

1. **Divine Wisdom**
2. **Editorial**
3. **Conversations with Swami Turiyananda**
Swami Raghavananda
4. **Questions and Answers - Swami Ghanananda**
5. **Transformation and Transcendence - Swami Bhajanananda**
6. **Lessons of Life - Swami Vidyatmananda**
7. **Seeds (continued) - Swami Yatiswarananda**
8. **Book Review - John Phillips**

Divine Wisdom

Master: "One cannot obtain the Knowledge of Brahman unless one is extremely cautious about women. Therefore it is very difficult for those who live in the world to get such Knowledge. However clever you may be, you will stain your body if you live in a sooty room. The company of a young woman evokes lust even in a lustless man.

"But it is not so harmful for a householder who follows the path of knowledge to enjoy conjugal happiness with his own wife now and then. He may satisfy his sexual impulse like any other natural impulse. Yes, you may enjoy a sweetmeat once in a while.

(Mahimacharan laughs.) It is not so harmful for a householder.

"But it is extremely harmful for a sannyasi. He must not look even at the portrait of a woman. A monk enjoying a woman is like a man swallowing the spittle he has already spat out. A sannyasi must not sit near a woman and talk to her, even if she is intensely pious. No, he must not talk to a woman even though he may have controlled his passion.

"A sannyasi must renounce both 'woman' and 'gold'. As he must not look even at the portrait of a woman, so also he must not touch gold, that is to say, money. It is bad for him even to keep money near him, for it brings in its train calculation, worry, insolence, anger, and such evils. There is an instance in the sun: it shines brightly; suddenly a cloud appears and hides it.

"That is why I didn't agree to the Marwari's depositing money for me with Hriday. I said: 'No, I won't allow even that. If I keep money near me, it will certainly raise clouds.'

"Why all these strict rules for a sannyasi? It is for the welfare of mankind as well as for his own good. A sannyasi may himself lead an unattached life and may have controlled his passion, but he must renounce 'woman and gold' to set an example to the world.

"A man will have the courage to practise renunciation if he sees one hundred per cent renunciation in a sannyasi. Then only will he try to give up 'woman and gold'. If a sannyasi does not set this example, then who will?"

Editorial Tejah (Spiritual Splendour)

Tejas is spiritual splendour. Those who live a life of purity consisting of continence, prayer, contemplation, truthfulness and righteousness acquire this splendour. Every spiritual seeker is advised to acquire this divine quality by Lord Krishna.

Often we see in the pictures of saints and holy people a halo surrounding their heads, symbolic of their spiritual attainment.

It is said that Kshudiram, father of Sri Ramakrishna, used to be revered like a Rishi (a Seer), and when he would go out the villagers would stand up with folded hands until he was out of sight.

Again it is said of Sri Ramakrishna that a divine light would come out of his body. The Master himself said, "Ah! There was such beauty then that people used to stare at me; the chest and the face used always to be red, as if a light emanated from the body. As people used to stare, I always kept the body covered with a thick wrapper and asked the Divine Mother importunately; 'Here is your external beauty, Mother, please take it back and give me internal beauty.' I used to pass my hand over the body, slapping it again and again, and say, 'Go in, go in'. As the result of this, the exterior became pale, as you see it."

It is said of Jesus Christ that he spoke like one with authority and not like the scribes. Of Swami Vivekananda the newspapers reported that he spoke with divine authority. We come across many such instances in the life of practically every saint.

Tejas may also be translated as spiritual power. Those who have had higher spiritual experiences exude a special power, albeit unconsciously. Whatever they speak has the great power of bringing about a real and lasting transformation in sincere devotees. But spiritual power is not like political or economical, or military power, which are likely to cause more harm than good.

Sri Ramakrishna said: "In the Purana it is said that it was as if a hundred suns were shining when Rama entered the court. Why, then, weren't the courtiers burnt up? It was because the brilliance of Rama was not like that of a material object. As the lotus blooms when the sun rises, so the lotus of the heart of the people assembled in the court burst into blossom."

Spiritual splendour or Brahma Tejas soothes and confers blessings on all fortunate enough to come near it. It can only help and not harm.

We come across many a beautiful prayer in the Upanishads for endowing a sincere aspirant with this spiritual splendour.

As a result of sincere spiritual efforts, made for a long time, this divine effulgence

radiates from devotees, and Yogis who have controlled their thoughts and whose thoughts constantly dwell on Brahman.

Such a person will have a beautiful, sweet and charming personality. A spiritual light will shine in his face due to the practice of continence. People will be drawn to such a personality. Physical beauty is nothing compared with spiritual beauty.

The most important function of this spiritual splendour is to protect aspirants from worldly snares. Wicked and selfish people, however much they may try, will not be able to take advantage of such spiritual seekers. Nor will they be able to harm them or create obstacles in the path of such spiritual seekers; for there is always a divine protection for such sincere aspirants.

That is why Sri Krishna advises all spiritual seekers to cultivate Tejah.

Swami Dayatmananda

Conversations with Swami Turiyananda Swami Raghavananda

These spiritual talks took place at Almora in the Himalayas during the summer of 1915 in the ashrama which Swami Turiyananda had established in co-operation with his brother-disciple, Swami Shivananda.

Swami Shivananda, some of whose talks are included, was also a man of the highest spiritual realizations.

June 1, 1915. It was morning.

Swami Turiyananda: "At one period of my life I used to live continually in an ecstatic state. Then the Lord suppressed this mood."

Disciple: "Why did He suppress such a wonderful mood?"

Swami Turiyananda: "You know that in our country if a young child is very handsome his mother sometimes draws black marks on his cheeks so that people will not be envious of him. Perhaps in the same way the Lord suppressed this ecstatic mood in order to protect me from the envy of others.

"Troubles exist as long as we live in the domain of thought. There is no peace until we transcend thought itself. When one kills the mind, the senses come under control. What does it mean to kill the mind? It is to detach it from sense objects. The enlightened man has his senses under perfect control. 'The tortoise can draw in his legs: the seer can draw in his senses. I call him illumined.'" The Swami closed his fist to illustrate how the enlightened soul draws in the senses.

"'Even a mind that knows the path can be dragged from the path; the senses are so unruly. But the wise man controls the senses; he recollects the mind and fixes it on Me. I call him illumined.' As long as one expects happiness, one stays restless. But the enlightened soul 'knows bliss in the Atman (the Self within) and wants nothing else. Cravings torment the heart; he renounces cravings. I call him illumined.' Craving for happiness brings suffering in its wake.

"The illumined soul keeps himself detached from his mind and intellect and directs them to work, whereas the ordinary man identifies himself with his mind and intellect."

Disciple: "I would like to live a contemplative life."

Swami Turiyananda: "Everybody works. The important thing is to awaken the Divine Mother within oneself. Of course you must also work. You may even have to go through drudgery if the Lord commands it. But never work for name and fame! You have renounced all that! Ah, what a wonderful spirit of self-surrender Swamiji (Swami Vivekananda) had! When he was seriously ill at Rishikesh and we, his brother-disciples, were watching over him, sad at heart, he said: 'Mother, if it is your will, let me die.' 'Although the Lord made us his instruments and engaged us in his work, at least ninety per cent of our mind dwelled in him.'"

June 2, 1915. There was a reading of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Turiyananda remarked: "He who places too much emphasis upon diet is a fanatic. As one grows spiritually, one overcomes this tendency. Is our Lord only the Lord of the Hindus? "God and mammon cannot be served at the same time. Those who try to compromise are still very much attached to the world. If you want to realize God, renounce all worldliness.

