

Magazine Articles January / February 2008

1. **Divine Wisdom**
2. **Editorial**
3. **Conversations with Swami Turiyananda - Swami Raghavananda**
4. **Dive Deep -Swami Shraddhananda**
5. **Paths of Realization - Clement James Knott**
6. **A Great Sacrifice -John Phillips**
7. **Jesus Christ and His Message - Swami Asaktananda**
8. **News**
9. **Book Review - John Phillips**

Divine Wisdom

Question (asked by an actor):

"Sir, what is the difference between lust and desire?"

Answer (Sri Ramakrishna):

"Lust is like the root of the tree, and desires are branches and twigs.

"One cannot completely get rid of the six passions: lust, anger, greed and the like. Therefore one should direct them to God. If you must have desire and greed, then you should desire love of God and be greedy to attain Him. If you must be conceited and egotistic, then feel conceited and egotistic thinking that you are the servant of God, the child of God."

Question (asked by an actor):

"Sir, what is the proof that the soul is separate from the body?"

Answer:

"Proof? God can be seen. By practising spiritual discipline one sees God, through His grace. The Rishis directly realized the Self. One cannot know the truth about God through science. Science gives us information only about things perceived by the senses; as for instance; this material mixed with that material gives such and such a result, and that material mixed with this material gives such and such a result.

"For this reason a man cannot comprehend spiritual things with his ordinary intelligence. To understand them he must live in the company of holy persons. You learn to feel the pulse by living with a physician.

"You must practise Tapasya. Only then can you attain the goal. It will avail you nothing even if you learn the texts of the scriptures by heart. You cannot become intoxicated by merely saying 'Siddhi' over and over. You must swallow some."

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna

May 24, 1884

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Editorial

Forgiveness (Kshama)

Kshama means forgiveness, forbearance, and patience. Kshama is a divine quality which all aspirants need greatly and have to acquire sooner or later.

Life is no bed of roses; it is full of suffering. There are three types of sufferings: existential suffering such as old age, disease, death, bereavements etc; suffering brought on by one's past karma; and a special kind of suffering due to God's grace, perhaps, a fast track to spiritual progress. When God gives us lot of trouble, it may appear He is cruel but we need patience to wait. When bad things happen to good people, they become better and not bitter.

Whatever be the cause, one needs to develop a good deal of kshama. Spiritual aspirants striving to progress in the spiritual path need to develop forgiveness, forbearance and patience.

Forgiveness

Kshama, Shankaracharya says, is unaffectedness when beaten or reviled. "Forgiveness is freedom from antagonism towards others even when they cause injury to oneself," says Ramanujacharya.

Forgiveness is the ornament of a hero. He has the capacity and the opportunity to avenge the wrongs done to him. But he aims at self-effacement by forgiving the offender and forgetting the wrong. Only a strong person can forgive, never the weak. Swami Vivekananda says: "Even forgiveness, if weak and passive, is not true: fight is better. Forgive when you could bring legions of angels to the victory."

Then, Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventytimes seven. (Matthew 18.22) He is saying that one should not keep count of times. True forgiveness does not keep a record!

The practice of forgiveness is also a great service to the world. Gandhiji used to say that if we practice an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, soon the whole world will be blind and toothless. The well-known saying that, 'To err is human; to forgive, divine, is too true. None of us are free from faults. So we must try to cultivate forgiveness and also forgetfulness; for to say 'I can forgive, but I cannot forget,' is another way of saying, 'I will not forgive.' One who cannot forget has not really forgiven. The memory is still lurking and may manifest at the earliest opportunity.

Forbearance

Life is full of uncertainty, and one has to put up with so many unpleasant things in life. There is no guarantee that good and righteous people will not suffer. In fact good people seem to suffer more. There are evil and wicked people whose pleasure seems to lie in giving trouble to others. If one does not learn to forbear one has to suffer greatly.

Sri Ramakrishna was kicked by the family priest of Mathur Babu. Holy Mother had to put up with endless sufferings caused by her relatives, especially, Radhu. Swami Vivekananda had to face immense opposition in America. There was even an attempt to do away with him in U.S. Did we find any of them harbouring any grudge?

"In the Bengali alphabet no three letters are alike in sound except the three sibilants (Sa, Sha and Sa); and they all mean for us, 'forbear,' 'forbear,' 'forbear.' (In Bengali Sa means forbear.

It is derived from the Sanskrit root Sah.) This shows that even from our childhood we are made to learn forbearance through the very alphabet. The quality of forbearance is of the highest importance to every man." (Sri Ramakrishna)

Shankaracharya in his Vivekachudamani defines forbearance as: "The bearing of all afflictions without caring to redress them, being free (at the same time) from anxiety or lament on their score." Every saint's life is an object lesson in forbearance.

Patience

Patience is defined as the ability to wait for an expected outcome without experiencing anxiety, tension, or frustration.

One of the most important qualities in spiritual life is patience. There are many factors affecting the outcome of all our actions. We can only do what best we can and accept with patience whatever be the outcome. Patience is described as a great virtue in every religion. It is highlighted in the Bible in the story of Job.

Even God has to practise patience. His patience knows no limit. Even though He knows all our doings He waits with infinite patience for us to return to Him. Needless to say patience is a quality all of us do well to cultivate. Sri Ramakrishna says: "With implicit trust in the sayings of holy saints and sages, one must try to secure God in one's own heart with the bait of devotion, and the rod and hook of one's mind. With unceasing patience one must wait for the fullness of time. Then only can one catch the Divine fish."

We live in an age of instantaneous gratification. That is why we become so agitated when things get delayed. We become deeply disappointed when our expectations do not come true. But success comes only to him who has infinite patience. Swami Vivekananda says: "He who has infinite patience and infinite energy at his back, will alone succeed."

Impatience is a sure cause of failure and can impair our health greatly. Many times impatience is a sign that our actions are done as a matter of duty and not with a sense of joy.

So Sri Krishna advises all spiritual aspirants to cultivate the divine quality called Kshama consisting of forgiveness, forbearance and patience.

Swami Dayatmananda

How to Meditate (From Swetaswatara Upanishad)

To realize God, first control the outgoing senses and harness the mind. Then meditate upon the Light in the fire, that is, upon the pure consciousness as distinct from the ordinary consciousness of the intellect. Thus the Atman, the inner Reality, may be revealed as behind the physical appearance.

Control your mind so that the ultimate Reality, the self-luminous Lord, may be revealed. Strive earnestly to obtain eternal bliss.

With the help of the mind and the intellect, keep the senses from attaching themselves to objects of pleasure. The senses will then be purified by the Light of the innermost Reality, and the infinite Light will be revealed.

The wise control their minds and unite their hearts with the infinite, the omniscient, and the all-pervading Lord. The discriminating souls alone practise spiritual disciplines. Great is the

glory of the self-luminous Being, the innermost Reality.

Hear, all ye children of immortal bliss, also ye gods who dwell in the high heavens: Follow only in the footsteps of the illumined ones, and by continuous meditation merge both mind and intellect in the eternal Brahman. The glorious Lord will be revealed to you.

Control the vital energy. Ignite the Atman within by the practice of meditation. Be intoxicated by drinking the wine of divine love. Thus shall you reach perfection.

Be devoted to the eternal Brahman. Unite the Light within you with the Light of Brahman. Thus will the very source of ignorance be destroyed, and you will rise above the law of karma.

Sit upright, holding the chest, throat, and head erect. Turn the senses and the mind inward to the shrine of the heart. Meditate on Brahman with the help of the word Om. Cross the fearful currents of the ocean of worldliness by means of the raft of Brahman - the sacred symbol Om.

