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My Spirit

My naked simple Life was I;

That Act so strongly shined

Upon the earth, the sea, the sky,

It was the substance of my mind;

The sense itself was I.

I felt no dross nor matter in my soul,

No brims nor borders, such as in a bowl

We see. My essence was capacity,

That felt all things;

The thought that springs

Therefrom is itself. It hath no other wings

To spread abroad, nor eyes to see,

Nor hands distinct to feel,

Nor knees to kneel;

But being simple like the

Deity In its own centre is a sphere

Not shut up here, but everywhere.

Thomas Traherne (?1636-1674)

God as Mother.

A talk given by Pravrajika Vivekaprana, a nun of the Sarada Math, at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, UK, on 30th September 2001.

The word God seems to be very familiar and yet it refers to a being which is most unfamiliar to us. We are always trying to puzzle out what it could stand for. On the other hand, 'mother' is a word known most intimately to every child. So it is as if the human mind, puzzling out what this life could mean, what this world could mean, is trying to bridge the gap between the most unfamiliar and the most familiar - that which is intimately known to us. Another thing that is very clear is that the human mind understands the manifestation that is this universe in terms of relationships. We try to

work out this puzzle with the help of relationships. Every child is taught how to relate to the father, to the brother, to the sister, to society, to strangers, to the world at large, to objects. Searching for God, or finding God, is definitely the basic purpose of human life, though we do not understand it all the time consciously. We seem to be puzzling out what is our relationship to the world around, to the people around, and finally, when we have the capacity to integrate everything that could possibly be imagined by the human mind, we say, "Where has the whole thing come from?" This question of where it has come from has given rise to many philosophies all over the earth, many psychological systems and many sciences, because everyone is trying to puzzle out the same question: where does it come from? How does it function, what is the meaning, what is the purpose, what is my relationship to it? I may not agree to call it God. I may call it the universe; I may call it matter; I may even call it physics, or chemistry, or biology; but behind these words stands the fact that I am trying to puzzle out a basic problem that arises with the questioning of where, how and what.

If you travel to India, to a very deep past - nobody knows how old it is - we find, through the words of Swami Vivekananda, that the people then seemed to have understood that human intelligence is evolving. We know from Western thought that the idea of evolution was introduced in the 19th and 20th centuries, but the idea that there is an evolving purpose being manifested to the human consciousness is very ancient in India. So much so that Swamiji says it is the evolution of human understanding that is linked to the evolution of the concept of God. God also has evolved. In my searching for a meaning to everything I am searching for God. If I evolve, as the Western point of view tries to tell us, and my conception of God does not evolve, there are great problems. If I believe that God was revealed once for all time, once upon a time, and cannot be revealed in every human mind, again and again, according to my own capacity, then the problem does not get solved. The puzzle cannot be solved. The only way out is to

understand that with the evolution of my understanding, my concept of God also evolves. Maybe there was a time that God was thought of as an extra-cosmic power. Power is manifested all around us. We are aware that this universe is a manifestation of some kind of a power. In the beginning, what names did they give to it? If you go to the Rig Veda, or the most ancient cultures, they would look at the sun, and say, well, that is something like God. Look at the moon, that is something like God. Look at the thunder, the power of thunder, that seems to be like God. They were aware that power is manifesting itself on this earth around us, in us, so they thought that there has to be someone who has created this. This word who is very important to the human mind, because we seem to be forced to think of the creator also as human. It is very natural for us to say who made it, because we believe someone has to make it, someone who is conscious. It cannot be inanimate. Why not? Because we are aware within ourselves that we are a mixture of two elements, conscious as well as material. So, one who has created the universe has to be a who. It cannot be what. I cannot say what created the universe. In today's physics that is what they are trying to find out. What is the first moment of creation? Instead of saying who created it, we have shifted our attention to what. But very soon, I believe, we will be able to merge what with who. Millions of people all over the earth are not satisfied with what created the universe. Physics is not something that I can live by. I may have a profession based on physical research, but I cannot live, I cannot call myself a conscious human being in search of love and feelings and sympathy and consolation and truth; I am not satisfied with what created this universe.

Who created this universe is answered in the beginning in dualistic terms by saying there must be a power which is beyond this cosmos and that created this world. Who is it? Since it is so powerful, it must be something that we are to be scared of. So, fear seems to be there originally. You go to the beginning of these cultures and you find people are

scared, they are trying to please this God; they are trying to offer all kinds of sacrifices. They say, please forgive us for whatever we may have done. These ideas of asking for forgiveness, which we carry still today, are there. We feel guilty. We do not know why. We feel that we have done something bad to be here. These ideas, connected with a very dualistic approach to who created the universe, created the first God, the first idea of God, or, the first concept of God as an extra-cosmic principle, or an extra-cosmic someone. What does he look like? You have all kinds of pictures, all kinds of images given in Christianity and in ancient Hinduism also. But they were not satisfactory, not close enough. They were difficult to relate to. It is impossible to relate to an extra-cosmic power which thunders, which creates lightning. I am scared of lightning, I am scared of thunder. I do not know how to relate to the sun, to the moon, to the sky; but I have a need to relate. This desire to relate, this desire to have some kind of an intimacy with this power which has created the universe, as well as me, seems to have worked with these ancient thinkers and they shifted their stand. They shifted their stand from the purely dualistic standpoint, which is called dvaita, to a very strange kind of a level by the method of thinking and meditating. This is the method that comes down to us in Indian thought: that there is a way of working at your own mental evolution which will also solve the puzzle of a God of the cosmos, as well as a God who has created me. The stand shifted from being purely external to something internal. They asked, who has created this universe? How do I relate to this God?

The word God is Western; there are so many words used for the same concept, so you can use any one, it makes hardly any difference. They say that the human mind is always searching. It is not true that there was a time when the human mind did not search, and suddenly, somebody came and said that there is a God and then it started searching. That cannot be true. The human mind has been searching from the very beginning. Even animals search in their limited ways. So, the human mind searched

deeper, looked at events around, looked at people around, looked at the manifestation of nature around, and started finding similarities. There seemed to be similarities. There seemed to be a law. There seemed to be something that runs through this universe. This thread that runs through, they said, is God. What is similar? There are seeds, almost invisible, which are put in the ground. They grow, and in the course of time, there is a huge tree. Where has it come from?

From something invisible. The invisible becomes the visible. If the invisible becomes the visible in its manifestation in external nature, why should it be difficult to imagine that I also come from a source which is invisible becoming visible. This invisible becoming visible is the shift that happened in Indian thought. First is visible. The first level is that all this is visible. Who has created it? That also must be highly visible somewhere beyond. I cannot see the whole universe, I cannot see beyond the galaxies, beyond the stars, beyond the sun, beyond the moon, so somewhere out there, there must be a being, very powerful. The next level is to say: no, it should be here; because I put the seed in the ground and it was invisible, and suddenly it became visible. So that means the power which I am searching for has a way of manifesting itself from the level which can be called unmanifested to manifested. How does it do so? It simply takes energy from various factors and somehow brings it within and then manifests itself in a new form. So all these forms, millions of forms, whether they are animate or inanimate, or whether they are animals, or insects, or human beings, seem to be manifestations of something very powerful, very invisible, which has all capacities within it. If this is so, the concept of God which was very far away has suddenly come very near. Now I can relate to it. I can relate to a tree, to objects, to other human beings, and to animals. There seems to have been a tremendous euphoria, a tremendous sense of joy and adventure that the God who was far away has suddenly come very near. It is possible to relate to this God. In what way? If it is totally invisible, how do I do it? How do I reach

this God? In order that I may be able to relate to it, this God has to become small, has to have a form. It is impossible to relate to the thread that is there in everyone. I know that I can relate to a few people, I can relate to a few animals, I can relate to a little bit of the space-time framework in which I live, but how to relate to this basic principle, which is manifesting itself everywhere? Is it possible that the sameness of this invisible reality can be caught, can be grasped, by taking a small image? There must have been thousands of people searching for this and doing research, because otherwise it would have been impossible to come to the conclusion that they came to. They seem to have understood that it is possible that that which was formless has taken form. What kind of form? Any form, since I need a form to concentrate upon. Now this idea of concentration seems to be very basic to Indian thought. Not that it is not basic to Western thought. It is equally basic to Western thought as applied to external research, research at the physical level. The very same fact was understood in India in a different way by turning it towards oneself. What happens when I concentrate my mind? We find that when I concentrate my mind it is somehow more illumined. It is not so illumined if I get up early in the morning and my mind is scattered all over - sometimes it is dull; sometimes a little more bright. It is haphazard. But is there a way of concentrating on something so that it will become more illumined? We find that yes, it is possible.

