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Editorial

Swami Dayatmananda

Steadfastness in the practice of knowledge

One of the most important spiritual qualities is steadfastness in the practice of knowledge.

What is knowledge?

Sri Ramakrishna says: "Do you know what ignorance means? It is the feeling: 'This is my house; these are my relatives; I am the doer; and the household affairs go on smoothly because I manage them.' But to feel, 'I am the servant of God, His devotee, His son' - that is a good attitude.

"To know many things is ajnana, ignorance. To know only one thing is Jnana, Knowledge - the realization that God alone is real and that He dwells in all.

"Do not forget Him but remember that all men must one day walk down the same path. We stay in the world only a couple of days."

Knowledge means that God alone is real and all else is temporary. Knowledge means that the goal of life is the realization of God. Knowledge means that this world is only a temporary place. Knowledge is to remember God always and to keep the mind calm, balanced and rational, and to practice discrimination between the Real and the unreal.

One who is treading the path of knowledge strives to remember that he is a child or a servant or a devotee of God.

Whatever be the circumstances of life a devotee forges ahead with his practice. Through regular practice he achieves steadfastness.

Steadfastness of knowledge is a sure sign of spiritual progress.

## The Trial of Yudhishtira

The five famous Pandava brothers, whose story is celebrated in the great Hindu epic, the Mahabharata, were born in the land of Kuru in northern India about 1500 B.C. These brothers were named Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva. Nakula and Sahadeva were twins, and they were stepbrothers of the other Pandavas.

During the period when the Pandavas were exiles from their kingdom for twelve years through the stratagems of their royal cousins, they once found themselves lost in the depths of the forest of Dwaitavana. Seeing how tired and thirsty all were, Yudhishtira, the eldest brother, asked Nakula to climb a tree and look about to discover if water were nearby. When Nakula returned to report that he had seen trees which usually grow near water and that he had heard the cry of cranes, Yudhishtira commanded him to go quickly to the spot he had noted and to bring back water in his quivers.

Bowing to Yudhishtira, Nakula hastened away and soon came to a lake of cool, transparent water, but as he stooped to drink, a voice from the sky said, "O son of Madri, do not drink! I control this water, and until you answer my questions, you may not drink it nor carry any of it away." However, Nakula was too thirsty to give heed to the voice. He greedily drank, and drinking, fell dead.

Yudhishtira, puzzled by Nakula's prolonged absence, sent his twin, Sahadeva, to find out what had happened. When Sahadeva also failed to return, the king said to Arjuna, "You are always our help in time of distress; go, bring back your brothers and a supply of water."

Arjuna took his weapons and went to the lake. There, beside the water, he found his two brothers lying dead. Filled with anguish, he raised his bow and looked about for the enemy who had wrought this tragedy; but not seeing anyone in the vicinity and being overcome with fatigue and thirst, he bent down to drink from the crystal water. At that moment the voice spoke to him, saying, "Do not drink. This water is mine, and you must answer my questions before touching it."

Disdainful of the warning, Arjuna of mighty strength, who could draw the bow equally well with either hand, drank - and fell dead beside his brothers.

Meanwhile the two remaining Pandavas became concerned about the strange disappearance of the others, and Yudhishtira bade Bhima go in search of them. When Bhima reached the lake and found them dead, his heart almost burst with grief. He thought, "This evil deed must be revenged, but first I must quench my thirst." At once came the voice from the sky, warning him not to drink. But he also disregarded it and, having drunk, fell dead.

Left alone, Yudhishtira was oppressed with an ominous sense of grief, and went towards the part of the forest into which his brothers one by one, had disappeared. No human sound came to him, but the bright eyes of beasts peered from stumps and bushes. The air was alive with the hum of bees and the cadence of bird voices. Amid the lush beauty of the forest lay the shimmering lake, adorned with lotus flowers. Near it Yudhishtira found his four brothers dead.

With a supreme effort Yudhishtira controlled his emotion. Then he said to himself, "Who has been guilty of slaying these warriors? I find no wounds upon their bodies; neither do I see footprints nor evidence of combat. Each of these four was filled with an unvanquishable power. Who could have conquered them except that great being, Death, who at the right time carries off everyone?"

Yudhishtira plunged into the lake, but at that instant the voice from the sky said, "Wait, Yudhishtira. Do not drink of this water. It is I who have put your brothers under the control of death. If you drink without answering my questions, you will be the fifth to die!"

Yudhishtira lifted his head, saying, "Who are you? What god are you? Though my brothers were veritable mountains of power, they have been slain without a chance to defend themselves."

The voice answered, "All hail to you, O Yudhishtira! I am a yaksha, and it was I who destroyed your mighty brothers. Now, behold me!"

Yudhishtira, turning towards the sound of the voice, saw on a tree above him the huge figure of the yaksha, whose horrible, unnatural eyes were staring at him. Ablaze like fire, the creature croaked, "I warned your brothers not to drink from this lake, but they disobeyed me, and so I slew them. O son of Kunti, if you will first answer my questions, you may drink and take away all the water you wish."

Yudhishtira replied, "Believe me, O yaksha, I do not want what belongs to you. Ask what you will. I shall answer to the best of my ability."

The *yaksha* croaked his satisfaction. With an unwavering gaze fixed upon the king, he enquired, "Tell me, what makes one learned? What produces an exalted state? What is

like a companion? And how does one become wise?"

"Verily," said Yudhishtira, "by the study of the Vedas one becomes learned. Asceticism produces an exalted state. A steady intelligence is like a companion. Service to the old makes one wise." "What is the sole support of virtue? What of renown? What of heaven? And what of happiness?"

"Liberality is the sole foundation of virtue; charity of renown; truth of heaven; and good conduct of happiness."

"Of praiseworthy things, is one better than all others? What kind of wealth is best to acquire? What is the best of all gains? What happiness is the greatest?"

"Skillfulness is most laudable. Wealth of mind, through the possession of Vedic knowledge, is best for man to acquire. Of all gains, health is most important. Contentment supersedes all other kinds of happiness."

"What is the greatest virtue in the world? What religion always bears fruit? What is that which, if controlled, leads men out of misery? With whom does friendship never break?"

"The greatest virtue is avoidance of cruelty. The religion of the three Vedas always bears fruit. A controlled mind cannot promote misery, nor can friendship among the good ever be broken."

"What, if renounced, makes one agreeable? What should one renounce to avoid misery? What should one renounce to become wealthy? By renouncing what quality is one happy?"

"Pride renounced makes a man gracious, and wrath overcome leads to no regrets. Desire abandoned makes one wealthy, and avarice forsaken makes a man happy."

"With what is the world covered? What prevents a thing from discovering itself? Why are friends forsaken? What prevents one from reaching heaven?"

