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Editorial

Straightforwardness

Swami Dayatmananda

Straightforwardness is one more quality Sri Krishna advises all spiritual aspirants to acquire. Straightforwardness is an indispensable virtue which must be practised by all aspirants desirous of realising God.

Everyone loves babies for they are innocent, pure and guileless. Unlike us who practise hypocrisy (often in the name of etiquette and good manners!) a baby expresses his or her inner feelings so naturally. A baby laughs when happy or weeps when miserable. During the time of his sadhana Sri Ramakrishna used to keep the company of small children. By observing them he wanted to learn their purity, innocence and detachment. Straightforwardness is the opposite of guile, deceit, crookedness, hypocrisy etc. It is akin to truthfulness. To be frank, to think, speak and act with one accord is straightforwardness. To make the mind, speech and action one is straightforwardness.

Straightforwardness also means uprightness. Only those who lead a righteous life can really become straightforward for they will, then, have nothing to hide or to be afraid of.

There are many aspirants who are sincere and pure. Unfortunately some of them are too outspoken, often hurting and creating problems both for themselves and others. The case of Golap Ma, a woman disciple of Sri Ramakrishna comes to mind. Many times Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi, warned her to be careful and not to speak out harshly. She did not heed and had to suffer as a result.

There are few of us who can claim we are straightforward. Apparently we may feel sometimes we are being straightforward, but often it may turn out to be a case of pure rashness.

A rash or impulsive way of speaking is not a sign of straightforwardness. I have come across people who have become positively proud and egoistic because they delude themselves that they are straightforward. They are in the habit of speaking out whatever comes to their mouth while failing to realise they are rash and unthinking. In many cases they are not even sincere. Their practice of frank speaking hides a great deal of selfishness and pride. Even a little observation makes it clear that our mind beguiles us often and we are not even aware of it.

Straightforwardness invariably follows simplicity. Simplicity, as many misunderstand, is not having less number of things. If this were the case all poor people would be simple people. Simplicity is a great virtue; it is the result of conquering desires and depending solely on God. Because a simple person depends for everything on God he has nothing to hide or fear. Therefore he can afford to be straightforward. Such straightforwardness not only does not harm any one, it often helps one go to God.

Straightforwardness leads the way to true faith. Sri Ramakrishna says: "Unless one is guileless and broad-minded, one cannot have deep faith. A guileless man easily realises God. He who can resign himself to the will of the Almighty with simple faith and guileless love realises the Lord very quickly".

But it is not so easy to be guileless. Unless one practises spiritual disciplines for a long time, it may be for many lives even, one cannot become guileless. Sri Ramakrishna says: "One cannot be guileless and liberal-minded without much austerity, or unless it is one's last birth. When a man has performed many good actions in his previous births, in the final birth he becomes guileless. Unless a man is guileless, he cannot so easily have faith in God."

Practice of spiritual disciplines makes one unworldly. Even a trace of worldliness does

not allow one to be straightforward or guileless. Sri Ramakrishna says: "The worldly man is a hypocrite. He cannot be guileless. He professes to love God, but he is attracted by worldly objects. He doesn't give God even a very small part of the love he feels for \hat{O} lust' and \hat{O} gold'. But he says that he loves God. One cannot be guileless without a great deal of spiritual discipline in previous births. Spiritual instruction produces quick results in a guileless heart. Unless a man is guileless, he doesn't receive the grace of God."

Bayazid was a great Sufi master. He advises that a believer be straightforward and completely humble as a servant. According to him straightforwardness is the last step on a three-step stairway leading to nearness of God. He says:

"The first step is consistency, where a traveller strives to embody Islam's theoretical and practical dimensions. Success in this continuous effort brings one's carnal self under control. The second step is settlement or tranquillity, where an initiate purifies his or her inner self of the vices contaminating the spirit and heart (e.g., show, fame, and vanity, all of which cannot be reconciled with servanthood), thereby purging the heart of all that is not God. The third step is straightforwardness, where the doors of Divinity and creation are slightly opened to the traveller, and the Divine gifts are bestowed in the form of wonder-working and blessings, although he or she neither desires nor seeks them.

"Straightforwardness, the last station of the way, means living without deviation from loyalty to God and under His direct protection; it is an environment in which Divine gifts and favours are bestowed. Flowers never fade away and hills and slopes do not experience winter, for it is an environment of eternal "spring." This is what is pointed out in: If only they were straightforward on the path, then, assuredly We would give them to drink of "water" in abundance (72:16). So long as people pursue straightforwardness on the path of belief in Divine Unity and fulfil their covenants with God and His Messenger by fulfilling the Divine ordinances, Divine gifts and bounties will flow abundantly."

Another Sufi master, declares: "So long as the heart of a servant is not sound and straight, his belief cannot be true and upright; so long as his tongue is not true, his heart cannot be sound and straight.

"Every morning, the parts of a man's body warn his tongue, saying: \hat{O} Fear God concerning us. For if you are true, we will be true and straight; if you are crooked, we will also deviate."

Straightforwardness takes one to God quickly.

The Yoga of Meditation

Swami Swahananda

In the spiritual view of life the purpose of our existence is to realise our spiritual nature, to realise God. The scriptures, saints, mystics, and wise men of all religions support this. They have prescribed four major methods, called yogas, for achieving this realisation. The four yogas correspond to four tendencies of the mind: jhana yoga, the way of knowledge, directs the reasoning faculty of the mind to distinguish the ultimate Reality from the transitory phenomena through philosophical analysis; bhakti yoga, the way of love, employs the power of strong feeling to direct the mind and personality to absorption in an ideal; karma yoga, the way of action, harnesses man's driving compulsion to act, leading him to freedom from action through non-attachment and desirelessness; and raja yoga, the way of concentration and meditation, utilizes the mind's ability to reflect upon and affect itself to gain the power to direct the mind and fix its attention wherever desired. By making the mind one-pointed or functionless, one can reach the Highest. Although meditation is the speciality of raja yoga, it is practised in some form in every yoga. "The greatest help to spiritual life is meditation," said Swami Vivekananda. "In meditation we divest ourselves of all material considerations and feel our divine nature."

Various scriptures stress the importance of meditation for spiritual realisation. The Chandogya Upanishad exhorts us, "Being tranquil, meditate." (3.14) The same Upanishad describes meditation as the key to success. (7.6) Sri Krishna, in the sixth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, describes the process of meditation in detail, instructing his disciple to become a man of meditation (a yogi) because the yogi excels all. (6.46) The Mahanirvana Tantra gives second place only to meditation to being absorbed in the Absolute, Brahman. (MT 14.122) The Vedas and Puranas stress the efficacy of austerity

in achieving success in any endeavour (aikagryam paramam tapah). All point to concentration, control of the mind, as the highest austerity. The Bhagavata says that the devotee becomes one with the Lord through one-pointed love. (Bh. 10.29.15; 11.15.27) In the Bible, Jesus alluded to one-pointedness of mind when he said: "If thine eye be single, thy whole body will be filled with light." (Matthew 6.22)

What is meditation? Patanjali, the original teacher of Yoga, said, "Meditation is uninterrupted thinking of one thought." (Yoga Sutras 3.2) It is like pouring oil from one vessel to another. Swami Vivekananda said, "Meditation is the focusing of the mind on some object. If the mind acquires concentration on one object, it can concentrate on any object whatsoever." Raja-yoga describes two processes for achieving concentration. The first process is withdrawing the mind from sense objects. This "turning the mind around" is called pratyahara. The second process, called dharana, is focusing the mind on some object. The combined practice of withdrawing the mind and focusing the attention leads gradually to dhyana, the state of true meditation, when we are able to hold the mind on one chosen thought. Although the terms "concentration" and "meditation" are used interchangeably, concentration means focusing the mind on any given object, and meditation means concentration on spiritual truth.