With earnest effort hold the senses in check. Regulate the vital activities by the practice of breathing exercises. As a charioteer holds back his restive horses, so does a persevering aspirant restrain his mind.

Retire into solitude, as in a mountain cave or any sacred spot. The place must be protected from the wind and rain, and have an even floor, free from pebbles and dust. It must not be damp, and it must be free from disturbing noises. It must be pleasing to the eye and quieting to the mind. Seated there, practise meditation and spiritual exercises.

As you practise meditation, you may see in vision forms like snow, smoke, sun, wind, fire, firefly, lightning, crystal, moon. These are the sign-posts on your way to the revelation of Brahman.

As you become absorbed in contemplation you will realize that the Atman is separate from the body and as such will not be affected by disease, old age or death.

The first signs of entering yoga are lightness of body, health, thirstlessness of mind, clearness of complexion, a beautiful voice, and an agreeable odour of the body.

Just as a piece of metal, stained by dirt, shines brilliantly when cleaned, so the dweller in the body, realizing the truth of the Atman, is freed from sorrow and reaches the state of blessedness.

The yogi experiences directly the truth of Brahman by realizing the Light of the Atman within. He is freed from all impurities for he has reached Him - the birthless, the pure, the bright.

He is the one God who extends in all directions. He is the creator; he enters into all wombs. He alone is born as all beings, and he alone is to be born as all creatures in the future. He is inside all persons as the innermost Atman, facing in all directions.

Our hearts' adoration to the Lord, the bright one, who is in fire, in water, in plants and trees, who pervades the whole universe.

(Reprinted from Vedanta and the West, Jan-Feb 1946)

Conversations with Swami Turiyananda (continued) **Swami Raghavananda**

June 16, 1915. During the morning there was a reading of Swamiji's Raja Yoga. Afterwards, Swami Turiyananda commented: "Raja yoga is a great science - the science of the mind. What a wonderful analysis of the mind it is!"

In the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, the Master had remarked that one cannot attain God though

work. But he had pointed out that if an aspirant works in the proper spirit an earnest desire arises to find Him, and that when this desire becomes intense He reveals His grace.

Swami Turiyananda: "Can God be attained by a little cursory study or meditation? One must have intense yearning for the Lord! Life must seem unbearable without his vision! Sri Ramakrishna said to us: 'Just because I had that yearning, the Divine Mother took care of all my needs and provided this Kali Temple and Mathur Babu (son-in-law of the temple's founder; a great devotee who provided for the Master and served him).' The heart must burst with longing for God. Then one attains everything."

June 18, 1915. We were reading the following aphorism in Raja Yoga: 'By giving up even these powers (of omnipotence and omniscience), the seed of evil is destroyed and liberation follows.'

Swami Turiyananda: "This is devotion, and this will save you! It is the devotee alone who can renounce enjoyment and psychic powers. Other people fall prey to these. There is no other way to liberation but devotion to God. Do you understand?"

Swami Shivananda: "What more is needed when the mind becomes absorbed the moment you meditate on the lotus feet of the Lord?" As he uttered these words, his face became flushed with spiritual emotion. When he returned to the normal plane of consciousness, he sang a song of Ramprasad expressing the idea that devotion is the root of all spiritual attainment. He continued: "Sri Ramakrishna prayed at one time, 'Mother, you revealed yourself to Ramprasad. Why won't you reveal yourself to me?' All of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings are of devotion mixed with knowledge."

June 20, 1915. It was morning. Swami Turiyananda was singing: 'Ah, when will dawn that blessed day when tears of joy will flow from my eyes while I chant the name of the Lord?' Then the Swami turned to us: "Do you ever weep for God? How wonderful is the state when the name of the Lord brings tears to the eyes!"

Swami Shivananda: When I first began to visit Sri Ramakrishna, I often felt like crying. One night at Dakshineswar, by the banks of the Ganges, I wept to my heart's content. In the meantime the Master had been asking for me. When I returned to his room, he said: 'You know, if you weep before the Lord, your tears wipe out the mind's impurities of many births, and his grace immediately descends upon you. It is good to weep before the Lord.'

"Another day I was meditating at the Panchavati. I was absorbed. Sri Ramakrishna was returning from the pine grove. When he looked at me, I began to sob. The Master stood beside me without uttering a word. A thrill went through my heart, and I began to tremble uncontrollably. Later I followed the Master to his room. He remarked to someone about my weeping: 'These are no ordinary tears; they are tears of ecstasy.' Then he made me sit near him and gave me something to eat. It was so easy for him to awaken the kundalini (spiritual energy) in us - without even a touch, just by his presence."

June 21, 1915. Swami Turiyananda: "Whenever Swamiji used the pronoun 'I', he was identified with Brahman and used the word from the nondualistic standpoint.

"You can exercise free will in two ways, either by identifying yourself with Him or by surrendering yourself. As long as you keep yourself apart from God, you have no freedom of the will.

"It is harmful to spiritual growth to think that one knows everything. Self-confidence means faith in the Atman."

In the evening, while taking a walk, Swami Turiyananda said: "Character is the essential thing in spiritual life."

June 23, 1915. At noontime, after his rest, Swami Turiyananda remarked: "One must have the faculty of love. How intensely I loved when I was a young boy! I had made up my mind to become a monk, but I used to weep at the thought of having to leave my brothers. I was so deeply attached to them. When I came to Sri Ramakrishna, he easily severed all ties of attachment.

"Once the Master asked B.: 'Whom do you love most of all?' The answer was: 'Well, sir, I don't

think I love anyone.' At this the Master exclaimed: 'Oh, what a dry rascal! Fall either into one pit or the other - into the pit of filth or into the pit of gold!' But who is fool enough to want to fall into the pit of filth?

"I never had any doubt about the existence of God."

June 24, 1915. It was morning. Swami Turiyananda, while taking his bath, talked about the days at the Baranagore Monastery when Sri Ramakrishna's disciples were still young boys: "Swami Abhedananda used to avoid all types of work. He would shut himself in a room and engage himself in study and meditation.? He used to say that he did not wish to work. Sometimes he would observe complete silence and not talk for days on end. Some of us used to be angry with him for that. But Swamiji said: 'You people are jealous! You can't bear that somebody is doing something to improve himself. He is not lazily idling his time away.?What if he doesn't work! Never mind, you don't have to work either! I'll do everything!'

"The worship of a man as man, without the awareness that he is God, does not lead to liberation any more than the worship of departed ancestors or spirits does. Even if you worship an illumined soul, you do not reach enlightenment unless you are conscious of his divinity, although you will imbibe his characteristics to some extent, such as purity and dispassion."

Swami Shivananda: "That also is no small matter."

Swami Turiyananda: "But if you worship a divine incarnation, whether or not you are aware of his divinity, he will reveal his Godhead to you.?But remember, this applies only to the divine incarnations.

"The gopis, (shepherdesses of Brindaban), for instance, were transformed and attained liberation although they had approached Sri Krishna with lust. One gopi was locked in a room by her husband. Through her pangs of separation from?Sri Krishna she was freed from evil, and through the bliss she received by meditating on him she also went beyond good, and attained liberation.

"There is a state of divine love where you forget the Lord's power in order to feel greater intimacy with him. That state comes after God-realization. But the gopis were no ordinary human beings. Their bodies were made of spirit.

"Through the grace of Sri Ramakrishna we can understand Jesus and appreciate the teachings of the Bible.

"Continence is the most important practice in spiritual life. He who practises chastity easily attains devotion and knowledge. Lust is born in the mind. He who is freed from passions transcends this world."

In the afternoon, after a reading of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Turiyananda remarked: "They say that from the Word evolved this universe. But this is only true if by the Word you understand that pure Consciousness whose symbol it is. When we think of the universe, we are awed by its vastness. Yet when we analyze, what is this universe but touch, taste, smell, form, and sound?