"The world is enveloped in ignorance, and darkness prevents a thing from discovering itself. Avarice separates friends. Because association with things of the world is strong, men fail to reach heaven."

"What is the characteristic of asceticism? What is the nature of true restraint? What do you say is forgiveness? And how do you describe shyness?"

"To remain firmly fixed in one's own religion is true asceticism. Real restraint lies in control of the mind. To endure enmity is forgiveness. And refraining from all unworthy acts is shyness."

"How do you define knowledge, tranquillity, mercy and simplicity?"

"True knowledge is realization of Divinity. True tranquillity is that of the mind. Mercy consists in wishing happiness to all. And simplicity is equanimity of mind and heart."

"What is the most invincible enemy of man? What is an incurable disease? What difference exists between honesty and dishonesty?"

"Anger is an invincible enemy. Covetousness is the disease most difficult to cure. He who is honest desires the well-being of all; he who is dishonest is unmerciful."

"Tell me of ignorance and pride, and also of idleness and grief."

"The absence of religious knowledge is ignorance. Regarding oneself too highly is pride. Idleness lies in not discharging one's duties. And grief is sustained by ignorance."

"What do the sages mean by steadiness? Can you tell me of patience? What is a real

ablution? What is charity?"

"Steadiness consists in remaining in one's own religion. True patience means the subjugation of the senses. Real ablution is to wash the mind clean of all impurities. Charity is the desire to protect all creatures."

"Who should be regarded as learned? Who should be called an atheist? What man is ignorant? Define desire and name its source. Also, define envy."

"He who is versed in spiritual knowledge is learned. An ignorant man is called an atheist. An atheist is ignorant. Desire consists in longing for worldly objects. Envy is nothing but grief of the heart."

"What is gained by one who speaks graciously? What is gained by the exercise of discrimination? Is there virtue in the possession of many friends? Is there profit for the man of virtue?"

"He who speaks graciously is well liked by all. Acting with good judgement, a man obtains what he seeks. He who has many friends lives happily. The virtuous attain to a most excellent state, here and hereafter."

"What is most strange?"

"Day after day countless creatures are going to the abode of death, yet those who are left behind expect to remain here permanently. What can be more strange than this?"

"What is the path?"

"Argument leads to no certain conclusion. The shrutis (Vedas) differ from one another. There is not one rishi (sage) whose opinion is not different from that of the others. The truth about religion and duty is deeply hidden. Therefore the path is the path which the



great ones have trod."

The *yaksha* was pleased. he said, "O Yudhishtira, you have answered every question correctly, but tell me two things more. Who can be called a man, and what man possesses every kind of wealth?"

Yudhishtira replied: "If one does meritorious deeds, the report of which reaches heaven and earth, so long as that report continues, he is called a man. The man unaffected by the pairs of opposites (such as pleasure and pain, heat and cold), to whom all conditions are alike, is truly rich."

"Well said!" cried the *yaksha*. "Truth stamps your speech. Therefore one of your brothers may be restored to life. Which one shall it be?"

Without hesitation Yudhishtira asked for the revival of Nakula.

"Why ask for the life of a stepbrother?" croaked the *yaksha*. "Is not Bhima, whose strength is that of ten thousand elephants, dear to you? Is not Arjuna of mighty arm your chief aid?"

Yudhishtira answered: "Always it has been my way to follow the dharma, to make every choice in the interests of righteousness. He who sacrifices dharma is himself destroyed, and he who preserves it is himself preserved. My father had two wives, Kunti and Madri. Of the children of Kunti, I am still alive, but with Nakula and Sahadeva dead, Madri has no living son. It is my wish to look upon the wives of my father with equal eye, to show no distinction between them. A son should be restored to Madri, that both Kunti and Madri may have a child. Therefore, let Nakula be revived."

"O noble Yudhishtira, I bow to you! cried the delighted *yaksha*. "Since you have preferred righteousness to mere personal benefit, I say - let all your brothers live once

more!"

No sooner were the words spoken than the four brothers of Yudhishtira rose joyfully from the ground, as if nothing had happened to them.

"Who art thou?" asked Yudhishtira, wonder-struck.

The *yaksha* said: "My son, know that I am Dharma, the lord of righteousness. Great is my strength. Fame, modesty, self-control, truth, purity, simplicity, steadiness, charity, asceticism and chastity are my very being. By the cultivation of non-cruelty, impartiality, asceticism and humility, a man can reach me. By good fortune you have made much progress towards me, and therefore I came here to test your merit. Well pleased I am with the results, O virtuous one! Ask any boon you please, and it shall be granted."

Yudhishtira knelt before Dharma and replied: "It is enough that I have beheld thee, eternal god of gods as thou art! Nevertheless, whatever thou wilt confer upon me, I shall receive gladly and gratefully. May I, then, O lord, always conquer covetousness, folly and anger! May my mind be ever devoted to charity, truth and austerities!"

Dharma said: "By your very nature, O Pandava, you are endowed with these qualities, yet since you ask in such humility and with such grace, I grant that you may realize them in infinite measure."

Reprinted from [The Voice of India, 1945](#)

## Leaves of an Ashrama: 6

Swami Vidyatmananda

### Existence as a Game of Blindman's Buff

Like so many others nourished on Christian thought, I always resented the doctrine of Original Sin. If God were the repository of all virtue, how could it be that his creatures could be possessed of a depraved nature? Taking myself as an example, I quite admitted that there were unworthy motives in me that I could not cope with, but there was another quality also, capable of generosity, sacrifice, and even at times of what Wordsworth called "intimations of immortality". How could I accept the idea that I as a human being was fundamentally perverted?

Moreover, Original Sin could be absolved only by a profound act of repentance on my part and a reciprocal movement of mercy on God's. It made no sense to repent for what St. Augustine called man's "total moral disability" if I had not been responsible for its acquisition in the first place; for the theory proclaimed that man was not merely depraved, but congenitally depraved.

Who would deign to solicit grace from a Divine Being who had arranged matters like that?

Of course St. Paul was right in finding man's will to separation from God monstrous, and in advancing such a strong term as Original Sin to explain it. But as I became familiar with Vedantic teaching, I realised that promoting the doctrine of Original Sin should be seen as an unsophisticated effort to deal with the problem of avidya - ignorance. The Apostle's proposition should not be taken so literally. The dogma of Original Sin was a crude attempt to resolve the puzzle of ego and its horrid product: man's unremitting

preoccupation with me and mine.

Vedanta's explanation was far more enlightened, and so was the remedy. Man is seen not as evil, but as essentially perfect, except temporarily suffering from wrong sight. This positive view makes a great deal of difference. It offers therapy founded on better psychology; it bids man work courageously for his own improvement; it replaces self-recrimination with the exercise of discernment and effort.

