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### Editorial

### Purity

Purity is an essential condition of spiritual life. Purity is the very bed-rock of spirituality; without it none can advance in the spiritual path.

It is impurity which obstructs our vision of God. Impurity arises from ignorance. Ignorance gives rise to egoism; we forget our real nature and identify ourselves with non-self i.e., the body and mind. The ego gives rise to attachment and aversion; it is

because of the ego we have intense clinging to life.

What is purity? That which dispels delusion and reveals our real nature to us is purity. Purity manifests in thought, speech and deeds. As we go on practising spiritual disciplines our mind becomes pure (Sativik), and like a clean mirror starts reflecting the divine. This reflection of the divine further intensifies our longing for God-realisation.

As the mind becomes purer it makes us aware of impure thoughts, desires, motives etc, and also shows us the way out.

*"Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God."*

Swami Dayatmananda

## **The Angelic Brother Giles**

### **Swami Atmarupananda**

April nights are normally cold in Assisi, and so it was on the evening of April 22, 1208.

Giles, who was then about eighteen years old, sat with his family round the fire. Though he was an uneducated peasant and most ordinary, the flame of spiritual longing was already burning within him, brighter, in fact, than the fire before him; so when the conversation this evening turned to Francis of Assisi, Giles listened with eager-ness. He had of course heard previously about Francis, the wealthy merchant's son, how he had renounced home and wealth two years before in order to seek the fair hand of Lady Poverty and enter the service of the great King, Christ Jesus. But Giles now heard from his relatives about the wealthy young merchant Bernard and the cultured lawyer Peter Catanii, who only eight days ago had given all their belongings to the poor and joined Francis for the love of Christ and the perfection of their souls.

When he retired for the night, Giles was still profoundly affected by what his relatives

had said about Francis and his companions. The flame of holy aspiration leapt within him at the thought of their renunciation, love for God, and spiritual joy.

In the morning he rose very early and, it being the feast of St. George the martyr, he went to the Church of St. George to hear mass. Then he went towards the Portiuncula chapel outside the walls of Assisi, where Francis and his two companions were staying. Coming to a fork in the road at the leprosarium, Giles stopped, for he didn't know the way to the Portiuncula. Not seeing anyone to ask, he turned to God and sought His guidance. The Lord evidently heard his supplication, for after a while Giles saw Francis coming out from the wood where he had been praying. The young man was overcome with gladness and fell at the feet of Francis.

'What do you want, my dear brother?' asked Francis.

'I want to be with you, for the love of God,' replied Giles.

At this Francis rejoiced and said, 'The Lord has given you a great gift. Suppose the Emperor came to Assisi and wanted someone of the town to be his knight or chamberlain; there would be many who would seek that honour. How much greater should you consider this gift, that the Lord has chosen you from among all of them and called you to his court!'

Then taking him by the hand and raising him to his feet, Francis took him to the Portiuncula. There Francis called Bernard and Peter and said, 'The Lord has sent us a good brother. Let us therefore rejoice in the Lord and eat together in charity.'

After their repast, Francis took Giles to Assisi to get a habit for him. As they were walking, a poor beggarwoman stopped them and asked alms of Francis 'for the love of Christ'. Seeing that Francis had nothing to give her, Giles was anxiously waiting for

Francis to ask him to give something - due to his awe of the Saint he hadn't the courage to suggest it himself. After the beggarwoman repeated 'for the love of Christ' the third time, Francis turned to Giles with an angelic smile and said, 'Let us give her your cloak, for the love of Jesus Christ!' Giles was overjoyed, and as he handed her the coat he felt as if it were being accepted by Christ Himself, who had said, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me' (Matthew 25 : 40).

Francis soon developed a special love for the innocent Giles, whom he called his 'knight of the Round Table'. In the spring of 1208 Francis started out for the Marches of Ancona on the first mission journey, and he chose Giles as his companion. These two made a wonderful team. Francis would speak in artless words, totally devoid of theological subtleties and rhetorical niceties, which were imprinted deep in the hearts of his hearers through the power of his inspired personality. And when Francis finished speaking, the simple-hearted Giles would add, 'What he says is true! Listen to him and do as he says!'

On their return to the Portiuncula, there were three new brothers. Francis now sent all the friars out on mission tours. Brother Giles went on pilgrimage to Compostella. He had only his one habit - the one procured by Francis on the day of his conversion - but during his pilgrimage he met a beggar; and as he had nothing else to give the poor man, he removed the cowl from his habit and gave that, although he had to continue for twenty-one days with no covering for his head. Perhaps it was on this journey that, as he was walking one day, he felt so exhausted with hunger that he lay down by the roadside and fell asleep. When he woke up, he found by his head half a loaf of bread; he didn't know who had brought it, but he did know that the giver was God, who does not abandon those who take refuge in Him.

Everywhere he went he urged people in his simple way to love God. Whenever he came upon a church or a cross, or even saw a church tower in the distance, he would bow down in the dust and repeat a prayer taught him by Francis : 'I adore Thee, O Christ, here and in all Thy churches over the whole world, and I bless Thee because by Thy holy cross Thou hast redeemed the world.'

Besides his pilgrimage to Compostella, Giles went on several other pilgrimages during the lifetime of Francis. On these journeys he had to suffer much from hunger, cold and tribulations; but the spiritual consolations he had been receiving from the very day of his conversion raised him above anxieties.

Francis taught a reverence not only for begging one's food, but also for manual labour done in exchange for one's food and other necessities (never for money!). Giles demonstrated in his day-to-day life this love for manual labour. On his way to the Holy Land he had to stop at Brindisi for some days while waiting for a ship, so he begged an old cart, filled it with water at the fountain outside the city, and dragged it through the streets crying *Chi vuole dell' aqua?* 'Who wants water?' In exchange for the water, he accepted bread and other such things as were needed by him and his companions. On the way back from the Holy Land he was put ashore at Ancona. Here he cut osiers for baskets and rushes for covering bottles, which he plaited and exchanged for bread. He also carried dead bodies to the cemetery, and thereby earned garments for himself and for his companions. He used to say that these acts of service done for his companions would pray for him while he slept.

Apparently it was during this stay in Ancona that a priest who saw him carrying a bundle of rushes into the town muttered 'hypocrite' as Giles passed him. Hearing this, the simple-hearted friar broke down in tears. When one of his companions saw him weeping and asked the cause, Giles said, 'Because I am a hypocrite, as a priest told me today.'

'And does that make you believe that you are one?' asked the brother. 'Yes', replied Giles, 'a priest cannot lie!' Then the brother had to explain to the childlike friar minor that, just as there are differences among men, so there are differences among priests, and that even a priest can do wrong.

During his pilgrimage to Rome he would hear mass early in the morning and then go to the forest to gather wood, which he would bring back and sell in the city for bread. Once when a lady who saw he was a religious man wanted to give him more for the wood than he had asked, Giles refused to take more than half of what he had originally asked, saying, 'I won't yield to greed.'