Yogis, practitioners of raja yoga, describe five states of mind. The same person may experience these five states at various times. In the restless or maddened state, the mind cannot be concentrated on anything. A person in this state turns from one activity to another in an exhausting flurry of unconcentrated and unproductive activity. The five senses, like untamed horses, drag the hapless person in five different directions at once. At times the mind becomes dull, drowsy. The brain does not function fully when drowsy, and no concentration is possible in this state. When the mind is alert but scattered, one's attention drifts from one thing to another. With effort one can keep the scattered mind for a limited time in a circle of thought. Through the practice of sense-control (pratyahara) and focusing (dharana) one may attain a one-pointed state of mind. One-pointedness is meditation. Meditation leads the developed yogi to a waveless state of mind in which spiritual truth is spontaneously revealed. This is the goal of raja yoga. "The real aim is to make the mind functionless," said Swamiji, "but this cannot be done unless one becomes absorbed in some object."

Spiritual teachers from different religious traditions, philosophical orientations and cultures prescribe different meditation techniques. There are hundreds of specific meditations. Nevertheless, we can categorize meditation in the sense of concentrated thinking into six major types.

One general type of meditation is to witness the workings of the mind without trying to suppress or direct thoughts that arise. Vedanta philosophy asserts the true nature of the Self as beyond mind and thoughts. The Self is the witness of all phenomena. Witnessing one's thoughts, one feels disidentified with the Witness Self, the spiritual Reality. As the spiritual aspirant practises this type of meditation, he finds his wandering mind becoming calm, fit for deeper meditation. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that the mind is like a naughty child; if you look at it intently, it feels shy, as it were, and begins to behave. Some also practise this type of meditation just to relax.

Another type of meditation is to think excellent thoughts. Swami Brahmananda said, "The mind has to be made steady by two means: first, go to a quiet place, make the mind free from waves, and meditate. Second, develop the mind by thinking excellent thoughts. The mind must be given food. That is how it remains calm. The food for the mind is meditation, japa, and holy thinking." The idea is to occupy the mind with ennobling thoughts to the exclusion of negative or degrading thoughts. Some compare the mind to a dirty inkwell attached to a desk top. To clean the inkwell we need to pour in a large quantity of clean water. Pure and holy thoughts, reflection on the love and compassion of God, contemplation of the inspiring lives of saints all these act like currents of fresh, clean water to cleanse and purify the mind. A pure mind is a calm mind, fit for deep meditation.

Some teachers, especially Buddhists, recommend meditation on the transitoriness of all things. The phenomenal world, composed of the same gross and subtle elements as our bodies and minds, appears intensely real to us. Our minds naturally seek what we believe to be real. Attachment to the objects and people of this world obstructs our view of the changeless Reality. When we think deeply on the composite and impermanent nature of all things our homes, our friends and family, even our own bodies and minds our attachment to these things decreases. We begin to realise that these things are not as real and permanent as they appear at first glance. Youth, beauty, wealth, prestige never last. Lincoln's advice to a young man applies equally in our days of success and failure: "Even this shall pass away." Because the disease of worldly attachment is deep-seated, drastic medicine may be needed to root it out. Therefore, some religious teachers instruct their students to practice meditation in a cremation ground or graveyard to impress vividly the transience of the world on an overly attached mind. The Holy Mother said, "Discriminate always between the real and the unreal. Whenever you find the mind drawn to any object, think of its transitoriness, and therefore try to draw the mind back to the thought of God."

Many sects of Hinduism and Buddhism practise meditation on God with form. They regard the various deities, Shiva, Durga, Vishnu; and the Avatars like Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, and Ramakrishna; as manifestations of the Supreme God. Meditation here means visualising the luminous form of the Chosen Deity. Repetition of a Divine Name, or a mantra greatly helps the mind to limit its wandering and achieve deeper concentration on the object of visualisation. Swami Shivananda said, "If you meditate on God with form, He Himself will reveal to you His real nature. It is very difficult to meditate on the formless... There is no question of inferiority or superiority in this; it is a question of temperament. Whatever appeals to one is best for him." If we love the object of meditation, our concentration deepens more easily. The yogi cultivates devotion to improve his meditation. The devotee practises meditation to deepen his love for God.

Some like to think of God as endowed with personal qualities such as love and kindness but without form. The formless personal God is the chief concept in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, and one of many conceptions in Hinduism and Buddhism. One may meditate on the formless personal God by feeling the living conscious presence of the Lord in the heart by visualising a Being of boundless light, radiating peace, love, wisdom and joy.

The sixth type of meditation is meditation on the Absolute Brahman, the formless, qualityless, impersonal Reality beyond all conceptions, the Ground of Being. Monistic Vedanta recommends this type of meditation. Swami Brahmananda said, "God should be imagined as vast and infinite. To bring this idea of vastness within, one should look at the Himalayas or the ocean, or gaze at the sky." Of course, any representation of the infinite falls short of the Reality itself. Therefore, some employ more tangible symbols like the syllable "Om," repeating the sacred word while visualising its written form as a symbol of the all-pervading Self specially manifest in the heart.

The benefits of meditation depend in part on the motive one has in practising. The jnana yogi in his discrimination between the Real and the unreal, the karma yogi in his performance of selfless work, the bhakta yogi in his worshipful adoration of the Divine and the raja yogi in his quest to control the mind, all benefit from the power of concentration developed through meditation. As any power can be injurious if not used with caution for a good purpose, so also concentration without basic moral training may be harmful to oneself and others. Modern medical science has discovered the therapeutic value of meditation in treating hypertension, high blood pressure, insomnia and other by-products of high-pressure civilization. The Latin root of the word

meditation means "to heal," but spiritual seekers will always consider good health as a fringe benefit, subordinate to their primary Goal, which is Self-realisation or God-realisation.

Of all spiritual disciplines prescribed for attainment of Self or God-realisation, meditation forms the core, the common, underlying thread. Whether one believes in God with or without form, as personal or impersonal, or whether or not one believes in God at all, one can practise some form of meditation conducive to success in one's particular approach. The science of meditation, raja yoga, includes a comprehensive psychology, both theoretical and practical, designed to diagnose one's state of mind and prescribe an appropriate technique to make the mind fit for deeper states of concentration. Even from the standpoint of maintaining one's physical and mental health in our modern world, one should consider practising meditation. Perhaps the root meaning, "to heal," most accurately describes the value of meditation, which can cure our ills, be they physical, mental or spiritual.