In addition, the Vedantic outlook gives point and spice to life. I cannot visualise spending my years agonising over innate wretchedness, but I can see myself as a conscientious learner, steadily trying to vanquish ego and become right-sighted. Indeed, how else to fill up a lifetime? The efforts I have already made show me that results are possible and will reward the struggle. I am not the creature of primordial selfishness that I was. I can view the passing scene and my inner reactions to it with heightened detachment. I can oftener see through the screen of maya and perceive who I really am.

One more difference: the doctrine of Original Sin gives no convincing explanation for "Why are we here?" but Vedanta's avidya theory furnishes a plausible reason - to play the game of learning to catch up maya, a kind of supernatural blindman's buff. Eyes temporarily bandaged for the sport of tagging the opponent, whipping off the bandage - and finding that there was no blind man and no opponent. Why are we here? For the fun of discovering that there is not only no "here", there never was any "we" either.

## Dhyana, Japa, Mantra, Guru, and Avatar (contd.)

### Swami Swahananda

Swami Vivekananda spoke about the symbol *Om*. *Om* is the oldest mantra in the world. Like the *Gayatri* mantra, *Om* has been repeated for thousands of years. But the *Gayatri* is a very long mantra. Swamiji says that *Om* is the first sound, or the complete sound. He gave a sort of etymological explanation for this: *Om* is composed of the sounds A-U-M. When "A" is pronounced, the mouth is open. When "U" is pronounced the tongue is controlled, and the mouth is slightly open. When "M" is pronounced, the lips are sealed. These are the three possible positions of the tongue by the manipulation of which all the sounds are produced, including the cawing of the crow. So Patanjali's Yoga Sutra says that if you want to know the language of the birds, if you concentrate on this mantra you can understand their language. I don't know whether any modern scientists have tried this method! The whole idea is that these are the three positions of the tongue that produce all the basic sounds. So Om represents the basic sound, and all the other sounds are combinations of these. Thousands of people, even now, repeat *Om* - practically all the sects of Hinduism and Buddhism add *Om* to their mantras. That's why Swami Vivekananda specially recommended it. Every sect has developed its own specialized mantras, but *Om* is the universal type of mantra, and other divine names and aspects are normally added to it according to the spiritual school of thought.

There is an extreme view that if you take any name of the Lord, if you feel it is the Lord's name, you will get the result. There is a famous story in a later part of the Ramayana about its writer, Valmiki. Earlier, Valmiki was very sinful. He was a highway robber at one time. Then he came in touch with Narada, and he was changed into a

saint. Valmiki had been committing robberies, but he had good karmas. According to the Hindus, you have got certain karmas. Karmas are the effects of your previous actions in this life, or in previous lives. Some of the karmas are operative now, due to association. Say you have got a musical talent, but you associate with cricket players. The musical karma will not develop, but will remain dormant. If you move into a circle of musicians, it will again come up. If the karma is very strong, it may assert itself. Otherwise association affects it. Valmiki had very good karmas; they were ripe for fruition. So Narada, a great teacher, came along the highway. Valmiki wanted to beat him up to get his things. Narada said, "Wait. You should not kill me. Killing brings in sin. Who will share this sin?" Now in ancient days, everybody believed that in killing there is sin. Otherwise Valmiki could not have taken the advice. "For whom are you committing such sins?" asked Narada. "For my wife and parents and children, to maintain my family." replied Valmiki. "Will they share your sin?" asked Narada. "Sure," said Valmiki. "All right," said Narada, "go home and ask your parents and your children and your wife whether they will share in your sin, which will be effective later." Valmiki replied, "Oh, you want to get away!" Narada said, "Then tie me up." So, on the suggestion of Narada, Valmiki tied him to a tree, and went home. He was very sure that everybody would share the sin because for them he was killing people to get money. So he went and asked his father and his mother. They said, "We have brought you up, and we are now old. Now it is your duty to look after us. Why should we share your sin? How you support us is not our business." Then he went to his children, and they said, "We are not grown up, why should we share the sin? That is your business." Then he went to his wife. She said, "You have married me. It is your duty to take care of me. Why should I share your sin? How you get your money is not my problem." Valmiki felt very dejected, and very disillusioned, and came back to Narada and said, "No, nobody is willing to share. How to get out of this sin?" By that time, he was feeling the pressure of the sin. Then Narada

gave him a mantra. But Valmiki was so sinful that he could not repeat the name of Rama, which is a good mantra. Nowadays we are not so sinful, because we can pronounce every word! But Valmiki was very sinful. He could not repeat it. So Narada had to reverse the word - 'Rama' becomes 'mara'. "All right," said Narada, "repeat mara." That Valmiki could do. As you quickly repeat mara, mara, mara it becomes Rama, Rama, Rama. (Mara eventually became a holy mantra, because it was repeated by Valmiki, who later became a saint.) According to one theory, every word is a representation of God. The Tantrikas believe that every letter is a form of the Divine Mother. Any word can be a mantra, but normally a good word is better.

So a mantra is a name of God or a holy formula. It can be picked up from a book, but it acquires more power if it comes through a holy man, or another devotee who practises it. It becomes even more powerful if it comes through a succession of teachers. It becomes still more powerful if that person is an illumined soul, and most powerful if the person is an avatar. As Swami Vivekananda said, fire is kindled from one fire to another fire. So the major idea is that if I have a desire to think of the Lord, or live a spiritual life, the mantra should come from a live person, who himself practises it, and whose life is more or less free from defects. That person is called a guru.

The guru idea has been very much stressed in some circles. Many people ask about absolute surrender to the guru, which is, of course a scriptural injunction. Sri Ramakrishna was asked this question. He said that God is the guru, really. Satchitananda is the guru. The Lord sits in your heart and prompts you. In another context he said that one's mind becomes the guru after some time. When the mind becomes more and more purified, you know what is good for you, what is proper for you, even if you don't do it. Gradually, the spiritual mind prompts you. Then, of course, there is the live guru, who transmits the power of the mantra. Through the mantra the spiritual power comes. The

special power has been released by a great teacher, an avatar. So really, the guru is a sort of conduit of the spiritual energy released by the avatar.