While staying with Cardinal Nicholas, Bishop of Tuscoli, Giles went daily to harvest olives. He was given bread for this labour, which he would bring back to eat at the Cardinal's house. When the Cardinal protested that as a poor mendicant he should eat the Cardinal's bread, Giles replied with the saying of the Psalms: 'Thou shalt eat of the labour of thy hands' (128 : 2), for Francis had taught that to him from the very beginning of his life in the brotherhood. One day it rained in torrents, and the Cardinal was rejoicing that Giles would have to eat at his table, as he couldn't go out to pick olives. Meanwhile Giles went to the cook and offered to clean the kitchen in return for two loaves of bread. The cook accepted the offer, and the Cardinal's pious desire was thwarted. As the rain continued the next day, Giles polished all the knives in the house in exchange for two more loaves.

Francis was delighted to see Giles' exceptional qualities of goodness; so when this disciple returned from one of his pilgrimages, seven years after his conversion, Francis told him to go wherever he pleased. But Giles said that he didn't want such freedom. Francis therefore sent him to the hermitage of Favarone, near Perugia. Here he received great spiritual graces. One night as he was praying, he was so filled with divine joy that

he seemed to be leaving the body. He felt as though the body were dying, beginning with the feet and passing upwards until he actually lost body-consciousness.

While gazing at his awakened soul he rejoiced because of the beauty of his luminous and subtle nature; and as he himself declared later, it was beyond all concept and description. While in that awakened state some divine mysteries were revealed to him, which, however, he would never speak of because of their sacredness. In after years he said, 'Oh, what a great and rare spiritual grace has he to whom the knowledge of his own soul has been given! Only God knows it, and he to whom He wishes to show it.'

In Christendom, to be martyred in the name of Christ has always been considered a great blessing, opening the very gates of heaven to the martyred soul. Among the early Franciscans, several were martyred by the Muslims in Spain and the Holy Land, and by the barbarians in northern Europe. Francis himself had sought martyrdom while preaching to the Muslims, but had been left unharmed. Giles also sought martyrdom in 1219, when he went to Tunis. But he too was spared. Afterwards, when he had climbed the heights of contemplation, he used to say, 'I am glad I didn't die then as a martyr. I want to die no better death than that of contemplation.'

St. Francis entered eternity in 1226. Even during the Saint's lifetime there had been a large sector within the Brotherhood who rebelled against the austere simplicity and evangelical freedom of the first Franciscans. Now these friars got the upper hand in the organization and began to work many changes in the Order which were contrary to the spirit and teachings of their founder. Francis had opposed the owning of all property, even by the organization itself. But now the friars began to build huge convents and cathedrals. He had been against the formal study of theology and church law within the Order, but now there were great Franciscan seminaries in the European centres of

learning - Bologna, Paris, Oxford.

There were several reasons for Francis' opposition to formal learning within the Brotherhood. For one thing, it necessitated the acquisition and storage of books, which meant building convents to house libraries - an act of unchastity for one wedded to Lady Poverty. It also tended to create a gulf between the learned friars and the illiterate peasantry. It meant the creation of an intellectual elite within the Order itself. As Francis once told a friar who wanted a psalter, 'My son, once you have a psalter you will ask for a breviary. When you have a breviary you will want to sit in a high seat like a prelate and order your brothers, "Bring me my breviary!"' Learning also meant preaching ideas rather than preaching life, speaking from books rather than speaking from knowledge gained in prayer. It meant separating the friars from nature by a seminary wall, thus putting an end to the poetic vision of God's being present in the cosmos. Whether St. Francis was totally justified in his fear of learning has been a much-debated question for centuries; but it is clear that he wished it to have little place in Franciscan spiritual life.

Brother Giles, who was in total harmony with the ideals of Francis, was pained to see these new developments. He didn't hesitate to use his sharp wit against those who were unfaithful to the founder's teachings. Once he said, 'There is a great difference between a sheep which bleats and one which grazes, for braying does no one any good, but grazing does itself good. It is so with a friar minor who preaches, and one who prays and works. A thousand and a thousand times better it is to teach oneself than to teach the whole world.'

A brother came one day to Giles and asked his blessing for a preaching mission. 'Yes,' said Giles, 'provided you limit your preaching to saying, "A great cry and little wool is



what I give!"

Soon after the passing away of St. Francis, Giles went to the hermitage of Cetona to spend the forty days' fast of St. Martin. After persevering there in prayer, one night, three days before Christmas, Jesus appeared to him in front of his very eyes. Giles was so overwhelmed with bliss that he felt as though he were dying, and he began to cry loudly under the influence of that unbearable sweetness. The other friars were alarmed to hear his cries and they came running to his cell. One of the friars, Giles' closest companion whom he had trained in the holy life since his youth, asked him, 'What is the matter, Father?' And Giles answered, 'Come, my son, for I have been wanting to see you.' Then he explained to the young friar the great graces which had been granted to him.

The next day the same friar came to Giles' cell and found him weeping. Giles felt that he had undergone a profound change and renewal after the previous night's experience, and he said to the young friar, 'Until now I have gone where I wished and done what I wanted, labouring with my own hands. But from now on I can't do as I used to, but I must do as I feel guided from within. Therefore I fear very much lest others should ask what I cannot give them.'

He continued to enjoy that ineffable sweetness at intervals both day and night from the third day before Christmas until Epiphany, the Day of the Kings (i.e. 6th January); for so intense was his ecstasy that had it remained continuous he could not have survived it, as he himself said.

After this experience at Cetona, Giles used to preserve with the greatest care the grace which God had vouchsafed him. For he was wont to say that through the slightest carelessness one might lose great spiritual treasures, which perhaps might never be offered again in this life. Therefore, he began to remain alone in his cell, watching,

praying, fasting, and keeping away from every bad influence. And if anyone told him about the bad actions of another, he would say, 'I don't want to know about another's sin. Be careful, Brother, not to see anything bad which does not concern you.' He withdrew not only from lay people, but even from other friars, for he used to say that God is the soul's only friend.

Finding this angelic friar such a fit recipient of grace, the Lord began to shower so many blessings on him that he could no longer conceal his blessed state from others. If anyone spoke with him about God or spiritual truths, Giles would immediately be plunged into ecstasy, and would remain speechless and motionless on the spot for a whole day and night. The friars therefore became cautious in speaking with him, lest he should be carried away from them in ecstatic union.

In 1234 Giles settled at a hermitage named Monte Ripido in Perugia, which he made his home until passing into eternity twenty-eight years later. Here he passed his last days in a state of paradisaical innocence. Sometimes he would speak with the doves in his convent garden. One day he heard a dove cooing and said, 'O Sister Dove, I will learn from you how to serve the Lord! For you always say Qua, Qua, not La, La - here, here on earth, and not there, there in heaven, are we to serve God. O Sister, how beautifully you coo! O men, why don't you learn of Sister Dove!' Sometimes for sheer uncontrollable joy he would take up two sticks, and, as if playing a violin, he would scrape one across the other, singing the praises of God as he walked or danced in the garden.