"If you say that stubbornness is strength, I cannot agree with you. Stubbornness merely hides one's weakness. Real strength is the capacity to yield when necessary and to resume one's position without compromising the ideal."

June 26, 1915. At lunchtime, Swami Turiyananda observed:"Do not forget the ideal for which you have renounced the world. It is good to analyze occasionally if you are progressing in your spiritual life."

June 27, 1915. Swami Shivananda: "Sri Ramakrishna did not initiate disciples like an ordinary guru. He used to awaken our spiritual consciousness. He would draw something on the tongue and one would immediately have some ecstatic experience. One day, after I returned from prostrating in the Kali Temple, the Master remarked: 'You belong to that high spiritual realm whence manifest name and form.'"

Swami Turiyananda: "Whoever approached the Master once could not even think of going to any other holy man."

Later in the day, Swami Turiyananda remarked: "I had intense longing to attain liberation in

this very life. Now of course I do not care whether this body lasts or not."

June 28, 1915. Swami Turiyananda: "We have seen with these eyes. We have heard with these ears. When we came to Sri Ramakrishna he made us feel that God-realization was within our grasp. Yet occasionally we would become discouraged and worry whether our lives would pass without our reaching the goal. Then, in the course of time, the Master did everything for us."

June 29, 1915. Swami Turiyananda was quoting from a song about Sri Rama: "'There is none second to Him. He is all in all. He is my only refuge.' When you come to this realization, then you will have achieved something. The ordinary man depends on many things - on wealth, on friends, or on his own intelligence. But there is no security in anything but God.

"Let nothing stand between you and the Lord. The Lord had freed the gopis from all bondages except shyness. Finally he freed them from this last limitation. If the Lord finds that his devotee has difficulty in renouncing a certain attachment, he himself takes it away. 'O Lord, you steal away all that I had hidden deep within my heart.' 'If you desire to cross this ocean of worldliness, O man, renounce all cravings.'"

While walking, Swami Turiyananda said: "The Master used to tell us: 'First tie the knot of nondual knowledge in the corner of your cloth; then do as you please. And adore Him.' That is to say, know Him to be your innermost Self - the life of your life, the eye of your eye - and realizing this, devote yourself to Him.

"To pray, 'Lord, give me this, give me that,' does not lead to liberation. True devotion does not arise so long as the slightest desire is left in the mind."

My Master (by Vivekananda) was read.

Swami Turiyananda: "Can a man rest contented without struggling if he knows that there is a Reality behind this world appearance, that there is a God, One who never dies, One who is the infinite mine of bliss - a bliss compared to which these sense pleasures are simply playthings?

"Just see! God to us is merely a word. What will a few minutes of meditation and japam (repetition of the Lord's name) do? Let your heart burn away with yearning for God! Feel that life is not worth living without him! Then he will reveal himself! As the poor man longs for wealth, as the lustful man longs for a woman, so must the devotee long for the Lord.

"Surrender yourself to God. You call him omnipotent and omniscient. Why then should you hesitate to take refuge in him? But surrender yourself sincerely. Don't rely upon your own strength while chanting his name. There is no deceiving God. He knows everything. 'Thou art the agent, I am the instrument. Thou art the operator, I am the machine.' To feel this sincerely is the alpha and omega of religion. Swamiji used to quote the Bible: 'My God is a jealous God.' If you are attached to anything or anyone else and do not renounce all for him, you cannot find him.

June 30, 1915. It was morning.

Swami Turiyananda: "Who wants God? Practically nobody. Everyone wishes to be free from suffering and to find happiness. Pure devotion without any ulterior motive is very rare.

"I knew a man who used to say he wanted nirvana. One day he asked me if he should marry again. You see, when there is an earnest longing for nirvana, even to be the emperor of emperors is a trifling thing. The very desire for nirvana brings such tranquillity to the mind. How can anybody then think of marriage!"

July 1, 1915. Swami Turiyananda: "Whenever Swamiji used the pronoun 'I' he was referring to the universal Self. When we say 'I', we are identified with the little self - with body, mind, and senses. Hence we should think of ourselves as servants and devotees of the Lord. The very utterance of the word 'I' would take Swamiji beyond body, mind, and senses. This was his normal state of consciousness. But this mood, 'I am He,' is not possible for us. So we have to say, 'Thou and Thou alone,' in order that we may forget the little self and be united with the universal Self.

"The real devotee thinks in terms of 'Thee' and 'Thine.' He always feels, 'Lord, thou art all in all; everything belongs to thee.' Where is the difference between his dualism and the

nondualistic standpoint? But when a devotee thinks of 'me' and 'mine', and separates himself from God, that kind of dualism is harmful to his spiritual growth. Such an aspirant remains deluded. Sri Ramakrishna used to repeat: 'Not I, not I, O Lord! Thou, thou alone! I am thy servant.' A devotee must completely renounce his ego."

Disciple: "How can we get rid of anger, jealousy, and other passions?"

Swami Turiyananda: "Just analyze yourselves - why should you be angry or jealous? Who are you to punish another? Learn to punish yourselves. But never say that you have conquered lust and other passions. If you do, they will be aroused. Pray to God that they may remain dormant.

"Divine love must awaken within your hearts and be intensified and crystallized. Then only the vision of God will open up. Take for instance, the life of Gopaler Ma (a woman disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, who had the continuous vision of Gopal, Lord Krishna as a child). She used to see Gopal accompanying her and gathering fuel for her. And Sri Ramakrishna used to have visions of Ramlala (the Child Rama) walking and playing with him.

"Intense devotion to God is the important thing in spiritual life. What does it matter whether you worship him as formless or with form?"

July 2, 1915. Swami Turiyananda: "Eating, sleeping, fear, copulation - these are the common characteristics of man and beast. Man differs from the beasts in that he can discriminate between right and wrong. If a man lives on a low plane of consciousness, he finds pleasure in the senses. With spiritual growth, he experiences happiness in subtler things. Then he no longer finds enjoyment in the gross. Most people live the lives of beasts - drinking, hunting, running after a mate. If one cannot rise to a higher plane of consciousness, human birth is wasted.

"Meditate! Meditate! Be absorbed in His consciousness! If you can think single-mindedly of the Master for five years, you will achieve everything. Then it does not matter where you live. East and West will be the same to you. Know that God alone is real. Nothing else matters.

(to be continued) (Reprinted from Vedanta and the West, Jan-Feb 1957)

Dive Deep Swami Shraddhananda

Progress in spiritual life depends to a considerable extent on one's earnest personal endeavour. When the Katha Upanisad says, "Arise, awake, approach the great and learn," it evidently points to the immense necessity of indomitable courage and enthusiasm on the part of a seeker of truth. All through the Gita we find Sri Krishna exhorting his disciple Arjuna in a similar strain. We may remember, for instance, the last line of the last verse of the fourth chapter. It reads: "Oh mighty descendant of Bharata, get up; shake off all doubt and sluggishness and hold fast to the practice of yoga." What again could be the meaning of those words of Christ, "Ask and it shall be given you, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you"? Undoubtedly, the great Teacher is unambiguous here as to the primary requirements of a spiritual aspirant, namely, keen desire and ardent striving for the Ideal. The same voice has been heard once again in our own day in this simple utterance of Sri Ramakrishna: Dive Deep.

Sri Ramakrishna coined this expression from two popular Bengali religious songs wherein man's spiritual quest has been compared to the search for precious gems on the bottom of the sea.

One of the songs begins thus:

"Dive deep, oh my mind, dive deep
in the ocean of God's beauty;

Descend into the uttermost depths and find therein

the precious gem of Divine love."