How Truly to Help

Ananda

The only true help that you can render to mankind is when, by your very character, you teach others. Then you do good by your every word, your every movement. When, for instance, you remain steady under all conditions of good and evil, those around you learn the value of steadiness and begin to try to practise it themselves. Thus, by the example of your character, your whole life becomes a lesson to others.

If we carry the joy of God in our souls others will feel it, for joy of God is also infectious. That is why great personalities, even without a word or any organized method, succeed in minimizing the miseries around them. There are human beings so radiant and vital that wherever they go they counteract all darkness and deadness. They bring a new feeling, they create a fresh atmosphere. Everyone who is overwhelmed with grief, or in

pain, feels new life on meeting them.

Practical, practical, practical religion! That is my plea. The only thing that counts is living the life, creating a power that no one can resist.

If you find somebody whom you feel has gone astray, and who is not living according to your ideal, do not go to him with long lectures. Overwhelm him by your own conduct and love. We cannot convey a great deal by preaching, no matter how full of beautiful sentiment our words may be. We need to live the sermon, that in our dealings with humanity, even in a casual way, people may come to realise that our faith is living. The aim is to hold the one single, definite, spiritual fact that we radiate light only as we possess it. Every time I have an opportunity to speak to you, I lay emphasis on this one point, because it is spirituality which enriches our own life, and is the only thing that enables us to reach the lives of the people of the world. You meet someone on the bus, the train or on the pavement, and you leave an impression. How wonderful if it is a radiant, living impression, full of spiritual magnitude!

"Religion is being and becoming." More and more do I become interested in this living aspect of life, as I see the unrest, the unhappiness, in human hearts, the sickness that dwells in the souls of men.

When we come face to face with a life dedicated, consecrated, so like a crystal that it shines, all confusion vanishes, all doubts are answered, and we are filled with inspiration. Here lies the spiritual province.

The world today needs, more than gold, the understanding hearts who will, by their staunchness of spirit, heal the wounds of humanity. Our real emancipation comes through the mind. I want men who will show by their lives that they have something other than just a material background. I want individuals who, when men are puzzled as to what is to be done and how they are to do it, will awaken them to the invincible power within. To you, my friend, who feel that your life is discarded because you can no longer earn a few pounds in a factory, to you I say, "You are going to be a producer, not just of machines, but of thought, ideas, and idealism."

The real heritage of man is within himself. Let him discover it. He who does so becomes a beacon light for his community.

Finding fault is not going to lead us anywhere. Disputing, discussing, are not going to solve problems. I say again and again, let us go close to our Ideal meditation, prayer, communion with the Supreme, then all these clouds will vanish.

Peculiar phases of religious development, mysteries and complicated matters, these do not interest me in the least, but there is a way of reaching the heart of humanity, and

we must find it. First however, we must reach our own depths. We may preach to others and try to convert them, but do you suppose we can ever really convince anyone until we have awakened in our own soul such ardour for the spiritual Principle that we can convey it without a word?

Blessed are those who have come to this way of seeing, feeling and knowing, for they alone can make others see, feel and know.

Blessed are those who have found their home in Truth, for they alone can guide weary and wandering souls to their shelter of rest.

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Leaves of an Ashrama: 12

Hazards and Benefits of Playback

Swami Vidyatmananda

In 1974 as the Watergate trap began to close on him, President Nixon must have asked himself ruefully, "Why did I ever make those recordings? How could I have conceived the idea of preserving on electronic tape what went on in my office?" for it was, ultimately, the President's own words, transmuted themselves from magnetized particles back into voice, which testified against him and made his departure from office unavoidable.

The undoing of the President was a spectacle played out for all the world to see. The Vedantist can view it as a clear case of the planting of karmic cause and the reaping of karmic result. In general, the relation between actions and consequences, whether good or bad, is characterized by a considerable time lag. The working out of a karmic equation is usually obscure because the process may lap over into several lifetimes. Unpleasant events in one phase are explained as having been created by unworthy acts

in previous existences. But in the affair in Washington, the cycle required but two years. What was sown in June of 1972 came to fruition in August of 1974.

And the rest of us? Are we not also busy recording every thought, every act? Is not each word and attitude registered on the tape of the subtle body, garnered up with a fidelity equal to that of the best cassette recorder? What is thus recorded will, as inevitably as in the Watergate affair, assert itself, to ensnare us, or as the case may be, to deliver us, later on.

The theory of karma is sometimes criticized as fatalist. On the contrary, it can be the strongest support to moral behaviour, for it gives a pragmatic reason to act and think well. What we ourselves amass "there" remains "there", to come forth later on in terms of forces harmful or helpful to us, ourselves. Vivekananda said it well: "You must always remember that each word, thought, and deed lays up a store for you, and that as bad thoughts and bad works are ready to spring upon you like tigers, so also there is the inspiring hope that the good thoughts and good deeds are ready with the power of a hundred thousand angels to defend you always and forever."

We all of us are proprietors of a White House basement storage room, and we are constantly adding to the hoard locked up there. For our own good, if for no other reason, let us resolve to act and think in such a fashion that we shall have no cause for regret when all is played back to us and our contemporaries later on.

St. Philip Neri

The Saint Who Wore the Mask of Humour

Brahmachari Bhumachaitanya

If any person seemed divinely commissioned to lighten the Christian conscience of the sixteenth century for it has always tended to be uncomfortably grave it was St. Philip Neri of Rome. Perhaps no one in the history of Western hagiography has been quite so jolly, so captivatingly outgoing or so delightfully eccentric. As one reads the life of of

this contemporary of St. Teresa of Avila (both were born in the year 1515), one gradually becomes aware of a few of the devices saints employ to cover up their saintliness. Some retreat behind a mantle of silence; others, gravity and sternness. Philip used humour. It is reported that one day four Poles, hearing of Philip's saintliness, went to see him - possibly expecting a miracle or some divine revelation. Philip settled them all around him and then unexpectedly began to read from the pages of Piovano Arlotto, a humorous writer of the period who was a favourite of Philip. Not only that, the saint added some sallies of his own, and laughed loudly and raucously at a number of the risqu' passages. "Well, there you are, my lads," he said to them as they began to disperse in embarrassment, "that's what I usually read. There's nothing like a funny book."

On another occasion, he was told that a certain Attilio Serrano, a prelate who considered Philip unscholarly and boorish, was to attend his Mass. During the service, Philip made a point of blurting out all sorts of nonsense, piling one grammatical error upon another. When the Mass was over, the first thing he wanted to know was what sort of effect he had produced.

One of the misfortunes of history has been the distressing habit of its reporters to strip our heroes of the past - particularly the saintly ones - of most of their humanity. For instance, we simply cannot conceive of Plato committing an unwise act; of St. Francis, an irreligious one; or of Genghis Khan acting at all like a gentleman. We so strongly identify such figures with some extraordinary feat or pontifical statement, that the subtler, wiser, and perhaps more enlivening aspects of their character are lost to us. As Pascal wrote:

“People always imagine Plato and Aristotle dressed in the long robes of the pedagogue, but actually they were ordinary decent people who used to joke with their friends like everyone else, and when they amused themselves writing their Laws and their Politics they were simply playing a game: it was the least serious and philosophic part of their lives. The more philosophic part was the quiet and simple way they lived.” (Italics mine)

Philip is a bit of an anomaly. He wrote very little and since his personality was so astonishingly vital we are left with the impression of a warm, generous, and thoroughly human being, remarkably free of ecclesiastical trappings or biographical emendations. He is a friend, surely, who will walk into the room at any moment, clap us heartily on the shoulder, and with a wink ask us if we have been behaving ourselves.