We do not know where this idea came from, this idea that one can concentrate on oneself, or one can concentrate on an image; but we find that the act of concentration evolves me, my mind, my understanding, and therefore, I can understand more and more about what I am searching for, concentrating upon my own power, inside power, mental or intellectual power - whatever you like to call it. The intensification of this energy became the key point of Indian thought. They gave it a very beautiful word, it was called tapasya. Tapa is heat, it also means making very strong by a power which

intensifies. So, this idea of tapasya, which goes back to Vedic times, is very predominant.

Till today the idea is dominant in the Indian mind that tapasya is something mysterious. It can create anything that you like. There is tremendous power in the universe. There is power within myself. With the help of tapasya I can solve any problem. Whether it is worldly, whether it is evil, whether it is good, I can turn this tapasya into whatever I want. I want to kill an enemy, I have to do tapasya. I want to live for a very long time, I must do tapasya. I want to discover something basic in this universe, I have to do tapasya. So when we come to the next level of thought in India, tapasya seems to be the main thread. Do tapasya and you will get whatever you want. This gave rise to a tremendous psychology, which is called raja yoga, where the mind is studied with the power of tapasya, and layer after layer of the inner person is uncovered. This inner person is called sukshmarira, the subtle body, what we call the mind.

This subtle body, which is made of up of very fine material, seems to be covered over with many layers. With the power of tapasya, concentration, these layers were uncovered. Then it was discovered that not only were they uncovering their own mental levels, they were also uncovering the understanding of the world around. So this link is what gives you the clue to how the Indian mind went deeper and deeper and understood that uncovering oneself is uncovering the mystery outside too.

How did they understand this? By a very simple experiment which we have almost forgotten in India: How do I experience the world? Do I experience it as it is? Do I experience it with the eyes which are visible? I open my eyes and the world is there. To this day we believe this, though physiology tells us otherwise. We have gone through education at the school level, college level, university level, and we come back and believe exactly the same thing: that I open my eyes and the world is there. These ancient thinkers discovered that this is not so. The eyes are merely the outer windows;

there has to be something more. That something more is within the nervous system. It is there today in all the books. You can read about it. There is a centre of vision in the brain which has to function in order that my eyes can see. Then is that all? They said: no, not at all; there is something deeper than that. What is that? I have to pay attention. If I do not pay attention, the eyes may be there, the centre of vision may be there in my brain, but I will not see. So which is the crucial level? The crucial level seems to be paying attention. Who pays attention? Is it the mind paying attention to me, or is it I paying attention to something within myself? It seems as if there is a tremendous laboratory within where all kinds of activities are going on, all kinds of processes are going on, and I have to pay attention in order that the whole laboratory starts and continues functioning. The laboratory seems to function at a subconscious level because we have forgotten how exactly we make images. We have forgotten, we do not know. But in a simple experiment I can understand that if I do not pay attention, I cannot experience this world. If I pay attention, the world is there and if I do not pay attention, the world vanishes. Is it a great discovery or is it something very common? It is not common because till this day we have not been able to understand the depth of this experiment: that paying attention is something very important. I pay attention and the world is there in front of me. Does it pass through many processes? Definitely. There is a physical level, a physiological level, a psychological level, and there is a metaphysical level, which the Indian mind adds. That there is a physical level everyone knows today. The light of the sun has to be there, it has to fall on the object. The object has to be photographed by my eyes, it has to be taken to my centre of vision. So far, it is absolutely clear; nobody can deny these facts any longer. But what about this 'I' which has to pay attention. Is it also part of the process or is it standing somewhere behind the process? If it is standing somewhere behind the process, because it seems to say, "I pay attention," then attention is the bridge and I seem to be standing behind

that. So, if I stand even behind attention, I do not seem to be part of the psychological level, or the physical level or the physiological level. I am a metaphysical entity. It is a very strange conclusion, a very simple conclusion, and one can experiment with it and find out whether it is true or not. So, I pay attention and therefore the world is there in front of me. (to be continued)

Eliot, Karma, and the re-birth of Language (continued)

David Moses and Miles Wright

Eliot's use of Eastern texts is predominantly Mantric. His use of scriptural texts as an ineffable space parallels Christian scriptural exegesis, where the concept of God as Alpha and Omega signifies the origin of meaning and final end of the world. This finds an equivalence in the status of the 'Word' of God in Hindu scripture:

AUM , this syllable is all this.

A further explanation of it:

All that is past, the present, the future

All this is simply AUM.

Whatever is beyond the twofold time that too

Is simply AUM.

(Mandukya Upanishad. V.i. trans. Wright.)

As the arbiter of intertextuality, we might see Eliot himself as the source of meaning, highlighting him as author(-ity) and meaning of his own text. He couples the idea of the absolute meaning of a Self beyond time with a self whose meaning is silent reverberation (AUM) rather than verbal: 'words, after speech, reach into the silence.' ('Burnt Norton' 139) Silence itself is the underlying meaning into which words flux, and then dissipate leaving all in place; the poet and his flawed language are just the instrument of its disclosure. If the allusions of *The Waste Land* defer meaning from one voice to another, this flow could be seen to find fixity in the presence of the speaking subject of the scriptural references, by identifying their origins as Mantra: 'May my word be one with my thought, and my thought be one with my word.' (Aitarya Upanishad Line 1-2) Silence is a perennial flow of language interrupted by vocal speech which abstracts silence. Chanted or listened to, it implies its origin as Godhead, 'The essence of man is speech' (I.i.2) 'the Rg is nothing but speech.' (1.i.5.) (Chandogya Upanishad trans. Wright.). Mantra is described as 'a word or formulae that represents a mental presence or energy; by it something is produced, crystallised in the mind ... Mantras correctly uttered or sung became part of the liturgy of sacrifice which gave them an additional authority, as well as ensuring communication with the chosen deity.' (Kearns 34)

Kearns' definition is a western one. Mantra is really not about thought, but about where thought is from. Mantric language is a doorway that allows you to go back to where you came from, a doorway, behind which is nothing, in front of which is language stretching out into creation - into time and space. Mantra is tracing your words back to where you came from: 'therefore that which purifies the word is attainment of the Supreme Self. He who knows the truth of its origin attains the immortal Brahmin', says the *Vakyapadiya* (1.131. trans. Wright.) If the mantra is closed to contingency, the significance of the line 'Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves / waited for rain' (396) is central to 'What

The Thunder Said'. It is a call for replenishment through the Word made flesh, Shiva, who mediates with the heavens letting the life and salvation-bestowing waters then flow gently to the earth for the physical and spiritual refreshment of mankind. On one side of the mantric doorway the word does not exist, on the other side it is flesh, and corruptible. In Prufrock, we may identify the intersection of the real with a prescribed social ideal. The intersection is one of realisation over appearance and pretence. There is a sense of life being acted out while the subject is etherised and displaced from any sense of self. Caught between appearance and reality, Prufrock offers the same sense of throbbing between two lives as Tiresias, in The Waste Land. Endlessly futile reincarnations to be escaped are `related to this intermediate zone between life and death, leading either to rebirth or liberation, is the concept of karma, a law of "action and reaction."' (Kearns 38) The irony is that Prufrock cannot achieve the just reimbursement of an introspective, enquiring devotion, because the `overwhelming questions' of existence are just out of his angle of vision, his situation devoid of faith in anything. These speculations may be seen in analytical philosophy, determinism verses free will, essence over existence, what Wittgenstein termed `the unutterable.' For Prufrock `karma may, in his case at least, have made a mistake.' (Kearns 40) `I should have been a pair of ragged claws' draws on the concept of rebirth at a lower level as a result of actions in a human life.

