of the Vedic scriptures.

Sankara was, therefore, very anxious to meet this great scholar and reformer, and to convince him of the superiority of *Advaita Vedanta* over the *Karma Kanda*. For should Kumarila accept Sankara's view, many of his followers would easily fall in line. The victory would give Sankara prestige, and would greatly advance his cause. But when Sankara reached Kumarila's Ashrama a sad scene met Sankara's sight.

Kumarila Bhatta, to accomplish his life's mission, had found it necessary to learn the secrets by which the Buddhist leaders kept the masses under their control. Now, Kumarila in his youth had joined the Buddhistic ranks that he might learn their doctrines and their arguments. Afterwards he left them and

started defeating them with their own weapons. It was not an honourable act, even though his motive was pure. Kumarila being a man of conscience was smitten with remorse. To learn from a teacher under a false pretext is considered a most heinous crime. Therefore Kumarila felt it his duty to atone for this fault in his conduct.

As an atonement for deceiving his teacher he decided to commit suicide on a slow burning pyre of husk. The destruction of his body by a slow and painful process was the price he had to pay.

Sankara came to meet Kumarila to debate with him and win him over to the path of Knowledge. But Kumarila was at the point of death, his body already on fire. So he excused himself and directed Sankara to have discussion with his disciple Mandanamisra who was also a great Vedic scholar and who lived in the city of Mahishmati.

Kumarila said that defeating his disciple Mandana was as good as defeating him. Taking leave of Kumarila, Sankara now proceeded to the city Mahishmati where Mandana Misra lived.

(To be continued)

Swami Dayatmananda

The Wonder of Being Cheerful

The Wonder of Being Cheerful

The common spectacle that unflinchingly moves to sorrow a keen observer of people is their forlorn countenances. These faces reflect hidden anxiety, restlessness, anguish and depression. People on the roads move like humanoid robots with bowed heads, downcast eyes, seemingly unable to carry anymore the burden of their sorrows. Whether in cities or in villages, the sight of sagging shoulders and melancholic appearance seems the same. Only children are an exception. Their boisterous nature enlivens the whole atmosphere. But when they grow old, that spontaneous mirth will disappear in the sands of life's sorrow and they too will share the burden. A person wrapped day after day in modern day frustrations, fears and tensions does not suspect the deleterious effects those emotions have on health. Such negative feelings endured over the years cause illness. It is becoming more and more accepted by psychologists that the shock of anger, depression, jealousy and other violent thoughts absorbed without much thought in youth, and accepted as "part of the play of life," affect the whole psychophysical mechanism over the years and finally lead to physical and mental illness. A spate of books and magazine articles have thus appeared in recent years on the subject of happiness and the destructive nature of negative emotions. Quite a good number of psychiatrists and therapists have appeared also to give sane advice and help to sufferers.

"A healthy mind in a healthy body" has been the old dictum. But how stress and emotions play substantial roles in both inviting and curing diseases has for decades attracted the

attention of researchers all over the world. Contemporary neurobiologists and medical researchers have brought to light many startling truths, previously unverified. There is a complex interdependence between mind and body, both in healthy states and in illness. The positive results gathered from a number of experiments in psychology and physiology, group therapies, relaxation sessions, guided imagery and biofeedback techniques, have left scientists with little doubt about the effects of mental activity on body and health. A pioneer in research, Dr. Robert Ader, a professor at the University of Rochester Medical School, contends: "There is little question that we can alter the cause of disease by manipulating psychological factors." Another statement by Cavin and Ojeman adds: "There is indeed a relation between emotion and "butterflies in the stomach." This overlap of brain sites for emotion and visceral function suggests an anatomic basis for psychosomatic diseases."

When "Donald" arrived for his first group-therapy session at UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute and Hospital in West Los Angeles, he was in a wheel chair, suffering from malignant melanoma and severely depressed. But after he spent six months sharing stories and good times with other cancer patients and learning relaxation techniques, his mood improved considerably, and so had his physical condition. As his attitude brightened, an important change took place inside his body: "there was an increase in the activity of his 'natural killer cells,' a crucial link in the body's immune system. By year's end, though he still had cancer, Donald was able to dance a jig for his group."

Even while undergoing conventional medical treatment, people are reaping miraculous benefits from mind-body therapies. The new discoveries in this vital field, though at present popular only in advanced countries, indicate exciting possibilities. Many leading medical schools, like Harvard and UCLA have

included psychobiology research in their course offerings. Within a few years further explorations will unravel many more facts about people's moods and their definite influence on body and behavioural patterns.

In the laboratory of Yale University's Center for Behavioural Medicine, Gary Schwartz and others are conducting experiments to know the interrelationship between the brain and muscle patterns of the face. Desirable or undesirable inner emotions produce outward signs of muscle tension on the face. In a laboratory experiment, a person sits quietly and four recording electrodes (to measure the body's natural electricity) are placed on his face. According to the experimenter's suggestion, the subject grits his teeth and two of the electrodes on the lower face become active. The emotion of anger and wrinkled forehead activates the two upper electrodes.

"The muscles of the face," explains Dr. Richard Restak, "are responsible for the outer expression of our inner emotions. When we feel sad, for instance, our eyebrows wrinkle into a state of sustained muscle tension, and the corners of our mouth droop. When we are happy, other muscular patterns evolve. Instead of drooping, the muscles around our mouth tighten while the outer corners turn upward into the beginnings of a smile. In general, these muscular contractions are outward signs of an inner mental state. But which comes first?"

If mind can exert benevolent or malevolent influences on the body, then, by changing bodily postures and facial muscle pattern, emotions can also be altered - say neuro-scientists. If one thinks of happy thoughts or angry or sad thoughts those surely reflect on the face. By feeding back to the mind the muscle patterns characteristic of joy, the mind generates or sustains inner feelings of exhilaration. To put on a happy or smiling face is an effective way to counter the inner harmful and depressing

thoughts. Therefore the Bible proverb says: "A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance." "Faking laughter," psychotherapist Goodheart says, "triggers the diaphragm. The diaphragm interprets this as a real one, and in a flash, a genuine laugh follows."

Negative emotions are poisonous. They slowly incapacitate the organism, rather imperceptibly at first. Cheerfulness, on the other hand, alters the whole metabolism of a cell, and triggers certain neuropeptides which reinforce the immune system. During stress, the body releases large amounts of a steroid called Cortisol. Commenting on the staggering sum of money spent every year on health care programmes all over the world, a noted biologist, Dr. Lewis Thomas, remarked, "Meanwhile we are paying too little attention, and respect to the built-in durability and sheer power of the human organism. Its surest tendency is toward stability and balance."

It was believed a few years ago that blood pressure and cardiovascular patients could not control their heart muscle or blood pressure. Such diseases were treated only with medications. The patients themselves were denied participation and responsibility for the healing process. But the modern discovery of the biofeedback mechanisms has entirely changed things. Biofeedback can be compared to the action of a common thermostat which controls our room temperature. The thermostat is set at the desired temperature. When there is a drop in the temperature, the thermostat "feeds back" the information and the furnace starts working. Again, when the temperature begins to rise high, the thermostat shuts off the furnace. Thus room temperature is maintained at a steady level. Our body has its own thermostat-like mechanisms, all coordinated and regulated by the brain so the natural tendency of the body's systems is always towards stability and balance. Walter B. Cannon calls this homeostasis in his

famous book, *Wisdom of the Body*. When an organism becomes destabilized due to some environmental fluctuation, or due to some internal disorder, the central nervous system receives the information, adjusts and compensates the body's mechanisms in the required measure. Scientists held the view until recently that the mind's or brain's control over the visceral organs was involuntary and that internal homeostatic adjustments could not be brought within the reach of one's conscious control. By recent experiments, however, it has been shown that some of these can come under voluntary control. In a normal course, the outer peripheral organs send warning signals of pain or some irregularity to the mind, indicating that something is wrong in the system and should immediately be set right. But the mind, wrapped in its own morbid emotions like anger, hatred, stress and anxieties, or intoxicated by ruthless ambition, pursuit of pleasures or under the influence of heavy medicaments, is rendered insensitive and unable to respond. For the majority of diseases, the internal environment of excitement, agitation, misplaced values or distorted views, play more pivotal roles in the patient's road to recovery than the external treatments. In such cases, changes in mental outlook or attitude have produced marvellous results.