"Why should you care about public opinion? Good people never criticize others. It is only the wicked who speak ill of their fellow men. Ignore them! The idea of doing good to other people! First help yourself! The illumined souls alone are the true benefactors of this world. They know what is good for mankind. Having attained knowledge, they work for others. You must rub your hands with oil before you break open the jackfruit."

June 3, 1915. There was a reading of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Turiyananda observed: "The study of the scriptures is important. It engages the mind in holy thoughts. But in a higher state even study is a distraction. When you are established in contemplation, it is best to let the mind be absorbed in a single ideal. At one time, when I was staying in the Himalayas, I used to study the Upanishads for eighteen to nineteen hours a day and to meditate on their truth. Through the grace of the Upanishads I had revelations.

"At the Baranagore Monastery we used to study scriptures and philosophy a lot. Swami Abhedananda particularly engaged himself in much study. Swamiji did too and also meditated many hours. We all practised great austerities. Sri Ramakrishna made us do it. Then we attained the bliss of liberation-while-living through the Master's grace. Free as the air we have lived - depending on none, feeling no lack, without cravings, fearless! Yes, we know the joy of liberation! We used to wander from place to place, depending entirely on the Lord. We would beg for alms when we were very hungry. Wherever it got dark we made our home. What freedom!"

June 7, 1915.

Swami Turiyananda: "A modern commentator on the Vedanta Sutras has made the remark that liberation cannot be attained by worshipping the personal aspect of God, that such worshippers after death only go to higher planes of existence. To realize one's true nature is to attain liberation. Certainly this realization also comes to the devotees of the personal aspect of God whenever they wish to erase their sense of individuality. However, although they realize their union with the Chosen Ideal, they usually prefer to keep a sense of separation and live as servants of the Lord in order to taste his bliss. God reveals himself to his devotees both as personal and impersonal. Look at our Master. He attained everything by worshipping God as personal. He used to say. 'He who has perfected himself by worshipping the Lord in one aspect knows all his aspects.'

"You must struggle to meditate and to become deeply absorbed in Him. Try to develop

intense devotion to God throughout your life.

"You have to admit this truth: As long as you have physical consciousness, the Lord is the master and you are his servant. When you think of yourself as an individual soul, you are a part of Him. And when you realize that you are the Atman, the Self, you are He. In that state there is no sense of ego."

There was a reading of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Shivananda remarked: "Ah, those days at Dakshineswar were like heaven itself!" He continued with a description of Sri Ramakrishna's daily life:

"From morning till one in the afternoon everyone was busy picking flowers and making other preparations for worship until the poor were fed. In the meantime, Sri Ramakrishna would discuss spiritual subjects, and the devotees listened to him with rapt attention. Even fun and jokes were related to God. There was no other topic. Everything culminated in his samadhi (transcendental state of consciousness).

After lunch, Sri Ramakrishna used to rest for a short while. Then again he spoke on spiritual matters. At vesper time he used to go to the temple of Mother Kali and fan her a little. He would become God-intoxicated and return to his room reeling in a state of ecstasy. He used to ask us, who were practising spiritual disciplines under his guidance, 'Tell me, do you feel divine inebriation when you meditate mornings and evenings?' At night, Sri Ramakrishna slept very little. He used to get up and wake those who were sleeping in his room, saying, 'Don't sleep too much! Wake up and meditate!' Again he would lie down a short while, then rise before dawn and chant the sweet name of the Lord. The others would sit and meditate in their own ways.

"May your hearts be filled with devotion for our Lord!"

June 10, 1915.

Swami Turiyananda: "You have to ascend to the highest peak of renunciation in order to realize the Atman."

June 11, 1915. It was noontime. Swami Turiyananda observed: "Is it easy to guard the mind from distracting thoughts? It demands heroic effort. Distractions constantly try to enter your mind and to take possession of you. Layers upon layers of rubbish are in the mind. What good is it merely to close eyes and ears?"

In the evening, Swami Shivananda mentioned a devotee. He prayed for him: "Mother, may he not go away empty-handed! Give him a grain of your grace! He came to your devotees."

Swami Turiyananda: "Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'I cannot stand anyone calling me guru. It irritates me. Who is the guru? Satchidananda (God) alone is the guru.' The external guru shows the path; the inner guru quickens the spirit. Ordinary men who pose as gurus do not know this and ruin themselves by feeding their egos."

June 13, 1915. Upon returning from a walk, Swami Turiyananda said: "A. wants to study raja yoga in a hurry. We have given our life-blood to this task! As long as I can remember, I have devoted myself to nothing else, and yet - how far am I from attaining purity of heart! Still there is anger and envy! Make me, O Lord, thy servant's servant's servant!"

Swami Turiyananda was lying down and I (Swami Raghavananda) was fanning him. Swami said: "Never let egotism control you. It ruins a man. He loses all discrimination - just like a drunkard. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'Water does not accumulate on high ground.' An egotistic man holds his head high." Swami Turiyananda lifted his head to illustrate.

Swami continued: "Strong is he who is elastic like steel and does not break. Strong is he who can live in harmony with many people and heed opinions differing from his own.

"Swamiji said at one time: 'As long as you have been born on this earth, leave an

impression on it.' At the Baranagore Math he remarked: 'Our names will be recorded in history!' Swami Yogananda and some other brother-disciples made fun of him. Swamiji retorted: "You will see if I am right or not! Vedanta is the only religion convincing to all. If you don't listen to me, I will go to the quarter of the untouchables and teach them Vedanta!"

"To preach religion is to give something tangible. It is not like teaching a class from the pages of a book. Religion is something that is transmitted. Hence, before you can give you have to earn.
(to be continued)

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Questions and Answers Swami Ghanananda

Q. How can we overcome distracting thoughts when we meditate?

A. Before meditating we should pray deeply and intensely to our ishta (Chosen Ideal) to free our minds from distractions. We should tell Him that we do not want the distracting thoughts and ask Him to take them away. Deep prayer like this may prevent them altogether. If, in spite of it, our meditation is still disturbed, then we must not identify ourselves with the thoughts which come, but merely witness them detachedly.

Q. Why do illumined souls continue to practise spiritual disciplines?

A. The main reason is sheer habit. But also they may want to set an example to others. The disciples of Shri Ramakrishna continued austerities after his death, because they wanted to intensify what he had already given them. For them, it was like going over more thoroughly a course through which their teacher had already put them.

Q. What is unmana samadhi?

A. This is a high level of concentration obtained for a very short time when the mind is suddenly withdrawn from worldly activities. It is certainly not realization, but only a glimpse. The mind, not being properly trained, very soon falls down from its high level and worldly tendencies reassert themselves. Shri Ramakrishna used to give the analogy of a mongoose which had found a comfortable hole high up in the wall, but was always being dragged down from it by a brick which its owner had tied to its tail. It is best to raise the mind slowly; the important thing is to become permanently established on a high plane. We may find it easy to climb to the hill-top, but that is not enough - we have to build a house there! This may take years of steadfast, serious application. Shri Ramakrishna is a fine ideal, for he never really came down at all to the ordinary planes

of consciousness.