Once when two cardinals were leaving after a visit, they asked Giles to pray for them. 'It is surely not necessary for me to pray for you, my lords, he said with a twinkle in his eye 'for you obviously have more faith and hope than I do.' 'How is that?' asked the two cardinals, somewhat taken aback. 'Because you who have so much honour and power and glory of this world hope to be saved, while I who live so poorly and wretchedly am yet

afraid that I will be damned!

St. Bonaventure, the Minister General of the Order, visited him in 1260. He was a great theologian known for his wisdom, holiness and charity. But Giles didn't spare him. The first question he asked his distinguished visitor was 'Father, can we ignorant and unlearned men be saved?'

'Certainly,' replied Bonaventure kindly.

'Can one who is not book-learned love God as much as one who is?' asked Giles again.

'An old woman is better able to love God than a master of theology,' answered the theologian.

Then Giles went to the wall of his garden and cried out to the wide world: 'Hear this, all of you, an old woman who has learned nothing and cannot read can love God more than Brother Bonaventure!'

Giles had once said that he wanted nothing better than to die in contemplation. And so it happened. Towards the end he had high fever; and due to a cough and pains in the head and chest, he could neither eat nor sleep. So the friars used to carry him about the convent on his bed so that he could get rest. On the night of the vigil of St. George the Martyr in 1262, exactly fifty-four years after the day of his conversion, the friars carried him on his bed to the chapel for the service; and there he quietly closed his eyes and mouth and laid down his head, never again to be dragged away from ecstatic union with the Beloved.

**Reprinted from *Prabuddha Bharata*, 1979**

## The Behaviour of an Avatar

### Swami Siddheswarananda

I had the good fortune to be in the presence of Swami Shiva-nanda when Christmas Eve was celebrated at the Madras Math in 1926.

After the worship of the Lord Jesus we all meditated, and different episodes from the life of the Saviour were read aloud from the Holy Bible.

When we all prostrated before Swami Shivananda at the end of the evening we found him in a very exalted mood. He gave an incident from the life of Sri Ramakrishna which, although well known among the latter's devotees in the East and the West, is yet incomplete without certain touching words of the Master which we do not find in the published version of the incident. These words, which Swami Shivananda repeated, are full of significance. Swami Shivananda narrated the episode as a fitting complement to the Lord Jesus' ideas about pardon, which he expressed on the cross: "Father forgive them; for they know not what they do."

It happened like this. During the early days of Sri Ramakrishna's stay at the Dakshineswar temple, Mathur Babu, the proprietor of the temple estate, had a family priest named Haldar. Haldar had first seen the Master when he was pitied and mocked by the outside world as a madman, unfit to do the work of a priest. Haldar had seen also how Mathur had shown the Master great respect, arranging everything to take care of his health

when his body suffered under the stress of violent spiritual emotions. And finally the same Haldar had seen to his surprise how year after year Sri Ramakrishna was attracting large crowds of influential men and women from Calcutta, who came and prostrated at his feet and listened to his words. Quite innocent of any spiritual life, Haldar came to believe that Sri Ramakrishna was the possessor of magic charms by which he was able to cast a spell over the minds of others. Now and then Haldar went to the Master and requested a mantram by which he could capture the minds of people. To each request of this kind the Master replied that he had no such formula, and that it was only the grace of the Divine Mother that brought devotees to Dakshineswar. But the family priest was not convinced, and he kept worrying the master with the same request. One day, very much vexed that he could not get what he wanted, Haldar became so angry that he used crude language on the Master and beat him.

Sri Ramakrishna did not mention this incident to anyone at the time. Later, Mathur Babu dismissed Haldar from his service for neglect of duties. When Mathur informed Sri Ramakrishna that Haldar had left, the Master narrated the story of the family priest's rudeness to him. Mathur became infuriated on hearing of it, and with great sorrow in his heart that such a thing could have happened to his Lord and guru, said: "Father, why did you not inform me of it at the time? I would have chopped Haldar's head off!"

It is Sri Ramakrishna's reply which is so significant, and which is so little known to those who are familiar with the rest of the story. Sri Ramakrishna replied: "You see, the man really believed me to be the possessor of some magic charm. I tried my best on many occasions to remove this false idea from his mind, but I could not do it. He really believed that; but I had not the power to make him understand the contrary."

Swami Shivananda, commenting on this, said that in these words Sri Ramakrishna implied that the fault was his own, and not Haldar's; for he, the Master, did not have the

power to remove the illusion from Haldar's mind.

When the congregation left after the Christmas worship, I was alone with Swami Shivananda. I still see him before me, talking in Bengali with much feeling. I can never forget the expression on his face. I asked him: "How is it, Maharaj, that Sri Ramakrishna, who could do anything, would say such a thing? Did he not have the power to remove the illusion from the mind of the priest? Did he not by a single touch give spiritual awakening to many who came to him. as for example on January 1, 1886, when he became the "Wish-fulfilling Tree"? You yourself told us the other day how you saw him on this occasion from the second floor of the Cossipore garden house. We are perplexed by the behaviour of the Master in respect to Haldar."

"You see," Swami Shivananda replied, "our Lord had different moods. With respect to Haldar he was not in the mood of the guru transforming the disciple; in relation to him he was like an ordinary devotee, who must see the Lord in the poor, in the ignorant, in the wicked."

In such a case the question of pardon does not even arise. Ordinarily, he who pardons remains in a higher position, and he who receives the pardon is one who has committed a fault and knows that he has done so. As explained by Swami Shivananda, the Master's attitude and the explanation he gave to Mathur have very little parallel in the history of human relations, surpassing the usual idea we have of humility. The example Sri Ramakrishna gave us will serve remarkably well in adjusting human relations when it is impossible for one person to convince another. When we are unable to come down to the level of the other, we cannot understand him. The very spirit of understanding demands unity of outlook. If true unity is not achieved, understanding remains only for a short time. If, with great equanimity of mind, one can remain neutral to the aggressive attitude of the opponent, in the long run the adversary cannot but be influenced by such

a chastening behaviour of the man of wisdom.

Swami Shivananda concluded by saying: "Very often when the Master was in the mood of the transforming guru he had a peculiar faculty of suddenly becoming the other, conserving at the same time his spiritual consciousness and power to transform the other. And then some miracle happened. A divine power, as it were, shot out from the master and enveloped the other, lifting him up to a very high place of human evolution. And this is the miracle of transforming character which the Master performed on so many occasions."