The sophisticated electronic instruments have not only brought about an advance in knowledge of the workings of neurophysiology, but have been able to translate subtle body symptoms into easily discernible visual and sound media. The EEG and EKG instruments, able to measure nervous electricity, characteristics of heart beat and even the tiny electrical currents involved in sensory perception and brain activity, can show up many types of disorders. With use of these the landmark discovery of the biofeedback mechanisms in the body has become very important in medical treatment. With psychological support

from physicians, patients can watch their own body conditions and try voluntarily to bring back the body's lost equilibrium, and very often can contribute greatly to restoring their own mental and physical health. The Department of Neurobiology at Bellevue Hospital in New York treats victims of stroke or cerebral injuries by involving the patients consciously in biofeedback techniques. A majority of patients have achieved control over their paralyzed limbs and have returned to their usual occupations. A seventeen year old girl who had lost control over her right hand, and remained in that condition since her childhood, regained total control of the limb and she could finally ride horseback, controlling the horse with the hands

Through "visceral learning," patients suffering from hypertension, frequent headaches, ulcers, asthma, and cardiovascular disorders, have in some cases almost got rid of these disorders. Visceral learning requires the patient's active participation in the curing process. Excessive medication and the habit of "pill-popping" at the slightest indication of discomfort are harmful, say the psychobiologists. Due to desensitizing effects, the medicines often inhibit or prevent the message of disorders reaching the brain centres and the body's natural mechanisms are impeded. The brain centres regulating the nervous system are disrupted and ultimately lose control permanently over the body. The increasing use of medications alters the biochemistry of body and brain in such a way that the system becomes dependent upon the drug for its normal functioning. Commenting on this widespread habit of pill-grabbing Prof. Steven Rose says: "With drugs to sleep and to wake, to sedate and alert, to ease pain and to generate joy, we have already arrived at one form of Brave New World."

Heart trouble may develop as a result of prolonged living in a stressful situation or environment, or due to unrealistic or

high ambitions. Consuming capsules indiscriminately dulls the brain's intelligence and judgement. Otherwise it would have warned to bring a halt to dangerous consumption or other behaviour taxing the body's limit of endurance. If some are hypochondriacs, over anxious to take medicine to help the body, others are maniacs who drive their minds and bodies recklessly to an irreversible state of illness. In the majority of cases where an early changing of internal or external environment is made, or slowing down the fast pace of life, the risk of severe damage to the visceral organs has been reduced.

Positive or negative visualization of oneself as happy or sad triggers mood changes in the mind. Mental imagery markedly affects neurochemical and endocrine hormone production. As mentioned earlier, physiologists have discovered that mental states have their reflection in the facial expressions. They produce their corresponding changes in facial muscle patterns of tension. Psycho-biologists are convinced that the process is also reversible and making voluntary changes in facial muscles can also bring about changes in the mind. Smiling, laughing and cheerful expressions set in motion "happy waves" in the mind stuff and can free an individual from the stressful psychic atmosphere. The body generates neuropeptides which revitalize the immunologic system to prevent and fight disease. Therefore a smiling and beaming face is not only a matter of being socially convivial, but immensely good for one's health and well-being. Associating with a person of radiant energy and good cheer is an effective therapy in itself, while a morose and irritable face repels and casts gloom all round. Society is a mirror and in it a person sees his own reflection. An easygoing person with joyful heart is less annoyed by trivial disturbances, and possessing the rare quality of laughter, is sought after and loved by all. "Laugh your way to health!," "Laugh a good belly-laugh and call me tomorrow,"

"Laughter may be hazardous to your illness!" These are the new prescriptions of many modern physicians. Cheerfulness is the wonderful drug. For this, one of nature's gifts, one does not have to foot heavy medical bills, or endure prolonged hospitalization to learn.

Exercises such as jogging, aerobics, even marathon races and others of vigorous nature, are becoming popular. TV, magazines and newspapers have contributed largely to highlighting their beneficial effects on health. But an experiment conducted at Yale tends to discredit this idea. Exercises do produce harmful stress on the body too. It has been found that one's mental state is a very important factor to be taken into account before physical exercise. The Yale experiment involved a group of several professional actors who were divided into two groups. One group was instructed to work themselves up into an angry state by imagining themselves in disagreeable, frustrating situations. The second group concentrated on thinking thoughts that put them in calm, quiet and peaceful moods. After this preparation, the experimenters recorded each person's heart rate, blood pressure and respiration. Then both groups were put through a moderate course of physical exercise, such as ascending and descending stairs several times. At the end of the exercise period, an important discovery came to light. "In the "angry group" heart rate and blood pressure were sustained at undesirable levels. In the "placid group" the exercise was truly beneficial, since heart rate and blood pressure remained well within normal bounds. Despite the fact that both groups were doing the same thing, only one group received benefit; in fact, the group that generated the energy and feelings of anger were actually harming themselves!"

In the light of the above experiment, neurophysiologists caution people to pay greater attention to mental preparedness.

Physical exercise can be harmful if it leads to deregulation, experts contend.

Health is really a multidimensional phenomenon," observes Dr. Capra, "involving interdependent physical, psychological and social aspects. The common representation of health and illness as opposite ends of a one dimensional continuum is quite misleading. Physical disease may be balanced by a positive mental attitude and social support, so that the overall state is one of well-being. On the other hand, emotional problems or social isolation can make a person feel sick in spite of physical fitness....What is unhealthy for the individual is generally also unhealthy for the society and for the embedding ecosystem.

The word cancer conjures up in the mind the dreadful image of a sick person and an incurable disease. Till the turn of the twentieth century, T.B., plague and leprosy were similarly dread diseases. Cancer has become an emotionally loaded word for most of us, practically synonymous with suffering and death. It is generally thought by people that it is a powerful enemy that invades the body from outside. Current research in cellular biology, however, indicates that cancer is actually an internal breakdown. Astonishingly, it has been found that cancer cells are not strong and powerful, but are on the contrary, weak, sluggish and abnormal. The cancer cell is an imperfect or damaged cell, either produced earlier by the body itself, or one which has been damaged by toxic biochemicals or stressful life events. Scientists do not know why a normal cell turns a traitor. But it seems that under the influence of incorrect genetic information, these renegade cells function abnormally and with alarming celerity reproduce other imperfect cells like themselves but larger in size. Healthy cells have correct genetic information and grow up to an optimal size, reproduce and function normally. When imperfect mutinous cells multiply in the system, however, the result will

be a tumor composed of a mass of the malignant cells. The disease being systemic, it spreads throughout the body and is not localized. Malignant cells, after reckless reproduction and metastatic rapid spread to other parts of the organism, pose the major threat and problem. The unpleasant treatments a patient sometimes undergoes are chemotherapy, radiation or surgical removal of the tumor. Physicians are aware that these treatments shatter and injure the body. But such remedies will have to be used until medical science achieves a much needed breakthrough. Research is going on throughout the world, and hopes are bright to clear the present darkness.