The second song opens in this manner:

"With the name of the Divine Mother on your lips

Dive deep, oh my mind, into the ocean of your heart.

The ocean can never be without gems.

So, if by diving twice or four times

you fail to secure them

Strike with the power of self-control

And reach the very bottom of this ocean

Where the Divine Mother is lying as Kundalini."

These two simple words "Dive Deep" are, then, an incentive to spiritual struggle and Sri Ramakrishna very aptly used them as a stimulus for devotees to take up religious practice in right earnest. Those blessed persons who have realized truth do not speak in the sophisticated jargon of the scholastic. Their language is straight and penetrating. Its appeal is not to idle imagination but to prompt and effective action. "Dive Deep" is an excellent specimen in point. It is interesting to note that Sri Ramakrishna employed this same simple maxim as a powerful corrective to three principal religious aberrations which he noticed in his time. We shall deal with them one by one.

The first of these can be termed as superficial fidelity to religion. Vast is the difference between a make-believe formality in the name of religion and a genuine spiritual hankering. When we do not care to know the true meaning and goal of religion and consider it as merely one of the customary fashions of our life, then religion loses its ennobling power and potency whether for the individual or for society. It becomes just a series of mechanical activities in a temple or a church, a bundle of idle speculations on the life beyond or some unquestioning ritualistic performance out of an element of vague otherworldly fear.

A true spiritual hankering is surely something very different from this manner of confused thinking and behaviour. It is well known that whenever a great religious teacher has appeared his first duty has been to point out to people the difference between lifeless customs and a living fervour for the divine life. This initiative was noticed in Buddha when he denounced the traditional followers of the then religious patterns. The evidence of the Gita shows that Sri Krishna, too, had to clearly draw the distinction between a formal religion based on ritualistic sacrifices and a genuine spiritual seeking. In the case of Jesus, we know that before He chose His disciples and began to preach His message in right earnest, He had first to prepare the ground by rebuking the Sadducees and the Pharisees. In his spiritual ministration, Sri Ramakrishna also had to face this same problem - the superficial allegiance which is man's number one perversity in the field of religion. "Dive Deep" was his solution. In the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna we find numerous instances in which the Saint in an eloquent mood draws the distinction between formal piety and honest religious quest. In order that religion does not remain a futile conjecture but becomes a mighty fact of life, its votaries must "Dive Deep." Not that Sri Ramakrishna did not recognize the value of rituals and customary religious observances under a certain context but, compared to the ultimate purpose of a man's life, namely, the realization of God, this formal religion was, according to him, of little worth. "God can be seen," said he, "He can be touched. We can even talk with God." God is not indeed a superfluidity in the scheme of human life. He is the most essential power in our life, the most important element in our thoughts, aspirations and actions. We may cite one simple illustration which Sri Ramakrishna used to give. When you add ciphers successively to the digit one, you get figures whose value increases proportionately, for example, a hundred, a thousand, etc., while any number of ciphers without this digit one before them are of no value. Similarly, God is the numeral one, so to say, in all the values of our life. If you leave Him out of the picture in life's pursuits, those pursuits become a mere string of worthless zeros.

We may here recall a portion of that interesting conversation between Sri Ramakrishna and Pundit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the great scholar, philanthropist, and pioneer of education in Bengal. Sri Ramakrishna one day went to visit the pundit, and as was his custom he soon gave the conversation a spiritual turn. In a mood of eloquent inspiration the Master made

much of the difference between philanthropy, a moral or even a virtuous life on the one hand, and a genuine hankering for God-realization on the other. He said to Vidyasagar: "The activities that you are engaged in are good if you can perform them in a selfless spirit, renouncing egotism, giving up the idea that you are the doer. . . . But the more you come to love God, the less you will be inclined to perform action. When the daughter-in-law is with child her mother-in-law gives her less work to do. . . . There is gold buried in your heart but you are not aware of it. It is covered with a thin layer of clay. Once you are aware of it, all these activities of yours will lessen." (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Chap. 3).

Did not Swami Vivekananda too reiterate that sentiment of his Master when he said that religion should not be looked upon as a Japanese vase in our drawing room? Such a vase is only one of the many decorations one has in his house in order to pass oneself off as a gentleman. Similarly, religion may be just one of the variegated interests we have in our life so that we can pose as "decent" men. With such a spirit do we not make of religion a kind of mockery? All of those criticisms we read or hear levelled against religion spring from the fact that the majority of people who pass as "religious" do not, in effect, show any higher behaviour than a lifeless, superficial allegiance to the faith they profess. If a case for religion is to be built up in the modern sceptical age it can only be done by the practical example of a great number of sincere people who are ready to "Dive Deep".

When Sri Ramakrishna said "Dive Deep" he was careful to describe the full implications of this phrase. "God is the ocean of immortality. A man sinking in it does not die, he becomes immortal," assured he. So we have nothing to fear from the spiritual struggle. It will not land us into darkness and uncertainty. The sacrifices we make at the beginning of and during our sadhana will be more than compensated when spiritual vision dawns on us.

The second of the unsound religious attitudes Sri Ramakrishna noticed is the confusion of spiritual wisdom with intellectual sophistry. For many persons religion is equated with a sort of intellectual understanding of the scriptures or of some systems of discursive philosophy. The emphasis is on argumentation rather than on actual practice, on the reading of books rather than on contemplation. Now an intellectual grasp of religious problems is, of course, good but here too great caution is necessary. Sri Ramakrishna's favourite way to illustrate the folly of mere religious intellectualism was to liken it to the counting of leaves, trees and branches in a mango orchard. Such idle counting is foolishness. It is wiser to take to the eating of mangoes. Similarly, since the aim of human birth is to love God, one should seek to realize that love and be at peace. "What need is there of your knowing the infinite qualities of God? You may discriminate for millions of years about God's attributes, and still you will not know them."

If by blessed fortune one happens to take an interest in religion, that interest should not be frittered away in mere theoretical estimations. "Dive Deep" would be the unequivocal pronouncement of Sri Ramakrishna to the speculators. Religion is not in books but in the concrete transformation of the words of books into indubitable truths in life.

To recall another simple illustration which the Saint used to give. Suppose you have to purchase certain things from the market. While at home, you prepare a list of the articles you want. After you have made the purchases, the list ceases to be of value; you may as well discard it. In a way, the scriptures are like such a list. Their purpose is to indicate the means to the realization of truth. Once you are on the track, however, it becomes a waste of time to cling to them too much. More important now is to plunge into spiritual practice.

Sri Ramakrishna's conversation with one of the celebrities of his time, Pundit Shashadhar Tarkachudamani, is illuminating in this connection (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Chap. 25).

To quote a few lines which the author "M" records the Master as having spoken to the pundit: "There are many scriptures like the Vedas. But one cannot realize God without austerity and spiritual discipline. . . . Better than reading is hearing but seeing is far better than hearing.? Then all doubts disappear. It is true that many things are recorded in the scriptures but all these are useless without the direct realization of God, without devotion to His lotus feet."

The pundit had taken upon himself the task of preaching the cardinal principles of Hinduism to various social gatherings. His talks which were fascinating, used to draw crowds - a circumstance of which the Master was aware. He now asked the pundit if he had received a commission from the Lord to preach. When the pundit replied in the negative, Sri

Ramakrishna told him that unless he had realized the truth and had actually received the Lord's commission, his preaching would be a waste of breath. In conclusion, the Master repeated his formula, "Dive Deep".

"My child, add a little more to your strength. Practice spiritual discipline a few days more. You have hardly set your foot on the tree, yet you expect to lay hold of a big cluster of fruit."