Lead me from the unreal to the real;

Lead me from darkness to light;

Lead me from death to immortality.

(Brihad·ranyaka Upanishad. `Refrain'.)

The refrain is from the same Upanishad appropriated for `What The Thunder Said'. What

is interesting in the first line of the Brihadāranyaka is the Sanskrit word Kośa, which means 'sheath' or 'envelope' to describe the human being in which the self is enclosed. Interestingly Yeats translates Kośa as 'personality': 'In the beginning all things were Self, in the shape of personality.'⁸ Yeats fails to tackle the dichotomy more clearly explored by Prufrock's attachment to the personality and ego, maintaining his fluctuating state between an attenuated reality and the point of asking a question which would dispel appearance in favour of the reality of Self. The mingling of Ecclesiastes, with its emphasis on vanity and ego, and the repetition of binary oppositions, is collocated with the observance that appearance is a version, but not actually Self. Mediation is the empty countenance which we present to others. 'There will be time, there will be time To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet' (26 - 28) The Dhammapada of the Buddha offers another source. The overwhelming question is, what would the subject do if s/he met their original face, rather than the faces prepared and constructed for others?⁹ In Prufrock faces, not selves meet. Visages are the empty gestures of a modern world devoid of spirituality, and where agency is etherised in favour of the idealised constructions acceptable to a socially superficial world. By evoking the context of the Brihadāranyaka Eliot evokes an already established discourse on appearance and ego. The Brihadāranyaka uses binary oppositions in order to show how they deteriorate and prove unsatisfactory. Clear opposites, good and evil, are inadequate relatives, failing to account for the interrelationship of the individual to all things. They are spiritually dangerous because they necessitate one individual passing judgement on another, an act of ego compelling I over (s)he. Part of the anxiety of Prufrock is that which is unattainable about existence: an individual freedom. Buddha's 'original face', like Bergson's depth of being is 'that which is most uniformly, most constantly and most enduringly myself. ... our acts spring from our whole personality, when they express it.'¹⁰ This is the development of the idea of a double self 'one aspect

being the everyday self, experiencing common reality; the other, a deeper self, attuned to profound truths, and normally in subjugation to the superficial self.' (48) For Prufrock the constant repetition of everyday actions reasserts time, notable in the poem's repetition complex. It is the cycle of birth and death, characterised by the stasis of 'a hundred indecisions, / And time for a hundred visions and revisions'. (33) The endless repetitions of worldly experience are a futility to be escaped.

The birth and growth of the body

Takes place through the offerings of Intention, touch, and sight, and by means of Food, drink and impregnation;

Whereas the embodied Self assumes

Successively in different situations the

Physical appearances that correspond to Its actions.

(Shvetashvatara Upanishad. 5. 11. Trans.Wright.)

In Upanishadic terms, if the waking experience is impermanent, there must be something abiding to support it, a reality exclusive of sensory perceptions. Freedom from the conditioning of mind and body is into a world unbound by the limitations of time, space and causality. It is the dreamless state where, in psychological terms, the nervous system is repaired, and which we could see, symbolically, as absorbance into the sea of Samādhi 'till human voices wake us and we drown' (131) or the 'death by water' in the ocean of samsara. As a lump of salt thrown in water dissolves and cannot be taken out again, though wherever we taste the water it is salty, even so, beloved, the separate self dissolves in the sea of pure consciousness, infinite and immortal.

(Brihadāranyaka 2.4.12) Because Eliot's texts use Upanishads as a documentary

manifestation of reflective thought which attempt to confront the problems of consciousness, we could see the object of the text as the process of reflection itself. The Waste Land's apparent fragmented consciousness may be an attempt at a non-hermetic language open to individual agency on multiple levels: 'the poem is what it means to different sensitive readers.'¹¹ The apparent occlusion of direct engagement with political factors gives way to socially representative figures: no transformation of self can take place in isolation from changes in a social context which rehearse what those encounters actually mean. By its 'frictional complementarity'¹² the poem attempts a reconciliation of the established values of Eastern mysticism with the abstract market forces embodied in 'Mr Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant.'⁽²⁰⁹⁾ The sexual liaison of 'the typist home at teatime' (223) represents constant re-enactments of carnal desire which Tiresius has 'forsuffered' (243) in the past, present and future. He sees whole substance of the poem and the business-like transaction of a moment devoid of spiritual awareness. It is something imposed by the modern upon individual selves, and is highlighted by the painful observations of Tiresius who, martyr-like, takes that suffering awareness upon his self. If Tiresius is, as critics posit (Smith 100 -113 Brown 90 - 142) Eliot's version of himself, sage-like, entering the poem, spiritual value is a subjective perception: 'man is now what he has always been and always will be. The narrator, the examining subject, is in motion; the examined reality is static'.¹³ Passion is objectified as an assertion of individuality, allowing the 'other' to be enjoyed, simultaneously subjective understanding is always struggling to transcend the web of relationships enmeshed in it, producing a heteroglossaic art form. Kearns suggests Tiresius' Indian counterpart to be the Seer figure Prajapati, the androgynous visionary and narrating consciousness behind the Brihadāranyaka, which corroborates Upanishadic influence as structural rather than local. (Kearns 206) Eliot's own observation that 'those highly-organised beings who are able to objectify their passions ... are also those

who suffer and enjoy the most keenly' (Southam 209) again sets Tiresius outside of everyday existence as one whose death in life has lost the sense of other people as inviolably other. Prajapati, as Tiresius, is the intense perceiver who brings all things into existence. As the organising consciousness of the Upanishads, he is often seen as ego because the act of creation is ego. But he is also the ego of the reader, - another intense perceiver - who becomes creator, creating the scene through language, on her own level. (to be continued)

Religion and Life (Continued)

Swami Bhuteshananda

I cannot digest sane advice. Can you tell me why this is so?

We accept only that advice which is pleasing to our mind. We close our eyes to unpleasant ones. Sri Ramakrishna said, 'I have told you everything; accept it after discarding the head and tail.' However, when it comes to renunciation, he is firm: 'Nothing can be attained without renunciation' he declared. Even if there is a little dirt in the needle, the thread cannot pass through it. Has the dirt been inherited from past births? Is there any account of how much has been stored in this life itself?

So many people are repeating God's names. But still there is no transformation in society. Why?

Some good work is going on. But the dirt has got accumulated for so long; will it go in a day? People think that the whole world will change for the better. Such a thing has

never happened before, and will never happen in the future also. ... So many `moulds' have been created until now. Where are those `moulds'?

Should we follow the dictates of circumstances?

If you swim against the current, you will feel the push. Now, if the circumstance is favourable, follow it; if it is not, try to avoid it and transcend it.

What is meant by the `Indivisible Satcidananda'?