Now comes the consideration of the avatar. If we are to meditate on a form of God, how do we decide on which form to meditate? The avatars like Buddha, Rama, Krishna, and Ramakrishna have replaced, in most cases, the ancient deities of the scriptures. The avatar is a special manifestation of God. There are two ideas regarding the avatar. One is that when virtue declines and vice prevails on Earth, God becomes incarnate. The other is that when many spiritually aspiring souls pine for the Lord, he specially manifests himself. Both ideas are valid. It is said of Chaitanya that because he was called down by Advaitacharya, he came. Sri Ramakrishna said that because of the call of Vivekananda, this divine manifestation has occurred for the good of the world. The idea is that God incarnates himself specially for the good of the people. But he assumes a little defect, as it were. The avatar is the stage next to God. Brahman is there, the impersonal Absolute, the Ultimate. God is a personalized aspect of the Absolute, which creates, sustains, and destroys the universe. Next are the deities, which are more or less identified with God. Then there is the avatar, who manifests himself in human form and releases a special spiritual energy. The major religions of the world are really the gifts of these avatars. Sometimes they are called avatars, and sometimes they are called great teachers. They sometimes declare themselves to be avatars, but very few people recognize them when they are alive. As time passes on, their influence goes on increasing. That is one of the signs of an avatar. Otherwise, anybody could say, "I am the avatar." Or, a person could say, "I am an illumined soul." Who is to question it? These experiences are one's own. At one time, when I was in Berkeley, there were said to be as many as eleven avatars in the Berkeley area. Someone merely claiming to be an avatar is not enough! There are certain qualities that an avatar or an illumined soul should manifest, normally. Some external manifestations will be there. Through this, we



can judge whether a person is sincere. The avatar has been described by Ramakrishna as an aperture in a wall. Through that aperture you can see the vast world outside. So through the avatar you can see the vast expanse of the Divine, which is incomprehensible to the limited mind. God by his nature is infinite, and the limited mind cannot completely grasp him; he can be more easily grasped through an avatar or a great teacher. So the avatar is specially recommended for this purpose. He, by his spiritual practice, releases special spiritual energy. Whoever thinks of him becomes the inheritor of that property. The writer of The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna often used to say that as you think of the avatar, of the great teacher, you become his inheritor. As a son inherits his father's property, similarly, you inherit the avatar's property by declaring yourself to be his child.

These five ideas which I have described - dhyana, japa, mantra, guru, and avatar - are directly applicable in our day to day spiritual living. All these concepts were to be found in the Upanishads, or in the earlier books, but it was the Tantra tradition which popularized these ideas by stressing them. The Tantrikas believed in five tattvas, categories of thought, or five elements: guru, mantra, dhyana, manasa, and Deva. The idea of the guru is especially a tantrik one. The idea of the mantra was given by the Mimamsakas, but the Tantrikas placed special stress on the mantra. Japa was specially boosted by the Tantrikas, and also by the Vaishnavas. Dhyana was a special technique of the yogis, but again this was adopted by the Tantra Sastra. The idea of the avatar was not included, but there was the idea of manasa tattva. A Deva, a deity, could be replaced by the avatar. Tantra is said to be as old as the Vedas. It focused more on the practical aspects of spiritual life. Later, all of the sects adopted dhyana, japa, mantra, guru, and avatar into their own systems. All of these things are available in every sect nowadays.

So these are the five things by which a person normally builds up his spiritual life. We require dhyana, meditation, for concentrating the mind, and becoming one-pointed in our thinking. To bring in meditation, we require a deity on whom to meditate. A deity is normally provided by the avatar, the great teacher, or a deity of the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures. To keep the mind in the thought of the Lord, we go on repeating the divine name, practicing japa, so the mind remains in that thought longer. That name is called the mantra. And then, when the mind is fully absorbed in that thought, deeper meditation, dhyana, comes, and then the glory of the avatar, or God, gets manifested. The person's spiritual life unfolds. Sri Ramakrishna often used to say that of all the spiritual disciplines, the essential disciplines are dhyana and japa. The other disciplines are all effective, but these two are easy and direct. To perform worship, you require your own home or surroundings, but you can meditate and repeat the mantra anywhere. That is why these are the practices often recommended in spiritual circles.

## **Sri Ramakrishna with Birds and Animals**

### **Kabita Banerjee**

*The Lord's grace recognises no distinction between human beings and birds and animals.*

*His love flows equally to all. Mrs Kabita Banerjee of Jaipur (Rajasthan) describes various incidents from Sri Ramakrishna's life in which birds and animals had their share of participation in his divine lila.*

The title of this article may appear somewhat intriguing. 'What had Sri Ramakrishna to

do with birds and animals?' - it may be asked. Let us remember that the Godman comes not only for human beings but for all creatures including animals whom man - himself only 'a rational animal' - is pleased to designate, with an air of superiority, as 'members of the lower species'. The latter too, however 'low' they may be, play an important part in his divine play, and are the fortunate recipients of his grace.

The theme is not new, for we already encounter it in our religious tradition. The Puranas speak of God who incarnated Himself as a fish (matsya-avatara), a boar (varaha-avatara), a tortoise (kurma-avatara) etc. In the Mahabharata, the Supreme Being in the form of a Swan enlightens Yudhishtira on the goal and purpose of life. It should not surprise us that birds and animals - in fact, the whole of creation - responded to His divine call when He came down on earth this time as Sri Ramakrishna.

Let us begin with Thakur's Hanuman-bhava. We trace its beginning from his very childhood. We all know from the Ramayana about the special and sacred relationship between Lord Rama and his devoted servant, Hanuman. Sri Ramakrishna, whose family deity was Rama, was familiar from his childhood with the wonderful exploits of Hanuman. When Sri Ramakrishna was barely five years old, his mother went to Mayapur, a village near Kamarpukur, to visit her brother. She took the child Gadadhar, as Sri Ramakrishna was then called, along with her. On the way, while crossing the fields, they were confronted with a horde of black-faced monkeys. Surprisingly enough, instead of being afraid of them, the little boy rushed forward and started playing joyfully with them. The monkeys, usually of an aggressive nature, took to him in a most friendly way and began playing with him as though he were one of their own.

As a young boy, Gadai used to tell stories from the Ramayana to the villagers assembled at the house of Madhu Jugi in Kamarpukur. A monkey came there one day and sat on a tree nearby, listening to the narration. When it was over, he got down and, coming close

to the divine boy-narrator, touched his feet. Gadai blessed him by touching his head with the sacred book!

Still later, when he grew up into the peerless devotee of the Divine Mother Kali, Sri Ramakrishna undertook rigorous spiritual disciplines of various types. After their successful completion, his health broke down. In order to regain health, he went from Dakshineswar to Kamarpukur and thence to Sihore, in response to the invitation of his nephew, Hriday, who hailed from that place. There, one day, he expressed a desire to eat the curry of fresh, green pumpkin. His nephews searched almost all over the village for it but in vain, for it was not the season for pumpkins. At last they saw a solitary one growing on a creeper over the roof of a hut belonging to a village woman. She refused to give it to them saying that it was still unripe. Disappointed, they turned round to go. Imagine their surprise when a 'Hanuman' arrived on the scene and, plucking the pumpkin, placed it near Hriday who joyfully picked it up and took it home. Mysterious indeed are the ways of the Almighty.

Let us also recall Thakur's Hanuman Sadhana (dasya bhava). He became so absorbed in the Hanuman-consciousness that he even emulated the monkey-god in climbing trees and jumping about from place to place and whole-heartedly invoking the blessings of Raghuvira. We learn that during that period there was a small tail-like growth at the lower extremity of his spinal cord! Such was his total identification with Hanuman at this time.