What really causes cancer? Is it due to the intrusion of carcinogenic substances, or weakening of the immune system, or to mental states and environmental factors? Neurobiologists and medical researchers have abandoned the reductionist approach of physical therapy aims at revitalizing and activating the natural healing powers of the organism. It also lays much emphasis on diet and pure moral life. Diet and other factors vary according to the nature of the diseases in question and do not now expect ever to find that cancer has a single cause. It is neither a completely biological phenomenon, nor does it arise due to purely psychological causes. The cause of cancer is a complex network of factors. In a healthy body, the immune system is ordinarily strong and immediately able to detect, tackle and destroy malignant cells. A large number of people have been able to arrest cancer naturally without medicine. The body is normally tough and buoyant and has the defence arsenal to fight with external invaders. But when the immune system weakens, it becomes defenceless and the organism is besieged and destroyed by slow death. What has been puzzling the scientists is this breakdown in the immune system. They are grappling with the problem and trying to unravel the mystery, in the meanwhile trying to find

ways to reinforce it Recent studies have shown that in a cancer-prone individual, symptoms of acute strain in interpersonal relationships, feelings of despair, neglect, insecurity and hopelessness are noticed six to eighteen months before cancer is diagnosed. For a patient reaching a state of emotional impasse, where all escape routes are walled, the deathwish may become a final resort. This extreme negativism is undoubtedly due to faulty personality development or adjustment. When one's zest for life is lost, the inevitable weakening of the immune system also occurs. It is widely accepted in the medical community that along with conventional treatment a patient also needs to unburden conscious and unconscious emotions that can inhibit recovery.

Notably in this field Dr. Carl Simonton, an oncologist, and his wife Stephanie, a psychotherapist, along with others are doing wonderful work. The Simontons have their cancer centre at Pacific Palisades in California. The couple make innovative use of visualization techniques, form intimate personal relationship with patients, encourage patients' willful participation in treatment, and administer ample doses of humour and laughter to help recovery. Their cancer centre has shown that if attitudes change from despair to robust positive hope, if fatalistic broodings change to positive anticipation, and if moods are enlivened, an important job is done in strengthening the body's defences. The Simonton's approach to cancer cure is holistic in the sense that their therapy regards cancer not merely as biological, but as a problem of the whole person, linked with his entire psyche. Without the dynamic interplay of mind and body, there is little hope of a cure. It is from a lack of interplay that the disease was allowed to grow. Now, say the experts, by skillful manipulation of biofeedback and by training the patient's willpower, the body's immune system can be strengthened to its maximum. With the Simontons this is not merely a theoretical concept. They have

taken up cases considered medically hopeless and their techniques have proven extremely successful. Their holistic method is similar to the Indian Ayurveda and Chinese systems of medicine which consider all physical disorders the result of unbalanced energy patterns of *prana*.

Dr. Karl Simonton says that the role of illness acts as a problem solver in the lives of some patients. Because of social and cultural conditioning, many have found it impossible to resolve stressful problems in a healthy way and therefore chosen, consciously or unconsciously, to get sick as a way out of distress. This may be cancer or catatonic schizophrenia, hysteria or insanity, or a "copping out" like that of drug abusers or alcoholics. In the opinion of Dr. Simonton, antisocial behaviour too is a social illness, and a reaction to stressful life situations. Like cancer, heart disease too, has an emotional component. According to him, the medical community is reluctant to accept the idea that the mental state and personality factors of a patient play a major role in the onset and development of disease, because many of them are not equipped to address the psyche of a patient. Therefore, cancer management is today fragmented and confused.

(To be continued)

Reprinted from *Brabuddha Bharata*, October, 1990.

New Atheism and Religion

For those who haven't heard still, New Atheism is a recent movement. Sam Harris is the leader of New Atheism. Actually, A. C. Grayling (*All Against Gods*, 2004) and Sam Harris are both pioneers. Gary Wolf coined the name New Atheism (in *Wired* magazine, November, 2006 issue). Some important new atheists are, the biologist, Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*, 2006), the philosopher, Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell: Religion as a New Phenomenon*, 2006), Victor Stenger (*God: The Failed Hypothesis*, 2007), and Christopher Hitchens (*God is not Great*, 2007), also Grayling's *The Good Book* (2010). In fact, it's raining books, blogs and articles. Some say New Atheism is a fringe movement and will die soon. Others say New Atheism is popular and worrying. The faithful have taken it seriously. Religionists are writing articles and books, countering new atheists, but commentators feel they are weak and defensive.

Biting its head off

What do New Atheists say? They reject God (the Semitic Creator), religion (the monotheistic faith), ethics (the fear-based forced morality) and everything connected to religion. Let's empathize with them for some minutes to see why New Atheists are angry. They say that God's creating the world in six days and resting on the seventh is a kindergarten story. Next, God's wanting Abraham to kill his son is bad, but Gabriel saved him. Further, the Ten Commandments are man-made, they say. Christopher Hitchens (*God is not Great*, 2007) says: "However little one thinks of the Jewish tradition, it is surely insulting to the

people of Moses to imagine that they had come this far under the impression that murder, adultery, theft and perjury were permissible." Further, the 'Moses and Aaron' story, the killings, Moses' pronouncements in Deuteronomy, etc - all are questioned. They say that the four New Testament Gospels were written, not by the famous four authors, but by scholars subsequently. New Atheists add that much of Christ's life history is fiction and adjustment. Though the ire, fundamentally, is against the three monotheistic religions, the new atheists take all faiths to task. The Hindu system of caste and its consequences, the Suttee and its outcome, the story of Hindu hell etc - all come under scrutiny.

New Atheists don't argue irrationally, or say 'God is dead,' like Nietzsche. They accept God and other related ideas as hypotheses and say they can disprove them scientifically. Dawkins stands on Darwin's theories. Victor Stenger writes that God is a failed hypothesis, and God with the three O's, omnipotence, omniscience, and omni-benevolence simply cannot exist: "Absence of evidence is evidence of absence." He adds that evidence for many religious doctrines is either terrible or non-existent.

Stenger and Hitchens quote John Stuart Mill, who wrote about his father's atheism: "He regarded it (his religion) with the feelings due ... to a great moral evil. He looked upon it as the greatest enemy of morality...; making it consist in doing the will of a being, on whom it lavishes indeed all the phrases of adulation, but whom in sober truth it depicts as eminently hateful." Victor sums their situation up in his *The New Atheism*: "I show how naturalism, the view that everything is matter and nothing more, is sufficient to explain everything we observe in the universe from the most distant galaxies to the inner workings of the brain that result in the phenomenon of mind. Nowhere is it necessary to introduce God or the supernatural to understand

the world." If religionists argue that science has no business with religion, New Atheists reply that religion has been interfering with science always. They question religious texts, practices, faith, ethics, religion and, finally, God, and reject religion. They suggest secular humanism for morality, materialism for life, and science for phenomena.

Why this reaction? Firstly, since ages, 'religion' has led thousands up the garden path, threatened, killed and enslaved them. In the past, while some converted 'aborigines,' saying that what they did was all superstition, others used the sword. As education spreads, those who got converted seeing bread baited to hooks are asking questions.

Secondly, non-essentials have become prominent in religion. To the herd, 'religion' is a supermarket: go buy health, wealth, and happiness for you and your family. But God must sell everything cheap or be ready for bitter criticism: "We offered incense worth \$2, put two coins into the beggar's box, fed rice to two sparrows, and you, heartless God, didn't give me a bank job." If it rains, criticize; if it doesn't rain, criticize.

Thirdly, 'religion' is materialism. 'Religions' do everything under the sun other than think of God. Prayer congregations are political meetings. Some prioritize the protection of husk - senseless rituals, meaningless junk, worthless fables. In India, some turn round and round a tree, eat prasad, and boast how many gallons of water their gurus turn into petrol every day. Some others think superstition and miracle-mongering is religion: to be a saint you must levitate or do some magic. Some are busy deciding solutions to social problems. So 'religion' is criticized - since ages.

Atheism is not news. There were atheists and materialists before. In India we had materialist Charvakas, God-rejecting Samkhyan and Yogis, atheistic Jainas, atomistic Vaishesikas, the

Buddhists - the list grows. Indians have respected all these atheists, honouring them as philosophers. Elsewhere, there have been many types of atheists who have voiced their opinions from time to time. New Atheists know all this; but they are powerful due to science. Science is both atheists' stronghold and human weakness. 'Science' is a magic word.