Let us assume that His form is indivisible. Then He is the Lord and I am His servant. Can we not become His servants if He is within us? We can worship the Formless also. If we worship the Formless, all-pervading Reality, why will there be a division between Him and us? Sri Ramakrishna has spoken about trees, fruits and flowers made of wax [cf. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 363]. He is immanent in everything and that is why Sri Ramakrishna said that He is like the salty taste that inheres in salt. You may say that strictly speaking this is not Advaita; but we are speaking about the inherent presence of God. In what way is He inherent? Like butter in milk. Maharaj, do we not get ghee in a different stage of processing milk? We are not concerned with that. We see He is present everywhere, like the thread being everywhere in the cloth. I read so many religious books, I visit temples quite often; yet my mind does not become pure, why? Dear child, you are not aware about the dirt that has accumulated in the mind. Go on scrubbing and it will become cleansed. ... It takes time.

What is the difference between sukha (happiness) and santi (peace)?

If you like to eat rasagollas, you feel happy by eating them; but you will not attain peace. The mind does not become free from anxiety etc. When the mind becomes free from anxiety, you have attained peace.

Is there anything beyond the universe?

If the Creator is not limited to the universe, He is beyond it then. He has pervaded the universe with one part of His glory; so He is beyond the universe.

Just as people get lost in the crowd, when I lose my way in the world, what should I do?

Do not 'get lost'! Do not go astray! Hold His hand - the hand which leads you safely through, and then proceed.

My mind becomes restless just after meditating for some time. Why?

My child, you have progressed a lot then! At least you are able to meditate for some time and the mind is becoming restless after that - that meditation becomes deep. Day and night the mind dwells on worldly things and in between you remember God once or twice: can the mind become concentrated in this way? You should think of Him always. You should open your mind and read it. You should do some self-examination.

My mind is such a small one, how can I perform self-examination?

It is certainly possible. With this small mind you thought a lot and so you got a job, became a father, and now, a grandfather too. Why can you not think and examine your mind now? 'I know what is dharma but have no inclination to follow it; I know what is adharma but have no inclination to give it up.' Your point is, 'O Hari! Repeat Your name Yourself. What can we poor people do?' Suppose we say, 'Your path is this one,' you will say, 'You must take us along the path.' If we ask, 'Why do you not come here?' you will instantly say, 'You should bring us here.' That is, 'We shall not do anything at all!' Maharaj, whenever I can get some time I run to your presence. I do not know if I have the ability to do anything myself. This coming here will not go in vain, I hope? Why will this 'running here' go in vain? But you will also have to prepare yourself. If you run here

just out of curiosity, and spend your time in talking, it will not be keeping true holy company. Why should holy company become futile? 'Holy company' means the company of God and we should be conscious of that company. Or else, it is not holy company.

Some are ordained by God to go downwards, while some upwards. Does this depend upon the potential of the souls so ordained? No, it doesn't. It is according to His sweet will. ... No, not depending upon the potential of the souls This is because, who has created the 'potential' souls? Even the 'potentials' are His own creation. (Candi 'Devi Suktam', 5) The Divine Mother says: 'I make a dear creature great, a brahma, a sage, and one with supremely divine intelligence.'

Maharaj, are all things on this earth dependent upon experience (anubhuti) alone?

You see, all experiences or anubhutis cannot be true. There is consistency in truth. Truth can never be a chameleon. What is light can never be darkness.

Maharaj, what is the difference between prarabdha and karmaphala?

Prarabdha, 'that which has begun to bear fruit', is also a form of karmaphala, 'fruit of action'. Whatever actions you had performed in past lives, and have begun to produce fruit now, are called prarabdha. What you are experiencing now and what you will be experiencing in the future are also, in a broad sense, karmaphala.

What is the meaning of bhavaroga?

Bhavaroga is the 'disease of the world' - the disease of worldliness. Bhava is the world and roga is disease. We are burning in this world, yet we want worldly attractions. If we had considered our living here merely as duty, and that we are only performing our duties, the world wouldn't have scalded us much. In the Durga Saptasati, there is a statement from the businessman, Samadhi (1.32): "I do not understand why, but even

though my wife and children are so averse to me, my mind is terribly drawn towards them." This is the fate of most people: their son tortures them, but still, 'After all he is our son!' It should have been a sense of duty instead of attachment; had there been a sense of duty alone, things would have been benevolent. This is called maya, this is slavery to the senses! We are bound hand and foot to the world. We do not aspire after liberation from bondage. And even if God Himself comes to give us liberation, we become terrified. An old lady was carrying a heavy load on her head. She could not carry it for long. So she cried with all her heart to the Lord of Death, Yama: 'O Lord of Death! I cannot bear this suffering any more. Please take me away!' Hearing her heartfelt wail, Yama appeared before her. Instantly, the old lady said: 'Father, since you have come to me, anyway, please carry this load for me.'

-Compiled by Smt Manju Nandi Mazumdar due acknowledgements to Prabuddha Bharata

The Five Commandments of Sri Ramakrishna

Swami Dayatmananda

"...you must practise discrimination... 'lust and gold' is impermanent. God is the only Eternal Substance. What does a man get with money? Food, clothes, and a dwelling-place - nothing more. You cannot realize God with its help. Therefore money can never be the goal of life. That is the process of discrimination. "As soon as a man finds his mind wandering away to the unreal, he should apply discrimination. The moment an elephant stretches out its trunk to eat a plantain-tree in a neighbour's garden, it gets a blow from the iron goad of the driver." (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna)

This was the fourth commandment of Sri Ramakrishna. Discrimination is the faculty of

distinguishing the higher from the lower, right from wrong, the sacred from the profane, and living that life. It is not mere intellectual gymnastics. Right understanding without the effort to lead an appropriate life is not only useless; it is dangerous and results in much suffering. Discrimination should be followed by dispassion and self-control. Blessed are those who have discrimination. It is the lamp that burns brightly in the hearts of all good and happy people; it lights up the path of life and gently leads one to God. Right discrimination results in peace, joy and Self-knowledge.

Discrimination is there in the heart of every creature helping it survive and thrive. But it is only in man that discrimination attains a glory that is unsurpassed; for it leads man to Self-knowledge and absolute freedom. Without it man cannot be happy even in worldly life, not to speak of attaining any spiritual success. All successful people whether spiritual or secular, possess it in a greater degree. Most people, though, use it for worldly ends.

Needless to say discrimination is indispensable in spiritual life. According to Shankaracharya, Viveka or discrimination is one of the foremost requisites for treading the path of knowledge; it is indispensable whatever be the path we tread. Shankara defines it thus: "A firm conviction of the mind to the effect that Brahman is real and the universe unreal." (Vivekachudamani) This process of discrimination is useful only for those who are far advanced in spiritual life. Most of us are far from it; we are not aware of what is unreal even though we are living in its very midst, not to speak of what is Real. And so it does not really concern us at this stage. What is useful for us is to find out what makes us sane, rational, strong, pure, cheerful, balanced and truthful.

Without discrimination man can never make progress. One of the reasons why so many aspirants make little or no progress in spite of many years of regular practice is due to

the lack of discrimination.

Four things are necessary to be able to discriminate properly: awareness, rationality, a well-defined goal, and sufficient will power. The faculty of discrimination will be absent or does not help us if these four requirements are not met. The very first requirement is awareness. Most of us wade through life as sleep-walkers, doing things mechanically, blissfully unaware of what is being done. Laya (sleep) or mechanical spiritual practice is one of the very first obstacles to Yoga. Until one develops the habit of doing everything with awareness there will be little or no progress. If only we can cultivate the habit of keeping a watch on whatever we do - whether it is talking, reading, cooking or meditating - a lot of problems, both physical and mental, can be avoided; certainly it saves time, money and effort.

"Even though it was the Master's Day of Silence a traveller begged for a word of wisdom that would guide him through life's journey. The Master nodded affably, took a sheet of paper and wrote a single word on it: "Awareness." The visitor was perplexed. "That's too brief. Would you please expand on it a bit?" The Master took the paper back and wrote: "Awareness, awareness, awareness." "But what do these words mean?" said the stranger helplessly. The Master reached out for the paper and wrote: "Awareness, awareness, awareness means AWARENESS." (One Minute Wisdom, p.9, by Anthony de Mello, S.J.)