Like Sri Krishna, Sri Ramakrishna too had a great fondness for cows and calves. In the early days at Kamarpukur, he used to play with them and feed them with his tiny, pretty hands, and how the cattle used to love it! He also played with his friends while taking the cows to pasture, which was reminiscent of his earlier incarnation as Bal-gopala, or

child-cowherd (Sri Krishna).

An incident involving a fish highlights Thakur's grace bestowed on a saranagata, one who surrendered to him. One pleasant day during his stay at Sihore, there was a slight drizzle. He walked near a pond with Rajaram by his side and stood watching the fish move about in large numbers. They were so close at hand and so numerous that Thakur asked Rajaram to catch some if he wanted, but when Rajaram bent down, one big fish suddenly darted forward and began to roll at Thakur's holy feet, as though imploring for mercy. Sri Ramakrishna was deeply touched by this display of saranagati (self-surrender) on its part and, patting it gently, said: 'Go, no harm will come to you.' He thus conferred on the fish his divine protection, abhaya dana. Subsequently, not only the big fish, which was probably the leader of the rest, but the entire shoal swam away safely into deeper waters.

We learn from the life of the Great Master that he had acquired unusual yogic powers, including the ability to understand the language of birds and animals. He could follow their conversation and once even disclosed to the astonished villagers that a crow-couple were talking about the weather and the impending rainfall. Birds would come and perch on his head because, during his prolonged and intensive meditation, his body became motionless and apparently inert, like the trunk of a tree, and his hair grew long and became matted due to lack of proper attention for a long time.

We also know how, as a child of six, Gadadhar went into deep samadhi at the very sight of a flock of snow-white cranes flying in beautiful formation against the background of dark overhanging clouds that presaged the onset of monsoon rain.

In later life, after he had attained the vision of the Great Goddess of Dakshineswar, he was one day persuaded by his devotees to visit the zoo in Calcutta. The first animal he

came across was the lion, and no sooner had he set eyes on it than he merged into deep samadhi because the lion reminded him of the Divine Mother as Simhavahini. He was carried home in that ecstatic state. Nothing more was seen at the zoo.

Again, there is the well-known incident of his feeding a cat with the sacred offering meant for the Divine Mother, because in his lofty state of cosmic consciousness he saw the same caitanya-sakti, power of consciousness, pervading all creation, as much in the hungry cat that was mewling as in the image of Mother Kali in the temple!

During his illness, when he was staying at the Kasipur garden-house, another cat became very fond of him and began to stay on the premises with her kittens. Thakur was filled with compassion for her as well as the little ones, because they looked quite underfed. He asked one of his devotees, Navagopal Ghosh's wife, whether she could take them home and look after them. Needless to say, the devotee very gladly agreed, not only because the request came from the Master - which was itself no small privilege! - but because, as she confided later, she was quite fond of cats. Obviously Thakur had assigned the task to the right person. She took the cat and her kittens home and took great care of them till the very end, regarding them as precious mementos given by the Master.

Alas! If only these blessed creatures - the birds and animals that came in contact with Sri Ramakrishna - had some means of disclosing the nature of their experiences to us, what valuable glimpses into the hitherto unknown aspects of his divine life and lila would we have gained!

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## **The Art of Living in Relationship**

### **The Meaning of Holy Mother's Last Message**

**Sri Umesh C.Gulati**

The present millennium has opened a new chapter in the history of world civilization. Never in recorded human experience have people from all over the world lived in so much anxiety, fear and insecurity, as at the present time. It is during such times, says the Bhagavad-Gita, a great saint or incarnation is born, or the teachings of a former such incarnation get renewed significance, to rekindle the divine wisdom in the hearts of humanity, to pull it from the path of death and destruction, and to lead it on to the path of peace and understanding. The present essay attempts to provide the meaning of the last message of Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi, an incarnation of this age, which, we believe, is essential for the moral uplift of humanity and peaceful inter-personal and international relations.

Just five days before her death a devotee, called Annapurna's mother, asked the Holy Mother, "Mother, what will be our lot?" Very tenderly the Mother said, "You have seen the Master [Sri Ramakrishna]. What fear can there be for you?" Then stopping for a moment she added, "But one thing I tell you - if you want peace, my daughter, don't find fault with others, but find fault rather with yourself. Learn to make the world your own. Nobody is a stranger, my dear; the [whole] world is your own." What a wonderful

prescription for the ills of our world!

In order to appreciate the meaning and significance of the Mother's last message, we should try to understand the causes of the conflicts and violence that have affected every society. One of the causes, we believe, is the utter lack of knowledge as to who we are, what is our real nature and how we are related to one another. According to Vedanta, our essence is the Self (Atman in Sanskrit), which is immortal and infinite, and is of the nature of Existence, Consciousness and Bliss Absolute. This world is seen as an ocean of Existence (bhava sagar in Sanskrit), with all the creatures of different names and forms, as waves within it. Some waves are big, while the others are small, but they belong to, or exist in, the same ocean. Similarly, the self is of the nature of Consciousness, which is always singular; it doesn't have any plural. It follows that the Self in one body is the Self of all, and we are essentially one; the world of multiplicity is just an appearance. Bliss then is the natural state of the Self, since conflict occurs in duality. Unity in diversity, therefore, is the universal law of our existence. In the real world, however, there is glorification of this apparent world of senses and sense objects. People identify themselves with their body and mind, and therefore consider themselves separate from one another. Therein lies the cause of disintegration in our society. Even when we enter into relationships, seldom are they right relationships based on what we actually are. Many among us make images of ourselves, and people around us; others do the same. It's our mind that creates these images or profiles, and if the mind is in turmoil, and filled with our own pride and prejudices, the profiles that we generate of others will be faulty.

Since the reality is different from our perception of it, based on the image we have created, we find fault with others. But whom does this exercise hurt? It has been well said that as we think, so we become. So, finding faults in others and dwelling on them



will only hurt us. The Holy Mother once said, "The mind is everything. Does anything happen to another if you enumerate his faults? It only injures you." Can we look at someone without any judgment, without any choice, and without reference to any prior profiling of that person? Putting the question differently, can we go to a mango orchard and just eat the mangoes and not care to count the number of trees in the garden? If we can, how happy and peaceful we will feel. In one of his most animated lectures in London on October 27, 1897, Swami Vivekananda said: "Who enjoys the picture, the seller or the seer? [The reader may like to substitute a football game for the picture, and Manchester United and Chelsea fans for the seller.] The seller is busy with his accounts, computing what his gain will be, how much profit he will realise on the picture. His mind is full of that. He is looking at the hammer, and watching the bids. He is intent on hearing how fast the bids are rising. That man is enjoying the picture most, who has gone there without any intention of buying or selling. He looks at the picture and enjoys it." [In the case of a football game, those fans that are not affiliated with either of the teams will enjoy the game most].