At the same time, we must resist the temptation to view Philip Neri as merely a comic figure who spent his days poking fun at people or making them laugh. He did make them laugh (and sometimes appear ridiculous), it is true, but there was usually a purpose to

it.

For instance, one of Philip's customs was to make a daily pilgrimage to the seven basilicas or ancient churches of Rome. Gradually, the number of persons in his entourage grew although the pilgrimage meant several hours' walking as Philip's personal magnetism drew more and more people to him. To one he would extend a smile, another a wave of the hand, a third a wink. None could resist him. In time, the group was made up of persons from all walks of life. Gentlemen rubbed shoulders with workmen, and priests with laymen. Frequently the convoy would halt while they listened to an impromptu concert of musicians, or Philip would ask a child to speak to the group about God. It was as though the Lord had appointed Philip one of His court magicians, to cast upon His children the spell of laughter and gaiety, even for a few hours, to ease the pain of their suffering.

Later the processions became more organized. Philip would assemble the group before dawn. Then they would visit St. Peter's, where Philip would joyfully begin praying, followed by the others.

They would go to another church, singing as they went, where they would attend Mass and Communion. All the while Philip would joke and banter with the crowd, maintaining an aura of liveliness and joy. The group would have a simple breakfast together, and then visit the other basilicas.

During these walks, Philip had a special knack for dissolving class barriers, using his love to veil, for a few hours, the rifts that pride and profession had created in his followers. For example, he might challenge a number of the more smartly dressed young men to climb the masts surrounding the castle of Sant' Angelo. Before long these gentlemen could be seen hanging by their hands from the forked gibbets, much to the amusement of the crowd. Or he might ask some distinguished person to carry the Cardinal's dog (who had also grown attached to Philip); another fellow would follow with Philip's cat in a basket. All in all, it was one of the most bizarre and motley processions that had ever walked the streets of Rome.

Philip had a deeply charitable nature, and he partly encouraged such gatherings, particularly picnics, so that the poor of the city could be given a grand treat. Although food was in abundance, he rarely ate much himself. When others would comment on this, he would say; "Tuck away, children, it makes me put on weight to watch you."

One of his biographers wrote of him:

"Everything was either a joy or a joke to him. In this way he emerged triumphant over everything and everybody, and over every kind of social set-up in which he was involved,

without being enslaved by any of them or by anything or anyone except God."

Philip's jocularly, however, in no way divorced him from the practical aspects of life.

One of his enduring concerns was for Rome's sick and needy, during a time when such persons were nursed with little skill or affection. Drawing upon his persuasive powers, he convinced many of the educated and noble of Rome to offer their services.

Even here his talent for practical jokes helped him. A wealthy nobleman named Salviati was a devoted follower of Philip. While Salviati would be deep in prayer, he would sometimes feel his brocaded mantle being removed from his shoulder and an apron replacing it. It was Philip's hint that his disciple had best go tend the sick in the hospitals.

Philip could literally get anyone to do his will. Fabrizio de Massim wrote of him:

"He won me over so magnificently that I was never able to give him up. He used to accompany me in my carriage to get me to persevere in my religion, or else he would force me to follow him a thing I had never done for anyone else with many embraces and other signs of affection. He was such a lovable person and had such a charming way with him that he could get anyone to do exactly what he wanted."

There is very little in Philip's early life to suggest either his extreme sociability or his whimsical nature. Perhaps the only incident in his childhood that might be called a prank was the time he rode a donkey down some cellar steps and nearly broke his own neck. Until the age of twenty-nine, he lived almost entirely withdrawn from the world (he maintained a consistent love of solitude throughout his life), praying and meditating for long hours in a small room or in one of Rome's dark and deserted catacombs. It was in one of those subterranean chambers, in 1544, that supposedly a divine 'ball of fire' from heaven entered his breast as he was praying. Such an extraordinary event was attested to for the remainder of his life by a protrusion in the region of his heart visible to all. A post-mortem examination, described in great detail by a doctor who examined his body, revealed that indeed his ribs had been forced out over a greatly enlarged heart.

It is of interest to know that after this event, the temperature of Philip's body increased to such an extent that he refused an overcoat in even the coldest weather. When he came upon people who expressed astonishment at this amazing resistance to the cold, he would laugh and let them take hold of one of his hands, which was burning hot.

Philip's heart was, indeed, the source of his overflowing love and spiritual power. As his official biographer wrote: "We find in him an effusion of divine love far more abundant than is strictly necessary to a saint; a certain kind of love, more visible, more fruitful,

brighter, and more gentle than we find in other saints..."

His love went particularly to children. He could often be found playing with them, taking part in their innocent games with a zest that belied his years. He developed a particular affection for one of them, a French boy by the name of Nicolo Gigli. When the boy died quite suddenly, Philip was found in the church, where he imagined he was alone with the body of his young friend, caressing the boy's face and chest, smiling at him, then bursting into laughter. When Philip's friends expressed amazement at this behaviour, Philip replied that he had good reason to rejoice, for his 'Lily' (the meaning of Gigli) would be flowering forever in heaven.

His way of treating the illnesses and mental problems of others usually involved, in one way or another, this generous heart. He seemed convinced that from his breast issued the source of God's grace. He would often clasp an ill person to him, and he was known to lie upon a person in extreme cases of suffering or temptation. In many instances the mere sound of his voice, the reassurance that all would be well, was enough to effect a cure. He told one woman, "Antonia, I forbid you to be ill without my permission." So, whenever she would feel particularly distraught she went to see him and her strength would return.

Nothing seemed more ridiculous to him than the thought that doctors alone could cure a patient. He would rebuke the doctors unmercifully. "There's nothing more wrong with me than what you are putting me through," he would tell them.

A woman with a number of children was about to die. "For the children's sake", Philip told her, "we must take heaven by storm." He grew furious with her husband and the others who were resigned to her death, for they set limits to God's power and grace. Philip won the day and the woman recovered.