I remember a story told me by Swami Vishwananda of Chicago, who had closely associated with M., the compiler of Sri Ramakrishna's Gospel. Swami Vishwananda had heard it directly from M., who was with the Master when the incident occurred. One day Sri Ramakrishna was visiting the home of a devotee in Calcutta. During that period Sri Ramakrishna had many adversaries who believed that he enchanted the minds of young men and turned them away from their mundane occupations. A certain person was commissioned to hurt Sri Ramakrishna physically so that he would be dissuaded from visiting that part of Calcutta any more. On this particular occasion devotional music was being played in the house of the host, but suddenly the mood of the Master changed. He got up and said that he was leaving, then he almost ran from the place. The stairs led from the main floor directly into the street. M. followed. As they came downstairs the Master said: "Who has come here to beat me? Come along, come near me - beat me, beat me!" The man who had been commissioned to beat the Master was standing on the street. The Master touched him, and he became a different person; it is said that a profound spiritual transformation came over him.

This reminds me of Angulimala, who set out to kill Buddha but was transformed by his touch and became a disciple of the Buddha and a saint. However much the story of

Angulimala is put in legendary garb, that it happened can no longer be doubted. For it is known historically that many a transformation of character - of sinners becoming saints - happened to persons that came in contact with Sri Ramakrishna.

I asked Swami Shivananda about the fate of the would-be assailant had he assaulted the Master, and what Haldar's fate must have been. Swami Shivananda told me that whoever came in contact with the Master, no matter under what circumstances, was saved - that whoever touched him personally, no matter how, could not come to perdition. The feeling with which he said this is beyond my expression. My mind went back to the Puranic stories where characters that came in contact with divine incarnations as enemies, fighting for example with Rama or Krishna, even in so doing gained their final liberation.

**Reprinted from Vedanta and the West, 1958**

## **Dhyana, Japa, Mantra, Guru, and Avatar**

### **Swami Swahananda**

I have chosen for discussion five special terms: dhyana, japa, mantra, guru, and avatar. I shall discuss each of them only briefly, since each of these terms could serve as a single topic. First, the idea of dhyana, or meditation. Even in the average person, the desire sometimes crops up to have a little grip over the mind. We do not like to be always at



the mercy of our own minds. Somebody tells us something and we feel bad; somebody says something to us and we jump. We are all the time at the mercy of external stimuli. Sometimes, the mind becomes restless. The mind has its moods. Controlling the moods of the mind is a problem for everybody, in some measure or another. Meditation is a technique for keeping the mind calm and serene. The more you are able to keep the mind quiet - perhaps several times in the day - the more will be your grip over your own mind, and fewer will be the disturbances. So even for the average person who is not especially spiritually inclined, meditation has a message.

In spiritual pursuits, as Swami Turiyananda once said, "Today's imagination becomes tomorrow's realization," so meditation tops the list; it is the highest form of spiritual practice because it is the direct apprehension of the Reality. The Vedanta says that man has a goal of life. The goal of life is based upon his essential, spiritual, permanent nature. A goal of life which is based upon man's temporary nature will necessarily be a temporary goal, such as earning money, achieving position and power, getting one's livelihood, and so forth. These are all temporary goals, valid for ten, twenty, or thirty years. But realizing God, or, as the devotees put it, having contact with God, or having devotion for the Lord, is the permanent goal. A person may live his life in day-to-day affairs, and at the same time keep a part of his mind in the Lord, because his goal of life has been fixed. That doesn't mean he must give up all other goals of life; all these temporary goals will still remain. As long as the body is there, it has to be sustained; as long as a person lives in a society, social obligations and duties will have to be performed; these are all taken for granted. But overriding all of these is a desire to have devotion for the Lord, which is the means for the highest illumination - or knowing one's spiritual nature, as the Vedanta puts it. Vedanta says that man's essential, permanent nature, the persistent nature, is not the body and not the mind, because these are temporal, but the Spirit. So by devotion to the Lord, or by knowing one's spiritual nature

through the cultivation of discrimination, a person goes in that direction. Meditation is a potent means, a direct means, of thinking about one's spiritual nature, or about God.

Meditation mainly involves withdrawing the mind from the surroundings and focusing it on an ideal, such as God. There are various types of meditation - for example, not to think at all, which is difficult, or to think excellent thoughts, or to think of the transience of things, as the Buddhists say. Then there are the more popular methods of meditation on God. God is normally visualized in one of three ways. In all of the major religious systems three conceptions of God exist. One is the idea of the impersonal Absolute. How to meditate on him? Think of a vast expanse of the sky, a vast ocean of bliss, or light, or some such substitute. A second idea is to view God as personal, but not having any form. Many of the sects believe in this. In this conception, God is often meditated upon as a light in one's heart. Then comes the most popular conception and method of meditation: meditation upon a deity, like Shiva, Durga, Kali, Vishnu, or on a great teacher, an avatar - Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Ramakrishna, or Christ. Meditation on these personalities, who are as good as God, is practised by focusing the mind on the idea of the form repeatedly, over and over, several times a day. The normal course is two times a day. In ancient times they used to say three times a day, and Swami Brahmananda used to say four times a day, at the four junctions, as they are called. Early morning and evening are the most popular times. Throughout the world religious people try to collect themselves at those times, and the yogis believe that this creates a special type of vibration, as it were, and the mind gets collected more easily. But a person can choose his own time. The main point is withdrawal of the mind, which in Yoga scriptures is said to be *pratyahara*, in-gathering. The mind is always spreading out to so many things: somebody walks by, so the mind is distracted; something happens, and the mind goes there. So try to withdraw the mind. The idea is that if the mind is withdrawn, it will automatically be collected, and if the mind is collected the thought of

the essential Self will come up. But then, as a help, it is easier to withdraw the mind if you focus the mind on something - on a form of God, or an idea of God, or on a light. Now as you are trying to focus, you are really actually visualizing the form. You take the form of, say, Ramakrishna, or one of the deities, or one of the incarnations, and you visualize the form before your eyes, your mental eye, often as sitting in your heart, and then go on doing this. You don't change the method from day to day; you repeatedly do it the same way. In this way, a certain measure of grip over the mind will be achieved, and when the need arises to withdraw the mind from certain thoughts, you can do it more easily. Everybody at sometime or other feels oppressed by uncomfortable thoughts - worries, anxieties and so forth. How to withdraw the mind? How to get out of that oppressive thought? The only effective method is the cultivation of the capacity of withdrawing the mind at will. Everybody does this unwillingly, but you must be able to do it at will. Then, if you want, you can withdraw the mind, at least for half an hour, one hour, two hours. To do this, you will have to build up the muscle earlier. If you start doing exercise when a disease has come, that won't do. Exercise must be practised earlier, especially in young days, or before you have the problem. So meditation, to be spiritually productive, must be started when we are healthy, and preferably, strong and young.