A case for religionists

But for some moments, let's empathize with the religionists. We begin with a tribute to 'science.' Whether or not scientific theories go on changing every day, whether or not it's true that the first moon landing was telecast (live) from 384,400 km, whether or not 'Pluto' is a planet, whether or not the 'bang' was really that 'big' for scientists to hear the echo now after '300 million years,' whether or not the velocity of light is the upper limit, whether or not $E = mc^2$ now to ground all theories, whether or not NASA is right in that there's water on the moon - 'science' is our weakness.

Look at the creation theory itself - the bone of contention. If the Biblical story is a fable, what is 'scientific fact'? Basking on two Einsteinian theories, they write the history of the huge and vast universe, sitting on a tiny speck of a planet, and scientifically explain what happened before, during and after Planck time. One says the universe is 20,000,000,000,000 years old, another adds three more zeros, yet another says it's 367 million - and all get awards. We can't verify; so we swallow these sensational discoveries stories hook, line and sinker!

Lamarck's (or was it Darwin's?) theory of natural selection has been adapted by many species but not the human being, sadly. While still in the womb, baby-giraffes heard their mothers whisper for generations to 'lengthen your neck, kid,' they became long-necked. All animals grew longer beaks and wings. But

human thieves did not develop wings, and so police are still successful. Despite millions dying in wars since ages, we fools didn't understand the 'survival of the fittest' theory like the birds, and did not grow wings.

If 'religion' is bad because 'it' burned some at stake, 'science' too is not without fault. 'Science' as a peculiar social theory of equality and godlessness has killed thousands of faithful - including monks and nuns, has robbed and desecrated religious places, imprisoned monks and destroyed thousands, if not millions. Russian, Tibetan, Chinese monks - all have suffered under godless people. Dharmashala is still in India. Further, science through its media incites peaceful people into religious conflicts.

To test some drug, chemical or food, many (even children) have been maimed or killed in poorer countries. Bhopal is in India. Nuclear waste is not dumped in New York City. They neglect the starving millions (even children) in Africa, but spend billions of dollars to build the LHC, maintain thousands of scientists there - all to prove some theories. Millions of dollars are spent on moon-bombing while children starve nearer at home. Maybe conspiracy theorists are fools, but if Aldrin and Armstrong have such bright sunlight on them while on the moon - why is the sky around so dark? Where are the stars if that's moonlight?

Atomic and nuclear bombs, guns, chemical warfare - all still in their infancy - have already killed millions. Wait to see what is in store as this roguish infant grows. In ignorance, 'science' becomes arrogant: something which it doesn't, or cannot know, does not exist. We speak of yogic mental capacities. However, Patanjali was a scientist and not a religious man. He worshipped no God; he scientifically showed in his *Yoga Sutras* what super capacities our mind has. His fault was, he wrote in Sanskrit. Fortunately Newton did not choose Sanskrit. 'Science'

is all-knowing, but it's still unclear how many planets revolve round the sun, how to create life, what sun flares do, what makes us think, how to cure common cold - the list is long.

If 'religion' spread superstitions, 'science' does too. Millions swallow vitamins, aspirin, over-iodized salt etc, seeking health for decades upon scientific advice. Finally, 'science' declares that they aren't good for health. By that time many have died. Millions consume antioxidants to stop rancidity in the body and to live long - on 'scientific' recommendation. But who knows your date of death? Orthodontists say all girls should wear dental clips for some time. Or else, they shall have protruding teeth. And just see how you are coaxed (or compelled) to buy things - to want more than you need - through ads. So people go crazy, wanting glitter. The funniest 'scientific' joke is to insist that there's no extraterrestrial life at all and to declare simultaneously that life on earth came from extraterrestrial sources, through meteors, comets, etc. One last example: Antidepressants! It's a depressing story.

Where things go wrong

These are the glories of 'religion' and 'science'. Evidently, neither Science nor Religion is wrong: their misuse is. Consider superstitions themselves. We all love superstitions, its language (science or religion) notwithstanding. Superstition is talking the herd language - coax or threaten. Secondly, senseless crime and injury have been perpetuated in the name of both religion and science, not by religion or science. To cheat using the science-tool is easier than to lie and cheat using the religion-tool. Remember the recent 'swine-flu' panic (sorry, epidemic)? ('100 deaths the very first day in Mexico!'). So 'herd' is the word. Sheep know neither religion nor science: they want to be led and to survive. Therefore, neither science nor religion is to blame.

Let's put it this way: if New Atheists use 'science' to kill 'religion' - well done! They are only helping religion by removing the junk and husk, because religionists themselves should have done this long ago. Religionists should have encouraged scientific research long ago and welcomed newer discoveries. The husk is the 'religion' of the herd. Junk accumulates because religion is handled both by fools and scholars alike. Masses thrive on nonsense than on subtle ideals. So they create new scriptures, rituals, theories - all superficial. In time, Religion faces stiff opposition for mixing things up: fable with philosophy, ritual with mysticism, 'religion' with spirituality, service with sentimentality, God with politicians and, importantly, religion with society. To defend some fable, worthwhile philosophy is sacrificed; to defend some meaningless ritual, mysticism is sacrificed. So atheists come down heavily upon religion.

Of the several criticisms, we take up only one for want of space: 'Do not kill', 'do not steal', etc are written in the *Bible* not because ancient races did not know such things were bad, but such things have to be written somewhere. Similar ideas are found in many texts. In *Yoga Sutras*, "non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing" are mentioned as basic moral virtues.

Religion should not worry if minor details, or stories, are to be given up. Religions will not go away if you go with the times so far as some non-essentials are concerned. Even scientists believed that there was nothing beyond the sea before the voyages began. You may consider stories as allegories. Hinduism has many stories of creation: all are ridiculed by practicing Hindus themselves. Krishna says to Arjuna in their greatest work, *Bhagavad Gita*, that the *Vedas* (the most sacred books) have their limitations and that he must go beyond them. We have travelled all along on carts and now use cars. Just removing a 't' doesn't destroy Christianity. Suppose you believed all along that Jesus

traveled on a donkey. A scholar accidentally buys some broken pieces of pot in Cairo, glues them as he thinks best, and discovers that the meaning of the original Aramaic word for 'donkey' had changed to 'horse' since 87.6 AD. Was Jesus afraid of horse riding? Scientists made the world believe that Pluto was a planet till yesterday! Since religion is handled by anybody and everybody, mistakes and failures happen, non-essentials increase; some soldiers fall. Does that not happen in science? Millions of dollars are spent on failed experiments in labs and thousands of guinea pigs are sacrificed. Many rockets fall down.

If religion erred, science too can err. If humans misinterpret things, God is not to blame. Swami Vivekananda says: 'If you want to be a Christian, it is not necessary to know whether Christ was born in Jerusalem or Bethlehem or just the exact date on which he pronounced the Sermon on the Mount; you only require to feel the Sermon on the Mount.'

Listen to the sane voice

New Atheism is popular because atheists are sincere seekers after truth. They want to know things correctly. To answer them, Religion should have proper representatives. Who can answer them? Not the 'religious' with swords or the so-called 'religious' leaders. Pundits, scholars, loud hailers, shepherds, sword-wielders - none would do. A truly religious person is needed.

A true religious leader is a spiritual person - a true child of God. He is impartial, open, scientific, rational, not given to superstitions, ready to renounce pet theories, not self-seeking, truthful, and a knower of Truth. He manifests the best scientific spirit: of enquiry, rationality, sincerity, and openness on the one hand, and also the best religious spirit: of truth, faith, purity, love, selflessness, etc on the other. This personality has no regional or

denominational limits. The world is global now, religion is global, and our problems are global. So he should be a global spiritual leader. This leader belongs to no religion - no Eurocentricism, Ecumenism, Americanism, etc. Moreover, religions are mutually complementary. So renouncing superiority complexes, we should look for such a leader. Do you have one? If not, we can show one.