Psychology tells us that by just being aware of our thoughts, emotions, motives and actions many a problem can be nipped in the bud. Even if the problem persists it would be easier to deal with and much suffering could be avoided. One of the functions of the teacher is to keep a watch over the aspirant's behaviour and warn him of the impending trouble even before it surfaces. Here the teacher is doing what the aspirant should have done himself. One develops awareness through constant practice; there is no short-cut.

The second requirement is to use reason and develop rationality.

`Hunger, sleep, insecurity and sex urge are common to men and animals but the understanding of dharma is the extra quality of man which makes what a man is'. (Hitopadesa) Without dharma he is just an animal. The word dharma may be loosely translated as right conduct and behaviour, which is the result of right knowledge. And right knowledge can only be got from being rational. To be rational means to be objective, fair and just. It is also the only way of doing anything rightly. `Man is a rational animal' is a well known adage, but experience shows human beings are rarely rational. St Francis de Sales, the admirable and practical teacher that he was, puts it so succinctly thus: "We are human only because of our reason, and yet it is very rare to find people who are truly reasonable. Self-love frequently falsifies rationality and leads it into a thousand kinds of injustices which, though often small, are nonetheless dangerous. We fault our neighbour for a trifle, but excuse ourselves for a major fault; we desire to sell for a good price, but to buy at a bargain; we demand that justice be meted out in the house of another, but want mercy in our own; we wish people to take our remarks in the right light, but we are sensitive and prickly about what is said to us; ...If we take an aversion to someone, no matter what he does, we find him at fault and ceaselessly badger and annoy him. We are punctilious about maintaining our rank, but want others to be humble and accommodating. We readily complain about our neighbour, but are annoyed when he complains about us. What we do for another always seems considerable to us, but what he does for us always seems insignificant. Be just in all your actions; always put yourself in your neighbour's place, and put your neighbour in yours, and then you will judge fairly. Imagine yourself the seller when buying, and the buyer when selling, and then you will sell and buy fairly. We lose nothing by living generously, nobly, courteously, with a royal, just and rational heart. Examine your heart often to be assured that it is behaving toward your neighbour as you would want his to

behave toward you. Therein lies true reason." (Introduction to *The Divine Life*, pp.249-250, by St. Francis de Sales) Most of the ills and suffering in the world can be attributed to irrationality. The root cause of irrationality is narcissism. Would to God more of us were more rational and reasonable! On this admirable quality Eric Fromm has this to say: "The narcissistic orientation is one in which one experiences as real only that which exists within oneself, while the phenomena in the outside world have no reality in themselves, but are experienced only from the viewpoint of their being useful or dangerous to one. The opposite pole to narcissism is objectivity; it is the faculty to see people and things as they are, objectively, and to be able to separate this objective picture from a picture which is formed by one's desires and fears. All forms of psychosis show the inability to be objective, to an extreme degree. For the insane person, the only reality that exists is that within him, that of his fears and desires. He sees the world outside as symbols of his inner world, as his creation. All of us do the same when we dream. In the dream we produce events, we stage dramas, which are the expression of our wishes and fears (although sometimes also of our insights and judgement), and while we are asleep we are convinced that the product of our dreams is as real as the reality which we perceive in our waking state. The insane person or the dreamer fails completely in having an objective view of the world outside; but all of us are more or less insane, or more or less asleep; all of us have an unobjective view of the world, one which is distorted by our narcissistic orientation." (*The Art of Loving*, pp. 98-99, by Eric Fromm) Needless to say without rationality we cannot overcome our narcissism, we wouldn't even be human. The third requirement is a well-defined goal. While it is true that discrimination becomes effective only after we have a goal, it is also true that discrimination itself will not function without having at least some idea about our goal. An ideal or a goal gives a purpose and meaning to life; it helps us release our energies and potentialities. Without a goal all our activities become desultory, and energies

become scattered. A goal also serves as a way of measuring our progress. Without a set goal any talk of progress is meaningless. Even in this world a higher type of goal brings a lot of peace and joy. It is a common experience that even a little achievement towards a good goal gives us a sense of well-being not to be had by any amount of sense enjoyment. If this be the case we can imagine the joy and peace an aspirant is likely to experience when he has God-realisation as his goal. Sincere effort, however small, brings immense satisfaction immediately. Without a definite goal and a strong desire for attaining it discrimination does not help. Many aspirants after reading a few books jump to the conclusion that God-realisation is the goal and focus all their attention on it. Though this is the ultimate goal it is well to bear in mind it is a long term goal to be attained only after many lives of intense effort. What should concern us right now and is helpful is to have short term goals that can take us to the next higher step. These goals include overcoming defects like hatred, jealousy, waste of time and energy in frivolous talking and useless activities. If we look objectively at our way of life we will be surprised at the many undesirable traits we cherish. Without getting rid of these no advancement is possible however much japa or meditation we may do. One of the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna used to say often 'that rowing an anchored boat is useless'. Swami Brahmananda's advice in this regard is an indispensable must for every spiritual aspirant: "Every night before you go to sleep, think for a while how much time you have spent in doing good deeds and how much time you have wasted; how much time you have spent in meditation and how much you have wasted in idleness. Make your mind strong through the observance of continence and the practice of meditation. You cannot buy God. His vision comes only through his grace. Does this mean that you should not practice spiritual disciplines? Certainly you must practice, otherwise passions will create havoc in you. A rich man employs a porter whose duty it is to see that neither thieves, nor cows, nor sheep, nor any other intruder enter the compound. Man's mind is his

porter, and the stronger the mind becomes, the better." (The Eternal Companion, p.197)

The fourth requirement is a strong will. Oscar Wilde's quip, 'I can resist anything but temptation' is a truism for most of us. If we give in to temptation what else is there to resist? Temptations, pitfalls and suffering in life are unavoidable. They are, in fact, our best friends in spiritual life; but for them all of us would be saints! What separates a saint from a worldly man is suffering and temptation. If life is all joy and sweetness we will be forever stuck in this mire of samsara. Miseries and temptations give us an invaluable opportunity of proving our mettle and strengthening our will-power; these are the very steps of the spiritual ladder leading to Self-knowledge. No one is born with an irresistible will as a fatuous gift from God. As we go on developing the habit of exercising our will it grows. In course of time it becomes strong enough to help us overcome greater pitfalls and move forward towards our goal. Life affords us daily more than enough opportunities of exercising our will. The best way of developing a strong will is to accept the situations of life cheerfully, with equanimity, and to strive to move towards God with patience and perseverance. Regular practice of japa, prayer, meditation, study of scriptures and the discharging of all our duties as an offering to God - all this will gradually but unfailingly make our will strong. Awareness, rationality, a well defined goal, and sufficient will-power - when these four requirements are met the faculty of discrimination blossoms forth and becomes an aspirant's best friend. Soon it leads to right knowledge and is invariably followed by Vairagya or dispassion. Dispassion is an instinctive rejection as poison of all that stands as an obstruction in our path. The test of true discrimination is dispassion; a discrimination which is not accompanied by dispassion is worthless. Discrimination is an indispensable practice in spiritual life. The opposite of Viveka or discrimination is Avidya or ignorance. Patanjali defines Avidya thus:

Anitya-ashuchi-duhkha-anatmasu nitya-shuchi-sukha-Atma-khyatih avidya (Patanjali Yoga

Sutras, 56) Ignorance is mistaking the ephemeral as the Eternal, the impure as pure, the painful as pleasurable, and the non-self as the Self. Discrimination and sincere spiritual practice are the only antidotes to ignorance. Thus when discrimination is practised it dispels ignorance, brings right understanding, sets before us the right goal, strengthens our resolve, helps us discard what is harmful, helps us overcome all obstacles, and gradually leads us to God-realisation, and Blessedness. (to be continued)

... and forgive us our debts...