Of course, meditation can be done at any stage of life, but it is a strict discipline. A particular posture is necessary. Swami Vivekananda says you can't meditate with your chest in, because that is a moody pose. The chest should be forward, he said, but not stiff. So there are certain directions, such as sitting straight. Yogis believe that the spinal column must be erect; that there are some yogic forces that pass through the spinal cord. So it is better to practise early in life, to be able to sit in the same posture for a longer time. If you don't practise it, the body becomes restless when you try to sit, and when the body becomes restless, the mind very easily becomes restless. If you don't

practise a particular method of sitting, the aches and pains will remind you of the presence of the body. If you do practise, you will be able to sit for a longer time. That doesn't mean that people who have already acquired aches and pains have no hope. For them, meditation may not be the strong point; for them japa and other methods could be practised. For everybody there is some scope. But meditation is more beneficial for people, more productive for people, who have a certain measure of grip over their own bodies - and of course, more important, over their minds. So, I make up my mind that every day I shall sit for half an hour. Whether I like it or not, whether the mind is concentrated or not, I shall sit. If you can do this for three months, then you will find that the body co-operates more easily, and the mind also co-operates because it knows it cannot get away. "I shall have to sit." Once the decision is made, the mind won't make you more restless, unless you have got some special problem, and when you have a special problem, it is even more necessary to sit quietly. So practise! First of all, the body must get used to it. If you are a complete beginner, you can start with 15 minutes. As you go on practising, half an hour is a good amount of time. Then, if you are especially religious, still more. To keep a flow of the thought of the Lord throughout the day, special meditation periods are required - at least two hours of meditation will keep the mind and thought in a spiritual flow throughout the day and night. But half an hour would be quite good, at least two times a day. I often recommend, especially for busy people, that if possible, every three hours, withdraw yourself and quietly sit, and go within, at least for five minutes. That will give a soothing effect to the body and the mind, and the nerves will be calmed. Just think of the Lord. How to withdraw the mind? Think of the Lord. Actually, meditation means visualization, trying to see a form of the Lord or a light, in your heart, or all around you. So this is dhyana, meditation.

The next idea is the idea of japa. Japa is the repetition of a mantra. What is a mantra? It is a holy name of God, or a holy formula. Why a holy formula? There are some who are

believers in the impersonal God; they are not so much interested in God's name, but they are interested in a holy mantra of the impersonal God, the impersonal Absolute. When we meditate intensely, we use visualization. Visualization collects the mind. By visualization, the mind gets withdrawn. But the mind's tendency is to go out again. It goes out; you bring it back. It goes out; you bring it back. This becomes easier if you repeat the mantra. If you say "Rama," you think of Rama. You can take up any name. When you repeat someone's name, his face comes to your mind. So this association is utilized in the method of japa. Every time you repeat the divine name, you remember the Lord. Japa is especially beneficial, it is easier, for those who find it difficult to meditate long. Perhaps I have decided to sit for half an hour. If in meditation alone I can sit for this amount of time, well and good. If not, with japa I shall sit. If I can neither meditate nor do japa, I shall simply sit. If you do this for three months, results will come. Of course, you must first be convinced that sitting in the thought of the Lord is good. Unless you are sure of that, you won't sit.

Repetition of the name of the Lord gives a special type of spiritual merit. This merit can be used in two ways: for God realization, or for the acquisition of worldly wealth. Both are permissible, both are all right. According to the predominant desire in the mind, merit is acquired. So many people use japa, and the power of the mantra, for well-being in life. Our lives are impinging on us; we cannot think merely of spiritual realization, bereft of a sense of well-being regarding things around us. Health is a prime consideration; the body is a prime consideration. In the Vedantic analysis the body may be negated as not our permanent nature, but it is so real to us, that if anything happens to the body, naturally the mind becomes dispirited. So, again the power of the mantra, or God's help, God's grace, is taken recourse to, for spiritual healing, as it is called. Help is sought in various ways - in the yogic way, or just by praying. The yogis assert that they are all right; devotees cry to the Lord, "Oh, please make me all right." These are the two

methods of seeking the same goal of well-being, especially of the body. The mind, of course, has a much stronger influence. If the mind is upset, even if the health is good, we feel bad. When health is not a problem, the mind becomes a greater problem. When health is a problem, the mind doesn't play too much of a part. It is already sad and dispirited, and the impact of the body is much more important. But when the body is in the normal condition, then the mind becomes a problem - restlessness, despair, frustration, and various other things arise. We are all conscious of those things. Again, there are two methods for seeking well being. The Lord's help can be taken, by prayer, in which I pray fervently for the Lord to make the mind all right. But the yogi's method is control of the mind. Yogis go on asserting: "I am of the nature of the Spirit. Why should I be so much disturbed by my own mind? The mind is my instrument. It is to be controlled by me." I make up my mind to hold on to this idea, and not allow the mind to go this way or that way. By repeated suggestion, by repeated assertion, gradually the mind becomes strengthened. When the devotees take the help of the Lord, "Please Lord, help me," that is an indirect method of doing the same thing. So japa is done also for physical and mental well-being, but when it is directed toward spiritual realization, it will bear the spiritual fruit more. Those who meditate for the sake of the Lord will indirectly get the other result. Those whose prime concern is the body and the mind will get that result directly, and indirectly, the spiritual result. So the result depends upon our special focus.

A stage comes in the life of a devotee in which in every situation he runs to God. This is accepted. But we are full of so many varieties of desires that it is better at a certain point to assert our own minds also. Some impossible desires will be there. Unnecessary anxieties and worries are there. Unnecessary irritations are there. "O Lord, take away my irritation. Take away my jealousy." Instead of saying this, why should I not try first to control the irritation as far as I can? Perhaps I am scorched by anger or jealousy, which

are two of the major problems of most people, especially in interpersonal relationships. I can pray to the Lord to lessen these feelings, but that will not be enough, unless I myself co-operate with the Lord. So the yogis say, you do it first. You do it; these things are your own mental creation. By your own mental assertion you can control them. Japa is still done so that the mind becomes calm to some extent. Then, with the help of the Lord's grace, you try to gain control over these things. Sometimes, after going some distance, you find a sort of wall, as it were, blocking your progress. Now, japa is a very popular form of spiritual practise because, even if the mind is not concentrated, you can repeat the mantra. If you are going by bus, or waiting for the bus, or waiting for a friend to come, you cannot do anything serious at that time, but some occupation of the mind is necessary. Instead of wasting the mind in useless fantasies, or meaningless thinking, you can repeat the name of the Lord. The belief is there that if I think of the Lord spiritual progress will be acquired, although immediately I may not feel it. So because of this, you practice japa. Sometimes people say, "Oh, it is very boring to go on repeating 'Rama, Rama, Rama' all the time," which is true. But if I knew that every time I have repeated Rama, one plus is being added to my balance, that my bank account has increased, then I would not mind. Sri Ramakrishna promises that every time you have prayed to the Lord, he has heard it. But he will give the result according to his time, not your time. If you want results in your time, utilize the yogic method, the assertion method. Right now, I shall make my mind calm and serene. If you want God to do it - "Make my mind calm and serene, I won't co-operate," then of course he will take his own time, and you won't see the results so palpably. The two attitudes are different. Japa is used to keep the mind occupied. Nowadays more and more people are left to themselves for most of the day and night. Staying occupied becomes a problem. Previously, in the joint family system, especially in India, you would be always surrounded by a dozen people. You would have no time to yourself, so the problem of mental occupation would

be less. If necessary, you could go and quarrel with someone and again be all right. But when you are left practically alone for twenty-four hours, except for one or two hours when you go out and meet friends, how to spend the time becomes a problem.