Q. Should we be patriots?

A. Yes, of course. We should all love our own country. But this does not mean we should hate other countries! We should love the world, and love our own country as part of it. Patriotism is higher than political affiliation, because, unlike the politician, the patriot need not identify himself with one country only, but can have a world outlook as Swami Vivekananda had. Politics is the science of privilege; but a monk cannot accept privilege; he ministers to suffering wherever it may be.

Q. Does devotion grow through meditation on the Formless God as well as on God with Form? And need jnanis be 'dry' people?

A. Devotion usually begins with God with Form, but later on it attaches itself to the Formless too. The devotee sees that his Chosen Ideal is one with the Absolute. Again, the answer depends on what we mean by devotion - Shankara defined devotion as having the mind fixed on the Absolute. The jnani is an adorer of Brahman. The remedy for dryness is the service of others, trying to see Brahman in them. Then you will realize Brahman in yourself. This is practical monism. You should care for the welfare of the world while on the relative plane. Practical Vedanta was taught most notably by Swami Vivekananda; no one since Buddha has emphasised it on such a scale.

Q. How much thought should be given to one's weakness?

A. Practically none. One should have no leisure for such thoughts. If troubled by any weakness, pray deeply for three days and it will disappear.

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Transformation and Transcendence

Swami Bhajanananda

Abraham Maslow, a pioneer in humanistic psychology, has narrated a beautiful anecdote about a small American-Indian boy:

He was about seven or eight years old, and I found by looking very close that he was a kind of rich kid, in a Blackfoot way. He had several horses and cattle in his name, and he owned a medicine bundle of particular value. Someone, a grown-up, turned up who wanted to buy the medicine bundle, which was the most valuable thing that he had. I learned from his father that what little Teddy did when he was made this offer - remember he was only seven years old - was to go into the wilderness by himself to

meditate. He went away for about two or three days and nights camping out, thinking for himself. He did not ask his father or his mother for advice, and they didn't tell him anything. He came back and announced his decision.¹

How many grown-ups make decisions, even important decisions which may have far-reaching consequences in their own lives, in the way that little boy did? When confronted with difficulties, most people would rush here and there and try to influence this person or that, failing which they would either go about blaming the world or sit brooding over their misfortunes. What that boy did was to seek a solution to his problem in the depths of consciousness. Being small, his physical and mental capacities were limited, but he knew how to transcend his limitations. Abandoning all external help, alone in the wilderness, he just let the Great Spirit open the door of his heart to the source of infinite knowledge.

Many of the problems of life, especially existential problems like insecurity, unfulfilment, loneliness, meaninglessness, etc, have no lasting solutions in the external world. This, however, is not the only difficulty. A more serious difficulty is that our present state of consciousness is itself too limited and inadequate to solve the basic problems of life. It is this awareness that induces people to practise prayer, worship and meditation. In critical situations some people may achieve a certain degree of transcendence through prayer or meditation and thus succeed in getting inner solace and strength to face the problems of life. But this kind of transcendence is usually a temporary experience and its beneficial effects wear off in a short time.

Is there a way by which man can attain permanent transcendence? The answer given by the saints, sages and mystics of all religions is that man can gain permanent possession of higher levels of transcendence by transforming his consciousness. This is one of the basic presuppositions of yoga, mysticism and spiritual life in general.

Transformation of the conscious into the superconscious

Human consciousness undergoes three types of transformation: transformation within the unconscious, transformation of the contents of the unconscious into the conscious, and transformation of the conscious into the superconscious. The first two types really belong to the province of moral life, and it is only the transformation of the conscious into the superconscious that is the chief concern of spiritual life.

The unconscious² is the storehouse of impressions (samskaras) of past experiences, whereas the conscious deals with the immediate present. The unconscious is also the fountain-head of all good and bad instinctual drives, emotions and creative power. At the beginning of our spiritual life the conscious remains mostly under the control of the unconscious. As a result, we find that our actions and thoughts are to a great extent determined by our inherent tendencies and are going on more or less automatically. In other words, we have very little inner freedom and self-awareness. Much of the early struggle in spiritual life is to free the conscious from the hold of the unconscious.

As the conscious gets freed more and more from the hold of the unconscious, we feel great inner freedom, alertness and tranquillity, our work efficiency increases, and our creative urges find finer modes of expression. Many people remain satisfied with these improvements. They, however, remain conditioned by their present level of awareness. Spiritual life is an attempt to go beyond the limitations of our present state, and this can be achieved only by transforming the conscious mind and illuminating it with superconscious wisdom.

It should be noted here that the conscious and the unconscious are to be regarded not as inert chambers but as functional configurations of the self. They represent two different ways the self functions. If the ego is visualized as a tree, the unconscious will be represented by the roots and the conscious by the trunk. The transformation of the conscious means the transfiguration of the ego - the metamorphosis of the human self

into the divine Self. In the Vedas this has been described through the well-known imagery of the two birds. 'Two birds of beautiful plumage, closely related and friendly, cling to the same tree. Of these one eats the fruit of different tastes, while the other looks on without eating. On the same tree (i.e. the body) the lower self grieves, being immersed (in worldliness), deluded and powerless. But when it sees the other (the higher Self), the adorable Lord, and His glory, it becomes free from sorrow.'³ It is the light of the higher Self, the Atman, that transfigures the ego. There is a point of contact between the Atman and the conscious mind; it is known as the buddhi or heart. It acts as the centre of control in spiritual life. The impulsion for the transformation of the conscious must come from this centre, and it will come only if the centre is awakened. We may read books on meditation or listen to the talks of wise men but, unless the spiritual centre starts functioning, our basic awareness will remain unchanged. If the first struggle in spiritual life is to free the conscious from the hold of the unconscious, the next struggle should be to awaken the spiritual centre. Once this higher centre starts functioning, every action and thought will become a means of transforming consciousness. There are, however, several special techniques or processes which accelerate this transformation and some of these are discussed below.

Transforming the power of work

We generally tend to look upon work as a means of achieving something in the external world. Rarely do we regard it as a means of transforming consciousness and yet, this transformation is the central aim of Karma Yoga. The popular notion that Karma Yoga only means doing good to the world is not wholly correct, for one can do good to the world in various ways and with various motives. Our actions become Karma Yoga only when they are converted into a technique of transforming consciousness. This also implies that even actions done for one's own good such as eating, dressing, cleaning etc. can be done as Karma Yoga. The type of work one does is irrelevant to Karma Yoga; what is important is how the work transforms consciousness.

Here it is necessary to clarify what the word 'karma' really means. In science any movement that involves the expenditure of energy is considered work. It is in this sense that a waterfall, motor car, stomach or lung is said to be 'working'. This, however, is not what 'karma' really means. Work to become karma must have three components: a conscious agent (karta), action which has a moral implication, and an effect (karmaphala) which is the fulfilment of a desire (istasadhyata). The only English word which connotes all these three aspects of karma is perhaps 'labour'. Karma is goal-oriented work done by an agent who owns, or has the obligation to own, moral responsibility for his actions. Sri Ramakrishna's parable of the Brahmin who killed a cow but claimed that it was his hand which did the crime and that, therefore, the sin belonged to the presiding deity of the hand, Indra, illustrates the importance of the agent. The agent who owns moral responsibility is the ego.

Why does the ego do karma? To fulfil its needs. Human beings have a hierarchy of needs - physical, physiological, emotional, intellectual, social, creative and spiritual. The lower needs like food, clothing and shelter are called 'basic needs'. The higher needs are called 'values'.