He stood on the platform of the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and told the world: "...holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world.... In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: 'Help and not Fight,' 'Assimilation and not Destruction,' 'Harmony and Peace and not Dissension.'" This was Swami Vivekananda. He was no mere mortal or angel or miracle-monger. He represented Truth. He spoke the truth, from experience. He called a spade a spade. It's not possible to show all that he said about this subject, unfortunately. However, here are a few ideas. In the face of atheist attacks, let's listen to his sane words. If not, suffer.

What Vivekananda Says

First of all, Vivekananda has plain words for 'religionists' who are fighting to save the husk called 'religion': "We are all atheists; let us confess it. Mere intellectual assent does not make us religious. We are all atheists, and yet we try to fight the man who admits it." "Jesus saw God and Buddha saw God. If you have not seen God, you are no better than the atheist." "It is better to be an outspoken atheist than a hypocrite." Does Vivekananda mean that we are all atheists? Yes, if we have no faith in ourselves. "You must believe in yourself, and then you will believe in God."

We have neither faith in our religion nor in ourselves, but pretend to be 'religious'. What should we do now? "Think for yourselves. Become atheists! Become materialists! That would be better. Exercise the mind!"

Vivekananda says that we all should be real truth seekers. He declares: "Religion can be realized. Are you ready? Do you want it? You will get the realization if you do, and then you will be truly religious. Until you have attained realization there is no difference between you and atheists. The atheists are sincere, but the man who says that he believes in religion and never attempts to realize it is not sincere." Questioning never means being atheistic; it only strengthens faith. If a Sam Harris or Richard Dawkins questions to know and your faith totters, let that fragile faith go. Vivekananda says: "There is no difference between theories and atheism. In fact, the atheist is the truer man." All true atheists are truly religious people, are sincere seekers of truth. They may not belong to any denominational faith, but they reject the husk. Vivekananda says: "We must each have our own individual religion, individual so far as the externals of it go." Hinduism accepted that antagonism towards God too as a devotional path, though negative. Those who hated God - Kamsa, Ravana and others - thought constantly about God and attained Him. Evil is perpetuated because we condemn people as evil, as sinners. "If a man, day and night, thinks he is miserable, low, and nothing, nothing he becomes. We are sparks of the infinite, divine fire. How can we be nothings?" Vivekananda says, "Man is not travelling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth"

Now, Vivekananda answers the atheists. No arguments, but placing facts. New Atheists reject God. But Vivekananda replies: "There are two ideas of God: the one, personal, and the other, impersonal. The idea of the personal God is that He is the

omnipresent Creator...Then ... the Impersonal, where all those adjectives are taken away as superfluous....And what are our relations with this Impersonal Being? - that we are He." New Atheists reject religion saying that it is all man-made. But Vivekananda replies that the germ of religion is in "the struggle to transcend the limitations of the senses" (2:59). Why struggle? He says: "...man is not only a gross material body; not only ... the finer body, the mind, but there is something yet greater, something beyond, the *Atman* - I cannot translate the word to you for any translation will be wrong." New Atheists reject faith, calling it blind. But Vivekananda says: "When it was discovered that 'I and my Father are one,' the last word was said of religion. In true religion there is no faith or belief in the sense of blind faith. No great preacher ever preached that."

Regarding the scriptures, New Atheists reject the theory of creation. Vivekananda says: "Unlike all other races of the world, we do not believe that this world was created only so many thousand years ago, and is going to be destroyed eternally on a certain day."

Atheists consider morality to be manmade. But Vivekananda says: "Man learns to give up the attempt to express the Infinite through the finite. This giving up, this renunciation of the attempt, is the background of ethics. Renunciation is the very basis upon which ethics stands."

Vivekananda sympathizes fully with the cause of the atheists: "Materialism prevails in Europe today. You may pray for the salvation of the modern skeptics, but they do not yield. They want reason. The salvation of Europe depends on a rationalistic religion, and *Advaita* - the non-duality, the Oneness, the idea of the impersonal God - is the only religion that can have any hold on any intellectual people."

However, who is a real atheist? “The idea of God and the ideas of brute and of man are within illusion (*maya*), and as such are equally hallucinations; all of them are dreams. But you must take care not to argue like some extraordinary men of whom we hear at the present time. They say the idea of God is a delusion, but the idea of this world is true. Both ideas stand or fall by the same logic. He alone has the right to be an atheist who denies this world, as well as the other. The same argument is for both. The same mass of delusion extends from God to the lowest animal, from a blade of grass to the Creator. They stand or fall by the same logic.”

Can there be a global definition of Religion? Vivekananda says: “Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work or worship or psychic control or philosophy - by one or more or all of these and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.” □

You have asked me whether vegetarianism is absolutely necessary for leading a spiritual life. My answer is that no hard and fast rule can be made with regard to food. Can we live without doing harm to some form of life? Do you think plants and vegetables have no life? Our scriptures say they have; science has proven it. If you can preserve the strength and vigour of your body and mind while living on vegetarian food, you are at liberty to do so. But if, while foregoing fish and meat, your health deteriorates, you must give up such ideas and take a more moderate stand.

Swami Saradananda

The Ego in its Extreme Expansion

Speaking of the ideal man the *Gita* says: "With the mind purified by devotion to performance of action, and the body conquered, and senses subdued, *one who realizes one's self as the Self in all beings*, though acting, is not tainted." The portion in italics calls for elucidation and comment.

The ideal man described here is a person who is equipped with *Yoga*. His mind is quite pure. He has conquered his self. He has subdued his senses. His Self has become the Self of all beings, from the highest *Brahma* to the lowliest clump of grass. Such a man alone sees rightly; for his Inner Consciousness, the Self, is indeed the Self of all beings. He literally feels himself one with every creature in the universe. Such a man is rare even among sages.

The ordinary man is obsessed with, and is circumscribed by, his individuality. His personality is incapable of extending beyond a very narrow circle. His ego is a very petty and tiny affair. The universe is to him a huge mass of variety. The unity behind it escapes his attention. It is the "many" that strikes him, not the "One" and he feels himself separate and distinct from every thing else. Therefore his interests are limited. His normal attitude to other units in the universe is tinged with the competitive spirit. He stands, not with, but against, everything else. Not homogeneity, but heterogeneity, is the air he breathes. Of such a purblind man does the Upanishad say: "He who sees as though there is difference here goes from death to death."

The ego comprising an ordinary individual finds it extremely difficult to blossom out and expand. Even when it does

expand it still delights in squeezing itself into narrow confines. For instance the highly individualistic man's ego, when it does tend to broaden out, will not broaden out with an abandon, but will do so only with halting steps and at a hesitant pace. The ego-centrist may become family-centred; his personality may now embrace a few more individuals than his lone being. But his identification with the family's interests will still be coloured by an indifferent or even inimical attitude to other families. Again a man may feel and function as a zealous unit of a caste or a community or a profession, but here again he will stand against other castes, other communities and other professions. A man may be a noble patriot, but his circle of patriotism may terminate at his national boundaries, and he may be quite unconcerned about, unfriendly, and cold to other countries and other peoples in the world. So the ego is an ego all the while; its circumference may shrink or dilate, but it can never get rid of a circumference.