Nowadays, because of universal education, it is easier to spend time reading books, or in substitutes for reading like watching television and listening to the radio, or in doing some type of work. All are useful to some extent. But a spiritual aspirant has got a goal of life. A person who has no goal of life can spend all his time only on these things. But if he has got a goal of life, he will have to spend some part of that time in spiritual practice. It is of course practically impossible to do japa for sixteen hours a day, or ten hours a day, unless you are a very special type of person, and it is not necessary to do so much. The idea is that whenever I feel that I have nothing else to do, at least at that time, if I repeat the name of the Lord, it is an occupation, but it is an occupation which is useful, which is productive of result, and which is pushing me forward gradually towards higher realization. That is the promise of the saints. That portion I take for granted, on trust. They have said it, it should be true. If not, what else would I be doing? If I read the whole newspaper and the cricket results - in America it is baseball results - I don't gain anything, really. I need not exclude these activities; I can put some part of my mind on these things also. But if I have a special interest, I spend time on that interest. When time is hanging heavy on my hands, how will I spend it? Japa is popular because it can be done at these times, and because of the promise that every time you have repeated the name of the Lord, some result will come - either a worldly result or a spiritual result.

There are three types of japa. One is to repeat the mantra out loud. For those whose minds are very much disturbed, it is better to repeat the mantra aloud, if you are alone, so that disturbing thoughts are replaced by another sound. To make the mind concentrated, three things can be done. You have a holy picture of your Chosen Ideal. If



you look at it, the organ of sight is used. Loudly chant, and the organ of speech is used. When you repeat the mantra out loud, the organ of hearing, the ears, are used. You apply as many sense organs as possible in the practice. A second type of japa is to repeat the mantra noiselessly, quietly, calmly, without making any sound - mentally. It is more productive of result, when you are a little used to it. The problem is that the mind runs away when you try to do japa mentally. So a third type of japa is to repeat the mantra a little audibly or simply with the lips moving. But the best type, they say, is to do japa in the mind, without making any noise.

The mantra is believed to have a special power. A mantra which has been sanctified by great saints, or repeated by many yogis, acquires a sort of special power. Especially in the Tantra, the idea was developed that repetition of a particular syllable produces a special result. Often people practice those mantras for an immediate goal. If you want to pass an examination, one mantra. If you want to get a husband, another mantra. Varieties of mantras are there. But again, for a spiritual aspirant, instead of diverting energy into too many mantras, it is better to concentrate on one mantra, the mantra of the Lord, a special mantra. There are many thousands of types of mantras, based upon deities, religions, sects, and so forth. The aspirant chooses one, and all other deities are, as it were, concentrated in this deity and mantra. Etymologically, mantra means "that which saves," or "that which salvages." A mantra can be picked up from a book. Nowadays, everything has come out in books. Previously, people could not get mantras in this way, so they had to go to somebody to learn them. When books are available, you can pick up the mantra directly from the book. But the benefit is more if it comes from an advanced teacher.

The Gayatri mantra, very famous in India, is a prayer to the effulgent Light, the effulgent divinity, to turn our minds in the right direction. "Please guide our intellects in

the right direction." Anybody can pray in that way. Tat savitur varenyam bhargo devasya dhimahi. "I meditate on the effulgent light of the divine." Dhiyo yo nah pracodayat. "May He direct our mind in the right direction." That is a very general type of mantra, but a belief is there that for thousands of years, millions of people have recited it, so it has acquired special strength.

*(To be continued)*

## **Leaves of an Ashrama: 5**

### **Taking Root in the Divine Ground**

#### **Swami Vidyatmananda**

A book that caused a stir in America and in several European countries some years ago, and subsequently served as the basis for a TV series, is *Roots* by Alex Haley. *Roots* was written by an American black who wanted to trace his ancestry back, through the penury of his parents and the slave conditions of his grandparents, to the happier existence of his forefathers in Africa. This he attempted to do by examining the memories of his parents, consulting such documents as existed, and visiting the village in Africa from which it seemed his ancestors had come. By talking to old people there Haley learned about traditions and tribal ideas which had affected him all his life without his having been aware of the source. This was an exercise, Haley felt, in finding out who he was by understanding what he had come from and what had formed him.

Eventually the book proved to be more an exercise in fiction than in fact. Insufficient records exist to allow most blacks to trace their ancestry with any degree of precision. The bulk of the text, although interesting, was felt to be more an imaginative account rather than serious social history.

We would criticize the project from another standpoint. Vedanta says that we are not so much formed by our physical ancestors; rather we choose them as appropriate vehicles for expressing the karmas which our subtle body has acquired and would express. Physically, of course, heredity has an effect. Bodily characteristics are dictated by our ancestry, and everyday habits and responses by the family environment; but an examination of the characters of our two parents, of our four grandparents, and of our sixteen greatgrandparents - supposing that this could be done - would never result in our knowing ourselves. How many of us could even supply the names and birthplaces of these twenty-two individuals, let alone know what they were really like? How could we possibly apply such data to ourselves, if discovered?

Indeed, it is all this baggage from the past which we, as devotees and ashrama members, are trying to rid ourselves of: the prejudices and fears; the anxieties and preoccupations that make up our everyday personalities, as they must have made up the personalities of our forbears.

That which we are basically has very little to do with our physical roots. This is what Vedanta teaches, and thank God that this is the case, for who would like to feel that he can rise no higher in his character than the average of that of the score or two of the persons immediately behind him, even if they might have been Boston brahmins, British aristocrats, or members of the AcadŽmie Fran ^ aise?

No, the roots which interest us are those which find their sustenance in what has been

called the Divine Ground of all Being. When we speak of finding out who we are, we mean this, to be able to say from experience what Sri Shankara<sup>1</sup> said in his Nirvanadasaka: "I am neither white nor black, neither red nor yellow, neither bent nor stout, neither short nor lean. I am formless, of the nature of the self-resplendent consciousness. I am the ultimate Truth, the all-pervading Self, the One without a second."

The roots which give this flowering are the roots which we want to trace and nourish.

## In Gratitude

### A Devotee

How often have I fondly thought of the day the book Ramakrishna and His Disciples by Christopher Isherwood landed in my realm. It was in England, way back in 1981. I was visiting a friend and I saw the book lying on his table, the only book lying on his table. Perhaps my friend wanted me to be part of the Ramakrishna family, or perhaps Someone else did. I enquired whether I could borrow the book and he immediately granted my request, almost as if he was expecting me to ask. We talked and in time, I bade goodbye and rose to leave. I was halfway to the elevators when I remembered the Book!