Like a number of other mystics, Philip resisted membership in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Though urged time and time again to become a priest in his early years, he remained quite happy with his role as lay chaplain to a number of Rome's young men. Eventually, however, Philip did yield to the pressures of the church and was ordained a priest at the age of thirty-six, but for the remainder of his life he stoutly declined the red hat of the cardinal, as well as a number of attempts to make him Pope. He did take a few courses in a theological school, but it was more to nourish his soul rather than to seek any preferment in the church. He found it impossible to continue, however, because the sight of the crucifix hanging on the wall of the classroom would send him into rapture and he would be unable to absorb what the instructor was saying. It was during this early period, in which he was living an utterly simple life, wandering

the Roman countryside and spending long hours in prayer and meditation, that he first conceived the idea of the Oratory. This unusual confraternity of young men was informally organized in 1548, and met weekly in a church that had been made available to them. Its members, under the affectionate guidance of the ebullient Philip, were required to attend Holy Communion together each Sunday (though frequent Communion was rare in those days), then attend service in the Church of San Girolano. In the afternoon, they met together to engage in ragionamenti or spiritual discussions designed to intensify their spiritual lives. Quite often Philip would begin the talks with a fervent sermon on the necessity for practising religious disciplines or offer some moving statement on the joys of spiritual life. He spoke with warmth and a simple, unadorned eloquence. One of his disciples, who attended many of these sessions, records that Philip's manner was so easy, so congenial and spontaneous that it was impossible for any to shun him, and that men of the world became attached to him with an everlasting devotion.

The congregation that Philip founded was really an attempt to join the natural and supernatural elements in man in the most agreeable and beneficial relationship possible. Philip's experiment, to say the least, was quite a sensation in his day. What other religious group required its members, both laymen and priests, to pay their own living expenses? Or permit voluntary vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience (knowing full well that only then will they be truly effective)?

The Oratory was a reflection of Philip's own unusual character. It was disciplined, yet unsystematic; unconventional and individualistic; yet thoroughly devotional. In its administrative procedures, the Oratory reflected Philip's well-known dislike for autocracy. "All that was organized and exacting displeased St. Philip," said Cardinal Newman. The Superior, for instance, though honoured as titular head of the congregation, was not free from contributing to the ordinary tasks necessary to the group including that of waiting at table. Unlike other religions, the Oratorians could call to account, depose, or restore any superior without recourse to outside authority. Today, three Oratorian houses are to be found in the United States at Rock Hill, South Carolina; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Monterey, California. They have a combined priest-layman membership of 33. Two congregations exist in England at Birmingham (founded by Cardinal Newman in 1847) and in London. There are, in all, about 530 Oratorians living in 52 autonomous congregations throughout the world.

In the nearly four centuries that have passed since Philip Neri's death, the Oratory has experienced the effects of the changing years. Much, of course, has not changed. Each

of the congregations still remains autonomous (remarkably similar, in this respect, to the Vedanta societies in the West) and resists attempts at centralization with an undiminished vigour. Nor do they appear to have lost the sense of community service inspired by St. Philip's teachings.

At the same time, one cannot help but sense a departure today from the strict injunctions of Philip regarding mental prayer, an art he taught innumerable times during the early days of the Oratory. With an insight that seems common to nearly all saints, Philip knew that good works must be supported by a well-established inner life. For perhaps the first time in their inexperienced and thoughtless lives, the young men Philip gathered about him were to taste the sweetness of contemplation. It was from these seeds, we must recall, that the organisation sprang.

One of his most distinguished recruits was Giambattista Salviati, whom we have earlier mentioned, a nephew to Pope Leo X and a cousin to the Queen of France. There was also Tarugi, the perfect courtier eloquent, urbane, a judge of fine horses and beautiful women. But under Philip's influence, Tarugi became completely transformed. "I was an open window to every sort of caprice," he wrote. "But after confessing to Philip for the first time I felt a flame burning within myself that no sins that I committed could ever extinguish, and it went on goading me until I put myself entirely in his hands."

These were the sort of men that Philip attracted to his divine net. Soon the Oratory was drawing persons from all walks of life, priests as well as laymen, all searching to broaden their spiritual lives under the guidance of this remarkable soul.

Spiritual power has the same mysterious characteristics as any other force whose source is unavailable to our senses. Rarely does this force fully manifest itself. In Philip's case, the spiritual power that lay within him seemed ever ready to burst the confines of his body, to overflow that fragile vessel which contained it. Philip was particularly sensitive to exposing this inner fire to others. Often, when he felt things getting out of control, he would either adopt an air of bravado or resort to some expression of humour or apparent anger to throw others off the scent. He was reported to have actually slapped a number of persons who sought to flatter him.

Some mention has been made of Philip's unconventional social behaviour. Much of it, so outlandish and bizarre, can be judged only as we judge the behaviour of anyone who has transcended the laws of society by renouncing its claims on him. For instance, Philip always found it difficult to obey the decorum of dress. It was often when he was expected to appear respectable that he showed his eccentric nature. He might, for instance, add a petticoat to his attire or white shoes would be seen peeping out from

under his cassock. In his old age, he wore a scarlet garment indoors in combination with a variety of other oddly assorted articles.

One day a Roman lady, proud of an opportunity to introduce Philip to some of her friends, held a reception in his honour at her home. One can well imagine her shock when Philip arrived with one half of his face clean-shaven and the other sporting a week's growth of beard! In this, his own peculiar way, he discouraged praise and sought humility.

Philip was ever ready to unmask the spiritual pretender. His test was not always so gentle. One famous story connected with him concerns his investigation, at the request of the Pope, into the case of a nun who was gaining a reputation for miracle working. She lived in a country convent several miles from Rome. Philip obediently rode on his favourite mule and paid a visit to the convent. But he returned much sooner than expected. He told the surprised Pope:

"Holy Father, she does not perform miracles because she is lacking in the first Christian virtue, humility. I arrive at the convent, bespattered with mud and drenched by the rain. I hold out my boot to her and indicate that she is to pull it off. She recoils indignantly and angrily refuses my request. What do I take her for, she shouts. She is the handmaid of the Lord, not of anyone who comes to demand a menial service of her. I get up calmly, mount my mule, and here I am, convinced that you will not find another test necessary."

Philip's common sense approach was well-known, and he often resorted to dispensing quite candid advice.

For instance, if a girl showed signs of hysteria or other weaknesses connected with growing up, he might say, "Marry her." Or if caught in a lie, "Give her the stick, then." The highest and most moving part of Philip's day was the Mass. It was here he had to exert great caution, or he might suddenly be thrown into a state of ecstasy, which, of course, would halt the entire proceedings. To keep his mind occupied during the preparations for Mass, he would often ask that little birds or dogs be brought into the sacristy for him to play with. Or he would ask others to read secular poems to him. Many were scandalized by these goings-on; but few realized his inner condition, that all these distractions were necessary if he was to avoid the absorption in ecstasy.

As soon as the Mass commenced, and Philip made the sign of the cross, he became a changed person. He said it as fast as he could, for fear that he would fall into a rapture, or perhaps be lifted a foot in the air. (There are numerous recorded instances of Philip Neri's levitations.)

Sometimes his body would sway or he would begin a quick-time hop from one foot to another, as though he were dancing. Many times he would turn to the server at the altar addressing some pointless remark to him such as, "Send those dogs away!" All such devices were attempts to prevent his mind from soaring in union with the Lord.

He was not always successful. If he was getting dressed, for instance, and there was nobody in attendance, he might be found an hour later still holding an article of clothing, his hand sketching the air.

During the final few years of Philip's life, his attempts at preaching were sometimes only a single cry, followed by silence.

On one occasion, when expected to say a few words after the regular sermon, he suddenly put his hands up to his face and burst into sobs. A person near him thought he heard him mutter, "Oh, people who want to have ecstasies do not know what they are like."