The hierarchical nature of needs has created a major problem for man: it calls for total fulfilment. The satisfaction of biological needs alone cannot bring complete fulfilment. There is in man the urge to seek and express higher truths, to share love, to create beautiful things and to experience higher forms of happiness. This has been called 'self-actualization' - a term introduced by Goldstein and Karen Horney and popularized by Abraham Maslow. Millions of people in the world are unhappy, not because of lack of food and clothing, but because of failure in self-actualization. The creative urge in man seems to reach no end. Says Paul Tillich, 'Man's productivity moves from potentiality to

actuality in such a way that everything actualized has potentialities for further actualization. This is the basic structure of progress.'⁴

It is with the hope of attaining fulfilment that people do work. But most people find that work brings them only partial fulfilment: it may satisfy some of their physical or social needs, but does not touch the core of their being, the true Self. They find work mostly a horizontal movement: if their aim is to earn money, work enables them to get more and more of it; if their aim is to get fame, work enables them to get more and more of it. Doctors, engineers, social workers and businessmen find that their work only enables them to move further in their own fields, and that this progress takes them away from the core of their true being, alienates them from their true Self. Work can bring higher fulfilment only if it enables them to move vertically upward and realize the higher levels of being and ultimately the true Self.

This upward movement can be effected only through a transformation of consciousness. Can work bring this about? Work produces two types of change: a subjective one and an objective one. It changes the object of work: a carpenter produces changes in a block of wood, a farmer produces changes in the land, a doctor produces changes in the body of the patient, and so on. The objective changes alone are usually noticed and regarded as work. But work has also a subjective effect: it changes the consciousness of the worker. However, this inner change is often so small that it is seldom noticed. Why is it that the inner changes produced by work are so small? Why is it that people find that even after doing work for several years they have derived little inner spiritual benefit from their work? This is one of the fundamental problems of life to which Karma Yoga addresses itself.

In ordinary work almost the whole of mental energy is directed towards seeking the results of work, and little of it is used consciously to deal with the mind and its problems. Therefore Karma Yoga prescribes as the first step the freeing of the will from attachment to the fruit of work (phala-samkalpa tyaga). That is why Karma Yoga is often described as *niskama karma*. But the renunciation of the fruit of work is only the first step in Karma Yoga. The second step is to deal with the ego. The clinging of the ego to the fruit of work is egoism. When egoism is given up, what remains of the ego is simple 'I'-consciousness. This self-awareness can be intensified by cultivating the attitude of an inner witness while one is engaged in work. When the ego is isolated and sufficient self-awareness is built up, one gains tremendous inner strength.

The primary reason why the work that people do does not produce any significant transformation of consciousness is that they lack this inner power born of self-awareness. The ego is not free to deal with itself. There is not enough self-awareness to check the automatisms of the unconscious. There is not enough self-awareness to be focussed upon different parts of the mind and bring about necessary changes there. Another reason is that work is seldom done as an expression of the soul's creativity or, in the words of Swami Vivekananda, as a manifestation of the potential divinity of the soul. It is the outer objects that draw out work from most people, not the inner creative urge. Many people find it difficult to work without some external stimulus or incentive. It is of course true that people have their own specific fields of creative activity like scientific research, music, painting, dance, business enterprises, but any work can be done creatively if there is enough dynamism in the soul. Uncreative work done mechanically without self-direction will not produce any significant transformation in the worker. When properly done, Karma Yoga transforms consciousness in different ways. It creates new good *samskaras* which counteract and check the activity of impure *samskaras* already present in the mind. It gives a higher direction to instinctual energy and sublimates lower instincts into higher sentiments. It enables us to understand the workings of the ego, especially its tentacles of egoism and selfishness which are put forth when the ego is brought into interpersonal relationships through work. The most

important way Karma Yoga brings about transformation is by opening the ego to the stream of universal life. Other than the simple 'I'-consciousness everything else that appears as ego and egoism is the creation of the society of which the person is a part. The very structure of the ego has been determined by the experiences of love and hate and fear gained from childhood. When through Karma Yoga we free ourselves from this triangle of attitudes and re-establish a new, spiritual relationship with others, it will radically transform ego-consciousness. As a matter of fact, Karma Yoga brings into existence a new, purified, liberated, spiritual ego open to universal life. Such a liberated ego alone can offer all work as worship to the Supreme Self who is all-pervading and is the ultimate source of all activity in the universe. This worship is a participation in virat-yajna, cosmic sacrifice of the Divine which, as the Gita assures us, speedily transforms the conscious into the superconscious.

The transforming power of ideals

Another agent of transformation of ego-consciousness is the ideal. An ideal is a psychological phenomenon which serves as a model of perfection and stimulates goal-oriented activity in the soul. Ideals are of two types, subjective and objective. A subjective ideal is a model or template which the self uses to shape itself. It is the prefiguration of the possibilities of the soul. In the ideal the self finds fulfilled all that it wants to achieve in life, all that it wants to become.

The subjective ideal itself is of two kinds, the ego-ideal and the spirit-image. If you ask a small boy about his future, he will say, 'I want to become so and so,' He may regard his father, elder brother, a bigger boy or a well-known sportsman as the personification of all that he wants to realize in life, and he uses this image to mould his own ego. That becomes his ego-ideal. There is nothing wrong in having such an external ideal to start life with. In fact children need such ideals during the early stages of development, and one of the functions of epics, mythology and fiction is to provide such ego-ideals to dream about. The elimination of such ideals from childhood through rationalization and over-emphasis on scientific knowledge is one of the main causes of rootlessness and vulgarity that characterize many modern youths. About this trend Abraham Maslow writes: 'Every age but ours has had its model, its ideal: the saint, the hero, the knight, the mystic, the gentleman - all these have been given up by our culture. About all we have left is the well-adjusted man without problems, a very pale and doubtful substitute.'⁵

One may accept the image of another person as model for one's own self-development but everyone will sooner or later realize that no external image can serve as a perfect model for oneself. Everyone has to evolve his own ideal of perfection out of his own soul. 'Eric Fromm has shown that, apart from superego which we acquire from our parental environment, there is also an intrinsic conscience in us which is based on the unconscious or preconscious perception of our own nature, our destiny, capacities, etc. It insists that we be true to our inner nature.'⁶

It is this search for a perfect self-ideal that leads a person ultimately to spiritual life. Spiritual life is based on the belief that man is the spirit, the Atman, which transcends the ego. This understanding gives rise to the spirit-image by which is meant an idealized concept of the Atman through which one can establish an intimate relationship with the Deity. One may thus visualize oneself as a child of God, as the mother of the Divine Child, or as an angel or simply as a luminous being. This spirit-image by its very sublimity, produces changes in one's consciousness, transforms the ego and finally supplants the ego-ideal.

But a subjective ideal, however high or sublime, is not enough to bring total fulfilment. Most people - though not all - need an objective ideal to adore, to centre their love upon, to bring a sense of completeness or wholeness into their lives. The attitude

towards such an objective ideal may be described as, 'I do not want to become one like him, nevertheless I need him as an inseparable part of my life.' A man may have his own ego-ideal, yet he may feel his life incomplete without a wife. Parents need children to complete their sense of parenthood.

Experience, however, teaches us that no ordinary human being, however good and virtuous, can serve as a perfect objective ideal. Ordinary human beings may satisfy some of our emotional needs but not the higher needs of the spirit. Only the great incarnations of God like Krishna, Buddha, Christ or some of the archetypal divinities worshipped in Hinduism can really measure up to the lofty standards of the human spirit. That is why they have been universally accepted as perfect objective ideals. Such a universal objective ideal is known as the ista-devata.