Of all of man's attachments, perhaps the noblest is his attachment to the religion he is born in, to the faith he is heir to. In this sacred region where his thoughts and commitments are all of God and God-men, soul and salvation, any narrowness must have no place whatever. But the ego can make even a healthy influence exude unwholesome airs, and we find that the history of humanity has been marred by religious persecutions, religious wars etc. One may be very pious, reverence-filled, devoted - but one may be all this only in respect of one's national God, national scripture, national church, and beyond the national bound one may be quite the opposite, abusive of others' Gods, derisive of others' scriptures, condemnatory of others' churches. Sri Ramakrishna, about the limitless nature of whose Ego we shall speak in the next section of this Editorial, has referred to this lack of the cosmopolitan outlook in most men. Swami Vivekananda says, "My master used to say that these names as Hindu, Christian

etc. stand as great bars to all brotherly feelings between man and man. We must try to break them down first. They have lost all their good powers and now only stand as baneful influences under whose black magic even the best of us behave like demons."

There is the story of a parrot which for a long time was confined to a cage and spent all its time perched on a cross-bar in the cage, feeding from a cup kept in the cage and periodically filled with the food needed by the bird-prisoner. It was a pet and was lovingly looked after. After a time the new head of the family who had a tender heart decided to set the parrot free as he felt that the encagement was a great cruelty on the bird. He conveyed the glad tidings to the bird only to be told by it, "My new master, please do not set me free. For, out of the cage, and in the wide open sky, where shall I find a safe perch and a hospitable cup? I shall feel quite lost. There can be no kindlier refuge for me than this cage." Man too like this parrot loves to stay cribbed, confined and caged, and feels that safety lies within bars, behind walls and inside fences.

The ego is the most potent tool in the hands of *Mahamaya*, the Cosmic Illusionist, and with it she binds everybody. None can escape being caught in her net. But of Swami Vivekananda it is said by those who knew him intimately that he expanded his ego to such extraordinary dimensions that it grew too big to be caught in *Maya's* net. The all-knowing and all-seeing Paramahansa Deva used to tell of Swami Vivekananda, even when he was still the young Narendra, "The Mother, *Mahamaya* Herself, cannot approach more than within ten feet of him!" The Swami's "I" was of cosmic proportions. In his great poem *The Song of the Sannyasin*, the Swami has given to humanity these lines of burning illumination:

The sexless Self! whose father He? Whose child?
Whose friend, whose foe is He who is but one?

The Self is all in all, none else exists; And thou art That.

....

There is but One - The Free - The Knower - Self!

....

In those that dwell on high, In those that lowly creep,
I am the Self in all!

....

The "I" Has All become, the All is and Bliss.
Know thou art That.

Perfected souls of Swamiji's calibre have their ego unfolded to the farthest possibility of expansion. They know no exclusiveness at all. Their being is all-inclusive. They are gifted with the unitive vision. Their being is conterminous with the whole creation. Their vision transgresses difference and variety. Of a man belonging to this golden galaxy of utmost ripeness the *Gita* says that his heart is concentrated in *Yoga* while his eye is one of evenness for all things, and this enables him to behold the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self. He sees the Divine in all things and sees all things in the Divine, and consequently he never becomes separated from the Divine, and the Divine never becomes separated from him. He resolves all duality in the underlying unity. The *Gita* pays a remarkable tribute to the man of wisdom who after many lives of incessant effort realizes that all this is Vasudeva (the innermost self); the *Gita* says that very rare indeed is that great soul.

The degree of eminence which our scriptures ascribe to the siddhas (perfected men) and the laudations they offer to them in profusion may make small mortals like us wonder if all this is only an essay in imagination or if at all such mortals of unbelievable excellence do ever walk on earth. There is enough evidence to substantiate the fact that spiritual super-excellence is not a poetical fancy, but a quite achievable end, that man has

potentiality enough to rise to the grandest heights of perfection in which he is practically identified with cosmic unity and divine immanence.

Vedanta calls the perfect man the *Paramahansa*. The *Paramahansa* is an open book of reference for earnest enquirers into the subtleties and magnitudes of the Absolute Reality. What he sees and does and declares may well provide for us dependable data to study the Ego which embraces every thing in and behind the manifested universe.

Sri Ramakrishna was indeed a phenomenon, and this he was from many points of view. He was quite human, indeed engagingly human, but was also bewilderingly trans-human. A study of him lands one in many a mystic truth of super-earthly significance. Indeed he was himself an encyclopaedia of soul-science. We have been talking about the ordinary man's ego in its flimsy allegiances and about the ideal man's Ego in its sweeping dimensions. A few incidents in the life of Sri Ramakrishna provide striking examples of the latter and we mention them below.

One day Sri Ramakrishna was looking at the Ganges in Dakshineswar. He was at that time in a state of trance, which in fact was his almost normal plane and mood. At the river ghat where he was standing lay two boats at anchor. The boatmen had started quarrelling over some point of dispute. The tempo of the quarrel rapidly gathered momentum, and from words it came to blows. The violent and able-bodied boatman severely slapped the other fellow on the back. The slap had strange repercussions. Sri Ramakrishna who was near the scene of the quarrel but had no part nor lot in it cried out suddenly with severe pain. His attendant, Hriday, who was then in the *Kali* temple was able to hear the cry. He ran out and found Sri Ramakrishna's back was red and swollen. He could not understand the cause of it. He

naturally thought that a blow had fallen on Sri Ramakrishna from some irreverent hand. Boiling with anger he shouted, "Uncle, show me the man who has beaten you thus. I shall tear off his head." It took a while for Sri Ramakrishna to calm down and tell Hriday of what took place. Hriday was lost in wonder, thinking, "How could a blow which landed on another man's back leave its marks on Sri Ramakrishna?"

It might not have occurred to him that Sri Ramakrishna was in a mood of at-one-ment with all humanity to such a profound degree that he was in active sympathy with any suffering anywhere and even co-shared it. It was not merely a case of pity, sympathy and compassion, it was a marvellous exhibition of the realization of unification, and co-partnership. We who know the impulse of sympathy only as a weak and passing sentiment have to stand aghast at the tremendous intensity which sympathy can assume in men like Sri Ramakrishna. (It is recorded that Sri Ramakrishna himself narrated this incident to his disciple, Girish Chandra Ghosh.)

The perfected man finds kinship not only with all humanity, but also with all nature. Not only in the living beings but also in the world does he sense the throb of the divine immanence. A patch of the yard in the Dakshineswar *Kali* temple was once carpeted by nature with fresh grass, and presented an enchantingly lovely sight. Sri Ramakrishna was one day happily occupied in drinking the green beauty of the area. Since to him seeing a thing of beauty meant a close identification with it, he soon forgot his environment and was in a trance of oneness with the grassy earth. Just then a man, to whom growing grass was as inert as wood or stone, walked across the field of grass treading on it with unfeeling steps. Sri Ramakrishna became restless and his chest was afflicted with a severe pain which was quite unbearable. The pain was exactly like the agony one feels when

a person actually tramples on one's chest. For six hours he remained in the grip of the agony. His disciples learnt of this experience from his own mouth, for it was his habit to often pass on very revealing things about himself to his close followers. Now what can we do but stand in mute astonishment at a man whose bone and flesh could be tangibly influenced by the sensations caused in the very flora for whose woes no one sheds a tear? And what applied to flora also applied to fauna. It is clearly stated in the biography of Sri Ramakrishna that at the time of his *sadhana* he could understand the language of birds and beasts.

So utter and absolute was the Paramahansa's identity with all life and all life-forms that he could express himself in the ways noted below: "I see many forms of the Lord, and this (his own form) too is one of them." "Do you know what I see? God has become everything." "I see He Himself is the executioner, the victim and the sacrificial post." "There sits Latu, leaning his head upon his hand. To me it is as if the Lord were sitting in that posture!" "My teaching of others is coming to an end. I cannot give any more instruction. I see that everything is Rama Himself. And sometimes I say to myself, 'Whom shall I teach?'"

