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### **Crossing the Ocean of ignorance: the Guru ideal**

**Swami Bhavyananda**

**Compiled by David Black from a talk given in November 1989**

#### **Introduction**

Next to the metaphysical doctrines of Vedanta in importance is the institution of a spiritual teacher, a guru. This occupies a central place in the spiritual tradition. Religious ceremonies, study, prayer and meditation begin after paying due respect to the gurus. Even in the Gita, Arjuna surrenders himself to Krishna declaring 'I become your student. Please, guide me'.

In the devotional sense, the guru occupies a place next to God himself. Even non-dualistic, advaitic schools have a very special place for the guru, who is identified with the highest reality. A follower may not worship any deity, but he worships his guru because he removes the ignorance from his eyes. All life's problems stem from ignorance, according to the advaitic teachings. Ignorance first, then desires. If you have real knowledge, no desires will enter your heart. So, ignorance is the crucial thing in our lives, and getting rid of it is the target of spiritual life. Once I have knowledge, I see the

Reality with these very eyes, here and now, not something afterwards.

Three types of guru are traditionally recognised and encountered in spiritual practice: the Divine guru is the first and foremost, the second is the inner guru, (inner awakening is necessary for spiritual life), and third is the human guru.

### **The Divine Guru - 'Imprisoned Splendour'**

The Divine guru - God - is the source of all knowledge, from whence everything comes. Consciousness is self-luminous and is the nature of the Atman, our individual soul. It is the light of the soul that lights everything else. 'He being there, everything else shines'. The source of all light is this reality, God, the ultimate truth. Everything else borrows this light.

Christians might call it 'the kingdom of God within', other traditions may have other expressions. A writer has referred to it beautifully as 'imprisoned splendour'. We have this Divine light within us, but it's imprisoned by this body-mind complex. The inner controller which dwells in the heart of everyone is the Divine guru. That light is there always and it alone gives any significance and meaning to our body and mind. That power in us is constantly awake and if something goes wrong if we make a mistake, it tugs at our sleeve and draws our attention: 'Look here, you're capable of achieving things, but you're going wrong'. This reality always draws our attention to what is right.

Though the Divine guru is always within us, we require help to bring it out and make it powerful, not just inside but outside also. A wise, knowing person can help us very much in the process of awakening the Divine guru within. But God alone is the teacher of all teachers. Spiritual knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation by a succession of teachers. In a way, an Incarnation is a Divine Teacher. God, the Ultimate Reality, requires a human form in which to achieve expression in the world. So, when we say 'Divine Guru', this is the real guru.

### **The Inner Guru - an Awakened Mind**

Now, let us try to understand what this 'Inner Guru' means. We may not get any

guidance from outside if our mind is not ready, cannot accept it. So, my mind must be ready for it. How many people have lived as contemporaries to great spiritual teachers, but they didn't recognise them, because they weren't ready. For bondage or freedom, it's the mind that's responsible. I require the help and co-operation of the mind for my spiritual life.

Effort has to be made to purify the mind by prayer and contemplation. Some people don't like even that! If you're trying to help yourself a little and spend time in useful study or contemplation they think 'What's the matter with you, it's wrong'. That's how the world would look at you, as if you're doing something bad. Go and spend your time in the pub or the Festival Hall, that's perfectly all right, distracting yourself. But to sit down and think for yourself... always I like the teacher who will never answer questions, who'll say 'Think for yourself'.

So, all of us have to think for ourselves first, because this mind has got to be made clean, through which the light can come out. That's what's called purity of mind. Once we have purified our mind and turned it Godwards, then the mind helps us to progress in our interior life. When I'm prepared, the required right guru is there, just in front of me, or the book that I want is there. But for that to happen, I must be ready. How often it happens to all us us; I'm always seeing a certain book on a bookshelf, until one day I open my eyes and say 'My God, what is contained in this book? How did I miss all this?' Because my mind was not ready to see it. When it is ready, you have the message. The message may come from the Divine guru or a human guru, but ultimately our mind has to accept and assimilate it. God himself may come and stand before me, but if I am not ready, he has to go his way. God is a gentleman. He wants to come into your life; comes and knocks at your door, the heart. He finds you preoccupied, waits a little, then goes his way. We must open the door and welcome Him, then only can he come. We want to treat Him as less than a gentleman. We expect everything from him, but I myself don't want to do anything. It will not work that way. I have got to prepare myself to meet him.

Normally, our minds dwell on a sensate level only. The sensual experiences are marvellous, they preoccupy us. When we receive spiritual instruction, it does not sink deep enough to transform us. Often people say 'Oh, I've taken initiation and for 20 years I've been practising, and nothing has happened'. But you never allowed anything to

happen! Our minds are preoccupied with other things, so no transformation can come in.

Some effort has to be made to purify the mind and build up a spiritual mood. You see human beings have got a lot of freedom; freedom to do right as much as to do wrong. That freedom, I must use positively, then only it helps, not otherwise. We've got to discipline ourselves for that search, as much as we do, for example, in the field of science. So this is what is expected of us. By repeated practice of prayer and contemplation and repetition of a holy name, the spiritual mood is built up. The more I do it, the more prepared I become. Once I am prepared, I encounter what is to be encountered. Till that time, I can't.

The intuitive faculty is dormant in most people. By a well-disciplined, pure life it becomes manifest. Such an awakened mind is our inner guru.

How do we recognise this inner guru, since we may mistake our ego for our inner guru? Ego is the biggest barrier for us, you see. Indeed, one has to make this mistake and be misled. Then only we understand it, because we can easily go wrong.

The awakened mind is characterised by what may be called Sattvika buddhi, a purified, positive mind. The Gita describes an awakened mind as one which distinguishes between action and inaction, and foolish action. It's able to distinguish between what is to be done and what is not to be done, what is to be feared and what is not to be feared. It understands also what leads to liberation and what leads to bondage in our daily activities.

Purity is a state of being in which we are close to God. You are pure because you are in touch with a pure being, which induces purity in me. Is there any way of knowing a pure person, one who is in close touch with God? What signs would we expect to see? First and foremost, he would be a man without ego. His ego has been completely merged into God, so there is nothing like self-assertion in him. He thinks of God, talks of God and lives in Him. He cannot talk of himself, except as a servant or a child of God. He may know much, yet gives the impression that he knows nothing. He's humble, quiet and thorough. When he does anything, he puts his whole heart into it, for he knows he is doing God's work. With him, no work is unimportant, since all work is worship. He sees God everywhere and in everything that's there, constantly. Whatever thoughts he has are pure. He's always cheerful, be the circumstances what they may. If there's a

problem, he accepts it as one of the ways by which God wants to test his faith in Him. He prays to God for the requisite strength and wisdom to solve the problem.

If he succeeds in solving the problem, he attributes his success to God and is not elated. If he fails, he is not depressed but thinks it's God will and is intended to make him more humble and self-introspective. To him, the means is as important as the end. 'I've done my best, it's God's business'. He's calm and collected under all circumstances and concerned for all, even those inimical to him. It's a privilege that he's able to help them.

