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Start Over

When you've trusted God and walked his way,
When you've felt his hand lead you day by day, But your steps now take you another
way...

Start Over

When you've made your plans and they've gone awry,
When you've tried your best and there's no more try,
When you've failed yourself and you don't know why...

Start Over

When you've told your friends what you plan to do,
When you've trusted them and they didn't come through; And now you're all alone and
it's up to you...

Start Over

When you've prayed to God so you'll know his will,
When you've prayed and prayed and you don't know still,
When you want to stop 'cause you've had your fill...

Start Over

When the year has been long and successes few,
When December comes and you're feeling blue,
God gives a January just for you...

Start Over

Anonymous

Guru Nanak: Prophet of Unity

Swami Rasajnananda

(Reprinted from Prabuddha Bharata April 1969)

Swami Vivekananda said in a lecture delivered at Lahore: 'Here it was that ... the gentle Nanak preached his marvellous love for the world. Here it was that his broad heart was opened, and his arms outstretched to embrace the whole world, not only of Hindus, but of Mohammedans too.'

A gem of numerous facets, Guru Nanak shone as a messenger of peace and love, unity and brotherhood, an apostle of the essential unity of religions and a social pioneer.

Brighter and brighter became his luminosity in the spiritual firmament as he came face to face with truth. He disseminated it dauntlessly and founded Sikhism. This living faith has stood the test of time and engendered in its votaries a virile attitude of hard work and the worship of One God, a militant defiance of injustice and a strict adherence to righteousness, humility and dynamism, a tight bond of brotherhood and a well-

organized, casteless community, disseminating goodwill and charity to mankind. It was his genius to have drawn from the scriptures of both Hinduism and Islam and to have harmonized them happily to formulate a new faith.

Endowed with a heart broad enough to embrace Hindus and Muslims, he strove to bring them together. This was not an easy task in the prevailing climate of intolerance and bigotry. For instance, as history bears out, Sikandar Lodi put to the sword the Brahmana Budhan for the sole offence of stating in the presence of some Mohammedans that the religions of both the Muslims and Hindus, if acted on with sincerity, were equally acceptable to God. It therefore stands not a little to the credit of Nanak to have given to India a religion which could satisfy both communities -- Hindus and Muslims -- and which was free from casteism, priestcraft, ceremonialism, miracles, superstitions, and accretions of both Hinduism and Islam. That he was able to endear himself to both communities is evident from the fact that 'at his death Hindus and Mohammedans quarrelled as to which sect should perform his obsequies'.

The popularity and esteem that he won were the natural outcome of the feeling of the brotherhood of man emerging from his realization of God. His love for man manifested itself in his long ministry for dispelling the encircling darkness of his day and redeeming man from misery and ignorance. In his view none was high or low and all were equal. As such he condemned in strong terms the exploitation of the lower or under-privileged classes by the higher castes or influential sections. His solicitude for the welfare of the downtrodden and despised masses led him to identify himself with them, as he voiced his feeling in the following words :

'I am with the lowest of the low. What have I to do with the great? God's eye of mercy

falls on those who take care of the lowly.' Service was his religion. He opened the portals of truth to one and all irrespective of caste, creed or colour.

Prophet of truth that he was, Guru Nanak laid emphasis on the supremacy of truth -- truth that is fundamental in all religions. Hence he seldom asked anyone to give up his own faith. What is more important for an aspirant according to Nanak is truthful living. Religion degenerates into meaningless formality without moral foundation. Guru Nanak was not only a mystic but a poet par excellence. His profound thoughts and teachings flowed in rhythmic notes striking a responsive chord in the hearts of the audience.

The achievement of Guru Nanak will be appreciated when we consider the age in which he was born and that he faced overwhelming odds. It was an age of dark crisis and constant strife, appalling atrocities and inhuman persecution. Nanak saw with his own eyes Babar's cruelty to the inhabitants of Saiyidpur; both he and his attendant were taken prisoner and obliged to work as slaves. The Guru gives us an idea of the Mohammedan rulers and the state of India in his time :

`This age is a knife, kings are butchers; justice hath taken wings and fled.

In this completely dark night of falsehood the moon of truth is never seen to rise.

I have become perplexed in my search. In the darkness I find no way. Devoted to pride, I weep in sorrow. How shall deliverance be obtained?'

Deliverance was indeed far off when there was political disruption and moral decadence, when in Guru Nanak's words `men nowadays are men only in shape and name; in action they are dogs', when in matters of religion, form totally supplanted spirit. The extent of the hypocrisy and falsehood of the Hindus can be gauged from the

following words of Guru Nanak :

`Thou performest the Hindu worship at home, thou readest the Quran in public, and associatest with Mohammedans. Lay aside hypocrisy, repeat God's name, and thou shalt be saved. They who have strings on their necks eat men, recite the Mohammedan prayers, and use knives to cut men's throats. Although the Brahmans sound shells in their houses, And enjoy their viands as they do themselves; Yet false is their capital and false their dealings. By uttering falsehood they maintain themselves. Far from them is the abode of bashfulness and honesty. Nanak, falsehood everywhere prevails.'