The self-identification of the Sage with all beings sometimes results in very pleasing happenings. One day Sri Ramakrishna went to Calcutta to consult a doctor. When the consultation was over he started back to Dakshineswar. The woman devotee, Golap Ma, and the boy disciples, Latu and Kali, were with him. It was meal-time and all the four felt the pinch of hunger. Sri Ramakrishna asked if any of his attendants had any money on hand. Only Golap Ma had a little cash which was as little as four pice. The party had to make the best of the situation, and Sri Ramakrishna asked Kali to go to the nearest market and buy something for four pice. A small quantity of sweets was all that could be had for the four pice and there were four mouths

to be fed. Sri Ramakrishna acted in a queer way. Without sharing the small quantity of sweets with the companions, he ate all the purchased sweets himself, drank some Ganges water and said, "Ah, I am satisfied." The three others in the party could not at first understand why Sri Ramakrishna was so highly selfish and callous in his behaviour. But when Paramahansa Deva declared he was satisfied, the three others felt that their hunger had been fully appeased - mysteriously! In giving food to one, Sri Ramakrishna had fed four!

It is said of Sri Krishna that when once Durvasa mischievously came to the forest-dwelling Pandavas with an army of disciples seeking hospitality at a time of the day when they had no way of feeding such a large number, and Draupadi mentally appealed to Sri Krishna for help in the hour of crisis, Sri Krishna (who also came there hungry) ate just a grain of rice which he managed to discover in the food-vessel cleaned and kept away after that day's use, and made the guests feel sumptuously fed! There is nothing very unbelievable in what Krishna and Sri Ramakrishna did. As Yogis they had access to higher secrets of nature, and they employed subtler means of getting desired things done. By enveloping other egos in their own ego they could confer on the other egos the fulfilment their own ego had had.

We shall now conclude with the narration of a very remarkable incident relating to the last days of Sri Ramakrishna's earthly sojourn, when he was seriously ill with cancer. Pandit Sasadhar counselled Sri Ramakrishna to cure his physical illness by using his willpower. Sri Ramakrishna flatly refused to employ his dedicated-to-God mind in any mundane undertaking. When the Pandit had left, Narendra and other devotees pleaded strongly with Sri Ramakrishna that he should pray to the Divine Mother - at least for their sake - to cure him. The Master could

not brush aside the earnest pleading. After some time Narendra pursued the matter and asked the Master what he had done and what the Mother had promised. Sri Ramakrishna said in his frank and honest way, "I said to Mother, 'I cannot eat anything because of this pain. Please so arrange that I may eat a little.' She showed you all and said, 'Why, you are eating through so many mouths.' I was ashamed and could not utter another word." Here we see the mark of a total indifference to one's own body, and of the firm stand in a practical knowledge of Oneness. To quote Swami Vivekananda again, "The I has all become." □

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Of course, complete self-surrender can come only when one is free from egotism - the most invulnerable enemy of man. The idea that "I am so-an-so" is the cause of repeated births and deaths. The more you can get rid of it, the more will you be able to realize your spiritual nature, which is obscured by the "I." The first personal pronoun is at the root of all our miseries. Hence our primary duty should be to get rid of it somehow or other. This can be done by the service of the great, by good works without caring for results, by concentration or discrimination. The first is the easiest and the best. If you can place yourself at the feet of a true Teacher, your egotism will gradually wear away by that very attitude of yours of a servant. If a man actually places himself under the guidance of Sri Ramakrishna he is sure at once to be saved by Him. But very few, almost none can do it, as every man is more or less an egotist

Swami Ramakrishnananda

Milarepa

Soon after his Initiation Milarepa retired for meditation into a nearby mountain-cave, and his Guru supplied him personally in a most generous way with food and all other necessities. There Milarepa was sitting motionless, with a lighted lamp on his head, day and night, until the light went out. Thus he spent eleven months.

One day he was called to his Guru to report the results of his meditation. What Milarepa told in reply is the gist of most Religious Teachings in the East, as: Discrimination between the Real and the Unreal. Having found out what the chief end of our life on earth really is, the necessity of a "perfectly well-accomplished Guru to realize by his Grace the Supreme Goal." Having found such a Guru, wholehearted obedience, surrender and faith in him are indispensable. There is further the necessity of renunciation, i.e., "to sacrifice all bodily ease and luxuries and to be willing to sacrifice even life itself." Milarepa furthermore stressed that "the first effort in concentration or meditation must be made in a compassionate mood, with the aim of dedicating the merit of these efforts to the Universal Good.

During the following period of seclusion and meditation in the same cave Milarepa had two dreams. The first one was a prophetic dream regarding the future development of the Khargyutpa Sect and Milarepa's own life, as Marpa interpreted its deep symbolic meaning, and which later on proved to be true in every single detail. In the second dream Milarepa saw his native place, deserted and in ruins, his mother dead and his sister roaming begging around. When he awoke his pillow was drenched with tears and he felt an irresistible longing for his old

mother and his sister whom he had not seen for many years. He was unable to meditate any more and therefore went to his Guru to ask his permission to go there. As he found him asleep, he sang in a gentle voice an appeal to him. When Marpa awoke, he gave reluctantly his consent and added: "Know that finding me in sleep when thou didst come, is an omen that we shall not meet again in this life." Then Marpa prepared a mandala and imparted to Milarepa the last and highest Initiations. In course of this celebration Marpa showed himself in the forms of different deities as a parting gift for Milarepa.

On the morning of his departure the whole party of thirteen persons accompanied him up to a hilltop and there Milarepa took leave from Marpa and his wife, all three of them pouring alternately out their overflowing love and pangs of separation in songs. Then, having prostrated before both of them, Milarepa departed.

Due to his mastery of *Pranayama*, he covered the distance to his native place in only threedays, which normally required a journey of several months. On the way he learned from some shepherds that his mother was indeed dead, her bones lying unburied in the ruins of the house. After sunset he went to his homestead and found it exactly as he had seen it in his dream. "Wherever I looked," told Milarepa to his disciples, "desolation and ruin met me, so that I was overwhelmed with despondency. Then groping my way towards the outer rooms, I found a heap of earth and rags overgrown by weeds and grass. On shaking it up I found it to be a heap of human bones, which instinctively I knew to be my mother's. So unbearable was the thought that I should never more see my mother that I was about to lose consciousness, when I remembered my Guru's Teachings." Milarepa then made a pillow of his mother's bones and spent there seven days and nights in samadhi. Having thus realized

"that there was no permanent benefit to be obtained in any state of worldly existence," he decided to retire into the Dragkar-Taso Cave and to spend the rest of his life in uninterrupted meditation.

Milarepa then collected the bones of his mother to get them pulverized and moulded, together with clay, into relics. He also took the holy Scriptures which he had found under dust and dirt, to use them as payment for this last service to his mother. Thus he started on his way to his first teacher's house and delivered both to his son.

The next morning, about to depart with tears welling from his eyes, he sang a Hymn on Illusoriness.

True to his resolve, Milarepa spent his further life in different mountain caves in most austere asceticism. Begging alms on his way to the Dragkar-Taso Cave, it so happened that he came also to the tent of his aunt. At first she was terribly frightened that he would again do them some harm; but slowly he succeeded in convincing her that he had changed his life completely. When she came to learn that he had still his mother's little field, but had no use for it in his present way of living, she came with some provisions and asked his permission to cultivate his field. In return she promised to provide him regularly with grains, butter and cheese. Milarepa agreed and was glad to be rid of it. She then brought him sixty measures of barley-flour, butter, grease and some clothes, and with these provisions he reached the Dragkar-Taso Cave. Finding it very comfortable, he decided to stay there and took the vows of not descending to any village or habitation.