So that is the standard of purity we must pursue, not just playing with it. Fantasies of an unpurified mind can cause difficulties for oneself and others. An intense spiritual life alone can awaken the inner guru. Till then, we must have the humility to accept a human guru who is available to us. It doesn't mean we go and accept anyone on the road, one has to be careful of that. If we are earnest and seeking, we will find the right person.

### **The Human Guru - an Eternal Relationship**

Now, coming to the final one, the human guru. Who can be a human guru? How do we recognise him? How do I know he can help me? A teacher is one who can help to awaken our inner guru and bring about realisation of the Ultimate Reality. That's the biggest test - does he awaken my inner feelings? First, he teaches the pupil about the spiritual ideal and means of attaining it. He gives the means to do it. He teaches about the practice of devotion, prayer, meditation and contemplation.

Most of the spiritual journey is an unknown path, because most of our being is tuned only to material things in life. I'm involved and tied up with it. So when I earnestly think of spiritual life, I really do not know where or how to get it, I'm lost. So we need help from one who has traversed some way on this road, maybe not the whole way, but at least knowing the direction. Such a person can throw some light for the benefit of others, based on his own experience.

It's not a classroom, where you've paid your fees and you have a right to be there, and having received the pay, the teacher is bound to teach. This relationship is different. To get the best out of it, you have to efface your ego completely. The disciple does not

simply listen to the lesson and ask questions. He reverentially serves and worships his teacher and absorbs spirituality from living close to him. He sees a model in him and tries to absorb it. The best qualities available he tries to bring out in himself. A book cannot do that, only a living person can. Only a lit candle can light others. Simply keeping a dozen candles together doesn't make for light, they have got to be lit. That is the position of a teacher and student.

The guru on his part humbly assumes responsibility for all growth and spiritual progress of his student. So, it's a great responsibility towards each other. The student, on his part, simply submits himself to it, serves the teacher, observes him day and night and sees what he really is, not simply accepting him. 'See the guru during the day and during the night - then only accept him.' You must know the truth by serving the teacher and questioning relentlessly to know the truth. There is no ego in that questioning, based on your need to understand.

It's not the guru's business to be teaching scripture or dogma, the 'ABC'. Enquiry into the nature of our spiritual self, and experiencing it, is the goal towards which the spiritual guide helps. Without much intellectual knowledge and learning, a person can be spiritual. In fact, learning, wonderful speaking ability, exposition of books are only an obstruction, since all those abilities give you name, fame and a big ego. It's not the guru's business to be doing all this. He stands by the pupil and guides him every step. His real function is to awaken the spiritual current and turn the mind of the student inwards. He inspires us to keep the goal of spiritual emancipation before us, ahead of other, lesser goals. A teacher will see that you have your priorities right. Nothing wrong with lesser goals, they have their place. But that's not the end and aim of human life.

When we start our spiritual life, our faith has not yet become stable - rightly resolved, but not stable enough yet. There are many obstacles to overcome; want of responses from within, slothfulness, dryness and despair can easily dampen our spirit. I'm rightly resolved, but obstacles are overwhelming. We are faced with the struggle of unforeseen forces of this spiritual world. It belongs to a different world, it's a rarified atmosphere. So situations which I don't anticipate at first come before me. I don't know how to handle it. We're inexperienced to understand the workings of our own mind. There are many pitfalls on the way, we're not familiar with the forces released during our spiritual practices. So I simply could give up my effort. We need help, and where else should we seek for help except in an able teacher? Contact with a human guru can help much in

resolving these problems. The ultimate problem is a far cry, but at least the immediate problems have to be resolved, and this is where a human guru can help.

An ordinary teacher opens the ordinary mind, in schools and colleges. A spiritual teacher helps in opening our intuition, lying dormant within us. He quickens our spiritual impulse. It's there in us, but somebody has to give it a little stimulus. That's what a teacher can do.

How does he do it? It's done by a process known as initiation. In this ceremony, a mantra is communicated to the student. You can get it from a book, but in this ceremony it's communicated. It has a potential power which, when activated by faithful repetition, leads to purification of the mind and unfoldment of spiritual potential. First I must have faith, and the teacher must have some power, and he sows it when the ground is ready. Otherwise it's like seeds thrown on the rock - they won't germinate. But when they fall on fertile soil, all the seeds germinate. That is what happens in this initiative ceremony. There's nothing esoteric about it. Secondly, the guru transmits the power of his own inspiration to the student.

That's why it's a very special relationship. In the small ceremony of initiation, the inspiration which he has in him, based on his own experience, however small it may be, I can take. Because I don't have anything you see. He's much better than me. He's not the best, but he's the best which is available to me. So I can use it to my advantage. Thirdly, an extraordinary guru can transform a student by touch or even a wish. Such gurus are rare, it's not every day we come across such people.

The biggest obstacle in our spiritual life is our ego. Unquestioning obedience to the guru is the best way to soften this ego, because it's my own voluntary submission - nobody is forcing me to do it. Because I volunteer and I need it, it's beneficial to me. If the disciple unreservedly opens his heart, the guru will be able to freely correct the defects and give a few raps on the knuckles, perhaps. But for that, voluntary submission is necessary, not simply a formal submission. If necessary, he will firmly discipline him, and that disciplining by the teacher will be taken as a blessing by a worthy disciple. He will cherish it all through his life.

In the relationship between the teacher and the student, there is no place for vanity or arrogance. Teachers also can be arrogant you see! The teacher links the disciple to an

unbroken spiritual tradition. Spiritual power flows from generation to generation through worthy teachers gaining momentum, because every teacher is trying to do something about it himself. So what he has received, is regenerated or additional power added to it. The collective spiritual power of a tradition gives a tremendous boost to aspirants. It's difficult to be on one's own in spiritual life.

It is believed that the relationship of the guru and the disciple is an eternal one, death does not bring an end to it. It is believed that the teacher cannot attain liberation until the disciples too attain it. This depth of faith is there. The guru vicariously accepts the suffering of his own students. So the disciples have a great responsibility not to inflict suffering on their own teacher. They have to live a pure and worthy life, and be regular in their spiritual practices. The teacher seeks nothing from his disciple, he accepts responsibility and suffers if necessary to help the student.

All people are not equally open to the grace of God. Our ego and past tendencies offer resistance in developing a respectful attitude towards the Divine. With the blessings of the guru, the journey will become less strenuous - it's still a strenuous journey, but it will be less so. It is for these reasons that an aspirant feels indebted to the guru.

### **Is the Guru essential?**

Now, is the guru essential? No, it's not necessary. If you are determined, if you have that strength of mind, if you can make it all alone, why should I subordinate to anybody? It's not necessary for those who are the exceptional souls, highly elevated, sensitive, whose inner light is already directing and guiding them; for them no outer guru is necessary. Their awakened mind derives guidance and help from everything around them. Their perception is already full of knowledge. So they see the Reality already, and the required strength to further unfold the dormant Divine is not a problem for them. But first, that understanding is necessary. However, for most people a physical guru is necessary. When we're not strong we require help from somebody who knows things a little better than us. He gives us guidance and discipline to evolve spiritually.