There is a close relationship between one's spirit-image and ista-devata. A spiritual aspirant should choose as his objective ideal only that divine Being who is in harmony with his own spirit-image and, if possible, one who is in harmony with his ego-ideal. It is a mistake to look upon the ista-devata merely as an aid in concentration, drsti-saukaryam, for even when a person is not practising meditation, the objective ideal continues to influence his thoughts, emotions and actions. There is a lot of difference between meditating on a black dot or gazing at a crystal and meditating on one's ista-devata. The former may intensify one's awareness, but the latter transforms the ego. Even if one regards the ista-devata as a mental projection (as in Tibetan Buddhism) or as an 'archetype' (as the Swiss psychologist Carl G. Jung did), still the objective ideal has a great power of transforming the ego. Dr. Jung has shown that the archetypal symbols of God play two important roles: transformation of consciousness and integration of personality.⁷ He regarded the self as a centre with the power to integrate the conscious and the unconscious and believed that, if this centre was not occupied by the Image of God, it would lead to disharmony and mental illness.

If mere symbols can produce such great changes in the mind, how much more powerful must be Reality itself! In Hinduism an ista-devata is regarded not as a symbol but as a living manifestation of Divine Reality. According to the Tantras, meditation on a deity automatically purifies the mind. Simply by adoring a divine Personality one's ego gradually gets transformed by absorbing to some extent his divine attributes. A person who has established firmly his ista-devata in the core of his heart will find his whole personality getting naturally integrated around that centre.

The transforming power of love

Another transforming agent which has a powerful influence on the ego is love. Unlike knowledge which is acquired from outside, love is supposed to be inherent in the soul. Since it is generally assumed that everyone has enough love in him, everyone is expected to love everyone else. This assumption is, however, seldom found corroborated in actual life. A good many human problems and sufferings are caused by inadequate or mis-directed love. This shows that love is not a simple emotional experience. Rather, it is a complex psychological phenomenon associated with different levels of personality. At the level of the body love takes the form of physical attraction or fascination. At a higher level it becomes an expression of the unity of Prana. An intense form of this love is found in the mother with a newborn baby. At a still higher level love manifests itself as the ego's fellowship with other egos. This is the type of love that characterizes relationships among friends, colleagues and members of societies. At the highest level love is an expression of the oneness of the Atman with Brahman. This is the transcendent love or bhakti which the soul feels for God.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition love is regarded as an I-Thou relationship. Even God is the 'wholly Other', an eternal Thou. Love is not a subject-object, I-it, relationship - like the relationship between a carpenter and timber or between a butcher and sheep - but

a direct subject-subject relationship. The person who is loved is not treated as an object. Human relationship is a mutual exchange, a dialogue.⁸ Clearly, love in Judeo-Christian tradition is conceived as an encounter between two egos. Egos are discrete entities with barriers separating them. The function of love is to overcome these barriers - a negative function.

This dualistic conception of love has two drawbacks. In the first place, it makes love an obligation - not a free and natural attribute of the soul but a duty imposed by God's commandment, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.' This view is based on the belief that man by nature is selfish and sinful and that love is a divine gift. Secondly, it regards love for one's own self and love for others as mutually exclusive and contradictory. By treating love for oneself as a sin it encourages self-hatred and taking recourse to selfless service as a form of escape from oneself.

According to Vedanta, love is an expression of the non-dual nature of Reality which is nothing but the Supreme Self of whom all individual selves are parts. Love is not a supernatural gift but a natural attribute of the human soul. There is nothing to separate two selves except ignorance - ignorance of the true nature of the self - and ignorance is removed only by knowledge. When ignorance vanishes, true love already inherent in the soul, manifests itself spontaneously.⁹ The natural relationship between human beings is not that of 'I-thou' but of 'we'. It is not necessary to hate oneself or escape from oneself in order to love others. Selfless service is not a special kind of activity but the natural way an enlightened soul acts. What one does for oneself should conduce to the welfare of others and what one does for others should conduce to one's own welfare. In brief, love is the progressive integration of other selves into one's true Self. The only authentic way to love others is to integrate their selves into yours.

An unavoidable step in this integration process is the transformation of ego-consciousness. The limited 'I' must change into an ever-expanding 'we'. In a natural way this takes place to a limited extent in the family, in the friendship circle and in the monastic community, but it usually goes on as an unconscious process interrupted and distorted by instinctual drives like fear, hate and greed. If freed from these lower obstructions, and if cultivated consciously as a spiritual discipline, love becomes one of the most potent means of transforming ego-consciousness. However, love can accomplish this task only if it is genuine. Merely imagining that one has love for others or cultivating polite and pleasing manners can bring about no inner transformation. Genuine, unselfish love is found only in spiritual people.

Meditation and other spiritual techniques

Prayer, worship, Japa (repetition), meditation and similar spiritual disciplines form another class of ego transformers. These disciplines, unlike work, ideal and love which operate during the normal course of everyday life, are usually practised at specific times. They produce significant results only when they are practised with great intensity and steadfastness.

Encountering the ego

Though the methods discussed above bring about transformation of ego consciousness, they do not deal with the ego directly. The most effective way of changing the ego is to get hold of it, understand its workings and re-educate it. For this the ego must first of all be encountered in the depths of one's consciousness. Most of the time we are driven into various activities without ever encountering the driver, the ego. We encounter so many people but seldom the ego. The ego has no visible configuration; it is not even a mental image. Nevertheless, its lineaments can be understood by encountering it directly.

This encounter is not a meditation of the ordinary kind which is usually concentration of

mind on an object such as a divine image, name or concept. Nor is it thinking about one's past or present actions and reactions. Encountering the ego is a direct communion with oneself. It is an immediate experience which may be best described as a kind of self-revelation. The ego generally puts on several masks, and much of our ordinary understanding of ourselves is based on self-deception. Encountering the ego is to know the ego without its masks. This self-revelation gives us a true picture of ourselves, a deep insight into our present problems and their causes which lie buried in the past. Lack of self-knowledge is one of the basic causes of our failures and sufferings. It is also the main obstacle to spiritual progress. Many spiritual aspirants do not realize that before they begin their meditation if they spend at least fifteen minutes in encountering the ego, it will greatly improve their concentration and make meditation more realistic. The ego can be truly encountered only in the silence and stillness of the depths of one's consciousness. The daily practice of this kind of interior encounter will soon bring about a great transformation of the ego and one's total awareness.

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Lessons of Life

Swami Vidyatmananda

There was an American play that was very popular a few years ago. It ran on Broadway for months, perhaps years. It was called 'You Can't Take It With You'. The theme concerned an ageing man who had made a good deal of money and who lived only for making money. Then some shock occurs. He realizes for the first time in his life that he is mortal, that he will die, that he has devoted himself to a largely false effort, that he has wasted his time, that - and this gives the play its title - he can't take his wealth with him. Understanding at that late date that "you can't take it with you", he makes an effort in the days which remain to him to seek higher values than simply making money. His efforts to humanize himself provide many comical situations that gave the play its popularity.

Thus it is that as we go towards the sunset of our life we begin to reflect on what we have done with the time allotted to us - how well we have used it; for there is something that we can take with us - not money, not worldly success - but the result of our struggle to think of God and of others, to purify our behaviour and thought.