Milarepa then continued his meditation, day and night, for over three years and was happy to feel how his spiritual knowledge expanded continuously. Though he was living on a starvation ration of only twenty measures of barley-flour per year, one day his provisions were exhausted. But true to his vows, he did not consider even for a moment to go begging alms. Coming

out of his cave and looking around for something eatable, he discovered a sunny spot with good springs of water and plenty of nettles growing round about. From now onwards he lived of nettle broth alone, and continued his meditation. This is how he described his physical condition of that time: "I had no clothes on the outside of my body, nor any wholesome food inside. My body became shrunken to a mere skeleton; and it was greenish in hue, just like the nettles, and over it grew a covering of greenish hair." Hunters and villagers, who once in a while passed by, got frightened at his sight, taking him to be a ghost. When he finally convinced them that he was a human being, they wanted food from him. Unable to believe that he had nothing whatsoever, they searched his cave, but in vain, and angrily, sometimes even ill-treated him, thinking he was hiding his provisions. But though he broke physically down under their pitiless blows, he felt only compassion for them. They could not help being impressed by his ascetic way of living and by his songs which both slowly worked a change into their minds.

At an annual festival at Kyanga-Tsa Milarepa's sister Peta heard some people sing a song about Yogic Comforts'. Deeply moved by it, she asked from whom they had learned it. Whereupon they replied: "From your brother." She could not believe that he was still alive and went to his cave to find out the truth. At first, she too was frightened by his sight; only when she heard his voice she recognized him and wept with joy and grief. From now onward she visited him regularly and brought him all that she could get by begging. There started between them an affectionate competition: Peta trying by all means to make her brother come back with her and live as a decent human being among other human beings, whereas Milarepa did his best to persuade Peta to share his religious life in solitude. Besides the many instructions he gave her, he also defined, in very plain

words, true and false shame, as she reproached him repeatedly about his nakedness. "I am proud he told her," that I have obtained the Truth through my being a man; there is no shame in that." With Peta came soon also Zesay to whom he had been betrothed in his childhood; and his aunt brought him again provisions. So it happened that more and more people heard of him and came to see him and got their minds turned towards God.

In the meantime Milarepa had succeeded in acquiring various supernatural powers which he described thus: "By day, I thus felt that I could exercise endless phenomenal powers; by night, in my dreams, I could traverse the universe in every direction unimpededly. I could multiply myself into hundreds of personalities, all endued with the same powers as myself. Each of my multiplied forms could traverse space and go to some Buddha-Loka, listen to the Teachings there, and then come back and preach the Dharma to many persons. I could also transform my physical body into a blazing mass of fire, or into an expanse of flowing or calm water. Thenceforth I persevered in my devotion in a most joyous mood, until finally, I actually could fly. Sometimes I flew to the Min-Khyut-Dzong to meditate, and there I obtained a far greater development of the 'Vital Warmth'"

As he had already become too well-known in these parts, Milarepa decided to go to a more solitary place and started on his way to Lapchi-Kang. But here also devotees and disciples followed him soon. When later on he was once asked by his disciple Rechung, who his first disciples had been, Milarepa gave the strange reply: "Non-human beings, those who had come with intent to torment me." These numerous attacks and temptations of all kinds by Dakinis (some kind of demonesses), his spiritual struggle with them and their final conversion form the content of many beautiful songs, which are not only of great poetical value,

in this life." Then Marpa prepared a mandala and imparted to Milarepa the last and highest Initiations. In course of this celebration Marpa showed himself in the forms of different deities as a parting gift for Milarepa.

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but also psychologically most interesting. In a more expanded form of his life-history his experiences with non-human beings are recorded in the first part, but are unfortunately omitted in the book edited by Evans Wentz.

The increasing veneration for Milarepa wherever he went, arose now and then also the envy of one or the other learned Lamas. Thus it happened that at a big wedding festival Milarepa was placed at the seat of honour, whereas a rich and influential pandit, was placed next to him. Though already offended thereby, he bowed to Milarepa. But, having never bowed to any human being except his Guru, Milarepa did not return the bow. Out of hurt pride the pandit resolved to lower Milarepa before all people present. He suddenly produced a book on philosophy and asked Milarepa to explain it to him word by word. Milarepa replied: "As for the mere word-by-word explanation of these dialectics, thou thyself art sufficient expert. Of such word-knowledge I am ignorant." The pandit internally furious, planned revenge. Promising a high compensation to a concubine of his, he made her offer Milarepa poisoned curds. Milarepa took it smilingly, and said: "Thou hast procured the turquoise as thy fee for doing this deed." Prostrating herself, she implored him not to touch the food. But Milarepa knew that his period on earth had come to an end. He sent message to all those, near and far, who had faith in him, to come immediately with small offerings. In a short time a great assembly had gathered at Lapchi-Kang, and above in the sky could be seen Devas and Dakinis of all kinds. Milarepa spoke to all of them during many days about the apparent truth and the Real Truth. At the end he bestowed in a song his final good wishes on them. A few days later Milarepa showed signs of serious illness. His disciples made preparations for some special worship to propitiate the Gurus, Devas and Dakinis, and were also about to bring some medical help, but Milarepa refused everything

though his physical sufferings were indescribable. He explained, "A *yogi's* illness and that of an ordinary person are not of the same character; to the former it may seem to be accidental. But in this particular instance my illness is to me an adornment." He then emphasized his words with a song on 'A Yogi's Illness.'

Milarepa, having finished his mission on earth, declared: "I have manifested here the phenomena of illness, I will manifest the phenomena of death at Chubar." The last hours there he spent in answering numerous questions and ended his last Instructions with a Hymn of "Yogic Precepts." Then he sank into *samadhi* at the age of 84 years in A.D. 1135.

His passing away was accompanied by many wonderful phenomena: "The firmament contained many wondrously tinted clouds, which assumed the form of royal umbrellas and banners, curtains and draperies, and various other objects of worship. There were profuse showers of blossoms. Clouds of varied colours adorned the mountain peaks and assumed the form of stupas, each with its head bending towards Chubar. Ravishingly melodious music to the accompaniment of heavenly psalms in praise of the departed Saint were heard. And delicious perfume, And delicious perfume, more fragrant than any earthly essence, pervaded the air. Celestial beings, both Devas and Dakinis, bearing various offerings, were seen by many people, as if about to welcome Milarepa."

During the following days these miraculous phenomena continued in manifold forms, and amazing events took place, as the resurrection of Milarepa, by which he manifested his Love and Omnipresence to all his disciples and devotees. □

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Programme for November - December 2012

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

Nov	4	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 11	Swami Dayatmananda
Nov	11	Raja Yoga 21	Swami Shivarupananda
Nov	18	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 12	Swami Dayatmananda
Nov	25	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 13	Swami Dayatmananda
Dec	2	Day Retreat	
Dec	9	Raja Yoga 22	Swami Shivarupananda
Dec	16	Patanjali Yoga Sutras 14	Swami Dayatmananda
Dec	23	No Talk	
Dec	24	Christmas Eve	
Dec	30	No Talk	

Vedanta Study Circle in Cheshire Area

November 18 at 11:00 am

Essentials of Inner Life

Swami Shivarupananda

For information contact Mr Aswani (tel: 01625 527075)
between 9.30 pm - 10.30 pm

Day Retreat

With Swami Dayatmananda and Swami Shivarupananda
at the Vedanta Centre, Bourne End, on 2 December
from 10:00 am until 7:00 pm

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

Christmas Eve Celebration

Monday 24th December
at Bourne End at 5:00 pm

Holy Mother's Puja

Tuesday 1st January 2013
at Bourne End at 4:00 pm

continued from the front cover

reveals Himself to His devotees in a tangible form, which is the embodiment of Spirit.

"The bhakta takes shelter under Vidya-maya. He seeks holy company, goes on pilgrimage, and practises discrimination, devotion, and renunciation. He says that, since a man cannot easily get rid of his ego, he should let the rascal remain as the servant of God, the devotee of God.

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, February 25, 1885.

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John Phillips

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Self-confidence, self-reverence, are of primary importance. Then comes spiritual attainment. The Master used to say "One's Chosen Deity is one's own Self. Self-worshipping is really what is needed." Do you understand? Now what will you do? Take the flowers and offer them at your own feet, put the fruits and sweets into your own mouth, the garland round your own neck....

Swami Akhandananda



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