### **Why not use books instead?**

The question can be asked, can we acquire all this knowledge and the techniques from



books? Even the mantras are printed, so why should I bother to go and spend hard-earned money on a guru, whose credentials are doubtful? The problem with books is to understand the spirit of the teachings. How often we hear people say they've wasted their money on a book, because to understand the spirit of the teaching is difficult. Secondly, can such reading generate the required faith? A book alone simply cannot generate such faith. We need a teacher who can orientate our mind properly and instill some faith into us. By seeing a person on the way, you're inspired. Faith is not simply belief, it's orientation of the soul towards an ultimate goal. My inner being is tuned, then I have no more doubt about it. Once that faith comes into our life, 'faith sees the invisible, believes in the incredible and is rewarded with the impossible'. I understand it only then, not before that. Beforehand we think 'Ah, these religious charlatans'.

So I must be ready for it to understand if there is truth in what this man is telling or not. Simply reading a book, I cannot make it out. It is awakening of the soul from its deep slumber. A lighted candle alone can light another candle. The burning words of the preceptor alone can inflame the heart of the aspirant.

What a living guru contact can convey, books simply cannot. A living contact with an able guru can be a source of strength, a perennial source of faith and inspiration. It can keep us afloat when the sufferings of the 'dark night of the soul' afflict us, and they do afflict us all. Sometimes, after years of spiritual effort, one feels 'Oh, my time has been wasted. There's nothing much to gain here.' One feels it because somehow circumstances, other influences, have overtaken us. I need help, where do I look for it?

### **Disadvantages of the Guru ideal**

Now, any system, the best of systems, also degenerates. The law of entropy is built into everything that happens in this world, even to these gurus! So let's try to understand, what are the drawbacks of this 'guru cult business'. It's good to see both sides. That principle, however noble, degenerates in course of time when it falls into the hands of unworthy people. In our times, it has been misused to exploit the simple and unwary. The system itself has certain drawbacks. If the guru is not of the highest type it is as the Upanishads would put it, 'like the blind leading the blind'. The disciples may build up a personality cult, disregarding the principle behind it. The relationship may degenerate to an ordinary human level - the guru becomes a father figure, whom they imitate

without much spiritual benefit.

To understand the spiritual stature of the guru, the student must try to develop spiritual intuition. Hence, the emphasis on spiritual practices. Some people tend to bank too much on the blessings of the guru and neglect the spiritual practices, thinking 'He will do everything for me; I don't need to do anything; he will do it.' That is not right.

Spiritual progress cannot be got by proxy. The disciple cannot gain anything by becoming a parasite on the guru. Finally, because of excessive personality cult, rival groups come into existence and bring a bad name to religion itself. This ultimately leads to inter-group jealousy, rivalry and disharmony, destroying peace.

### **Advantages of the Guru ideal**

What are the advantages of the system? These outweigh the defects. The system makes the transmission of spiritual truths practicable. It has kept alive spiritual experience as a living tradition, a continuity. A teacher leads a student to this experience. A church is not needed for this living tradition, and the system is a great help to a beginner in spiritual life. Apart from the teaching, the guru is a model, providing much needed support to an earnest student. It's easy in the beginning to concentrate on the godly qualities of the teacher and direct the mind towards a chosen ideal. We learn our first lessons of self-surrender to God by humbly serving the guru.

Thus, the guru proves to be a great prop and support in spiritual life. Successive teachers in different traditions have continued to mould and shape the destinies of spiritual aspirants from generation to generation. Only those who have lived close to a real teacher know what his blessing really means. The debt to a guru cannot be paid back. There is no substitute for this guru tradition. He is a guru who takes you across the ocean of ignorance to illumination.

### **Final thoughts**

The institution of the guru is universal; in all religions we find some sort of 'guru-ship'. The spiritual guide is very much present in Islamic and Christian mystic traditions. God of course is in all beings. Once the egoistic concept of 'I and mine' is dissolved, God is felt in the whole of existence. The barrier of ego obstructs my perception. The guru removes this ignorance by giving you knowledge, that is the purpose. The teacher opens our eyes to this reality and leads us to this awareness. The real guru is well grounded in

God awareness. As God is manifest in him in a very great measure, he is God-like, so we worship him like God. The Vedantic scriptures say, 'the knower of Brahman is *Brahman* himself'.

To get a human birth is difficult, and having got it, to have a spiritual ideal, a desire for emancipation, is difficult. Then, to find somebody who can help us is much more difficult. By God's grace alone, you get all three. One should constantly make an effort to be a competent student, so that a teacher may be found. The guru, once found, inspires us to keep the goal of spiritual emancipation constantly before us. He helps in discerning the world of maya around, and in freeing ourselves from the grip of ego which keeps us bound. Or, if we're caught, he'll be able to 'diagnose the disease'! If rightly diagnosed, remedies can be found. This is the main role of the guru. All other things are secondary. he may expound scriptures or doctrines, but these may be obtained from other sources as well - we don't need an eminent guru for that. His silent presence transforms the student. So to be in his very presence is good enough to inspire us.

The relationship of spiritual teacher and student is not a temporary one. It's a commitment for life, it's a total involvement. It's an obligation between two persons who are bound to each other for ever, till this problem of duality is completely removed. It is the purest and most sublime of relationships.

## **The Poet Saint Tulsidas**

### **Upendra Chandra Dutta**

From time immemorial two currents of different types of culture have been running in the land of Bharata - sometimes parallel, sometimes crossing and sometimes fusing on one broad stream. One of them is Aryan, Vedic and Monistic, the other is non-Aryan, Tantric and Dualistic. Both of them have found their utterances in the Upanishads and attempts have been made from time to time to synthesize these elements by philosophers, prophets and saints. The Monistic torch was carried by the Rishis of Old,

Buddha, Mahavira, Goudapada, Sankara and others, while the Dualistic current was pushed by the Pancharatras and Bhagavatas, Ramanuja, Ramanand, Kavir, Chaitanya, Mira, Tulsidas and other numerous devotees. As thought and feeling grow in an individual, organically in the same manner knowledge and devotion grow in the mind of every saint; but their difference is based on different philosophical standpoints and emphasis laid on knowledge or devotion as the practical method. Every one of them tried to reconcile in some form or other the opposing philosophical doctrines of the Upanishads in a manner peculiar to himself, till a grand reconciliation was reached in the lives and teachings of the double personality - Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.