Thoughts of God, selfless motivations - these are stored in our consciousness and will have a beneficial effect on our after-death condition.

I have been doing that kind of reflecting - inventory taking - recently. I have been very fortunate in having come in contact with Vedantic ideas while still in my 20's and in having made the acquaintance of a guru shortly after - a swami who was a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, or Maharaj; and Maharaj, as you know, was the spiritual son of Sri

Ramakrishna.

I learned so many things from my guru that have enriched my life and shown me how to live - so that now in my older years I have a feeling that my life has been well spent; it hasn't been a wasted life; it has been a life of some value to me, and I hope also to some with whom I have come in contact.

My guru was an Indian, a Bengali, a very charming man, a very original man; and at times completely incomprehensible to me. He seemed often "outrageous"; but since it takes strong medicine to cure a serious malady - and he was surrounded by disciples as headstrong as I was in those days - strong medicine was what was required. He was the type of doctor who, to use Sir Ramakrishna's illustration, put his knee on our chest, forced open our mouth, and thrust the medicine down our protesting throat!

Well, I have been reflecting on what I learned from my guru, and I will spend the hour at my disposal today recalling to you the lessons of my life.

A couple of months ago I paid a visit to the country of my birth, the United States. It was eight years since I had been there, and in the meantime America had become more cautious in letting people in - even, it seems, her own citizens. The immigration officer asked me, "What is your occupation?" Now, as we reach a certain point in our life we really begin to ask ourselves, What is our occupation? Because what we think it has been all these years we find it really isn't at all. So I thought, Well, what am I? Am I a farmer? It's true that we have a farm at Gretz and we do quite a lot of farm work in an effort to be self-sustaining, but I wouldn't say I'm a farmer. Am I a hotel keeper? That is perhaps a bit more to the point, because as you know, Gretz welcomes people who come to make retreats there and we try to make them as comfortable as we can. But I'm not really a hotel keeper. Am I a writer? Well, maybe a little bit, but not really. A speaker? Certainly not. An animateur? That is a good French word and means the kind of person in an organization or group who animates, who makes things go. You might say the sports leader on a cruise ship would be an example of an animateur. Yes, to some extent. We do try to make the ashram interesting, with festivals, programmes, and group activities; and of course there is plenty of work to inspire. Then I thought, No, I am none of these. What I am is the only thing I am, a devotee. I ended by filling in the immigration form: "Retired". We finally end up realizing that all else is of little interest, or passing interest, and our occupation, as well as our avocation is to be a devotee. You realize that at a certain point.

After I returned to America from taking sannyas at Belur Math many years ago, my guru told me the following: "Remember, nothing bad can ever happen to you again. It may be bad, it may seem bad, but it won't be bad for you." Now that's a very curious statement because it seems to contradict itself, but if you reflect a little bit on it you will see exactly what it means. It means this, that having put yourself in the Lord's hands, having taken your stand as a devotee, both as to occupation and to avocation, whatever happens you must believe and know that it must be good for you. Of course, when you go on with your life you realize that He is pulling all the strings. Events that seem impossibly terrible at the moment, disastrous at the moment, somehow or other twist themselves around, or you get twisted around - that's probably the case - so that later on you think, "I wouldn't have had it any other way."

Another teaching my guru insisted on was this: "Feel for others. My child, you must learn to feel for others." What does that mean? A very difficult thing to do because we are always acting and reacting in terms of our own point of view. And if the other person doesn't seem to fall in with that point of view or seems to be in opposition, or seems to be ignorant of it, we immediately consider that person at fault. "Feel for others" means somehow or other trying to think through his brain, see through his eyes, feel through his emotions. Of course, that feeling for others doesn't come quickly or easily. But it seems to me that as we go on suffering and making stupid mistakes and realize how

often we are wrong, we begin at last to see in certain ways how other people feel about certain things. Then this feeling for them, this sympathy which is love, or love which is sympathy, somehow begins to stir in us. Then we become a blessing to others and they become a pleasure for us.

Now I am going to relate a very astonishing saying of my guru. It is extremely cryptic, and I won't even try to interpret it. It happened on an occasion when my guru asked me to go to the high Sierra mountains in California with him as his attendant and cook, which was a very foolish thing for him to do, but of course a great privilege for me. As you know, water does not boil at the same temperature in the high mountains as it does at lower levels. My guru ate principally rice, and that rice had to be thoroughly cooked. What with my inexperience as a cook and the fact that the water would boil even while not cooking the rice, the main ingredient of my guru's diet was to him uneatable. After a day or two of suffering in silence, my guru said to me in great irritation: "If a person doesn't know how to cook rice, he doesn't know how to do anything!"

Another curious thing I heard my guru say more than once: "I've never suffered a moment in my life."

Now of course I know that he suffered, but he did say that. He said this partly to discipline me because in the early days of my sadhana I took myself and my struggles very seriously and often spoke of my spiritual combats. My guru believed that spiritual life should be fun. He disliked the torments experienced by Christian saints. So he often said: "I've never suffered a moment in my life."

Now how are we to interpret that? Well, we interpret it as true because if one has his feet planted firmly on his faith and one has taken refuge in his faith, then one does not suffer in the same sense as people who are simply torn by the slings and arrows of everyday life. But as I have reflected on that saying, I think that relief from pain can also come to us if somehow we get our life organized. We suffer because we have incompatible desires. We are torn by all sorts of alternating currents. We produce confrontations and suffer from confrontations because we are so self-centred. So I come to the concept of sacrifice. I think that until we somehow or other make up our minds that we must be a living sacrifice, we shall suffer; that when we come to the point, if we are so lucky, that we can say, "All right, I'm not holding anything back, I am not trying to preserve a particular situation or position or privilege or expect the appreciation or even the approval of others" - then our life reaches a point where there isn't very much conflict in it, insofar as human relations are concerned, or incompatible desires. Then a certain kind of happiness, a kind of contentment, begins to take over, and the raw suffering of our earlier days becomes a thing of the past, or even forgotten as in the case of my guru.

The existentialist says, "I am responsible for everything in this universe." We say, "I am not responsible for anything in this universe. I am simply here to serve." I often tell our probationers in Gretz who don't want to do this or that or refuse to do this or hesitate about doing that: "As long as you are holding yourself back you won't be happy. If you say, 'It's his job, not mine', you won't be happy. Just make yourself a sacrifice: sooner or later you will have to. Then you can say, as my guru was fond of saying, 'I have never suffered a moment in my life'."

I like to quote a saying by Mahatma Gandhi. I was reading recently about his visit in 1931 to Romain Rolland in Switzerland. He and Romain Rolland had some wonderful conversations, all of which are recorded in Romain Rolland's published 'Journal'. Gandhi said: "Truth brings joy." He said, "First of all I felt that God was truth and then I came to see that truth is God. And truth brings joy; if it doesn't, it isn't truth."

Another lesson I learned from my guru, which he was fond of insisting upon, was:

"Meditate, meditate, meditate." And I would add, that certainly includes doing japam. I am a great believer in japam. It was forced upon me - I did a year's purascharana¹ once

- and I must say that it was effective.