E.B.Mack

In the Anglican Book of Common Prayer the phrase is used in the Lord's Prayer: "... and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us." The Bible, however, uses the word `debts' instead of `trespassers' which puts a rather different meaning on the word. `Forgive us our debts' is something quite important. `Forgiving' in this context means wiping out the debt altogether.

Money and debts and borrowing and repaying all figure quite a lot in the New Testament. Matthew, who became a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, "sat at the receipt of customs", that is, he was a tax-gatherer. In those days tax-men were notorious because not only did they extort money with interest, but they would add a bit more for their own pocket. Jesus gave parables about servants collecting debts for their masters. One such was about a servant who went around `forgiving' his master's debtors of about half their liabilities, so as to have many good friends when hard times were approaching (see Luke 16).

In the Indian tradition, all humanity has five debts to redeem: the debt to the devas (the

gods); the debt to the rishis (the sages); the debt to the manes (the ancestors); the debt to other human beings; and the debt to animals, vegetables and minerals. Of course, these are not debts of money; they are far more significant. These are five great eternal debts. For example, how much are we indebted to the gods! All the forces of nature have each their own god - the sun, the moon, the ocean, and so on. How much are we at their mercy! When the gods are friendly everything goes well - the sun shines, the rain rains (in moderation), the wind blows gently, and plants flourish. But what happens when that force is excessive? We have floods, earthquakes, forest fires, etc. Man has learned to live with nature, to conquer nature too, he thinks, until some terrible catastrophe occurs. But catastrophes are the exception to the rule. Most of the time mankind lives in stable conditions. So we have a debt of gratitude to the gods. What about the debt to the rishis? Every civilisation, every race, every religion, has its wise men who laid the foundations for social mores, for a suitable philosophy of life. The rishis of old made the Upanishads; Buddha from his own experience gave his four-fold truth and eight-fold path; the Semitic religions had their old prophets: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses, and all the others, to Jesus and Mohammed. Just as the wise ones set the scene, so later thinkers embellished, modified, enlarged, commentated, interpreted, so the wisdom did not remain static for all time, but is even now being amplified and demonstrated by living sages. This is another debt for us. Then we have the debt to the ancestors. There is much talk these days about genes. The ancestors have given us our heritage, material as well as physical, moral and cultural. In whatever circumstance we find ourselves today, we have to thank our ancestors for all the struggle in providing a groundwork in evolution through long history. Therefore, we should not only 'honour our father and our mother', but also our grandparents and all the generations stretching back beyond memory. The Indian tradition is to offer formal worship to the ancestors going back seven generations - earlier generations are

considered to have been reincarnated since. Sri Ramakrishna's father went to Gaya with the express purpose of fulfilling his obligations to his ancestors. Subsequently he had a dream-vision in which he saw how pleased they all were with him. We have a tremendous debt to other human beings as well. Even a recluse is dependent on countless anonymous other humans. Who, we wonder, is taking care of his water supply, his gas and electricity, his waste disposal, and, who is bringing his food to market to arrive conveniently in his local shop? Even in the most far-flung outposts of the wild, a human would still be hard put to survive without help from fellow-man - not to mention the problems of mental anguish caused by loneliness. Humans are social animals. Animals, vegetables and minerals, are all lumped together in the fifth category, yet we are all dependent on these separately. A close bond exists between humans and all the other life-forms around us. Children from their very birth are taught to identify animals and birds by the way they act, the sounds they make, as well as the way they look (Baa, baa, black sheep..., I love little pussy..., etc.) and so they grow up with a natural feeling of kinship and affection for the co-inhabitants of their world. Under the heading of vegetables are included all the earth's wonderful trees and beautiful flowers. To say 'vegetables' implies 'food', just as 'animals' does to non-vegetarians, so we have an enormous debt to these uncomplaining objects of sustenance. Even minerals are needed for human existence. Quite apart from the beauty of cut stones - diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and the like - the human body requires an intake of certain minerals in order to survive. Traces of salt, iron, iodine, zinc and so on, are vital for physical health. Then, of course, so many things are manufactured using natural minerals. From the stone age, man made weapons for hunting and domestic artefacts, and so life progressed to the present day's sophisticated use of all kinds of minerals including silicon chips. All these things are woven together inextricably in our lives. We should regard all things in the five categories with respect, recognising our utter dependence on them. How may we

redeem our debts?

Thinking of the devas as the elemental aspects of the universe, we have (in the Indian philosophy) the five elements of ether, air, fire, water and earth. Grouping together the two most intangibles: ether and air, there are certainly ways we can redeem our debts, at least in a negative way: the way of not causing undue air pollution. Air pollution is not a new topic. For years the problem has been troubling countries world-wide. It is a global problem which seems inevitable where human beings are busy with their activities. The more sophisticated the civilisation, the more pollution seems to occur. We have a collective guilt over this, because a certain amount of pollution is inevitable; but, we can at least examine our conduct on an individual level and try to cut down to a minimum the damage we cause. For example: London's winter fog used to be a real killer; people exposed to it succumbed rapidly to bronchitis and other lung conditions. Then legislation was brought in to clean up the air by banning the burning of anything but smoke-free fuel in open fires, heating systems etc. The result was instantaneous - purer air, to such an extent that now people are acutely aware when the air becomes polluted by other causes. Now the London fog is invisible but palpable in the form of fumes from diesel engines from buses, taxis, lorries and diesel-run private cars. The Americans are conscious of this menace and diesel fuel is scarcely used at all. No doubt petrol too gives off fumes, but well-constructed and maintained engines have a reasonably "clean" exhaust. Our individual responsibility is to see that we do not add to air pollution any more than we can help, and to give our support to any local schemes which may improve air quality - for example, the use of hydro-electricity and wind-powered energy production. Fire is a valued friend but a powerful enemy. Multitudes have to flee for their lives when a volcano erupts. In Australia recently acres of forest were incinerated because the land was dried out. Man must fight for his life until the gods send rain to cool the earth once more. But then, how did these devastating fires

start? Were they caused by lightning or did mischievous children start the blaze? In some parts of the world farmers regularly burn stretches of jungle with disastrous consequences. Why do catastrophes happen? How many are brought about by mankind's own actions? Clean water is a necessity for human existence. In Britain we may get bored when the sun disappears and steady rain limits our outdoor activities. Yet this country is so fortunate to get plenty of rain. Water is a scarce commodity in many parts of the world and acres of land are becoming new deserts. We may think, living here, there is plenty of water, and if we use the hose on the garden in the summer, or if we let the tap run for no reason, it doesn't matter. In fact, although most of the time there is plenty, still our use of water is accelerating to the extent that reserves are becoming dangerously low. Let us then bear in mind that water is a precious commodity not to be thoughtlessly wasted. On the other hand, sometimes man is subjected to tremendous flooding - not only man, but all living creatures are at risk. Nature sent the rain in torrents, but, who created the dam that burst? Who opened the sluice-gates to flood the villages below? Sometimes the gods are responsible, but not always. Man must monitor his own actions. Our earth is regarded as the mother of all. One observing strict regulations in the Indian tradition, when arising in the morning, apologises to mother-earth for treading on her. For Westerners this is going a bit far, but still it is good to have the awareness of the wholesomeness of our environment. Who has not taken in breaths of the fragrance given off by the earth after a shower of rain?

Can we repay the debt to other humans? Perhaps the answer is in the old saying "Do as you would be done by." A worker should be given due respect, no matter how lowly or unpleasant his work. Maybe we should give more respect in proportion to the unpleasantness of the work involved. In these days of wars and violence, we have a duty to create as much peace within our own circle as possible and to widen our circle to

embrace all.