The third religious aberration Sri Ramakrishna was at pains to correct is a lukewarm attitude in regard to spiritual practice. Some people have the clue to a genuine spiritual life; they have realized the importance of sadhana and have also understood the difference between mere intellectual interest in religion and a real longing to realize God. Yet for some reason or other they have not been able to exert themselves as much as they should. As Sri Ramakrishna would put it, they are "lukewarm". This lukewarmness in spiritual practice is a great danger. And here, too, Sri Ramakrishna would employ his pithy, imperative sentence "Dive Deep". Once a Brahmin devotee named Ishan Chandra Mukherjee came to visit the Master at Dakshineswar, as was his wont. Sri Ramakrishna, who was fond of him, sometimes gave him instructions. On this occasion, after a little conversation with the Master, Ishan took his leave so as to perform the ritual of the Sandhya Vandanam in front of the Kali temple. Later in the evening Sri Ramakrishna came upon him engaged in this act of devotion. In a rapturous mood he remarked: "What? Are you still performing the Sandhya? . . . How long must a man continue the Sandhya? As long as he has not developed love for the lotus feet of God."

Then the Master sang two devotional songs in praise of Kali, wherein emphasis is given to the cultivation of genuine love for the Mother, rather than to the routine virtuous acts, such as the counting of beads, charity, vows, pilgrimages, etc. Addressing Ishan again, the Master resumed in words which were stronger still and sounded like a mild reproach:

"You cannot achieve anything by moving at such a slow pace. You need stern renunciation. Can you achieve anything by counting fifteen months as a year? You seem to have no strength, no grit. You are as mushy as flattened rice soaked in milk. Be up and doing! Gird your loins!"

Ishan was a man of affluent circumstances. Not much entangled in the affairs of his family, he would often engage himself in a lot of self-chosen public activities. Sri Ramakrishna knew this and today wouldn't leave him on that score too. In the same mood of chastisement he continued:

"What are these things you busy yourself with - this arbitration and leadership? You have been doing this kind of work for a long time. Let those who care for such things do them. . . . You have had enough of these. Now the time is ripe for you to devote your mind to the lotus feet of God. If you realize God you will get everything else."

And the pitch of the counsel reached its climax when Sri Ramakrishna asked Ishan to become mad with love of God.

"Let people know that Ishan has gone mad and cannot perform worldly duties any more! Then people will no longer come to you for leadership and arbitration."

The truth of the Spirit, though closest to man, may yet remain farthest from him if man, out of his perversity, does not care to see it. Great teachers like Sri Ramakrishna feel it their duty to cure man of this obduracy. Truly has Sri Krishna said in the Gita: "What is night to ordinary men is day to the sage and what is day to the former is night to the latter" (II, 69). Spiritual values are as clear as daylight to the seer of truth. It is beyond his grasp how man, a child of immortal bliss, can remain satisfied with a world-bound existence forgetting his spiritual nature. Hence out of compassion these messengers of God move among men and inspire them to realize the supreme goal of life. They do not talk much but they talk clearly and powerfully. They do not promise much but they vouchsafe something which is of eternal value. They do not always appear pleasant but they appear to have reached Truth beyond any possibility of doubt.

All these characteristics become transparently evident when we hear Sri Ramakrishna say: "Dive Deep".

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Paths of Realization

Clement James Knott

The Western world's tradition of education, whether it is scientifically or religiously based, has no available technique that can teach the student to find out for himself how his own mind is functioning and what his mind can do. Furthermore, there does not appear to be any generally agreed definition in academic circles as to what the mind is. The subject of the nature of the mind has long been mired in unnecessary philosophic controversy. Western style education is largely devoted to scientific, vocational or cultural training, with little attention given to personal development in a religious direction.

As Westerners, we have been taught that it is good to be individualistic but within certain prescribed limits. This can produce a conflict situation for the aware individual - whether to express one's own personality to the best of one's knowledge and ability or to sacrifice oneself to the interests of the group, be it familial, social or political. We each need to balance and harmonise these conflicting demands for ourselves.

There is, on the other hand, a modern Western cultural drift that promotes a sort of anarchic individualism which feels free enough to make its own rules or standards and to change them arbitrarily, regardless of the rest of the community. Those people who are over-individualistic or egoistic can soon become tiresome or at worst oppressive and anti-social.

In order to perceive our needs clearly, we need to learn to put aside our self-created egos and accept our own mind as being capable of re-directing itself in the direction of our ideal, albeit in the wider interests of the community at the same time.

Advaita Vedanta holds to the principle that all knowledge exists already in the Universal Mind. Individual minds are each part of one mind and are enlightened by it through the spiritual self, Atman, being of the same nature. Why is it then that expressing one's individuality and personality as a human being can tend to separate us from other people and other ideas, instead of bringing us closer?

This separation is partly due to the existence of the "veil of forgetfulness" (Maya) which exists in the communal mind of the social group to which one belongs. Communal oblivion of unwelcome facts and inconvenient history is imposed by negative elements in the group for the purpose of ensuring conformity and control. This communal Maya permeates the minds of individual members. It persists in the communal ego-mind which is the genus of the false realities and the imposed modes of the mind which retard the development of the person's spirituality and personality and which re-shape his life purposes, with or without his consent.

The Will

Reading this text (or any other) is an act of will - of decision and action. It is helpful to stand back, as it were, and watch how one's own will is manifesting and functioning. Is it possible to discern how much of one's life effort is directed by one's self and how much is directed by others, with or without our knowledge? Can we direct our own minds to operate more efficiently and to foresee the effects of our actions? As Sri Ramakrishna has said, it is a matter of having the mind and the mouth in the same place.

The four Yogas each manifest an aspect of the will, each having its own field of apparent reality, its own assumed will and its own memory. The will to action is a manifestation of the feeling body acting with the mind through the senses. The outflows of perception are a

function of the will and each conscious perception is an act of the will. The impressions left in the mind and in the memory are a consecutive record of our perceptions. The will to action arises from the integration of perception, feeling, thought and action. It is influenced by the predominant desires at the present moment. The will can also influence consciously the movements of the self (Jivatman) and the subtle body within. The realized mind has the capability of enhancing its own consciousness and its own modes of functioning.

According to the sages, there is a source within that co-ordinates all our faculties and illuminates them. It is the centre point of our being - of all our faculties and senses. It is the divine Supreme who prompts us, silently or through the inner voice. God is truly the inner guide sitting in the heart of man (Purusha). The individual will, seems at times to be very real in guiding and shaping our lives, but it is an apparency.

The individual will is a projection of one's personality and a reflection of the state of one's beingness, balanced or unbalanced, however it may be. The will may have been partially suppressed during one's up-bringing, leaving opposing counter-intentions in the subconscious. The negation or absence of expression of the will may have been the result of the imposition of negative modes of the mind. These negative modes may have left behind footprints of suppression in one's feelings, emotions or attitudes. Each imposed negative mode saps the will of the individual a little more, until it becomes almost ineffective, except when acting on a basic level of self-survival. In a repressive environment it is difficult for the will to find beneficial ways of expression.

However extreme may have been the repression of the personal and spiritual development of the individual, the self acting through the mind has the capability of resurrecting the consciousness of the individual by enabling the mind to realize its true nature and power. If a person has been denied opportunities for personal expression, then his sensitivity of his own spiritual qualities will also have been depressed.

How is it possible to observe movements of the mind? The mind, being of subtle substance cannot be perceived directly. It is not discernible to the physical senses. Only spirit can perceive spirit. The will can be rehabilitated through the realization of the four vital bodies. The most accessible of these for most people is the feeling body.