How could I have forgotten?! I turned back to go fetch. As I swivelled, I felt the weight of the Book in my left hand. I must have subconsciously picked it up as I left the room.

*Or had I?*

Be that as it may, I started reading the Book, and every time I would pick it up to read, my spirit would surge within. It would Whirrr and Roarr... and make its presence known!

How grateful I have felt all these years for that Book and my friend! It was only many years and many cities later, that I realised that there were so many others who were also directly responsible for that lone Book to be placed on that lone table.

A few years ago, I was listening to (the now late) Swami Pramathanandaji Maharaj reminisce about his time with Swami Madhavanandaji Maharaj (the then president of the Ramakrishna Order) as his private secretary. It was then, that I learned that they were both also involved with the publication of that Book. He mentioned how the manuscript for that Book had been sent to Swami Madhavanandaji by Swami Prabhavanandaji and Isherwood from Los Angeles. They had requested Swami Madhavanandaji to proof-read the text and ensure its authenticity, prior to its publication. Swami Madhavanandaji wavered at the outset and only reluctantly agreed to do so. Once he had agreed, however, his commitment, his zeal for finishing the task undertaken, his thoroughness, all at the cost of his own personal comfort and ease, at an age when most individuals would much rather take things easy, was very touching to hear. His drive and energy, Swami Pramathanandaji mentioned, ensured that right up to the very last chapter, his concentration waned not, wavered not! Swami Pramathanandaji remembered that for the last chapter Swami Madhavanandaji had begun work at 7 a.m. and continued for almost 8 hours without a break of any kind. Swami Madhavanandaji stopped his intense research and proof-reading of that chapter at 2.45 p.m., only so as to give Swami Pramathanandaji 15 minutes to walk over and deliver the manuscript to the postman

who collected the Belur Math mail every day at 3 p.m.

So, not only must I be grateful to my friend and the author Christopher Isherwood, but a host of others.

And how can I forget that warden of the hostel where I was staying in England. The warden? He was a devotee too? Yes, in a sense. I was staying in a Christian hostel that was run by a warden who was committed to ensuring that everyone embraced Christ. He used to hear me chant some shlokas that I had learned when I was young, and would grimace and say that it was all pointless. All this chanting "did not assure me salvation" he would say. This would shock me no end. Although I never really entertained the thought of converting, so overwhelming were the warden's thoughts directed at me, that I began to doubt myself and my faith. Young as I was, my doubts grew. It was at this time that the Book came into my orbit, at a time and a moment when I was most intensely searching and looking for answers. After reading the Book, I told myself, "Ahhh! Well! If Ramakrishna has gone to Hell, that is where I want to be too!" Who but to thank but that warden, for not only did he hasten me to Ramakrishna's Abode, but he also increased my reverence for The Christ, for when I read the Bible, how can I not harbour a reverence for The Christ, despite my devotion for Ramakrishna. That, for me, is the greatness of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda. So, I would do well to genuflect and lay my wreath of gratefulness at the altar of Swami Madhavanandaji, Swami Prabhavanandaji, Isherwood, Swami Pramathanandaji and that Postman of Belur Math. I do so now, with humility. But then, what about the postman in Los Angeles who delivered the manuscript at the other end, other proof-readers and those responsible for typing the manuscript, the couriers, the pilots who piloted the plane carrying the manuscript from Los Angeles to India and then back to Los Angeles? The list is endless! So many other nameless individuals who will never be known to the world. Like the

Supremely Revered Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, they choose to remain hidden. The wreath of gratefulness, I suppose, must be laid at the altar of all of Humanity. Even before we are born, so many are preparing the ground, so that others may reap the benefit. I was one of those lucky enough to reap the benefit, and for this, if I do not say "Thank You", I would be doing myself the greatest dishonour. So "Thank You, Thank You, Thank You.

## **Durgacharan Nag**

### **A Devotee Like No Other**

#### **Swami Gambhirananda**

Nag Mahashaya believed Sri Sarada Devi to be none other than the Mother of the Universe. The day that he came to the Mother's house, happened to be the eleventh day of the moon when orthodox Hindus do not eat rice, curries, lentil soup, etc., but take other and lighter things according to convenience. The Mother had sat for her scanty repast when the maidservant announced, "Mother, who is Nag Mahashaya? He is bowing down to you; but he is striking his head so hard (against the pavement) that, methinks, it will bleed. Maharaj (Swami Yogananda) entreats him so earnestly from behind to stop, but there's no answer, as though he is unconscious. Is he mad, Mother?" In those days men devotees were not allowed to appear directly before the Mother but they bowed by

touching the steps with their heads, and the maidservant went in to announce, "Mother, they are saluting you." On the present day no sooner had the Mother heard about this self-forgetful devotee, than, filled with affection she said to the woman, "My dear, ask Yogen (Swami Yogananda) to send him here." When Yogananda himself led Nag Mahashaya by his hand to the Mother's presence, she noticed that his forehead was swollen, his eyes full of tears, and his steps unsteady. Because of his tears he could not see the Mother; it was as though he was no longer in the conscious world. The Mother was so much moved by this sight that she forgot her natural shyness and taking hold of the hand of her devout son made him sit by her. Nag Mahashaya was still crying, "Mother, Mother" - as though in a state of delirium, and yet he was otherwise so peaceful and unobtrusive! The Mother wiped away his tears. There were articles of food in front - roots, fruits and sweets. The Mother ate a little and with her own hand put some of these into Nag Mahashaya's mouth. His mind, however, was then so completely indrawn that he could not eat these, but went on repeating as before, "Mother, Mother!" and sat holding her feet with both hands. The other women suggested, "Mother, your meal is being spoiled. Let us ask Maharaj (Yogananda) to take him away." But the Mother replied, "Let him alone! Let him calm down a little." The Mother patted his head and body and uttered in his ears the name of the Master Sri Ramakrishna for some time; and then only he came round. The Mother now resumed her meal and went on feeding Nag Mahashaya, too, like a child. When he was being led down after the meal, he kept on telling the Mother, "Not I, not I; but you, you." The Mother drew the attention of those present there to this and remarked, "Look what perfect wisdom!" Overpowered with the joy of receiving food from the Mother's own hand, Nag Mahashaya said further, "Mother is kinder than Father (Master), Mother is kinder than Father." The Mother loved this son of hers very deeply; and had the confidence that he could do everything for her.

There is another example of the Mother's affectionate dealings with Nag Mahashaya.