Then we have our debt to animals. Poor creatures! How badly they are treated usually! Factory farming constricts their movements and turns them into 'meat machines'. Hundreds of chickens are reared in enormous barns, shut off from sunlight, given enough meagre food, water, air and space to grow to adult size, when they are taken away for slaughter. Battery hens are viewed simply as egg-laying machines. At least we can choose whether or not to eat meat and eggs, and we also have the choice of 'free-range' eggs (though the free-range may not be very free!). In sharp contrast we have pet dogs and cats who are fed to a state of unhealthiness. And on what are they fed? Supermarkets stock hundred of tins of food for them - mostly horsemeat, though the labels don't admit it. How many horses does a cat eat during its lifetime we wonder? What can we do as individuals to honour our debt to all creatures? It really comes down to personal choice. Perhaps more people would become vegetarians if they were obliged to kill their own meat. Even milk-producing entails much cruelty when the young calf is removed and all the milk is taken for human consumption. The cows and calves cry out when they are separated. Hour after hour, all day and all night they call for each other. It is possible for the calves to have their share and leave some over for humans - but usually it's only in villages where the young ones are cared for in this way. How can we hope to redeem our debt to animals? If we reject animals for food, then plants become all the more important. Not only do plants feed us, but with expert knowledge of their properties, they can provide us with medicines to cure us from disease and help keep healthy bodies. After all, where did the scientists originally procure their drugs? They mostly began with plant life. One way we can start to repay our debts to plants is to think about how to preserve them as much as possible.

Minerals are also essential for human life and we should take care not to use them to

extinction. Already we have nearly expended coal and mineral oil resources. All supplies have a limitation. Man plunders and exploits the earth and all within it. Man should learn to curb his greed. We should listen to our wise men and give due respect to all things, animate and inanimate. By honouring the social mores we can in part repay our debt to the prophets. We should try to keep in mind the Vedantic concept of the unity of the whole of existence. Our debt of gratitude to all things is impossible to be repaid, so, after having done our best, we should ask that our debts may be forgiven.

The Gita (Swami Swahananda is the Swami-in-charge of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, U.S.A.)

Swami Swahananda

Throughout the religious history of India, no single scripture has captured the hearts and minds, or so well represented the spiritual aspirations of the people of India as the Gita. Of all the holy books of Hinduism, the most popular is the Bhagavad Gita, "The Song of God," or "The Song Celestial." In Hinduism, a religion characterized as much for its diversity as for its unity, no single text has been more universally relied upon for daily inspiration. Countless editions, commentaries and translations of the Gita have been published, and its influence on the world at large has steadily grown since its first English translation was made in the 18th century.

The Gita is composed of eighteen chapters and is found in the Bhishma Parva of the Mahabharata, the world's longest epic poem, which deals with the descendants of King Bharata, particularly the Kauravas and their cousins the Pandavas, and their struggle for control of the kingdom. Various opinions exist regarding the date of composition of the Gita, and it is difficult to settle the question conclusively. For one thing, works such as

the Mahabharata are often written over a period of centuries, with later portions added on to the original body. Some scholars are of the opinion that the Gita was composed relatively recently and later interpolated into the text. Others take the opposite stand and claim that the Gita was much earlier than the Mahabharata - perhaps pre-Buddhistic - and later incorporated into the text. However, the consensus is that, since the philosophical ideas of the Gita are consistent with those of the Mahabharata, the Gita was probably composed around 200 B.C., along with a large part of the Mahabharata. The traditional view is that the Gita is an integral part of the Mahabharata and is a few thousand years old.

Next to the Bible, the Gita is the most translated book in the world. There are several reasons for this popularity: literary, historical, and philosophical. For one thing, the stories of the Mahabharata - as also those of the Ramayana, India's other great epic poem - have captivated the imagination of the Indian people for centuries and have become an integral part of their culture. Sri Krishna, friend of the Pandava brothers and Arjuna's charioteer, is the deliverer of the message of the Gita and is one of the most beloved figures in the religious history of India, worshipped by millions as God incarnate. Dramatically speaking, the setting of the Gita cannot be rivalled: Arjuna on the battlefield requesting Sri Krishna to position his chariot between the two armies about to make war. There he sees his own kinsmen, his cousins, his uncles, grandfathers, teachers and friends. Overcome by grief, he throws down his bow and arrow and refuses to fight, thus evoking from Sri Krishna one of the world's most inspired spiritual talks, delivered with unparalleled eloquence and power.

Another fact contributing to the Gita's popularity is that, as an epic (itihasa), it falls within the category of traditional knowledge (smriti, in its widest sense) as opposed to revealed knowledge (sruti). Thus, whereas the Vedas and Upanishads were traditionally

restricted to a certain caste, the epics, such as the Mahabharata, as well as the Puranas, legal texts, sutra texts, etc., were open to all, giving the highest spiritual truths. And, indeed we find many verses in the Puranas referring to the Mahabharata as the "fifth Veda," which is attributed to Vyasa, the legendary compiler and arranger of the Vedas. Consistent with its popular nature, the Mahabharata presents its teachings not as a dry philosophy but interspersed with, and by means of, varieties of fascinating stories. The Gita not only represents the most sublime teachings of the Mahabharata, it also occurs at the most climactic moment of the story.

Though not considered a revealed text, the Gita occupies a special place in the school of Vedanta, representing one of the three authoritative works on Vedanta, technically known as the prasthana-traya, the other works being the Upanishads and the Brahma-sutras. The individual most responsible for helping to elevate the Gita to its present position is probably the great Vedantic sage, Sankaracarya. We know from his Gita commentary that earlier commentaries had been written and were known to him; and it seems clear that he wrote his own, partly as a refutation of an earlier view advocating the dual practice of ritual and knowledge. But Sankara's commentary is the earliest known to us and certainly the first of any real importance. Since his time, it has become incumbent on any Vedantic thinker wishing to establish a particular philosophical position to write a commentary on the Gita, as well as on the Brahma-sutras and the Upanishads. Thus, at least partly because of Sankara's high esteem for the Gita, its status has been raised above other works of its kind, including the Mahabharata itself, and it occupies a position of authority within the Vedanta school second only to that of the Upanishads.

Aside from the literary merits of the Mahabharata, its accessibility to all, and its position of respect within the school of Vedanta, there is a further, more basic

explanation for the longevity and popularity of the Gita - the sublime and universal nature of its teachings. Much has been written about the teachings of the Gita, and even a cursory study of the various commentaries reveals how open to diverse interpretations much of the Gita is, and how much difference of opinion exists as to its true meaning. But the variety of commentaries that the Gita has attracted, only further elevates its stature as a true spiritual classic - in its broad teachings, which have influenced many philosophical schools and religious sects, and in its personal appeal of practical spiritual advice, which crosses the parameters of political boundaries, socio-religious customs, and centuries of time. The Gita passages are charged with special power, since they are the words of the Lord Himself. Therefore spiritual aspirants through the ages have been inspired to memorize Sri Krishna's teachings and thereby soak and strengthen their minds with the revelations of God incarnate. There is no end to the creative force of a powerful idea. By holding a Gita imperative in the mind, an indelible impression is made on the unconscious, which in turn creates an atmosphere of success in the aspirant's spiritual life. How many people have been comforted by Gita passages like, "Arjuna, know it for certain, My devotee never perishes." (9.31) It works like a tonic to a despondent soul.

In day to day life, we strive for clarity of mind, since that is when the thinking faculty is at its best. The Gita tells us, "Fight, being free from mental fever." (7.30) Sri Krishna gives order and balance in his method, so that the aspirant need not plunge into spiritual life in a haphazard way: "Yogah karmasu kausalam." (2.50) and "Samatvam yoga ucyate." (2.48): "Being steadfast in yoga, O Dhananjaya, perform actions, abandoning attainment, remaining unconcerned as regards success and failure. This evenness of mind is known as yoga." This verse gives three requirements for perfect work. First, perform work as yoga; second, don't choose the nature of your work; and third, don't be anxious for the result. If we develop the habit of liking our work, discontent will melt

away, and our lives will be sweeter.