Despite any counter-intentions that it may be holding on to, the suppressed will can be regenerated by approaching it through the realized aspect of the mind. Since the will to action manifests through the feeling body, if it has been repressed, then the feeling body may also have been subdued. It is the habitual suppression or ignoring of our feelings or emotions as being insignificant that prevents the subdued will from regenerating itself. The dormant will remains as part of our character largely as the result of our life experience. It is there, vacillating between the conscious and the subconscious parts of the mind and it is available for self-observation and self-assessment.

The lack of individual mind-training in education leaves many people with an unfortunate legacy. The student never finds out what his own mind can do when extended and what his will is capable of, outside the acceptable parameters of the groups to which he is attached.

Self-observation and assessment

Self-observation requires a discipline of the will and a purpose - a moral motivation. The daily practice of self-observation and assessment should be directed to the thoughts, feelings and actions of today. It is not necessary to look back at bygones except where they are influencing present-day actions.

Self-observation can begin with the four bodies of Yoga, however they are in the make-up of one's beingness. For many people the feeling body has received little objective study or guidance and has been left more or less to take care of itself. It is necessary to detach oneself from it substantially when one is perceiving its movements and reactions. One can question persistent feelings and direct the feeling body in the preferred direction.

Every perception, thought and action that we do is accompanied by a sensation, feeling or emotion. Every word and phrase that we use can have a feeling associated with it that we may or may not be aware of. In self-observation it is necessary to separate memories of feelings that come from the past from feelings that are reactions to events or things in the present time. Our feelings and emotions should be generated by our present perceptions and

actions.

The person whose emotions are blocked due to imposed negative modes of the mind such that he is unable to express them spontaneously, is prone to reacting after a shorter or longer period of time because he has to call on his memory to remind him how he responded previously to that feeling (or if he responded at all). He is relying on a vague remembered impression of his feelings rather than on a more immediate experience of them.

Realization of the vital bodies

Realization is not a state in itself. It is realization of a field of reality. The four Yogas necessitate four stages of realization, each of which involves the innate ability to bestow appropriate realities. Realization is a gradual expansion of consciousness of a chosen field of reality: once it has commenced, its progress becomes heuristic, serving to aid further discovery. The choice of a starting point depends on the individual's own situation and ideals in relation to the four Yogas, for example:

1. Jnana: Opening the mind to spirituality. Allowing the power of the self to enlighten the mind. Transforming the occlusions of Maya to release the mind.
2. Bhakti: The feeling body. Achieving consciousness of all perceptions of the body through the senses, feelings and emotions, in order to direct them towards the Absolute.
3. Karma: Increasing awareness and control of the vital parts of the physical body so as to become aware of the physical body as a vehicle for the divine.
4. Raja: Concentration, meditation and prayer to gain accession to divine consciousness through mysticism.
5. The Absolute: The divine Supreme is beyond any of our concepts of reality. It makes our individual realities possible, creating and energizing them and raising them to a higher level of consciousness. We can perceive the presence of the divine Supreme in all manifestations of divine qualities, and in the flowing of the cosmic energies through each of us.

The Yogi can proceed through the fields of reality of the four Yogas, separately or in conjunction, developing each according to his temperament and his ideals. If any one of these four fields becomes out of balance, then the being and his environment will tend to become unbalanced. Such an imbalance may be self-perpetuating if it is lying in the sub-consciousness of the group or of the individual. How can such an imbalance of realities be addressed? One needs to begin by determining which of the four aspects is the most out of balance and is at the same time accessible to the aspirant.

For many people their feeling body is out of balance. It is over-expressed in some ways and under-expressed in others. This is a reflection of the imbalance in the communal mind, whether it is the family, or the social or political group which involves the individual. Every person who can redress this imbalance in himself is helping to reduce the imbalance in the communal mind. We each have the capability of preparing one's own feeling body for the realization of its true nature so that it can be shared with the divine Supreme.

To start on this path, we need to consider what incites the manifestations of feelings and emotions in ourselves and in others. As a case in point, we can consider the commonalities in the ecstasies experienced by numerous contemplatives in the higher stages of their quest for mystic union.

Ecstasy

Ecstasy is a state experienced by contemplatives usually with imagery in the context of their religious belief and practice. It can be overwhelming in so far as it entails substantial suspension of the faculties and assumed realities of the adept's mind and of his physical body. The ecstatic thus feels released from his or her worldly self, which submits, through perceptions of the feeling body to visions of a divine nature but of temporary duration. Thus the devotee's will is surrendered to the divine will and the ability of the individual to respond to his perception of the visions is in abeyance.

Ecstasy is a gift of grace. It is the immanent spirit perceiving and being perceived by the transcendent. The sublime feelings of ecstasy are peace, knowledge, certainty and joy. The dominant state is of "one-ness" where there are no boundaries or barriers. It follows on a period of selfless love and submission to the will of the divine Supreme, and it is an

affirmation of it. The one-pointedness of the contemplative is subsumed into the "one-beingness" that follows release from the worldly self.

Since it surpasses the mental faculties, the experience is not easily subjected to subsequent analysis by the devotee on return to possession of his normal faculties. It is not a state that can be foreseen by the adept and it is liable to manifest unexpectedly. If it has a purpose, it is a divine purpose.

The experience is more emotional than physical. Spontaneous ecstasy is a realization of the feeling body. It is a manifestation of individual love for the divine joined with the pure love of the divine Supreme for all of his creatures. The inflows and outflows become as one. All is just existence. One's emotions become as one with God's ineffable love for us all.

After experiencing spontaneous ecstasy, the adept finds that his view of worldly realities has changed. They will seem to be more real to him, but he will be less and less attached to them, depending on his reality level previously.

The perceptions of the vision and the feelings that it induces are virtually instantaneous and seemingly indistinguishable so as to appear to be one overpowering flow. This may leave the ecstatic with the impression that his perception and the reactive emotion are identical and even interchangeable.

Spontaneous ecstasy is distinguished from ecstasies of an emotional origin which have been generated on a more or less volitional basis. Ecstasy is not comparable with a full experience of exteriorisation. It could be described as partly "out of body" as the adept is still located in his or her physical body but control of it and of the mind and of the will have been apparently exteriorised.

Those schools of thought which have made acts of sexual union a ritual part of their belief system and practice have confounded the emotional ecstasy with the physical ecstasy. If their techniques are misapplied they can lead to a subtle interiorisation of the physical experience leaving a persistent effect on the subtle body. This can become a barrier to attaining the realization of the spiritual being (Jivatman) that leads to the mystic union of returning to the divine Supreme, the ultimate goal of Yoga.

(to be continued)

A Great Sacrifice

John Phillips

During the period after the collapse of the Roman Empire, Europe was split up into kingdoms ruled by the conquering Germanic tribes. In a region ruled by the Vandals a Christian bishop named Paulinus was so compassionate that he sold all his possessions to ransom prisoners held by the Vandals. Finally, when he no longer had any money or even clothes he could sell, there came to him a poor widow and begged him to help her to ransom her only son. Paulinus searched his whole house and, not finding a single penny, told the sobbing mother: "I have nothing except myself; so take me and sell me as a slave to ransom your son." The poor widow thought the bishop was joking and wanted to go home, but Paulinus stopped her, insisted that he was speaking the truth and asked her to sell him for her son.

Paulinus and the widow left the town and went to the Vandals. The widow fell at the feet of the Vandal prince, who was the son-in-law of Rix, the king of the Vandals. She begged him to take a slave in exchange for her son. At first the prince did not want to accept, but hearing

that Paulinus was an expert gardener, he accepted him in exchange for the young man. The widow and her son returned to their native village; but Paulinus began to labour in the prince's garden and received the order to bring to the prince's table every day various herbs and fruits. As the prince was fond of gardens, he often went to Paulinus, talked to him and, learning of his wisdom, took such a liking to him that he formed the habit of going to talk to him every day.