There are saints and saints in India, but she is particularly lucky in having a number of poet saints, of whom the most well-known are Jaidev, Vidyapati, Chandidas, Ramprasad, Kavir, Surdas and Tulsidas. Tulsidas is decidedly the most popular among the Hindi-speaking people. His Ram Charita Manas is a wonderful book, it is the book of books, reflecting the spirit of Indian culture and civilization. He was a man of great vision endowed with the rare faculty of epic imagination and lyric execution. Above all he was a true saint; so he could represent the soul of India. And this is why what is the Bible to Christians and the Koran to Muhammadans, the Ramayana of Tulsidas is to the Hindi-knowing Hindus. Of course, the Bhagavat Gita is more comprehensive, for it lays equal stress on Jnana, Bhakti and Karma, but as it is more deeply concerned with abstruse and abstract doctrines and written in Sanskrit, it is not meant for the masses. The popular demand has been met by the Ramayana of Tulsidas. It has given a section of Hindus law, religion and culture and has held a large number of people at a pretty high level of morality.

The life story of Sri Ramchandra has occupied a very large space in Indian life. Sri Ram has set forth in His life all the ideals that a man should try to realize. He is called Maryada Purushottama-an ideal incarnation. So, there are many Ramayanas: The Valmiki Ramayana, the Adhyatma Ramayana, the Yoga Vasishtha Ramayana, the Ramayanas of Kasidas, of Kesavdas and of Tulsidas. Even the Buddhists and Jains have their Ramayanas. But no Ramayana other than that of Tulsidas satisfies a scholar as much as a day-labourer. It is a book of reference and a balm of repose. It is cited by people in moments of joy as well as of sorrow. It is a sacrilege to question its authority. It has captured the head and heart of Hindusthan. Go to any up-country village, you will find people sitting in groups in the evening after the day's hard toil, and devoutly

listening to the Ramayana of Tulsidas. Dr. Grierson, a well-known Hindi scholar, expressed in J.R.A. Society in July, 1903, thus:

"Over the whole of the Gangetic valley his great work (the Ramayana) is better known than the Bible is in England."

Apart from Ram Charita Manas Tulsidas is supposed to have written 24 books, of which the most well-known is Vinay Patrika. These books contain poems mostly lyrical in form and devotional in spirit centering round the personalities of Ramchandra, Krishna, Janaki, Parvati, Hanuman and others. Some critics consider Vinay Patrika to be his masterpiece. It contains hymns and prayers to different deities asking for devotion to Ramji in a spirit of extreme humility (Vinay).

Tulsidas is one of the nine makers of Hindi literature. In chronological order he comes fourth, but from literary point of view his position is unquestionably first. Here it will be very interesting to note that three widely known saint poets - Kavirdas, Surdas and Tulsidas - appeared at about the same time. Mira Bai, a unique devotional figure of India, is another contemporary of Tulsidas. When the divine love of Chaitanya was flooding the land, these bards of paradise were harping their divine tune in Aryavarta and turning the hard earth to a veritable heaven. This Vaishnava movement is rightly called the medieval revival of India. It is characterized by subtlety of thought and intensity of feeling, breaking of barriers and breadth of spirit. This goes to show that great men, like constellations, have a tendency to grow together. They grow and help others to grow, they along with others live the life eternal.

Like other historical personages the time of Tulsidas was preceded by conflict of ideals and confusion of ideas. Monotheism of the Vedic India was greatly disturbed by the teachings of the Puranas and their effect on ordinary people. The three aspects of Brahman - Existence, Knowledge and Bliss became Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesa. These personalities were differentiated and different schools were founded. In course of time the fundamental principle of unity was forgotten and different sects began to fight with one another. The divine energy was personified as Sakti and a new cult was made. Numerous deities cropped up. Each attribute of the great God was personified and became a God or Goddess. This sort of mass polytheism received a rude shock when it came in contact with the strict monotheism of Islam. Many became shaken, doubting and questioning began and as a matter of reaction Nanak and Kavir had to make their

appearance to guide these tendencies in the direction of a new synthesis. These masters rendered great service to the cause of religion by separating much of the husk from the grain. The sects of Nanak and Kavir remind one of two other modern sects known as Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj founded by Raja Rammohan and Swami Dayananda by way of reaction against Christianity and Islam.

Ramananda belonging to the sect of Ramanuja was the first to break away from the rigidly orthodox school of the South. He is the first Ramanujist who made non-Brahmins his disciples, of whom one is Kavir, a weaver, and the other is Ruidas, a pariah. Kavir rose to great spiritual height. He preached against idolatry and maintained the doctrine of God with quality and without quality, and emphasised the latter. His ideas were mostly based on Vedantism and Sufism. Though Kavir had a large following and his followers were both Hindus and Muslims, the masses could not rise to his height. His attempts to reconcile Hindus and Muslims failed just after his passing away. His contemporary, Surdas, known to some as Bilwamangal, preached love for Krishna in his masterly work Sursagar and other writings but his thoughts were too deep and language too stiff for the people. So he could not touch them in spite of his genuine qualities. Now comes Tulsidas, wiser with the lessons taken from the lives of his illustrious predecessors Kavir and Surdas. He did not try to reconcile Hindus and Muhammadans. He wanted to bring different sects within the Hindu fold in harmony with one another, and gave such a popular form to the abstract scriptural truths that they found a ready response.

The life-story of Tulsidas is still in obscurity. There is not a single fact or incident which is not questioned or contradicted. However, after much discussion the following facts are almost accepted at present.

Goswami Tulsidas was born on the bank of the Jumna at Rajpur, Tahsil Man, Dt. Banda in the year 1530. His father was Atma Ram Dube and Mother Hulsī, and his first name was Rambola. On renouncing the world he became known as Tulsidas. It is said that he was much devoted to his wife. He could not stand separation from her at all. Once she left for her father's place without his knowledge. Tulsidas followed in her track impatiently; and when they met, his wife said, "O if only you had as much love for God, what would follow!" This remark became an eye-opener to him. The stream of his love was turned from man to God, the centre of his attraction was changed and the man became a god.

Leaving his home behind at the age of 25, Tulsidas became the disciple of saint Narahari Das, belonging to the Ramananda sect. Then he travelled from one holy place to another making pilgrimage. He visited Muttra, Vrindavan, Kurukshetra, Prayag, Chitrakote, Puri, Soron, etc., but he spent much of his time at Ayodhya and Benares.

There are internal evidences that his parents left him in his childhood, and he had to go begging from door to door. Probably his parents died, and he had nothing to fall back upon. He like the great poet Homer must have `begged from seven nations.'

Mirabai, Queen of Mewar, was so much filled with the divine love for Krishna that she could not mind worldly things. Her husband and relatives tried all possible means to turn her mind, but to no purpose. Then devices were made to put an end to her life. As they too failed; persecution began. When things passed all limits of forbearance she wrote to Tulsidas thus: "O lord, I bow down to you. I wish to pass my days in the company of saints and in devotion to God, but my own people stand in the way. From childhood I have made friends with Giridhar Gopal (Sri Krishna). This relation does not cease, as the moment of our first union happened to be auspicious. Now please write to me what to do." Tulsidas wrote her back, "A great friend averse to Seeta Ram should be given up like a deadly enemy. A saint does not scruple to leave father, mother, brother, son and husband, who are the greatest benefactors on earth, like a straw, if they go against God. Prahlad had to leave his father, Vibhishan his brother, Bharat his mother, Bali his Guru and Gopis their husbands. The lovers of Ram are the only friends. Anjan (a soothing balm to eye) is of no use to the sightless. In my opinion you should do whatever contributes to the friendship with Ramchandra, who is dearer than life." On reading this letter Mira left her home and moved from place to place making pilgrimage.