At times, his body would stiffen until it was rigid as a corpse, or move uncontrollably. Fabrizio de Massimi relates that he would often go in Philip's room and find him struggling with himself; he would look at Fabrizio without seeing him.

Once, during Mass, his eyes suddenly shone with a great beauty. His body became motionless and rigid, and he stared fixedly at the Host. Two priors left their prayers and went up to Philip. They found him cold as ice, deprived of all sensibility, deaf to every word addressed to him. They rubbed his hands without effect, and immediately assumed he was in some kind of a fit. He was moved to a cell and remained in that condition for a long time. At last the ecstasy abated and in a state of joy Philip related to them, "I have seen Jesus Christ visibly present in the consecrated Host, and with his most sacred hand blessing all of us who were there praying."

The painting we have of him in old age shows him seated at a desk, his eyes large and luminous, expressing a serious, yet joyful countenance. Giovenale Ancina described Philip towards the end of his life: "He is a splendid looking old man with hair white as ermine; his skin is as delicate as a girl's. If he lifts his hand up and it happens to be against the sun, it looks transparent, just like alabaster."

Philip Neri passed out of the body in 1595, only a few months short of eighty, after predicting the exact time of his death. Yet even during the last few days he was still bounding up the stairs like a boy and indulging in his whimsical joking. At two in the morning, the hour he had foretold, he sat up in bed and had only sufficient time to extend his blessing before he fell back dead.

He was canonized by virtual acclaim, despite his unorthodoxy, which could well have

worked against a man of lesser humanity and saintliness. But the people loved him, and there are few who can successfully resist that will. The canonization process began only two months after Philip's passing away, on August 2, 1595, when a hundred and ninety-four witnesses appeared on his behalf. Twenty-seven years later, on March 12, 1622, he was declared a saint by Gregory XV.

Goethe perhaps best summed up the character of Philip Neri when he wrote: "Man is an extraordinarily complex being, in whose nature absolutely contradictory elements coexist, the physical and the spiritual, the possible and the impossible, the attractive and the repellent, the bound and the unbound... In Neri's case, all these opposites overtly manifested themselves, confusing the intellect by thrusting the incomprehensible upon it, unleashing imagination, outwinging faith, justifying superstition, juxtaposing and even uniting the most normal states with the most abnormal. It is not surprising, therefore, that such a man, working untiringly for nearly a century and on a vast stage, should have had the influence he did."

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At a Franciscan Seminary

Swami Prabhavananda

This question-answer session was held at a Franciscan Seminary in Santa Barbara, USA, on the 13th of March, 1965.

Q: Swami, do you feel, in general, that the moral beliefs and practices, the world principles and the needs, of the average Western man one who is born and grows up in Western society and has no acquaintance with Eastern religions are similar to those of the Eastern man, say a Hindu?

A: First, I must point out to you that this distinction between "eastern" and "western" religion is a wrong distinction. After all, Christ, in whose name you are devoting your life, was an Easterner. He was born and lived in the East.

In relation to moral life, or ethical life, or spiritual life, I think that all believe in the same general principles. For instance, you have devoted yourselves to the religious life, and have taken vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. In our religion, we take such vows; only our terminology is different. We say that we have to give up cravings for progeny, cravings for wealth, cravings for name and fame you see, it amounts to the same thing. We are taught to be truthful; not to hurt any being in thought, word or deed; not to express greed for another's property; and to overcome lust.

We point out that this whole world really is bound by lust and greed, and that worldliness and God do not go together. Therefore, in order that we can devote ourselves to God and realize God in this life that's what we emphasize in order that we can acquire the saintliness which comes when life and character have been transformed by the vision of God these are the necessary precepts to follow: truthfulness, not hurting any creature, chastity, overcoming greed.

As for obedience; what is meant by obedience after all? To renounce the ego, the little self "I" as distinct from everybody else. This is the cause of all bondage. We point out that the first-begotten son of ignorance is ego. And from that comes attachment, aversion, and clinging to the surface life. Jesus pointed out: "He who loves this life shall lose it." Clinging to life is something instinctive, through ignorance. But it has to be overcome. How? There is only one way: to devote ourselves to God, to follow the first commandment: "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy mind, with all thy soul, with all thy strength." This commandment is universal. The same in the east or west, north or south.

We all worship one God. In Vedic times, long before any history was recorded, it was stated: "Truth is one; sages call it by various names." And so it is one God. You call him Christ, I call him Krishna. One man says "Allah," while another says "Brahman." What difference does it make?

This reminds me of a story. Four men were travelling in the desert. One of them said, "Oh, I wish I had a drink of water." Another said, "I wish I had a drink of pani." A third said, "I wish I had a drink of jal." The fourth, "Oh for a drink of aqua." But the first one said, "What are you three talking about? Pani and jal and aqua cannot satisfy your thirst; only water can!"

Just then somebody came with some water, and all four pointed to it and proclaimed:

"That's it! That's it!" And they all took some and drank it.

Q: Could you elaborate a little bit on your understanding of God?

A: Is it possible to have any understanding of God? That's where we get into difficulty! You define God in this way and I define God in that way, and we quarrel. You say, "My God is the only God," and I say, "No, my God is the only God." But what is the truth? I'll tell you what our Master, Sri Ramakrishna, said about God. He said the bee, before it sits on the flower and begins to suck the honey, makes a big, big noise. Then, as it sits on the flower and drinks the honey, it becomes silent. Then again, having drunk the honey and become intoxicated, the bee makes a sweet humming noise. Similarly, those who have no vision of God, who have not gone to the neighbourhood of God even, who have only book knowledge they make a big noise about God: "God can only be defined this way, can only be defined that way." But as one begins to drink that honey, that sweetness which is in God, one becomes silent; and then again, becoming God-intoxicated, one begins to talk about God.

Some say God is personal, some say he's impersonal; some say he's with form, some say he's without form. Some say God is with attributes; some say he is without attributes. Yet they have drunk of the same ocean of nectar. According to their temperaments, they introduce different ideas when they come to define God. But the truth is, his name is Silence.

I'll tell you a story from our scriptures. A father sent his son away, saying, "Go and study religion." The young boy studied for twelve years, and then came back. His father asked him, "Tell me what you understand of God." The young man gave him a wonderful sermon, quoting the scriptures. But the father said, "My boy, go back. You have not yet learned what is to be learned. Go back. Study some more." So the son studied for another twelve years. Then he came home again. And again his father asked, "Now tell me what you have learned of God." But the son kept silent. So the father said, "Why, my son, your face shines like a knower of Brahman. You have known him. His name is Silence."

Q: We feel, though, that God can only be defined as silence in the sense that we cannot rightly put down what he is he's way beyond us.

A: The moment you say, "He is this and that," you are limiting the unlimited, the infinite.

Q: Then how do you explain Christ? In him we see the love, the justice, the mercy all these aspects.

A: Wonderful! That's right! Christ is like a door through which you gaze into the Infinite, the Absolute.

Q: From this point of view, how do you speak of God as silence?