A disinterested observer watching a game is happier than the rival fans because he is only absorbed in observing the game, forgetting himself in it and becoming one with it. It is only then that one attains infinite joy and happiness. Therefore the Mother's instruction implies that we should stop making images or profiles of others, comparing them or analysing them, for this sets a barrier in creating right understanding between two persons, or even two nations, and without understanding there is no relationship. In the Bhagavad-Gita (12.17), Sri Krishna says: "He is dear to Me who neither runs after the pleasant nor away from the painful, neither grieves nor desires, but lets things come and go as they happen." That is the correct description of a person who deals with people without pre-judging them, and therefore enjoys the presence of the Lord's love. On the other hand, if we build a relationship on what is pleasing to us, on physical and

emotional attraction, we will be building it on quicksand for if there is anything sure about physical attraction, it is that it has to change. Physical attraction, in other words, is a sensation; love is a relationship. If we want to build relationship and have peace of mind, we should build it not on what changes, but on that which endures. What endures is the Self, the source of all happiness, the bliss absolute.

Not finding faults and not making images might sound like negative values on which to build healthy relationships. So, putting it more positively, the secret of right understanding and right relationship lies in the art of listening. To be able to really listen, one should abandon all one's prejudices and preferences. Unfortunately most of us listen to the voices of the image that we have made of others than keeps us from understanding them. "Understanding comes through being aware of what is. To know exactly what is, the real, the actual, without interpreting it, without condemning or justifying it, is surely the beginning of wisdom." Wisdom then is the fruit that manifests naturally when one earnestly follows the Mother's instruction of "not finding faults." In the Gita such a person is called "one of steady wisdom", and all relationships of such a person are built on the foundation of love and understanding.

Before leaving this "not finding faults" part of our discussion, a few concluding remarks are in order. As was pointed out before, unity of existence is the universal law, and each one of us is connected with each other. This has far reaching implications. Suppose we find fault with our spouse, our parents or our children, and make demands on them, which they cannot possibly fulfil because they are based on the images we have made of them. As a result, we get angry and upset. They in turn vent their frustrations on neighbours, classmates or colleagues at the workplace, and on and on it goes until this fault-finding and resulting anger and frustration engulf the relationship between nations. This scenario is not as far-fetched as one might think. We don't realise how very

responsible each one of us is, in recreating the environment of violence and insecurity in the world. Instead we depend upon institutional responses for the solution of these and other social problems, as if governments can stop all this strife that originates in our minds. Governments thrive on dividing people, perfecting and trading weapons of destruction, breeding fear everywhere, and creating an arms race. Their guiding principle is to serve their self-interest, not create relationships. The Mother is beckoning us that we must become the change that we seek, and stop finding fault with others; we can take our destiny into our own hands.

The Holy Mother's second part of the first instruction, "rather find fault with yourself", is equally, if not more, important. This requires us to turn our attention inside to our own hearts, which is not easy, as the senses have the tendency to go outward. What do we find if we do have the will to turn our attention inside? We will see that many of the faults that we see in others are in us too. It is said that someone asked Charles Darwin, the famous author of the theory of evolution, who had asserted that human beings and apes had a common ancestry, whether there was still anything unique about the human being. He answered, "Man is the only animal that blushes." That is, human beings are the only creatures capable of recognising the gap between the potential and the actual, and of being embarrassed by that gap. The Holy Mother too realised that no-one is perfect. As Rabbi Kushner has put it, "The person who knows his flaws all too well is open to God's love and God's presence because he realises he is not god. In the words of authors Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, 'Imperfection is the wound that lets God in.'" And God gets in, through the guise of His divine graces of forgiveness, forbearance, and fortitude!

In fact once one succeeds in turning one's attention from finding others' faults to one's own faults, faults take to their heels. It's just like a child who is about to do some

mischief but stops doing so when it discovers that its mother is watching. The following incident from the life of Swami Vivekananda during his itinerant days in Northern India around 1891, beautifully illustrates the point we have just made:

'One morning, after visiting the temple of Mother Durga [in Varanasi], the Swami was passing through a place where there were a large tank of water on one side and a high wall on the other. Here he was surrounded by a large troop of monkeys... They howled and shrieked and clutched at his feet as he strode. As they pressed closer, he began to run; but the faster he ran, the faster came the monkeys, and they began to bite at him. When it seemed impossible, he heard an old sannyasi calling out to him: "Face the brutes". The words brought him to his senses. He turned and boldly faced the irate monkeys. As soon as he did that, they turned back and fled.'

You see, our faults are like monkeys; once we become aware of them they run away. In fact, some years later in a New York lecture he said: "If we are ever to gain freedom, it must be by conquering nature [both external and internal], never by running away. Cowards never win victories. We have to fight fear and troubles and ignorance if we expect them to flee before us."

For that reason the Holy Mother wanted us to live consciously, not compulsively. We must watch our thoughts and speech carefully, so that they are in harmony. It's this attribute, joining our thoughts with our words, that purifies us of our vices and faults, that brings us closer to the Lord, our own Self, seated in the core of our hearts. The Holy Mother once said, "In the fullness of spiritual realisation, a person finds that God who resides in his heart resides in the hearts of all. This realisation makes one truly humble." The same is true when we find that the faults that we saw in others exist in us too; our ego is crushed. This will make us very humble. With the dawn of humility goes the last fortress, pride, which keeps us from seeing the Lord face to face. It is said that

once Sri Radha asked Sri Krishna: "What do you see in your flute, which you don't see in me that you always keep it with your lips?". Sri Krishna turned the flute upside down and showed it to Sri Radha; there was nothing in there to see! The moral of this anecdote is that when one has emptied oneself of the ego, the Self shines in its own glory. The Bible expresses the same sentiment: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." (Matthew: 5.5) So, earnestly practising the art of "finding our own faults" is the key to self-realisation.

The second part of the Mother's message is nothing but a corollary of the first one: "Learn to make the world your own. Nobody is a stranger, my dear; the [whole] world is your own." Once we become adept in not finding faults, and perfect the art of listening that it entails, our whole personality changes. As mentioned before, we realise the Self, which is the source of infinite joy, and identify ourselves with all humanity, nay, with all creation. Then who will be stranger to whom? Duality melts into oneness, which is our true nature.