The goal of life is God. Those who help God-realization are friends, and those who oppose are enemies. All the relations in the world should be judged by this standard.

Some supernatural incidents are current about Tulsidas. His writings reveal nothing of the sort. It is said that while Tulsidas was doing tapasya at a suburb of Benares, his holy contact freed an evil spirit, which in its turn wanted to do him some good. Tulsidas longed to see Ramchandra and nothing else. The evil spirit said, "Hanuman, the devotee of Ram, is the only person who can help you in this. Go to such and such a place where the Ramayana is read, there Hanuman sits behind all in the guise of a leper. Go and seek shelter under him." Tulsidas met Hanuman and under his guidance went to Chitrakote to

pass his days in thoughts of Ram. There he had the vision of Ram and Lakshman going a-hunting on horseback. He was blessed with the vision of Ram. Then at the suggestion of Hanuman, Tulsidas undertook to write the Ramayana. On his pilgrimage to Vrindavan, when he saw the image of Madanmohan, Krishna, it took the form of Ram. On reviving a Brahmin who died, his reputation as a Yogi spread far and wide. At this the Emperor of Delhi, probably Jahangir, asked him to show some miracle. Tulsidas said that he knew nothing but the name of Ram. At this he was put in prison where he recalled Hanuman and he was miraculously set free. It is said that certain thieves made several attempts to get into the Asrama of Tulsidas, but they were prevented by a person with a bow and arrows. On hearing this the repentant saint gave away all he had to the poor, and the thieves became his disciples.

Even if the supernatural elements be not true, the greatness of Tulsidas does not suffer in the least. As a poet, as a preacher of religion and a man of realization, he will be looked upon as a towering personality commanding respect and admiration from people of every age and clime.

Goswami Tulsidas was a Smarta Vaishnava. Smartas never oppose any sect or doctrine; they have equal regard for every deity, though generally they profess to be Saivas. They lay more stress on devotion. Tulsidas has spoken very highly of Siva who is the Guru of the universe. In fact Siva, the knowledge aspect of God, does the work of a Guru by kindling spiritual light in aspirants. Knowledge leads to bliss, and in its highest form it is bliss that is represented by Ram (from the Sanskrit root Ram meaning to enjoy). Tulsidas has given proper place to knowledge and devotion, though he considers the latter to be superior. He holds the views of God with form and without form, with attributes and without attributes. But his Ishta or the Chosen Deity is Ramchandra. According to Tulsidas God must be realized through devotion mixed with knowledge. 'Devotional practices without knowledge (discrimination and reasoning) are futile like the attempt to kill a snake by striking the mound of earth in which it lives, or to kill a bird by cutting a tree in which it dwells.' Again, knowledge without devotion is risky. Unmixed knowledge is compared to 'a light that may be blown out by a sudden blast.' A man may be blessed with many worldly gifts, but 'without devotion he is useless like a cloud without water.' Devotion or love is the essence of spiritual life.

Quite consistent with the qualified monism of Ramanuja, Tulsidas believes Brahman to be the ultimate Reality of which the individual soul and the world are mere parts or



expressions. The appearance of the world is deceptive and illusory. 'As an oyster is taken for silver or the sun's rays in a desert look like water,' Reality appears as the world through the force of Maya - God. Iswara and Jivas are different in nature, the latter is subject to ignorance, pleasure, pain and egotism, while the former is ever free and luminous by nature. An Incarnation is that special manifestation of God who like God is 'self-conscious' and free from ignorance throughout. He is a centre of mighty spiritual forces intended to restore equilibrium that is lost. These traditional Hindu ideas have been nicely and forcibly expressed by Tulsidas in his immortal poems. He was the spokesman of his age and in certain respects anticipated the great movements of the future.

The problem of God with attributes (Saguna) and God without attributes (Nirguna) has given rise to long discussions from the theologians of every country. Tulsidas says, "There is no difference between Saguna and Nirguna. That which has neither form nor quality becomes Saguna out of love for devotees." "How is it that Nirguna becomes Saguna? - Just as water becomes ice." Both of them are the same, but appear to be different. In fact God has the infinite power of assuming infinite forms and attributes and at the same time of having none. He is much more than what we can think of; otherwise He would have been one of us. It is purely a temperamental difference that distinguishes a Jnani from a Bhakta. Tulsidas himself was a Saguna Upasaka (worshipper of God with attributes) and has made the path of devotion supreme. The poet saint says, "Know the whole of creation to be filled with Ram and Seeta and bow down to everyone with folded hands." This reminds one of the teachings of Kapila to his mother Devahuti in the Bhagavata. This method can bring Samadarsana (equal sight). It is a means and it too is the end. Sri Ramakrishna says that a perfect man is he who after realizing unity in Brahman sees that Brahman has become everything. Blessed is the poet who has preached this truth and thrice blessed is the saint who has realized it.

(Reprinted from Prabuddha Bharata 1934)

## The Message of the Upanishads (continued)

### Swami Swahananda

The Upanishadic teachings affirm the deathless, immortal nature of the soul. The moment you have known that you are this ultimate Spirit, that you are one with it, that this Spirit has no death, you have attained what is called deathlessness. God himself has been identified in the Upanishads with amritam, immortality, and with abhayam, fearlessness. God is immortality itself, because He is the Ultimate Reality, which knows no change. And the moment you have realized your real nature, you have become That. After knowing Brahman, you become That - you have acquired that immortal nature. It was there within you all the time; now you have discovered it. What will happen as a result? Fear will go. What is there to fear? I am deathless. Some psychologists have said that man has about half a dozen fundamental fears. Of these, three are centered around his body: illness, decrepitude, and death. So half of man's fears are centered around the body itself. Now the moment you know that you will continue, that there is no death for you, all fear goes. There is death for the body, of course, but no death for the real you, who is not the body, not the mind, but the Spirit. Once you know that you are not these limiting things - the body and the mind - you will not be completely affected by fear if anything happens to them. Fear is the major problem - more of a problem than even the actual experience. Apprehension is the problem. If a blow falls on you, you don't mind much. But before the blow falls, the whole body becomes tense to receive the blow. So much of suffering is in apprehension, in fearing that a blow is coming. But when the blow actually falls, you already have it, so the body relaxes, the muscles relax. Vedantic realization is nothing else - just to know that you are the Spirit, that's all. If really you understand this - if you really understand - then there is no fear. Even if you understand it thirty percent - in a theoretical way - then you will have thirty percent less fear.