One day, while they were talking, Paulinus quietly mentioned the following to him: "You will soon encounter an important event: King Rix will die a sudden death; be careful not to be away from the capital; otherwise someone else will seize power and the kingship." Amazed by such an important prediction, the prince did not know whether to believe it or not; but being always a favourite of the king, he at once went to him and told him what he had heard from his gardener. "I myself want to see this man," the king replied "Order him to bring herbs and fruits to my table."

As soon as Paulinus, in obedience to the order, entered the palace, Rix trembled and then, mastering his feelings, called his son-in-law and said: "His words are true: last night in a dream I saw my barons sitting in council, and this man was above them all: talking among themselves for some time, they suddenly passed a resolution to take my kingdom away from me; so ask him who he is? And where is he from? I do not think that this old fellow is an ordinary man." Then the son-in-law took Paulinus aside and made him swear an oath to tell the whole truth about himself. Because he had sworn to do so, Paulinus told the truth, that he was a Christian bishop.

King Rix and his son-in-law were seized with horror. "Forgive me, man of God," said the prince, "for burdening you with slave's labour. I did not know who you really were." "Ask of me what you wish," said the king, "and go back to your country with great gifts." "I ask only one thing of you", Paulinus humbly replied. "Release prisoners from all the places in my country; that is the greatest gift you can give me."

Then the king's orders were sent out everywhere. All the prisoners were gathered together in one place and handed over to Paulinus. Finally he returned to his own country and with joy handed over the freed prisoners to fathers and mothers, wives and children. The Lord Himself safeguards the life and freedom of the man who sacrifices himself to save the lives and freedom of others.

Jesus Christ and His Message **Swami Asaktananda**

Who was Jesus Christ? The Lord? What kind of Lord? A mighty official - a ruler of earthly empire? No, the Lord of the Universe: the Lord of Lords.

If the question were put to Christ himself, what would he say? He has, in fact, given the answer to this question on different occasions differently. He said, 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.' Again, 'I am the door. By me if any man enter in, he shall be saved...' Again in a homely simile, dear to the hearts of those among whom he was born: 'I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.' To those who had the power to understand, he said that he was the Son of God; and to his closest disciples, 'I and my Father are one.'

The next question which comes to mind is: Why should we worship him, just because he says he is the way, the truth, the life, etc? He is the door to enter in? In this world, human beings are submerged in agony and misery. What is truth? Where is real happiness? We do not know.

Truth and untruth, both are mixed together. What truth really is we cannot know. Here is precisely our need for someone who can point out the truth, lead us towards it - the highest service that the great Incarnations such as Christ, Rama, Krisna, Buddha, Ramakrishna, can give us. All these have in more or less similar words told us that they know the Way - if not indeed that they are the Way, - and we should follow them. Truly if such as these do not point out the way, show us and lead us towards the goal, how can we hope to find the road to immortal life? Therefore an Incarnation tells us this, shows us, 'There is the door, there is the way: Go!'

Sri Ramakrishna used to say an Incarnation is like a hole in a great wall which is between the finite and the infinite - the relative and the absolute - through that hole one can glimpse a bit of the infinite. In this sense, we believe, Jesus declares, 'No man cometh to the Father, but by me.'

But where is Jesus now? We hear that he was born long ago, took human form once upon a time. But how far away it sounds. Yes, he came to earth in the form of a little babe the son of Mary in the house of a carpenter; but where is he today? He is in our heart of hearts: he is within. He is today, even today in all human beings. It is said that when Sri Krisna was in Brindavan playing with the Gopis (milkmaids), someone asked who was then in the Abode of Heaven. Who was left as the Lord of Heaven? Yes, the Darling of mother Yasoda (Krisna's foster-mother) was in a physical form for the time; yet the Lord, the Spirit, was still the Spirit always - pure Consciousness - in the abode of Spirit.

So, the tremendous power that manifested as Jesus is ever existing, eternal: it cannot be that he came from nothing. The Lord Himself comes on earth as an embodiment of knowledge and power, of love and compassion, through his own divine Power (Shakti or Maya). In the Bhagavad-gita, Sri Krisna says to Arjuna:

'Though I am unborn and eternal by nature, and though I am the Lord of all beings, yet, subjugating My Prakrti, I accept birth through My own maya.

'Whenever there is a decline of dharma (virtue), O Bharata, and a rise of adharma (immorality), I incarnate Myself.

'For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of dharma, I am born in every age.'

Now, what was the condition of the society into which Jesus was born? Stagnant: 'religion' was just a word of mouth, while in practice it was all ritual, 'sacrifices', leading to group-rivalries, quarrelling priests, and even downright immorality and irreligion. What a terrible fall from the wonderful ideals and practice of the forefathers and their prophets! Yet, as Swami Vivekananda shows in his lecture 'Christ the Messenger', had there not been this great fall, the gigantic rise - the spiritual wave in the form of Christianity, with Jesus on its crest, could not have arisen. Thus it is just such great 'falls', in morality, in religion, in society, which demand, and actually bring in, that tremendous power of God in man's form.

The inconceivable spiritual force which then became embodied in Jesus has already taken almost 2,000 years to expand, to reveal itself; and yet we know not how much more is still to come!

The next question that comes to mind is, where do these Incarnations take birth? Clearly they themselves choose the time and place, even the family into which they will come - even the disciples and associates who are to come to them.

Yet the Incarnation stands out above even these holy surroundings. Jesus, though born in the home of a carpenter, was no mere carpenter. He was not just a goody-goody young man, a meek craftsman. He was no other than God Himself, infinitely powerful. He was absolute: he was the eternal word made flesh. It is easy for a Hindu to appreciate these ideas - the phenomenon of Incarnation. But many Christians don't understand it. Jesus says: 'Ye are born from beneath; I am from above. Ye are of this world; I am not of this world.' What does this mean? That he is not bound by the ignorance, the delusion, the worldliness with which we are bound. Similarly Sri Krisna in the Gita says: "Though I am the birthless, the deathless Lord of all, I seem to be born. It is only seeming, only My maya, I am still master of My Prakrti, the power that makes My body, My form." Just see: it defies all logic - the birthless, deathless Lord taking 'birth', which means bondage for all. And still the Master of Nature, of the Power that made 'him'!

But as we have said, he obviously chooses his time and place; and this time the Lord chose the house of a carpenter, of Joseph and Mary. Pure, simple souls, both of them. We are again reminded of the birth of Sri Ramakrishna in the home of the holy Khudiram and Chandramani, who like Jesus' parents had also had visions indicating a divine child's advent. His childhood, like Jesus', was marked by tremendous power of thought, observation, memory. When the pundits got entangled in long arguments, he would solve their question by a few simple words! Though we know so little of these years of Jesus, still Luke tells us that at age twelve Jesus was 'sitting in the midst of the doctors (that is, teachers) both hearing them and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and his answers.' And when on this occasion his parents - who had left Jerusalem thinking him to be in the friendly group of pilgrims, and having to return a day's journey when he was missed - chided him for his absence, his answer was priceless: 'Knew ye not that I must be about my Father's business?' At so young an age, he was already not only brilliant in intellect, but fully aware of who he was - and who his Father was!

Yes, where else should that boy be? He had to be at his Father's place. His true home of course is the heart of man, the fittest temple of God - the temple of the purified heart of the devotee.

In his early manhood Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. After that his heart was full. He felt filled with the spirit of God as never before. 'The heavens were opened unto him' as Matthew tells us, 'and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: and lo, a voice from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."' He saw with a new clearness what God wanted his life to be - the great role he was to play in the drama of redemption.