You can easily test what meditation does for you. Now I am not talking about it bringing you to a state of ecstasy or nirvana. I am talking about the daily practice of regularly going and sitting, and the slow, steady effect that has on the rebuilding of your personality. Suppose you go on vacation. Your whole routine is upset. So in the morning, instead of going to the room where you meditate, or to the chapel, you decide to take a swim. And in the evening, instead of thinking at six o'clock that it is the time to be quiet for an hour, you decide instead that this is a good moment to go to the cocktail lounge or take a horseback ride or go out in a boat. You find after a few days - this has happened to me, so I know - that a certain fineness, a certain edge of your recollectedness becomes blunted. After a while you don't like it. You miss your meditation and you decide: "I think I shall be glad to get back to my regular practices again." Because distractions don't distract. That is a conclusion that one comes to: distractions don't distract.

Then I remembered my guru saying very often to me, perhaps oftener than to some: "Always be positive". This is a very simple statement, and yet how easy it is not to be positive. How easy it is to be negative. And I think particularly when we criticize others mentally or verbally, we are going against this suggestion to always be positive. Silence is best, if one can possibly keep silent.

I receive a good deal of inspiration on this particular subject from the leader I am with now at Gretz. He is very positive. I will give you an example. There is in France a well known artist, extremely well accepted by the public and immensely popular. He has had many successes. As in the case of some artists, the success has been too much. He went through a nervous breakdown, drugs, divorce - the whole thing. He has never had any interest in religion, but somehow or other he heard that there was a holy man, a fatherly person, in Gretz. So he began to come and see our leader, while simultaneously being treated by a psychiatrist. Well, the Gretz swami has received this artist every time, anytime, night or day - anytime he takes it into his head to come - often when it is not convenient to do so. It is always the same story, a desperate story of depression, lack of confidence, failure in the midst of success. It sounds curious. I often ask: "Well, Swami, haven't you had enough of it now? There doesn't seem to be any improvement." "No, but he may change." Always it ends the same: "He may change; he hasn't yet, but he may change." That's an example of always being positive.

We often receive phone calls from unknown people asking for help, sometimes in the middle of the night. They somehow feel that calling up and talking may help them, and they often ask for our prayers. I often have to answer such calls at Gretz as I did in America before coming to France. You may be amused by a story about one such request.

I once asked my guru: "If someone asks you to pray for them, what do you do?" He answered, "Tell them that you will pray for them and mentally put them at the feet of the Lord." This has always been my practice and still is.

Not long ago at Gretz there was a call from a woman who said, "My teenage son is very terrible towards me. He even hits me, and will you please do something." So I thought, "Well, I'll do what I have been taught to do." So I said: "Please tell me your name; not your family name, but your first name, and the name of your son, and I will pray for him." So she told me her name and she told me his name, Henri. "Yes, madame, I shall do it," I said. "Well, sir, would you also pray for Francois." Now it's twice as many! "Yes, if you wish," I replied. "And also Jean Pierre?" she asked. It seemed there was quite a big family there! "And Eliane and the twins Christian and Christiane?" So I did as I was requested - put them all, this entire group, at the feet of the Lord.

Then this woman called back some days later and said, "I want to tell you that things are really very much better." You see, it gives confidence to the people themselves. That's

perhaps the psychology of it. With confidence they work to solve the problems themselves. Then she said: "It's Bruno that's causing the trouble now." "Bruno," I exclaimed, "but you didn't mention Bruno." And she said, "I know, and that is why he is acting so badly."

Now I will tell you another teaching of my guru. He often said, "Oh, what patience it takes! My child, what patience it takes. And nothing is accomplished without patience." I've heard that from him, and since I have been in a position of, to a slight extent, trying to look after the young men, the novices, in our own centre, this saying has repeated itself in my mind many times: "What patience it takes!"

You see, evolution is a slow thing. As older people, we see things from our standpoint. We look at the young people beginning their sadhana, and we wonder why in the world they don't see things as we see them, immediately. Why doesn't he or she quickly grasp the situation? But it just doesn't happen that way. It takes patience. But without patience you won't accomplish anything in dealing with such situations. Patience, love - that's the only way I know, and trying to give a good example. That's the only way I know of helping anybody. The only way to reform somebody is to love him.

I am reminded of a story which I believe originated with the American humorist, James Thurber. It depicts, a bit maliciously, what happened to a woman as a result of impatience.

Early in the morning Mr. Dupont went out to walk in his garden, leaving his wife still asleep in bed. After a few minutes he came in and woke his wife. "There is a unicorn in the garden," he announced. "Don't be idiotic," cried Mrs. Dupont angrily. "Unicorns don't exist. The unicorn is a mythological beast." She turned over and went back to sleep. Mr. Dupont went out into the garden again. A few minutes later he returned and again woke his wife. "The unicorn is eating the tulips," he said. Again he went out to the garden.

Mrs. Dupont was getting really angry. She got out of bed and dressed and telephoned the psychiatric branch of the police department and asked them to send someone with a straightjacket, urgently.

An ambulance arrived and two male nurses carrying a straightjacket came into the house.

In a very disturbed tone Mrs. Dupont told the men: "My husband says there is a unicorn in the garden." The attendants looked at her suspiciously. "What did you say, Madame?" "I said my husband says there is a unicorn in our garden. He says that the unicorn is eating our tulips."

"Come, come, come," the attendants said soothingly. They slid the straightjacket over Mrs. Dupont despite her protests, put her in the ambulance, and drove her away to the psychiatric hospital.

Now I mention another lesson I learned from my guru: "Never give up the struggle." And this was often coupled with another saying, "There is no failure in spiritual life."

There is no failure in spiritual life. You will find that promise clearly set forth in the Bhagavad-Gita. Even if you seem to fail or stop, what has been gained will not be lost. It is stored up, put in a kind of deposit, from which you can draw the next time round.

Someone was saying to me today. "Isn't it remarkable that when I first came to this life, even when very young, I knew what I wanted to do and become?" Those tendencies with which we arrive are tendencies we have learned and which come to fruition in a succeeding birth. But of course that is a rather lazy way, a laissez-faire way, of looking at things. I prefer the other saying, "Don't give up the struggle; never give up the struggle."

This was very clearly brought to my attention once in the United States by a dream one of our members had, who was in a very discouraged frame of mind. She was about to decide to abandon her effort to perfect herself. Somehow or other the cry of the heart

was answered by a dream. In the dream this disciple was on a train and the train stopped at some small wayside station. And so the disciple was going to get down. The train would go on, of course, but the disciple would not be on it. Then a voice was heard saying, "Don't get off the train" And this solved the problem. She was convinced that, discouraged or not, she would continue her spiritual efforts. We all know this, and must all remember it. As long as you stay on the train you will keep moving, even if slowly or even with stops, as on days of strikes. But if you get down, then it is a different matter. "Never give up the struggle."

Here is another lesson my guru taught me - you may find it a cryptic, even bizarre, statement, but there is much wisdom in it: "Never sit on the threshold of a door." At our temple in Hollywood we had an inner shrine and an outer shrine. And there was a wooden threshold between the two. Because then as now I like a little support under me when meditating, I took to sitting on that slightly elevated wooden threshold. This from my background was not an extraordinary thing to do, but after two or three occasions, one of the disciples was sent to me to inform me: "We do not sit on thresholds." It was explained that the gods of the door, the protectors of the portal, are there and they don't like it. Which to my western way of thinking made less than perfect sense! But the truth of the matter is far deeper and subtler than that. It consists of making a commitment - be in or be out - don't be half-way between. It shows a lack of decision, a psychological tendency to have a foot in two camps. Whether there are gods protecting the entrance or not, I do not know. But I can understand perfectly that if you are going to be in the inner shrine, be in the inner shrine; if you are going to be in the outer shrine, be in the outer shrine. But don't try to be in the two at the same time. The important lesson to apply in our life: make clear, strong decisions, and stick by them, no shilly-shallying, no wishy-washy commitments. My guru once told me, "If you take up a project, see it through to the end even if you tire of it, even if you conclude that it's not worth while. If not, your mind will become frivolous."