Swami Vivekananda pointed out that the immediate result of the experience of the Spirit is a sense of freedom. The moment you know that you are not limited by this body, or this mind, which are the limiting adjuncts - the moment you can disidentify from the body and the mind - a tremendous feeling of freedom will arise. Even in a normal situation we can see this. Take the example of a little girl. She grows up, marries, and has children. Her "I", her ego, spreads out over half a dozen people: husband, children, relations. That is, an expansion of the ego has already taken place. So their joys and their sufferings are her joys and her sufferings. If a person belongs to a

group, and if anywhere in this group there is some success, he feels, "Ah, it is my success." And an individual feels identified with humanity in general. If a man anywhere in the world has discovered something, other men take pride, and say, "Yes, we have done it." This is an expansion of consciousness in some form. The moment you are able to identify yourself with a larger group, through language, religion, or ideas, or even with humanity at large, your ego has expanded. Their joys have become your joys. Their sufferings have become your sufferings.

From this you can understand that if you are really able to identify yourself with the Totality, a tremendous sense of release will come - tremendous freedom - there is nothing to bind you. You are everywhere - that is the idea. That is the description given in the Upanishads - that the Atman is fast. Though it is sitting here, it reaches New York. You will take a few hours to reach New York, but after reaching there, you will find that it is there already. This is because the Atman is all pervading; it is everywhere. It is far off; it is also the nearest of the near - much nearer than the child on its mother's bosom. That is the description of the Atman given in the holy books, in the Upanishads. The moment you have identified yourself with the Atman, or known your real nature to be identified with it, a sense of release will come.

What else will follow from this understanding? There will be social and ethical implications. The social implication will be that anything that pushes man forward, towards physical freedom, mental freedom, and spiritual freedom, is good. There will have to be some criteria for deciding what is good and what is bad. The Vedantins say, freedom is your real nature. By salvation, they mean freedom. Mukti is the word used in the Upanishads. So if freedom - our real nature - is the goal, then whatever takes us towards that goal is good. If man is bound, his chains will have to be broken, physically speaking.

If somebody, saying he has taken the idea of Vedanta, fights against all injustice, he is perfectly a Vedantin. We had a swami in England, a devotee of Ramakrishna, who started his own movement. He would write of a "spiritual communism," based, he said, on communistic ideas deriving from Vedanta. If there is the same soul everywhere, then there must be absolute equality. Why should equality be valued only in the spiritual field? Why not also in the physical field? That is a corollary. Equality should also be promoted in the physical field. And of course, he cites many scriptures and quotations for support. For example, he says that if you hoard things, or acquire things in excess of

your needs, you are a thief - a strong word - because you have deprived somebody else. The idea is very simple; the same soul, the same Spirit exists everywhere, so if you take something extra, you are depriving somebody else. So the ideal will be to lessen the differences as far as possible. Absolutely speaking, whether it is possible to abolish all differences is an open question. It is a difficult question to settle. By and large, the world is created with defects, and some defects will probably always remain. But Swami Vivekananda says that even though we believe that a perfect millennium is not possible, that a perfect world is not possible in the dualistic experience, still, such an ideal is a great motive power for creating a society where there will be no exploitation, where there will be complete harmony, absolute equality. At least that is the goal for which humanity must try. This is the social implication of the Vedantic understanding of oneness of all existence, and its corollary is the necessity of freedom for all people - not merely spiritual freedom, but also physical and mental freedom.

Modern man is under much physical control. Arnold Toynbee puts it very nicely in his *Civilization On Trial*. He says that modern man is being controlled at every turn, though he doesn't always feel it. For example, if you are driving along the road, and suddenly a policeman raises his hand, immediately hundreds of cars will stop. You are being controlled - for your own good, for your own safety - but you are being controlled. Whereas a primitive man could go across the country anywhere he wanted. Nobody was there to tell him, "Don't go this way." And Toynbee asserts that with the progress of science and technology, more and more control will come. But then he adds a very significant point - that man's spirit will not tolerate this type of bondage. It must seek freedom somewhere. If physical freedom is lacking, if it is not possible to give man physical freedom, he will seek avenues for the expression of freedom in the mental and spiritual fields. So according to Toynbee, a wonderful efflorescence of the mental sciences - the arts, philosophical systems, and spiritual things, will develop in the coming century.

Vedanta supports the idea that we are to bring the Upanishadic ideals, by implication, into society. On the spiritual level, we have to realize the same Spirit inhering in all. If a man is living in society, what goal is he to follow? What is the argument for ethical action? Why should man love his neighbour as himself, and not cut his throat? Several reasons have been given which, by and large, rest simply on the fact that some great man has told us to behave in this way. Because the founder of some religion, who has

provided civilization to a society, has told us to behave ethically, we do it. But what is the real reason for ethical behavior? The real reason, say the Upanishads, is that the same Spirit inheres in all. When you harm somebody else, you are really harming yourself. So the necessity for ethical action results from realizing, even vaguely, this idea of oneness. Some sense of identification with others is recognized, and the source of this identification is the Vedantic truth, realized by the great saints, of the oneness of the universe.

The Vedantic teachers, the Upanishadic seers, and the galaxy of saints and sages throughout the centuries, down to Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, experienced the real spiritual nature of the Self and have told us that our real nature is not the body, not the mind, but the Spirit. The moment we appreciate this, many problems will immediately be solved; the more we get ourselves established in this truth, the more shall we be free from all fear, free from all apprehension - and gradually, ultimate realization will follow.

## **Gems from Swami Vijnanananda**

### **Jyotirmay Basu Roy**

From 'Sri Ramakrishna Parshad Swami Vijnanananda', translated by Swami Swahananda, head of Hollywood Centre

If you remain steadfast in your faith, entertaining no prejudice against other faiths, and hold fast to the truth in all circumstances, then the Divine Mother will come and guide you.

The Mother is looking after us all the time, but does not appear before us. We cannot say it is a fault on Her part. She is always with us, only we ourselves refuse to see Her. How can we see Her if we are slaves to our senses and passions? It is these senses and passions which, for their own sport, have kept us in the dark. The only way out is to think of Her night and day, to surrender ourselves to Her unreservedly, with the determination to free ourselves from passions and to effect a complete suppression of

them.

We should hold fast to faith and never lose it. With all the strength of this faith, we should, in all simplicity, patiently pray to the Mother to make us pure in heart, and She will certainly grant our prayer. It is purity of heart that is required. Everyone will achieve Truth in accordance with his temperament when there is purity of heart. Once that is attained, we shall get what we desire.

Everything in the world is a compound of many things; it is only God who is pure and simple. The Vedanta characterizes time, space and causation as Illusion or *Maya*. That *Maya* is the "Mother", the Primordial Energy. To know that *Maya* is to conquer it, and one who has done so is a man of real strength. One who knows the uses of time, and lives it properly in all respects, will gain victory over time, i.e. over life and death.