A: When you see Christ, and through that door you reach That (the Absolute), then you become silent. Until you have seen Christ you talk about him, and you say he is this and that. We say Krishna also is this and that. If you were to take Christ and Krishna and Buddha and Ramakrishna and shut them all in one room, they would embrace each other. But if you shut a Buddhist, a Catholic, and a Hindu together they'll fight one another. Why? Because none of them has known anything about Christ or Buddha or Krishna or Ramakrishna. When you know, it is different. A dog has the canine instinct for recognizing his master no matter what clothes he is wearing, but we human beings have not even that canine instinct to recognize that Christ can come in other dress also. It is the same God. (I hope I have not disturbed any of you!)

Q: Swami, one comment almost accusation made against Eastern religions is that these religions de-emphasize the individual so much that they want to annihilate him, to dissolve him so he cannot be himself any more. In other words, I cannot be "me" any more, in a sense.

A: What is your "me"? Explain it, define it. Is it your body? Your mind? Your senses? Your character? Would you like to be what you are now forever? Aren't you losing your "me" all the time? So your real "me" is in the infinite in God. Find yourself in him: then you have truly found yourself. This idea about individuality where is it? Define that which is you. Sages and saints Christians and Hindus and Buddhists have dedicated years of their lives to finding out, "What am I?" Ultimately they lose themselves in God. Shall I quote to you Meister Eckhart, one of the great Christian mystics? This is what he says: "Most people are so simple that they consider we are here and God is out there. But it is not so. God and I are one." Is that blasphemous? Find that out for yourselves. We are not the "I" or "me" that we think ourselves to be.

Q: Well, how can you speak of transforming yourself then?

A: Transforming yourself? You cannot transform yourself; but by devoting yourself to God, by loving God, you can be transformed by him.

Q: Then who is it that seeks the real identity?

A: We have an ego. God has given us an ego, he has given us the little self, in order that we can love him, and in order that ultimately the love, lover, and the Beloved can become one.

Q: I'm still confused. You say we are to seek our true identity in God, and yet I am confused by who this is then that is doing the seeking.

A: For this you have to go to Upanishadic thought. Atman, which we call the true Self, the real Self, the real I, is Brahman: "I and my Father are one." And that Atman is the unchangeable reality within each one of us. But through ignorance from a beginningless time the Atman identifies itself with the sheaths covering it. For instance, the body is a sheath, the mind is a sheath, the life principle is a sheath, and we are identified with them: therefore, the sense of ego. When you analyze what the ego is, you find it has no existence, no reality at all. And yet, such is our ignorance, that we settle our whole world upon the false ego. All the Western mystics point out to you (and they are all at one with Eastern thought) that if you can empty yourself of your "self," there will come the greater unfoldment of God. So this ego that we are holding on to, the individuality that you speak of, is just a shadow.

Here is a parable that we find in our scriptures. Two birds of beautiful golden plumage are sitting on the selfsame tree. The bird on the upper branch is calm and is in its own glory. The lower bird, hopping from one branch to another, tasting the sweet and bitter fruits, forgetful of the upper bird, continues to enjoy and suffer. When it has eaten a very bitter fruit it looks at the upper bird, and sees how calm and majestic, how glorious that bird is; but again forgets, and goes on eating sweet and bitter fruits, until it has become completely frustrated. Then it gazes at the upper bird, moves nearer and nearer to it, and is gone. All the time the upper bird's shadow was playing; there was all the time just one bird, calm, majestic, in its own glory.

Q: What is it that caused the bird to look up?

A: His true nature. Man's true nature is infinite and divine, and no matter how he may go down and down, ultimately that divinity in him unfolds itself and lifts him up.

Therefore, none will be lost. As Christ said, we have to bring about the death of the ego. Buddha showed the difference between ignorance and spiritual knowledge. He said we are asleep, and we become awakened. Buddha was asked, "What are you? Are you a god?" He answered, "No." "Are you a man?" "No." "Then what are you?" He said, "I am

Buddha, the awakened one." And he said that everyone will be awakened.

Q: This unity that we strive for, the unity with God, is accomplished through love. But love demands a separation, and once we arrive at that identity, there's no more love. Right?

A: No! Love wants to become completely absorbed in the Beloved.

Q: But as soon as it is absorbed, it is no longer love.

A: We have a saying in India: "I want to taste sugar and not be sugar." That is your viewpoint. But learn to taste sugar and then see what happens. This is not human love, but in human love also there is what you can call a fruition, a complete absorption. The Sufi mystics describe it this way. There is a knock at the door. From inside comes the question, "Who is that?" Answer: "I." The door does not open. Again a knock. "Who is that?" "I." No response. For a third time comes the knock. "Who is that?" "Thou." The door opens. Love God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, with all your strength, and then see what happens. I don't have to prove anything to you. You will prove it to yourself.

Q: Is union with God the same in all the Eastern religions?

A: "Union with God" is not exactly correct. The language does not express it. The Vedantic idea is this: you are God, and that God becomes unfolded. There are no two to have union. There is just one. I believe Meister Eckhart, among the Christians, had that kind of experience.

Q: Many of us are not familiar with the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita, or the Vedas. Could you just explain to us what these scriptures are the general content?

A: Well, I don't know. Suppose I were to say to you, will you explain to me what is in the Bible? That's a very hard task! I'd have to give a series of lectures on the Gita, a series of lectures on the Upanishads. But generally, these scriptures give the methods and means by which one can realize God.

Let us look briefly at one, the Bhagavad-Gita. According to the Gita there are four ways, called yogas, by which one can attain God. One is the path of discrimination. That is, through a process of analysis we try to find out what is Real. Now of course in your discrimination you must define the Real as that which is abiding and eternal. Unreal is that which today is, tomorrow is not. And so when you learn to discriminate this way you

find that God alone is the reality. Everything else is unreal. He is the one treasure. You devote yourself to him. This is the path of knowledge, discrimination.

Then there is the path of love or devotion. It is the same as your idea to love God.

Then there is the path of action work as worship where every act becomes an act of worship.

Last there is the path of meditation psychic control.

All these paths are brought out in the teachings of the Gita. The teacher, Sri Krishna, says that a harmonious combination of all these yogas is best. You see, we have certain natures: emotional, intellectual, active, meditative. So we are told, "Be emotional. Love God. But be discriminative. Also be active. At the same time be contemplative. Combine these yogas." That is what we emphasise not to be one-sided.

Of course this summary does not do justice to the Gita!

Q: Swami, could you explain to us a little of the doctrine of rebirth or reincarnation?

A: The idea is this. If you consider God as the creator of this universe, you cannot admit the beginning of a creation. To admit the beginning of creation is to admit the beginning of a creator. So this creation is from a beginningless time. Now, for instance, if this is our first birth, and the only chance we have, what a calamity! You may say God has given us freedom, freedom of will to devote ourselves to whichever we choose.

But why did he not give us the will to devote ourselves to God? Why did he create some morally blind? Why did he create so many differences amongst individuals? That God must be a cruel, unjust God. And then if this is the only chance we have, and some go to heaven and the rest go somewhere else well God is responsible for that; and who would like to love such a God? Love him through fear? No, we cannot love God that way. In order that we can believe in a just God, we have to believe that he will give us every opportunity, many opportunities, through rebirth or reincarnation, until we wake up. Then all will come to him. So that, in short, is the theory of reincarnation. It is the giving of many chances.