The next teaching that I wish to bring to your attention is this: "Never lower the ideal." This is something that is very important for religious organizations to keep in mind, and individuals, because the sharp enthusiasm with which we begin spiritual life naturally becomes somewhat blunted with the passage of time. We may begin to make compromises. But we must keep in mind that even though we don't achieve our ideal at once, we must remember that the ideal is an ideal and should not be tampered with. One may admit clearly and openly, "No, I have not been able to achieve the ideal." But one should never attempt to justify one's performance or make compromises in terms of lowering the ideal for reasons of success or reasons of comfort or any other sort of reason.

We have seen so many religious movements, so-called religious movements, in the West which seem to make everything easy, and which have achieved, it seems, success. But that is not our way. Even if Vedanta remains small - and it still does remain small, at least in the West - I think we must be faithful to our Master and Mother who asked of us the highest spiritual achievement, the highest virtue, the deepest devotion, as our ideal, and not bring these ideals down to make things seem to go a bit easier. So far I think we are keeping up the standard.

I would remind you that my guru frequently said, "Our objective is the transformation of personality." Sometimes he said, "Our objective is samadhi and nothing less." That certainly is keeping the standard high. He said often: "My sole hope for my children is that they should become men and women of God." Well, that is what we are really struggling for, to become men and women of God.

Even though it may seem childish, I like the American enthusiasm for the transformation of personality. In the United States they are constantly publishing what are called self-help books - books that explain how to remake yourself in a newer and better way: 'How

to Realize your Greatest Potential,' 'How to be your own best Friend', 'How to be Considered Absolutely Marvellous' - titles like that. Transformation of personality in terms of its being transformed into a spiritual personality, not simply a personality that is interesting or which attracts other people and produces success - but a spiritual personality.

I should like before finishing to say something about another lesson that I have learned, this time from the head of the Gretz centre. This is something that I find a very practical teaching and which complements all these others that I have already brought to your attention. The Swami uses silence as a response. It is a most effective response. You see, when someone comes and makes a pointed remark, immediately we fly to our defence, or self-justification, explaining, explaining, maybe hurting another person in order to explain.

I am scolded and blamed more often than you might expect. Accepting blame for things that don't go right, for others' failures, is a part of my work. For years I used to react, offering self-justifications, explanations, sometimes not very pleasantly. But over the years I have learned simply to say nothing. Simply keep silence. This quickly reduces the anger of the person scolding you, and soon harmony can be re-established. To have responded would have been to pour oil on the fire. So silence, silence, as a response. I would really like to recommend that as a basis for everyday life.

(Reprinted from Vedanta for East and West, Sep-Oct 1981)

Seeds (continued)

Swami Yatiswarananda

Habits

With the formation and strengthening of habits, spiritual life becomes easier and loses much of its earlier strain. There should be perfect regularity in the hours of spiritual practice, as only thus does the mind become accustomed to them and meditation become possible, even when the mind is restless. A certain minimum must be kept up in one's daily practices and the time slowly and steadily increased in the case of the beginner. Later, in the most advanced state, one can make use of the undercurrent in one's mind. This enables one to keep part of the mind busy with the practices at all times, whatever one happens to be doing outwardly.

Holy Company

Fellow-travellers can help each other and that is why holy company is of such great importance. Mutual help and sympathy do much to sustain our energy and striving. We should never try to be teachers, but only students among fellow-students, giving others a helping hand if we can; then we do not become dangerous to ourselves and others. "Thou art the mechanic and I am the machine" - this is the attitude we should adopt, and never that of superiority. Before we lead others we must learn to serve with dedication and self-surrender.

The Self

Generally, we ourselves create all the obstacles that stand in the way of our spiritual progress or self-realisation. We think of ourselves in terms of body and of the mind and do the same in our attitude to others. On what does the whole life of the body and of the mind depend? On consciousness. The moment the Self leaves the body, the body becomes lifeless, all its charm vanishes. Nobody feels attracted by a dead form, be it ever so beautiful, but what really attracts us in the man-form or the woman-form is consciousness which we mistakenly identify with that particular body or mind. There is so much blind infatuation in the world, owing to this superimposition on the Reality, that without undermining all these wrong conceptions of body and mind-bound likes and dislikes, attractions and repulsions, we shall never be able to make progress. If I live the life of the body so greatly, why, why, do I not look to that on which it depends? I should learn to love the life of the Self, because only from Its presence is there any life in the body and mind at all. The cause is greater than the effect and the cause of the life of my body and mind and that of all others, is the Self alone. If I want life and love, permanent and unchanging, I must look to the Self and never to any of the limiting adjuncts. But it takes people many, many lives to see this and realise their Himalayan mistake.

(Reprinted from Vedanta for East and West, Jan-Feb, 1980)

Book Review - John Phillips

A Global Guide to Interfaith - Reflections from around the world.

By Sandy & Jael Bharat

Published by O Books, an imprint of John Hunt Publishing Ltd.

Available via Orca Book Services. Price: £19.99 (paperback).

This is a really interesting and inspiring book, which one can read right through or just dip into. It surveys the whole development of the interfaith movement, beginning with the First Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, at which Swami Vivekananda so memorably spoke, and then tracing developments up to the Network of International Interfaith Organisations in Oxford in 2003 and beyond.

It is a very practical book, as it deals, among other things, with the problems of organising interfaith activities, mentioning for instance the sensitivities inherent in the various faiths, which one must take care not to offend. (Do not offer roast beef to Hindus or pork to Muslims - do not provide ham sandwiches for Orthodox Jews).

In the pages of this book more than one hundred thinkers and academics from all parts of the world have expressed their views on the origins of the interfaith movement and the issues it raises. Such a wide spectrum of views makes interesting and enlightening reading.

Freedom of religion implies that we should respect the faiths of others and not misrepresent them in order to assert the superiority of our own faith. Moreover, if we examine self-critically the record of our own religion, we shall see that it has been far from perfect. This should lead us to favour reform to put an end to the misuse of religion for political purposes.

In discussing religious diversity, the authors also indicate points of contact. Interfaith activity helps break down the feelings of 'otherness' many experience when confronted with religions other than their own. Some Christians, for instance, assert that Muslims

worship a different God from 'us'. Finally, the book examines the prospects for the future. How much can the interfaith movement contribute towards international peace and harmony in our civil society?

One of the co-authors, Sandy Bharat, was Co-ordinator of the International Interfaith Centre from 1994 to 2004. She is a theology honours graduate, has been a trustee of the World Congress of Faiths and an editing contributor to the Encyclopaedia of Hinduism. This book is clearly printed on quality paper and contains a wealth of photographic and other illustrations, which are as eloquent as the text in presenting the interfaith scene. In our present times, when we hear a lot about fundamentalists and extremism, it is refreshing to recall that there are other people who are working hard to bring about mutual understanding between the various faiths. There will no doubt always be some fanatics, but let us hope and pray that those seeking harmony will in the end prevail.