Invoke the blessing of the Mother - morning, noon, and evening. Pray to Her: "O Mother, give us that intelligence which enables one to realize Divinity." Make your prayer as you find it in the Gayatri.

Our Mother is the embodiment of law. If you conduct yourself in accordance with this law, you will gain complete knowledge and understanding. Going against this law will only lead to inevitable disaster, and you will be pulverized into atoms. This law of God acts silently, it is great and all-powerful. This is what Christians call the Holy Ghost and Hindus call Shakti.

For the sake of devotees, the Mother comes with ten arms, and says: "Shed your fears. You have made Me your sole refuge, and I am, therefore, protecting you with ten arms. Death will be powerless to come anywhere near you. It is for you that I hold the sword."

Whatever we do should be a dedication at the feet of the Mother. Her external manifestations are time, space and causality. As the perfect embodiment of all wisdom, She points out where our duty lies, and that is exactly what we have got to do, my brother, that is what we have got to do.

He is the real monk who can discard the whole bundle of his past impressions and surrender himself completely to God and the Mother. All desires and ambitions should be merged at the feet of God. "I want the Mother and nothing else" should be your motto.

God is all-powerful and so is the Mother.

The Mother knows everything and I am nobody.

Don't you worry about having a vision of the Divine Mother. She is not the Mother of you and me alone, but of all the Universe. The Queen of Lord Shiva wants to hear Her children call her, and therefore keeps Herself concealed, lest after seeing Her they should cease to call Her.

When I utter the name of the Mother, I say: "Ma Anandamayee" (the Mother who is the embodiment of pure joy). Her name confers devotion, faith, reverence, wisdom, wealth and everything else. In the book of Chandi, you find She can give you wisdom and deliverance. The Mother's name gives me greater strength than that of the Master. The Mother is very near and dear to me and my heart is always submissive to Her.

I went on a certain occasion from Belur Math to Kalighat to see the Goddess. The monk accompanying me carefully took me inside the temple where I had a good view of the Goddess and touched Her. When I was going round Her, She was good enough to reveal Herself to me. The kundalini surged upwards and illuminated the sahasrara.

Other incarnations have, almost without exception, addressed God as "Father", whereas our Master was the first to invoke the deity as "Mother". Keshab Babu once asked him to explain the reason for this, to which he replied: "You have seen the limitless ocean and the infinite firmament. With such manifestations of Shakti, (power), can't you recognize the Mother? The Mother is the embodiment of Shakti. Nothing will come unless you call on the Mother. She is everything. As the Mother, (or Shakti personified), She holds the sky and the universe and everything else. Without the Mother's help, can you recognize the Father?" Then Keshab Babu understood, and since then, he started worshipping God as both Mother and Father.

I was also inclined at first to worship God as Father. I, of course, entertained feelings of respect and reverence for the Mother, but felt greater attraction for the Father. Now, I invoke the Mother morning and evening and feel as if I am a small child sitting on Her lap.

Our idea is that Mother Kali, in a whirl of delight, is dancing like one possessed. We know that the Mother Kali is dancing for joy and the universe is quaking under the

rhythm of Her feet, and rushing forwards towards annihilation. To check this frenzied dance of the Mother, Lord Shiva fell flat on the ground before her; and when She saw Him lying at Her feet, She was overcome with shame and stopped her dancing.

Now I find there is no end to Mother's work. The Universe is in a perpetual whirl of motion and work has to go on constantly.

Our Master used to say: "What is the utility of knowing all this? Call on the Mother with all your heart and soul, and She will reveal what She thinks necessary for you." To Keshab Sen, the Master once said: "You have been to so many foreign countries and have seen so many things. But couldn't you see the Mother who is holding all the universe inside Her?"

Whether you invoke the Mother or not, She is looking after you all right. But if you really call on Her, you will be filled with joy. See how the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains and the rivers are all in a quiet meditative mood, as if invoking the Mother and thinking of Her only. Only man, the greatest of all created beings, is engrossed in material comforts and does not think of Her. To invoke the Mother with all one's heart is a very joyful experience. My dear brother, there is not the slightest doubt about it. To doubt is to sin. Her divine light is pervading everything; only Man cannot realize it. Babies, six or seven months old, see that Light and, seeing it, smile and play moving their arms and legs, at the sight of which people say that they are doing so in dream.

Brahman is like a motionless snake. Shakti is like a snake in motion, and that is the kundalini. When this spiritual energy moves upwards, the mind also gets elevated; and when it moves downwards, it draws the mind down to a state of ignorance and darkness. I find that in women this upward trend of energy is more evident. That is because they are part of the divine Shakti.

In all these fifty-three years, the Mother has never appeared before me in Her alluring form. Indeed, She warns me in time against approaching danger and surrounds me on all sides.



## Discrimination

### Swami Dayatmananda

#### Self-awareness (self-observation)

One of our swamis used to say that people are born sleeping, grow up sleeping, live sleeping and die sleeping. There is a lot of truth in it. Most of us go through life like automatons. We breathe, talk, eat, sleep, love, act and react - live most of our life - unconsciously. No wonder there is so little improvement!

Devotees are asked to remember God always. This constant remembrance is not mere mechanical repetition of the name of God. A mantra or a name is only a means of achieving the state of consciousness. The emphasis is on God who is of the nature of Pure Consciousness. Sri Ramakrishna advised Swami Adbhutananda to meditate on the idea behind the name. What is this idea behind the name? God. Similarly a Jnani is advised to remember his Self or to keep enquiring on `Who am I'? Both are pathways to reach the state of Pure Consciousness, Brahman or God.

Great people possess tremendous power of observation, of awareness; greatness is directly proportionate to the power of observation. This power of observation gives them accurate knowledge which leads them to form correct goals and methods. Spiritual life is a life of progression from the unconscious to the conscious, from the conscious to the superconscious. From Tamas to Rajas to Sattva. An awakened soul is one who lives perpetually in a state of pure consciousness. The measure of spiritual progress is increasingly living in a state of consciousness. When this conscious state becomes unbroken man becomes illumined.

#### Here are a few examples of awareness:

Buddha had seen an old man, a sick man and a dead man. These are common sights we come across every day, and yet they bring no discernible change in us. But Buddha did not merely see them; he saw them with full awareness. This led him to conclude that the world is impermanent, and life is full of suffering. It made him seek a way out. The result was he renounced the world, found a way of out of suffering to a life of Blessedness.

Holy Mother Sarada Devi used to get up early in the morning and meditate. Once she was sick and could not get up for a few days at the usual time. Later she became aware that even after she was well the habit of getting up late continued. This awareness made her revert back to the habit of early rising.