We read then that he went into the wilderness, led on by the Spirit of God, and fasted forty days, practising great austerities and meditating on the mysteries of life and death, the temptations and delusions of the world. At the end he was thrice tempted by Satan: urging him to perform various miracles, promising immense rewards - all of which he spurned saying, 'Get thee hence, Satan...' Then, as we believe, the last shreds of the covering of maya were lifted up and he clearly perceived that the Son and the Father were one. Although the Incarnations have that knowledge all the time, still it seems they keep it covered with a veil, in order to see things and be 'tempted in all manners even as we are...' That is why they have to practise all these disciplines and harsh austerities, till at last the proclamation comes to inspire us struggling mortals - in Jesus' words, 'I and my Father are one.'

Now I will again dwell, at a little more length, on the links between Jesus and Sri Ramakrishna. These are very interesting to us and to me particularly. Sri Ramakrishna, as you know, practised all the Hindu disciplines of the Tantras, of the Vaisnava scriptures and the Vedas, he also practised Islam and found God through each of these different paths. Then in 1874, he began listening to the Bible. He did not know English, but someone read it in translation to him. After this he began to practise the disciplines of Christianity. Once while he was looking at a painting of the Madonna and Child, suddenly that whole picture became living to him and he went into deep ecstasy. He saw in this state a church with devotees lighting candles, burning incense; and their faces were white. The devotees, it seems, were all of the Western world.

Under this spell he spent three days. On the fourth, he saw a person of serene countenance approaching him slowly and smiling beautifully; and a voice from the depths of his soul rang out, 'Behold the Christ, who shed His heart's blood for the redemption of the world...' Then the Son of Man embraced the Son of the Divine Mother and entered into his body. Ever after, Sri Ramakrishna was convinced of Christ's divinity. He repeatedly declared that it is the same spirit which manifests itself as all these great world-teachers or Incarnations.

Again, after the passing of Sri Ramakrishna occurred a second notable event. In December 1886, most of the young men who became his monastic disciples visited Swami Premananda's village home. One cold night they had lighted a big fire and around it were meditating, chanting the Lord's name, and talking of renunciation. Then Narendra (Swami Vivekananda) began to tell the story of the Lord Jesus, from the wonder of his birth to the supreme sacrifice of his death and the glorious resurrection. Narendra stirringly showed how as future monks they must follow Christ's example - sacrifice everything for the realization of God and

the service, the redemption, of mankind. So greatly were they all moved by these thoughts that they then and there took the high vows of sannyasa, in a mood of intense exaltation.? That very night the Ramakrishna Order virtually came into being. Early next morning they found out that that had been the night of Christmas Eve. Thus we all have another strong bond with Christianity and Christ.

(to be continued)

News

Maha-Samadhi of Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj 14th President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission

Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, passed away on 4 November 2007 at 5.35 pm at Ramakrishna Mission Seva Pratishthan hospital, Kolkata. He had been admitted to the hospital on 4 September for investigation and treatment, after a sudden setback in his health owing to several old age problems, like Parkinson's disease, etc. In spite of the best medical attention his condition grew worse and he passed away on 4th November.

The body of Maharaj was brought to Belur Math at 9.25 pm and was kept in the Cultural Hall behind President Maharaj's quarters. A large number of our monastic brothers from branch centres, and thousands of disciples, devotees, admirers and friends, poured in all through the night and the day after to pay their last respects and homage with floral offerings.

On 5th morning at 10.30 am, the body of Maharaj was taken in procession to the courtyard in front of the Math Office and kept on a high platform in a decorated pandal where it remained till 12.30 pm. The last rites of cremation started at 1.00 pm and were over by 3.45 pm. An estimated 50,000 people thronged the Math to pay their last homage to Maharaj.

Known as Naresh Ranjan Roy Choudhury in his pre-monastic days, Swami Gahanananda joined the Ramakrishna Order at its centre in Bhubaneswar in January 1939 at the age of 22. He received initiation, mantra diksha, in 1939; brahmacharya in 1944, with the name 'Amrita-chaitanya' and Sanyasa from Swami Virajananda, the then President of the Order.

He had the good fortune of once meeting Swami Abhedanandaji, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna.

Book Review John Phillips

Christ across the Ganges - Hindu Responses to Jesus
By Sandy Bharat
Published by O Books
Price £14.99

In our multi-cultural, multi-ethnic modern society we are all faced with the question of relating to religions other than our own. Traditionally the tendency was to reject them as false. This may have been a way of escape from facing up to the true solution in the days when we lived in separate countries with our own institutions, but nowadays with the global economy there has been such a mixing of peoples that we have to relate to others in a sympathetic way, if our society is to continue to live in peace and harmony. It is therefore interesting to read how India coped with what one could call the "invasion" of Christianity. Sandy Bharat has written a historical study of the development of Indian attitudes to Christ. The book has been published in the UK and the USA and so she considers it appropriate to begin with an explanation for Western readers of what Hinduism is all about. In particular she explains the meaning of the word "Avatar", about which there has been some misunderstanding in the West.

Contact with the Christian message may have begun in India as early as the year 52 A.D., when St Thomas, Christ's disciple and apostle, is believed to have come to the South of India to preach the gospel. Some would put it even earlier than that, as there is a widespread Hindu belief that Jesus was in India during the "missing years" not recorded in the New Testament.

Be that as it may, it was not until the 16th century that the Jesuits began their missionary work in India. Sandy Bharat paints a rather painful account of these early missionaries, who allegedly destroyed Hindu temples, banned Hindu rites, denied certain employment to Hindus, etc. This kind of approach continued right up into the 18th century. With the establishment of British rule, the emphasis changed with the dispatch of missionaries who sought to obtain some understanding of Hinduism. Scholars studied Sanskrit in order to use it in attacks on the Hindu beliefs.

The situation was however gradually changing as more and more Western intellectuals began to draw inspiration from the Hindu scriptures. At the same time in India movements such as the Brahmo Samaj sought to incorporate Christ into their teachings.

Then some Hindu leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi, began to show a sympathetic attitude towards the teachings of Christ, even going so far as to include some of them in their ideals. The end result was in Sandy Bharat's words the "inculturation" of Christ. As Swami Dayatmananda makes it abundantly clear in his contribution to the work, "Jesus is revered by all Hindus as an incarnation or Avatar. He is revered and worshipped like other Avatars such as Rama, Krishna, Buddha and Chaitanya. He is one of the doorways leading man to the One, Infinite, Ultimate Reality."

So this has been the Hindu solution to the question of relating to another religion. One can contrast this with the traditional Christian reaction to Hinduism. For centuries Christian theologians tended to distance themselves from what they regard as a "pagan" religion. This attitude can be traced back to Christianity's roots in Judaism. In the Ten Commandments given to Moses, God says: "Thou shalt have no other god before me" and then "for I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God." Rather like Muslims and Jews, Christians find it difficult to tolerate the idea of any other god. For this reason, the question of accommodating Hinduism with Christianity may seem almost insoluble.

With the spread of Hindu ideas in the West through the work of the such organisations as the Ramakrishna Vedanta Movement and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, rigid Christian attitudes are however softening and there is hope that a more universal approach to the differing religions may emerge.

This book raises questions which we should all be considering, if we are to ensure that the various communities living together in our country continue to co-exist in peace, tolerance and harmony. We must learn to understand and sympathise with one another. Instead of despising the other for his "false" beliefs, we should, instead of trying to convert him to our way of looking at the world, try to get to know him and his culture better. Then we shall be able to live together as brothers and sisters in harmony with one another.

Ramakrishna taught that all religions are true, but each is suited to a particular people and culture. Perhaps this indicates a way forward. Let us accept all of them as valid paths to the Ultimate Reality.