It is interesting to note that forty years before Annapurna's mother asked the Holy Mother how to have peace of mind, M., which is the pen name of Mahendranath Gupta, one of the brilliant disciples and chronicler of conversations of Sri Ramakrishna with his disciples and devotees, asked the Master a similar question: 'How ought we to live in the world?' Here are Sri Ramakrishna's words:

'Do all your duties, but keep your mind on God. Live with all - with wife and children, father and mother - and serve them. Treat them as if they were very dear to you, but know in your heart of hearts that they do not belong to you... If you enter the world without first cultivating love for God, you will be entangled more and more. You will be overwhelmed with its danger, its grief, its sorrows. And the more you think of worldly things, the more you will be attached to them... First secure the oil of divine love, and

then set your hands to the duties of the world. But one must go into solitude to attain this divine love... Further, by meditating on God in solitude the mind acquires knowledge, dispassion, and devotion. But the very same mind goes downward if it dwells in the world. In the world there is only one thought: 'woman and gold' [lust and greed]... Together with this, you must practice discrimination [between the Real and unreal]...

In the few lines of instructions, Sri Ramakrishna had used the words, "God" or "divine love" five times. For the Master, the purpose of our life is to realise God. He emphasized the importance of practising detachment, renunciation and discrimination, without which one cannot realise God. M asked another question: "Under what conditions does one see God?" The Master said: "Cry to the Lord with an intensely yearning heart and you will certainly see Him. People shed a whole jug of tears for wife and children. They swim in tears for money. But who weeps for God? Cry to Him with a real cry." He further said, "The point is, to love God even as the mother loves her child, the chaste wife her husband, and the worldly man his wealth. Add together these three forces of love, these three powers of attraction, and give it all to God. Then you will certainly see Him."

It follows that anyone earnestly following the necessary spiritual practices the Master had suggested, will certainly realise God and his or her affinity with one and all, erasing any sense of separateness from one another that lies at the root of divisions in a society. In the face of such a well-rounded scheme of spiritual discipline from the Master, doesn't the Holy Mother's prescription for peace seem rather simplistic? No, not only is Mother's prescription for peace not simplistic, but also it is consistent with the spiritual discipline that the Master has laid down for humanity. As we saw in the above paragraphs, to succeed in not finding fault with others requires the abandoning of our deeply ingrained habits of making images of other people, refraining from judging them by our standards, and practising the art of listening to others without prejudice. All this requires great

humility, forbearance and fortitude, qualities that, as we pointed out before, allow one to attain Self-knowledge. He or she then, says the Gita, "is fully delighted in the Self by the Self." For that person no desirable object from outside has any appeal; and renunciation is natural and spontaneous. In that sense, the Holy Mother's last message of not finding faults reinforces the master's stress on practising dispassion and discrimination for Self-realisation. More importantly, it provides another dimension not only to the Master's teaching for attaining Self-knowledge, but also to achieving healthy inter-personal and international relations.

## **Respect as Service**

### **Swami Vidyatmananda**

There was an ancient monastery, now fallen on evil days. It had had a glorious past, but now the institution had been reduced to only five monks and their abbot - all rather old and inclined to be ill-tempered. The buildings had fallen into disrepair, and the grounds around the monastery, which had once been so inviting, now gave out an air of neglect. No new postulants were in prospect and, worst of all, the old-timers who lived there were bored with each other and given to mutual faultfinding. They were not capable of making themselves happy, let alone of serving each other or anyone else.

'What is going to happen to us?' the abbot asked himself every day. 'What is going to happen to our dear institution once so fair?' He was often in despair.

The abbot had a friend, a rabbi, reputed to be a wise man, who lived not far away. Having no one to share his despair with, and feeling particularly lonely in his trouble, the abbot decided to meet this acquaintance and talk to him. The two met in the small hermitage at a far corner of the monastery grounds. Each had brought food and drink, so they shared a friendly dinner. After the meal the two sat back and talked. They established a feeling of fellowship which felt good to the abbot. Then he poured out his worries about the deterioration of the monastery and asked the rabbi what he thought could be done. The rabbi entered into himself silently for some time, then finally spoke. His message was cryptic and short but had to satisfy the abbot. It consisted of one sentence. It was all that he would say. It was this: 'There is a great holy man amongst you.'

When the abbot returned to the monastery the monks wanted to know where he had been and what he had done. He decided to tell them. 'I had an evening of fellowship with the old rabbi,' he said. 'I told him about the conditions in our monastery and my worries about its bleak future.'

'And what did he advise?' they asked.

'He didn't advise anything. His only reply was: "There is a great holy man amongst you."

The monks, very much interested, glanced from one to the other and pressed the abbot to tell more. 'And did he tell which of us this holy man is?' they asked.

'No, that is all that he would say.'

The brothers were astonished. 'A great holy man amongst us!' They looked around wonderingly. 'Who could it be? Could it be Brother James?' Brother James looked at Brother John. 'Is it Brother John? Perhaps it is Brother Peter?' 'Is it X, is it Y, is it Z?' So



on around and around the group.

A tremendous respect developed among them, for how else but with esteem could one treat a brother who might be the great holy man? Showing respect was the service they accorded to one another, and this in turn had its effect on each. A vigorous example of respect as service.

Gradually the atmosphere of the monastery began to change. There was a new joy and lightness. Visitors coming for the Sunday service in the chapel felt it, were impressed with the climate, and some stayed to picnic on the grounds - as had been the custom long before - after the service. They also offered help to beautify the surroundings and repair the buildings. Among the visitors there were some young men who were so attracted by the prevalent feeling that they asked if they might become novices. Gradually the monastery regained the glory of its past.

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**St. Teresa, Bride of the Sun**

**Swami Atmarupananda**

Sitting high on the barren Castilian plateau in central Spain and encircled by forbidding medieval walls, the town of Avila seemed to grow up out of the lifeless soil. It was said

that en Avila, santos y cantos... 'in Avila, saints and stones' - for there wasn't much else immediately visible: saints, because the many churches, monasteries and convents bore their names and honoured their memory; stones, because the austere-looking town was constructed of them. Indeed, it had a fortified appearance, and even the gothic cathedral looked more like a fortress than a place of worship. 'Avila of the Knights and Liegemen' had been for centuries a frontline post in the struggle of the Christians against the Moors. The struggle had ended in 1492 when, after eight centuries, the Moors had finally been driven out from the peninsula; but it had left as a legacy a spirit of strength, determination, fortitude, and a high code of honour.

Don Alonso de Cepeda held a position of respect in this small but proud town. Though of Jewish descent, he was a Christian and, like many of the Christianised Jews in Spain, he was a moderately wealthy man. His first wife passed away after giving him three children. In 1509 he married again, this time the beautiful and well-born Do-a Beatriz de Ahumada, and on March 28, 1515, with the first glimmers of dawn, Do-a Beatriz gave birth to her third child. The baby girl was given the name Teresa. (It was then the custom in Spain that some children take the name of their father's line, and some, their mother's; thus, Teresa became 'Teresa de Ahumada') Soon little Teresa became her father's favourite; and indeed, there was an irresistible charm about her which won the hearts of all.