Putting on a dirty and worn out piece of cloth and with a basket of mangoes from his own garden on his head, Nag Mahashaya came to the Mother's house. The mangoes were of a special quality and some of them were marked with lime. At the Mother's house he went on moving about with the basket on his head. He would not give it to anybody, nor would he speak. At last Swami Yogananda sent word: "Tell Mother that Nag Mahashaya has come with mangoes; he says nothing nor does he hand it over to anybody." The Mother on hearing this said, "Send him here." Nag Mahashaya came with the basket on his head and when a Brahmachari took it down, he made his obeisance at the Mother's feet, who noticed that he was as unconscious as on the previous occasion. He was repeating the name of the Master and while calling on the Mother tears were rolling down his chest. As the Master's worship had not been finished, some of the mangoes were cut and offered to him. When, after the worship, Yogin-Ma gave to the Mother on a leaf a few mango pieces, she took some of them and told Golap-Ma, "Bring another sal leaf." On that leaf she placed some of the pieces and asked Nag Mahashaya to eat them. But who was to do so? He had no physical sense; the hands were as good as paralysed. The Mother took hold of his hand and entreated him to eat, but he simply took a piece and began rubbing it on his head. Helplessly the Mother had to ask someone to come up and lead him down. There he kept on striking his head on the steps till the forehead became swollen, and at long last, when consciousness returned, he left for home without partaking of the consecrated food.

When the Mother was living on the top of a godown near the Ganges in Calcutta, Nag Mahashaya visited her there. She gave him some prasada on a sal leaf. Through an intensity of devotion he looked upon everything touched by the sacred prasada as prasada itself and gulped down the leaf also. On another occasion the Mother gave him a piece of cloth, which he considered too sacred to be dishonoured by wearing; and so he tied it on his head as a turban. The Mother's affection for Nag Mahashaya found

expression in a hundred ways even after his demise. A devotee one day noticed on entering the Mother's bedroom that she had hung up on the walls the pictures of Swami Vivekananda, Girishchandra Ghosh, and Nag Mahashaya, each of which she approached one after the other, wiped with a piece of cloth, put a mark of sandal paste, and then kissed it with her hand. Last of all she said, keeping her eyes on Nag Mahashaya's picture, "Quite a number of devotees come; but not another like this one."

**An extract from the book Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi**

## **Discrimination**

### **Swami Dayatmananda**

#### **Self-Realisation**

The practice of discrimination makes a man pure, unselfish, strong and content. Discrimination leads to dispassion, and gradually helps control the mind and the turbulent senses. Discrimination also makes the goal of spiritual life clear and produces an intense longing for the realisation of Reality.

An aspirant serves all men looking upon them as God. Such service makes the mind pure and one-pointed. In addition the aspirant also meditates on an aspect of God with devotion and concentration. Thus through unselfish actions his mind becomes pure, and

through the practice of concentration, his mind develops the ability to detach itself from all objects at will and at the same time enables him to identify himself with the form of the deity he is meditating upon.

Yet he has a higher goal to strive for. Even though such an aspirant has advanced far in spiritual life he is yet to rise from the world of appearance to the world of Reality. In other words he is still ignorant about his real nature. Therefore his goal now is to strive for the realisation of his true nature, Atman. In Vedanta this goal is called Moksha or Liberation. One will not be free until he realises the Atman.

The goal of every spiritual aspirant is to realise his real nature. Man is neither the body nor the mind; nor even a combination of body and mind. Vedanta tells us that man is the Supreme Spirit, Atman or Brahman. Because of ignorance man does not know his real nature and comes to identify himself with his body and mind.

### **The Atman - the individual self**

The Atman is beyond speech and mind; it is indescribable. Yet the Upanishads give us enough hints pointing us in the direction of the Atman.

*The Self is not born and it does not die at any time. And it does not again come into existence by being born. It is birthless, constant, eternal and ancient; it is not slain when the body is slain.*

*Weapons do not cut it, fire does not burn it, water also does not moisten it and wind does not dry it. This Self is said to be unmanifest, unthinkable, and unchangeable.*

*In the beginning Brahman was all this. He was one and infinite; infinite in the east, infinite in the south, infinite in the west, infinite in the north, above and below and*

*everywhere infinite.*

*The wise man, having realised the Self as great and all-pervading does not grieve.*

Such descriptions as the above are found abundantly in the Upanishads. The goal of human life is to realise this Self or Atman within each one of us. Such is the goal of every sincere seeker whatever religion he or she follows.

## **The way**

There are two paths for the realisation of the Atman or Brahman - the path of devotion (*Iti, iti*), and the path of knowledge (*Neti, neti*).

## **The path of devotion**

For those who are endowed with (often excessive!) emotion the path of devotion is best suited. Most of us, undoubtedly, fall into this category and are called devotees. The path of devotion is easy and natural .

Swami Vivekananda says: *"Bhakti (devotion) is not destructive; it teaches us that not one of the faculties we have has been given in vain, that through them is the natural way to come to liberation. Bhakti does not kill out our tendencies, it does not go against our nature but only gives it a higher and more powerful direction. How naturally we love the objects of the senses! And when the same kind of love that has before been given to sense-objects is given to God, it is called Bhakti."*

Devotion is a total dedication wherein the devotee is thoroughly infilled with God. It is the acme of devotion, attaining which the devotee hankers for nothing else. In this path the aspirant has intense faith and devotion to a personal aspect of God (Saguna Brahman). He pours out his heart through prayer, japa, and meditation. He sings the

glories of God, goes on pilgrimage, cultivates the company of other devotees, and tries to serve his Chosen Deity with utmost devotion. Slowly through spiritual practice he forges a definite relationship with God.

The devotional scriptures classify these relationships into five categories. These are:

1. *Santa* (the serene attitude), *Dasya* (the attitude of a servant towards his master), *Sakhya* (the attitude of a friend), *Vatsalya* (the attitude of a parent towards a child), and *Madhura* (the attitude of a lover towards her beloved). A devotee chooses one of these relationships according to his mood and ability. Perfection in any one of these moods gives the aspirant the vision of his Chosen Deity. Finally the aspirant goes beyond the personal aspect of God and merges himself in the Non-dual Brahman.

Through the practice of devotion (1) the devotee feels that God alone is real and all else unreal, (2) he feels that he is similar in nature to God, and finally (3) that he is one with God. Thus the path of devotion takes the aspirant to the Non-dual Reality.

### **The path of knowledge**

There are people who do not feel attracted to the personal aspect of God; they feel a strong pull towards the Impersonal Reality. Generally such people are rational, less emotional and a clear intellect dominates in them. For such people the path of Jnana or knowledge is best suited. In this path the aspirant is advised to practice Sravana (hearing of the truth that the Individual Self is one with Brahman), Manana (reflection on this truth until all doubts disappear), and Nididhyasana (deep meditation until he realises that 'I am Brahman'.)

Whatever be the path, the goal is to realise one's real nature. When once the aspirant realises that he is the Spirit, the divine, the Atman, he becomes free (*Mukta*) of all

bondage and goes beyond desire, fear and grief.

He realises:

*Om. I am neither the mind,*

*intelligence, ego nor citta,*

*Neither the ears nor the tongue,*

*nor the senses of smell and sight;*

*Neither the ether nor air*

*nor fire nor water nor earth;*

*I am Eternal Bliss and Awareness*

*- I am Shiva! I am Shiva!*

Thus the practice of discrimination takes the aspirant to the realisation of Brahman, the Ultimate Reality.

(To be continued)

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