It is said that Sri Ramakrishna was a master mimic even from his childhood. Mimicking requires a great deal of observation. He trained his mind to keep fully awake and observe everything thoroughly. As a result, like Buddha, he too came to the conclusion that worldly life is not worth the trouble. This turned his mind to God. He gave it such a thorough training in this respect that his very unconscious kept up the vigil and used to remain conscious! This training acted like a guardian and stopped him from taking a false step even unconsciously. Here is an instance: Sri Ramakrishna was a monk and monks are required at the time of taking monastic vows to renounce all worldly possessions and avoid accumulating anything; for they are required to depend completely on God. Sri Ramakrishna was in the habit of chewing a few spices after taking his meals. One day Sri Sarada Devi tied a small quantity of spices into his wearing cloth. He started to go back to his room but his legs were pulling him towards the Ganges river. He was about to drown when his nephew came and pulled him away just in time. Consciously Sri Ramakrishna was not aware of doing anything wrong. He wondered why his legs were pulling him towards the river even though he wanted to go to his room. Then he remembered his monastic vows. Later he used to say: "If one relies on the Divine Mother completely She will never allow anyone to take one false step". Who was this Divine Mother? We can safely presume that it was his own unconscious mind which was not allowing him to act contrary to his vows. We can also recall his seeing a young monk watching and correcting him in a similar way.

Girish Ghosh, a householder disciple, had given the power of attorney to Sri Ramakrishna. Some time later he was heard saying, 'I will do this'. He was unaware that once he had given up his power to God he had no right to assume doership anymore. Sri Ramakrishna heard him and immediately corrected him: "Girish! What is this you are saying? You should rather say 'If He wills I will be able to do it.'" Even such an advanced soul could slip and do things all unaware! What a lesson to be learnt in the art of developing self-awareness!

This is why one should remain alert at all times. Inadvertence is death in any field of life, much more so in spiritual life. The great Shankara says: "*Hence to the*

*discriminating knower of Brahman there is no worse death than inadvertence with regard to concentration. But the man who is concentrated attains complete success. (Therefore) carefully concentrate thy mind (on Brahman)". (Vivekachudamani, 327)*

The famous Russian teacher Gurdjieff (re-)discovered this important fact that we go through most of our life with very little self-awareness. This is the cause of most of our suffering and the remedy is to live with awareness. Be it physical illness or mental illness self-awareness is the one remedy. So Gurdjieff devised various exercises with the sole purpose of developing self-awareness. Self-awareness leads to self-improvement, better morals and ultimately leads one to God.

### **Practice of self-awareness:**

The very first step in the practice of self-awareness is a strong determination to do so. This determination or aspiration itself helps gather the scattered energies of the mind. It also helps us monitor progress on the way. Without a goal or purpose it is impossible to focus attention on anything. A well defined goal alone can lead us to the right means.

Here we are concerned with the development of awareness, of paying attention to whatever we do. In this regard Vipassana, taught by Lord Buddha, can help us much. Vipassana means clear insight, right knowledge, or the ability to see things as they are. Whenever we experience any object we get two types of knowledge: knowledge of a thing as it is, and then this knowledge coloured by our likes and dislikes, our judgements. For instance if you come across a table your eyes present its shape, size, colour etc. This is knowledge of the table as it is. But then your mind will almost instantly colour it with thoughts such as 'This is a beautiful round table, or, This is a broken useless piece of junk, I must throw it out' etc. The purpose of developing awareness is to be aware of the first type of knowledge, i.e., to be aware of a table as it is without letting the mind colour it with judgements like good, bad, round, flat, beautiful, useless, etc. Once we develop this ability the mind develops the capacity for seeing things clearly which leads gradually to enlightenment.

### **Here are a few exercises:**

1. Watching the breath: Sit down at ease, with spine erect. Relax for a few minutes. Now start watching the breath. Just watch it as though someone else is breathing. Observe whether it is short or long, deep or shallow, strong or weak, and which nostril is

active etc. Do not try to control or force or alter it; just watch. Soon the mind will be filled with interesting thoughts: 'What am I doing? What good is it to watch my breath? I must be stupid! Oh! I am a shallow breather. Why am I wasting my time instead of thinking of God?' etc etc. The purpose of this exercise is just to be aware of the process without being judgemental in the least.

2. Watching the various parts of the body: Now start paying attention to the various parts of the body - how the hands, feet, neck, spine etc are placed, whether they are relaxed or tense etc. Even though you are asked just to watch without the least attempt to control the breathing or the various limbs of the body, you will soon see surprising benefits, though that is not the purpose of this exercise. The breath tends to become deep and rhythmic, and the body starts relaxing!

3. After the mind becomes capable of sustained attention for some time, start observing the various thoughts that are passing through your mind. Just witness all the thoughts. Done sincerely these exercises soon lead you to be aware of whatever you are doing at all times. In time this opens the doorway to the unconscious. Then the motives, thoughts, actions, emotions, phobias, fantasies etc become progressively clearer. This greatly helps us detect our defects and helps us overcome them.

4. Recall any incident that disturbed you in the past. Go through the incident again as though it is happening now. But this time just watch it as a spectator without letting the mind form judgements, who is right or wrong etc.

5. If you are in the habit of meditating, part of the time can (should) be used to watch the mind. Also some time may be spent in finding one's own faults, defects etc.

In fact, the practice of self-awareness can be done at any time - while reading, walking, talking, cooking etc. Practised with patience it becomes a habit which will pave the way to self-improvement.

Self-awareness or self-observation is the only way for any self-improvement. When once this is developed it acts like a faithful watchman and helper. This awareness is the very first step to self-improvement in any form. It gives us correct knowledge about our thoughts, motives, emotions, strengths as well as weaknesses. The practice of self-awareness is not easy. One might say that one who has developed it has already

progressed much in spiritual life.

Self-awareness leads the way to self-analysis which in turn helps us move forward. We will be discussing this in our next article.

## **Religion and Life (continued)**

### **Swami Bhuteshananda**

*Mahendranath Gupta, M., who is the chronicler of The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, wrote this great work from memory after Sri Ramakrishna's passing away. Is this true? Again, are the numerous stories in the Puranas true?*

Mahendranath Gupta has described his personal experiences in that work.

The central theme of the Puranas is Self-knowledge. This theme has been expressed in diverse ways, through innumerable stories. Sri Ramakrishna too has narrated numerous parables. You see, for instance, whether there was a war between Rama and Ravana is for the historians to decide. According to the Puranas, the question is not whether Rama or Ravana were genuine characters. But the fact is, the common masses can understand terse philosophical truths more easily through the medium of stories and anecdotes than through philosophical argumentation. The aim of the stories of Hitopadesa, for instance, is to instruct us about higher truths. The Puranas also follow the same tradition. These stories are superficial and outer embellishments. But to know what the core truths are becomes difficult. All these become useless unless we experience things ourselves. These are means for us and using these means we should know the end.

The Upanisads question: 'How was this universe created?' Just as an earthen pot is made of a lump of earth, and just as a piece of iron is used to make a sword, this universe is created. And just as a spark is non-different from the fire, so is this universe non-different from the Truth and will merge in It.

The Puranas say through stories that this world has been created. Who has seen this