Her parents were not only very pious, but Don Alonso was also devoted to learning, his home boasting books on religion, philosophy and other subjects. He was determined that his children should learn to spell at a tender age, and be able to read by the age of seven. Thus it was that little Teresa was soon able to read the lives of saints together with her favourite sibling, Rodrigo, the elder brother closest to her in age. She was fascinated by the word 'eternal' which appeared over and over. 'It means for ever, ' her

mother explained. Teresa would indulge her sense of the mysterious by repeating again and again, 'for ever-ever-ever, Rodrigo!'

As she read the lives of women martyr-saints, she would think how easily they had purchased heaven: by patiently suffering just a short period of torture, these martyrs had won the right to enter heaven, for ever and ever! Nothing seemed so wonderful to her childish imagination as the glorious life in heaven as described in these books.

'What if we should go to the land of the Moors, Rodrigo, to be martyred? Then we too should be taken up into heaven to live for ever in glory with the angels and saints!' *La ni-a*, 'the little one', was not so much inspired with the love of God; she was enamoured of the thought that she would be clothed in golden raiment by the angels.

'It's not so easy Teresita! You don't know what a stoning is like!'

'But Rodrigo, it only takes a little determination. On our way we'll beg our bread, and once we reach the land of the Moors, they'll behead us. It'll all be over in a moment. Just remember the rewards we'll get in heaven!' That settled it, for what were Rodrigo's common sense and age worth when pitted against the persuasive powers of *la ni-a*?

At daybreak the six-year-old Teresa and her ten-year-old brother sneaked silently out of the house, their only provision a few pieces of bread tied up in a napkin at the end of a stick. First they went to the hermitage of Lazarus and prayed before the Virgin Mary's image for Her blessings. Then, totally innocent of geography, they passed through the city gates and took the road towards Salamanca, thinking that the land of the Moors couldn't be too far. But there the truants were met by their Uncle Francisco who hurried them home, where Do-a Beatriz and the other children were in tears as the servants dragged the well in an effort to find the missing ones.

Rodrigo suddenly forgot his pledge to die at the hands of the Moors and began to fear an imminent spanking. 'I told you we shouldn't, Teresa!'

'O Rodrigo! How could I know?'

Foiled in her quest for martyrdom, Teresa turned to the hermit-saints. With the help of Rodrigo she would build hermitages in the garden by piling up stones, but they would immediately tumble down again, or she and other little girls would transform the courtyard into a convent and play nuns, *la ni-a* no doubt being the prioress. This sort of play was quite natural, for in the Spain of those days, only two doors were open to women - marriage with its consequent total submission to a husband, or the convent.

Trained by the example of her compassionate father, Teresa would give tiny alms. From her pious mother she acquired a love to go off by herself to say her many daily prayers, especially the rosary. Thus all her childhood instincts were moulded in purity and religion.

As she grew a little bigger, *la ni-a* picked up another liking from her mother. The beautiful but frail Do-a Beatriz, though only in her late twenties, was suffering the fate of many wives of that period - exhaustion from repeated pregnancies; so could she be blamed for trying to find a little relief and entertainment by reading tales of chivalry? Now as Teresa would come and sit alone by her mother, Do-a Beatriz would still talk to her of the saints and the Mother of God; but she also began to speak of her favourite hero whose glories were related in the latest novel she was reading, for Do-a Beatriz, who lived almost as a recluse those days, loved to share with the appreciative Teresa all her private enthusiasms - 'private', because the austere Don Alonso would not have tolerated the reading of romances in his house for a moment; so the submissive Do-a Beatriz kept her books hidden.

Teresa was a girl of high spirits, and these stories began to catch her imagination.

Hearing of the love between a knight and a lady she would ask, 'And they loved each other for ever and ever?' 'Yes, for ever,' the well-intentioned mother replied.

Then, in 1528, at the age of thirty-three, Do-a Beatriz passed away, leaving behind seven sons and two daughters of her own, besides the now grown-up children of Don Alonso's first wife. She died so peacefully that she seemed to be but sleeping. Her will read, 'I bequeath my soul to Almighty God who created and redeemed it with His precious blood. I bequeath my body to the earth from which He formed it...'

Teresa found herself alone in a world from which her mother had protected her. She went at once to the hermitage of Lazarus, knelt before the picture of Mary the Mother of God, and with tears asked Her to take the place of her earthly mother.

Now the thirteen-year-old girl suddenly became aware of her natural graces, which were considerable. She found that the heads of young men turned irresistibly as she passed by, and she felt a confusion of joy and shame. Had she not been initiated into the chivalric romances, she perhaps would have avoided this dangerous pleasure of flaunting her beauty, but as it was, she was now no longer happy unless she had a new novel. The martyrs and hermits of her childhood were replaced by Amadis de Gaule and other heroic knights. Inspired by these new ideals, she began to feel such pleasure in hearing people praise her beauty that she took great pains with her clothes and jewellery, hair and hands.

Don Alonso had always tried to prevent outsiders from entering his home, in order to keep his children away from impure influences. Only his brother Francisco's children were allowed entrance. Among these cousins of Teresa, there was one girl a little older than her who was so frivolous that Do-a Beatriz had tried to prevent even her from

entering the compound. Now that Do-a Beatriz had passed away, no one was successful in keeping this girl out, and soon she became the great favourite of Teresa, who was bubbling over with the joy and excitement of blossoming womanhood. The girl began to fritter away Teresa's time with her idle chatter, and Teresa herself began to engage more and more readily in frivolities.

There was another cousin, a young man somewhat older than Teresa, who soon took a liking to her, and Teresa was not indifferent to him. (At that time cousin-marriage was permitted in Spain.) Abetted by the servants and encouraged by the frivolous girl-cousin, their affair developed secretly. For la ni-a's part, even in dream she couldn't do anything dishonourable; she had a twofold instinct for purity: purity of the body and purity of reputation. She merely loved to be loved. Though their relationship never went beyond sweet conversation, the danger was always present. She fell further and further from the good instincts of her childhood.

Luckily, three months after this affair began, she was sent to a convent. Her elder half-sister Maria had just been married, and there was no responsible woman left in the house to watch over la ni-a. Besides, Don Alonso was beginning to worry about his sixteen-year-old Teresita's inventive and fiery spirit; though he could believe no evil of this his favourite child, he thought it safer to give her care to the Augustine convent, Our Lady of Grace.

Our Lady of Grace, located outside the walls of Avila, enjoyed great prestige. Girls of well-to-do families were sent there for their education, which consisted more in the practice of virtue, the deepening of their religious faith, and learning to manage a home, than it did in formal book-learning.

For the first week there, Teresa was most unhappy; not so much from being in a convent, but because of wounded honour: she was afraid that others knew of her vanity.