But, you know, Sri Ramakrishna one time was asked, "What do you think about reincarnation?" And he answered, "Yes, they say there is reincarnation. But learn to find God, here and now." That is the practical teaching.

Q: Swami, In the Christian religion we make the distinction of natural and supernatural. I was wondering, for example, how would you look upon a couple who loved each other, but let us say they weren't familiar at all with any religion; however, there was love, a

true love between this man and woman. Would you call that love exclusively human, or does it in some way participate in divine love? Is there a distinction?

A: All love is divine. But when one loves a man or a woman and does not know that one is loving God in that person if one is loving the flesh, or the mind it is misguided love, no matter how faithful it may be. That would not lead you to God. But if you can love somebody, with the idea that there is God dwelling in him, and you love God that would lead you to the highest.

Your distinction between natural and supernatural is true. This is what we call "relative" and "beyond the relative." In the relative there are three states of consciousness: waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep. We live within these three states, but in them we cannot find God. Yet it is within the waking state that we struggle to find God. Then we are lifted above the relative plane to the plane of I cannot describe it, it is something beyond, that's all I can say. Here we live in the relative plane, and it is by transcending this plane that we have the vision of God, or an experience of God. None can see God with the physical eyes, but he who has eyes to see, sees him; he who has ears to hear, hears him in another plane of consciousness.

Q: Is there any distinction between persons and classes in India?

A: Of course! Just as you have different classes and persons and castes in America, in Europe, everywhere, so we have different classes and castes in India. We know that in God, in spirit, we are all one: but manifestations differ. There's good; bad; saint; sinner; all kinds of people; ignorant, wise, learned, illiterate. In spirit there is oneness, but in expression there is difference, of course!

Q: Is there any effort to make India classless?

A: If you made America classless, there would be no America. Distinction, difference, variety that is what makes life interesting; that is what makes the world function. If we all behaved alike, and if our tendencies were all the same how awful! Why don't you want difference? Variety is the law of nature. But at the same time, recognize the underlying unity.

Q: I think what Father was talking about was difference of opportunity. We talk about a classless society in the sense of equal opportunity.

A: Oh, yes, in America I know even a pauper is dreaming to be a millionaire, and perhaps he can be a millionaire. So it is in India, everywhere.

Q: But can a lower-class person become a brahmin in that sense?

A: Not a brahmin. He can go beyond brahminhood. I, for instance, was not a brahmin to begin with, yet now brahmins come and bow down to me. So what do you say to that? Right here an example!

Q: Can you point to any experience in India, Swami, where you feel that the Christian faith has made a creative contact with the Hindu faith?

A: Frankly speaking, as long as I lived in India, I never came in contact with Christians at all. I've seen them, lecturing in the corner of a park. But we never went there, because they would be denouncing the Hindus. That is their way of preaching. You see, such preachers were untouchables to us. I'm sorry to say that, but it is true.

Q: Swami, I'm very impressed with how close you seem to be to nature, and I just wondered if you could amplify on your outlook towards the world, and just how nature itself fits into your theology, or approach to God.

A: In order to approach God there are two things we must practise. One is to close our eyes, forget the world just God and me. But that is not enough. Then we open our eyes and see God dwells in everything.

Q: Well, how about utilizing a response to nature? Say the birds, or the tress, or a beautiful place?

A: Wonderful! I'll give you an illustration of that. I was once on a pilgrimage; I was about twenty years old at the time. There were about a hundred of us, men, women, old and young, travelling in the Himalayas. As we were walking, we saw the sunrise over snow-capped mountains. It was an exquisitely beautiful sight. All these hundred people sighed, "Ah!" Then they sat down and closed their eyes. Can you imagine it? You know what they felt? If this is so beautiful, how much more beautiful would be the source of all that beauty! And where is that source? The Lord within. And so they closed their eyes and tried to commune with God. Yes, nature is beautiful and we love it, but it should remind us only of God.

Q: I thought you said that God is not really the source of all creation.

A: Who else?

Q: Well, you said he could not be a creator.

A: I said if God is regarded as the creator, and if the creation had a beginning, then God had a beginning. And we say God is beginningless, creation is beginningless.

Q: We would say that matter could not be eternal, because then it would be like God.

A: Nature is not eternal, in the sense that nature is always changing. We do not say it is eternal in that way.

Q: Swami, is Hinduism polytheistic?

A: Neither "polytheistic," nor "monotheistic," nor any other of your English words can apply. Forget what you have learned about Hinduism before, please. There is one God. He has many aspects.

Q: How does Hinduism regard good and evil?

A: In creation there is good and evil both. Either you have to take this as a relative creation, or nothing at all. But what is good to you today becomes evil tomorrow. There is no such thing in this relative world as absolute good and absolute evil.

Q: Would a Hindu consider the principle of good and the principle of evil as unequal elements?

A: They are both here in this universe: otherwise, if there were no evil, you would not recognize good.

Q: Will evil be defeated?

A: No, there cannot be a millennium in this world. You can defeat evil by rising above good and evil, to God. Goodness is the path to the absolute. But you have to rise above both good and evil. You have to rise above both pleasure and pain, through Christ, to God, the absolute.

Q: What would you say is the basis of Hindu ethics?

A: The basis of Hindu ethics has this one ideal in view: without purity of heart there is no possibility of realizing God. That which would lead you to God is good; that which would take you away from God is evil. For instance, why should I not hurt anybody? Because when I hurt another I hurt myself. I hurt God, for God is within.

Q: But on an abstract level, you might say God is not "hurttable."

A: Yes, that's true. But because I recognize God in you, I would not hurt you.

Q: I'd like to know what you think about the relationship of poetry and religious language.

A: You know, I'm not a poet. But it's wonderful to express God's truth in poetry and poems. In fact, God is said to be a great poet. Kabi in Sanskrit means "poet," and God is considered a great poet.

Q: Do you have any comment on the Christian belief that this world comes to an end? Do you believe that?

A: No, I believe it is beginningless and endless. But for you and me we get out of this mess!

Q: But we come back?

A: Oh, no! If we are devoted to God, and find God, then we do not come back. We have to come back until we find him. This creation is infinite and is going on infinitely. That is his play.

Q: What would you say about Christ's statement interpreted as saying the world will end?

A: Did Christ say that?

Q: According to his followers, he did.

A: I'd like to see that what Christ said. You know, at one time I was in an apartment in Portland, Oregon. And two young ladies knocked at the door. I opened the door and said, "What is it?"

They said, "We are preachers."

I said, "Just a moment. I'm going to hold a class; you come along with me."

So I went and gave a class and they followed me and attended the class. After the class, when I asked for questions, they said, "Do you believe in the Bible?"

I said, "Yes, I do."

They asked, "Every word of it?"

I replied, "Do you believe every word of it?"

"Yes, we do."

I asked then, "Have you read it?"

And they answered, "No."

I said, "That's why you believe in it!"

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