As a spiritual aspirant strives for the goal of God realization, he realizes the importance of strengthening character. Jealousy is a great weakness and obstacle to spiritual life. How can one overcome a trait so ingrained in human nature? Sri Krishna gives us a philosophy that enables us to transcend our pettiness:

"Whatever being there is great, prosperous or powerful, know that to be a product of a part of my splendour". (10.41)

Practically applied, the Gita imperatives have immense personal value. They have the power to elevate and broaden our narrow, finite ego-consciousness into the grandeur of our true nature which is one with the Universal Consciousness.

There is a traditional belief that the Gita represents a summary of the essential teachings of the Upanishads, or that it functions as a commentary on the Upanishads. This idea is explicitly stated in the introduction to Sankara's Gita commentary, where he calls the Gita "a summary of the essential ideas of all the Vedas." We also find this belief embodied in a famous verse found in the "Gita-dhyana," or "Meditation on the Gita." This verse compares the Upanishads to a herd of cows. Krishna is the milker of the cows; Arjuna is the calf; and the Gita is the milk. The affinity of the Gita to the Upanishads is also seen in the number of the verses from the Gita that seem to quote, or at least echo, certain Upanishads, notably the Katha, Mundaka, Isa, and Svetasvatara. One can easily imagine Yama uttering the very words to Nachiketa in the Katha Upanishad that Krishna does to Arjuna in chapter 2 (11-30) of the Gita on the immortality of the Self. Furthermore, as if to emphasize the Gita's Upanishadic nature, we find the Gita referring to itself as an Upanishad in the colophon at the end of each chapter. The Gita stresses the philosophy of detached and dedicated action as well as a harmony of all the

yogas in one's approach to spiritual life. Sri Krishna's battle cry to Arjuna to conquer his enemies and regain his rightful kingdom is symbolic of the dominant theme of the Gita: to perform one's duties on the battlefield of the world, free from attachment to the fruits, and to thereby attain the highest goal of life. Taken literally, Sri Krishna's emphasis on action can be interpreted as a necessity of historical circumstance, namely, Arjuna's need to go to war. However, in an allegorical sense, Kurukshetra symbolizes the battlefield of the mind, where passions must be conquered before one can attain Selfhood. Consequently, the duties we are exhorted to perform are understood to be a blend of spiritual practices - not only karma yoga (selfless action), but also raja yoga (meditation and japa), jnana yoga (discrimination and dispassion), and bhakti yoga (devotion to the Chosen Ideal).

However, the teaching of karma yoga is thought by many to be Sri Krishna's special message and the very heart of the Gita's teachings; and the Kurukshetra battlefield on the eve of battle is the most appropriate time and place for him to deliver that message. The emphasis on karma yoga represents a departure from the Upanishadic preference for the path of knowledge or discrimination. It is true that we often find Janaka and other royal figures in the Upanishads, teaching the highest truths while at the same time ruling over kingdoms, but for the most part there is very little emphasis on action or the performance of duties. Perhaps the reason is that the Upanishads were geared specifically to those already free from social obligations - the forest-dwellers and hermits - while the epics and the Puranas were intended for society at large. Still, this distinction cannot solely explain Sri Krishna's persistent return to the theme of karma yoga which, as taught in the Gita, is relevant to the householder as well as the monastic.

The Gita's presentation of the secret of work does not discard earlier Upanishadic

teachings. Rather a rigorous attempt is made to revitalize concepts from their old, and sometimes petrified forms into fuller meanings, more suited to the needs of the times. Terms are redefined and old distinctions are challenged. We find such questions asked as, "Who is the true sannyasin?" "What are action and inaction?" "Is there any real distinction between the paths of action and knowledge?" etc. The answers given in the Gita are in all cases perfectly consistent with the spirit of the Upanishads, though often at variance with traditional interpretations. For example, Sri Krishna maintains throughout the Gita that the "true" renunciate is one who understands the real meaning of renunciation, namely the renunciation of the lower self, the ego with its desires, attachments and aversions. Thus he terms the real sannyasin as one "who neither hates nor desires," (5.13) "Who performs his duties without attachment, not he who merely gives up his obligatory rites and the keeping of the sacred fire." (6.1) The Upanishads take for granted the fact that one should have this understanding before renouncing the world. However, they do not go so far as to say that a householder with such a frame of mind is more deserving of the title "sannyasin" than the hermit without such an understanding. Sri Krishna further explains (4.18) that what appears to be action or the renunciation of action from the ordinary point of view may, in fact, be its opposite. Thus the sannyasin who secretly feels in his heart that he is the doer while performing austerities, will only create further karma for himself even though he appears to be actionless in meditation; while the person who knows himself to be an instrument, free from the sense of "I" and "mine," though hard at work in the middle of a busy marketplace, will experience the same tranquillity as if he were in a secluded forest. It is the second person who is truly "actionless" because he is without any feeling of agency. All this does not imply that the Gita has any bias against renunciation - only against a hypocritical renunciation (3.6) brought about as a result of an aversion to duty, as was the case with Arjuna. Sri Krishna concedes that "one who delights in the Self

alone has no more duties to perform" (3.17) and that "for one who has reached the state of yoga, quietude or abstinence from action is the proper path." (6.3) And yet, Sri Krishna reminds us that even the genuine renunciate must perform some action, if only to maintain his body (3.8) and thus must also practice karma yoga.

Another example of the Gita's technique of reinterpretation is the concept of yajna or sacrifice. One of the characteristics of the Upanishads is a distinct antipathy towards the extreme ritualism of the Vedic period, where elaborate sacrifices were performed for the attainment of such desires as heaven, progeny, cattle, etc. The Gita, without endorsing rituals for the fulfillment of desires (kama-karma) nevertheless utilizes the concept of a yajna as standing for sacrifice in the larger sense, and builds an entire ethical framework around it. In chapter 3 (9-16) and chapter 4 (23-33), we find that virtually any action can be transformed into yajna if it is done in the spirit of sacrifice, or as an offering to God. Furthermore, Sri Krishna explains that every action we perform, including inhalation and exhalation, is to be performed as yajna. With this revitalized understanding, even the old Vedic rituals can be performed without an eye on the results, but with a desire for the social and cosmic good. (3.11-12) Sri Krishna gives the final word on yajna when he claims that by seeing all elements of the act of offering (including the offerer himself) as nothing but Brahman, he attains Brahman. While the Gita no doubt embodies many distinctly Upanishadic teachings, we also find a realistic strain, probably the result of the co-mingling of the Sankhya teachings with those of the Upanishads. One of the most important teachings of the Gita is bhakti yoga, the path of devotion to a personal God. This heralds the very beginnings of the theory of the divine incarnation, or avatara, which we find elaborated upon in the Puranas. What results is a philosophy of harmony, in which varieties of paths and attitudes are all recommended for leading to the highest goal. However, if we must look for one unifying element in all these diverse paths, it would be the insistence on selfless action, karma

yoga - whether performed out of a sense of duty, for purification of the mind, as an offering to the Lord, or based on the Vedantic teachings regarding the Self.

The spirit of acceptance and liberality, the many-sidedness of its teachings, and the urgency of its message delivered on the battlefield, have given the Gita a timeless and universal relevance not often found in religious scriptures. Its distinctly democratic air, its emphasis on same-sightedness and equality make it especially suited to the present age. The Gita has long been a source of inspiration for both householders and monastics, for world-movers such as Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi, for unknown hermits and simple villagers, faithfully performing their duties. And it seems certain that its timeless message of hope and practical spirituality will continue to inspire future spiritual aspirants of all faiths.