Thus at the time of the Guru, there was no religion. If there was one, it was an intriguing and intricate maze of observances and formalities, hiding the tyranny of heart and emptiness of devotion or knowledge. Where there was no devotion or knowledge, there was endless strife and wrangling. In the place of the worship of God - One God who is the common feature of both the Veda and the Koran - there was the worship of numerous deities, pirs (holy men) and dargahs (holy places). Instead of uniting men, religion divided them into hostile groups, each one trying to exterminate the others. However, the dark cloud was not without its silver lining. The wave of Muslim invasion and oppression of Hindus leavened Hinduism, and powerful religious reformers arose, not only to defend the faith, but to restate its catholic, cardinal principles in a popular manner and to make good the deficiencies at the social level. The fact arrests our attention that Muslims too were attracted to the teachings of Ramananda and became his disciples, Kabir being notable among them. In the oft-quoted words of Cunningham:

`In the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Hindu mind was no longer stagnant or retrogressive, it had been leavened with Mohammedanism, and changed and quickened

for a new development. Ramanand and Gorakh had preached religious equality, and Chaitanya had repeated that faith levelled caste. Kabir had denounced images, and appealed to the people in their own tongue, and Vallabha had taught that effectual devotion was compatible with the ordinary duties of the world.'

The message of these Hindu reformers, called Bhaktas, had close affinity with the tenets of the Mohammedan Sufis. The closer the Bhaktas and the Sufis drew to each other, the narrower became the gulf between Hinduism and Islam. The gulf was not very wide and it was left to Guru Nanak to bridge it.

Early Life

Guru Nanak was born in the year AD 1469 in the village Talwandi, about forty miles from the city of Lahore, now in Pakistan. His father, Kalu by name, was a Hindu belonging to the Khatri caste and made his living by working as an accountant in the village. Nanak was precocious even as a child. When he was seven years of age, he was admitted to the village school. After the schoolmaster wrote the alphabet on a slate for Nanak, the latter astounded the teacher by composing an acrostic on the alphabet - a hearty discourse on God, man, and education; a message of hope, joy and deliverance. The acrostic begins as follows :

'The one Lord who created the world is the Lord of all.

Fortunate is their advent into the world, whose hearts remain attached to God's service.

O foolish man, why hast thou forgotten Him?

When thou adjustest thine account, my friend, thou shalt be deemed educated.' Having thus demonstrated his scholastic proficiency, he left school and took to private study

and meditation.

Association with the Ascetics

He retired into the dense forests that surrounded the village and sought association with the ascetics and anchorites. He learnt of them the religious and philosophical literature as well as the reforms and revivals of the age. What was more important than this learning was his own undisturbed communion with nature, with his own soul and with his Creator. 'The voice that had spoken to many a seer again became vocal in that wilderness, and raised Nanak's thoughts to the summit of religious exaltation.' Alarmed at their son's frequent visits to the forest anchorites and discourses with itinerant fakirs, Nanak's worldly-minded parents arranged for his study of Persian - a knowledge of which was essential for employment at that time - and also for his marriage later. As at his first schooling, he is said to have astounded his Persian teacher with another acrostic on the Persian alphabet to boot. However, Nanak's use of numerous Persian words and some Persian verses in the Granth Sahib, the Bible of the Sikhs, shows that he became a fair Persian scholar.

Investiture with the Sacred Thread

The next important incident in the life of Nanak was his investiture with the sacred thread (janeu) at the age of nine years. When the family priest put it on the boy's neck, the boy Nanak caught hold of it and asked the priest for an explanation of the ritual. Not satisfied with the explanation, Nanak composed the following song:

'Make mercy thy cotton, contentment thy thread, continence its knot, truth its twist.

That would make a janeu for the soul; if thou have it, O Brahman, then put it on me.

It will not break, or become soiled, or be burned or lost.

Blest the man, O Nanak, who goeth with such a thread on his neck.

Thou purchasest a janeu for four damris, and seated in a square putttest it on;

Thou whisperest instruction that the Brahman is the guru of the Hindus - Man dieth, the janeu falleth, and the soul departeth without it.'

Other-worldly Temperament

Nanak was married at the age of fourteen to Sulakhani, daughter of Mula, a resident of Batala in the present district of Gurdaspur. In course of time two sons were born. But his spiritual pursuits continued as before and he seemed to become unfit for all secular occupation. His indifference to worldly pursuits became a serious source of anxiety to his parents. They tried their best to get him interested in some worldly occupation. His father, Kalu first tried him in the capacity of a herdsman, then in that of a cultivator and finally attempted to make him a merchant, but all to no purpose. His mother attempted at the worldly reformation of her son. She even requested him to forget even for a few days his devotions and go abroad so that the neighbours might be assured that Kalu's son had recovered his reason. Finding no change in Nanak's way of life, the family grew sad that he had become mad. A physician was sent for treatment of his insanity. On being asked what he himself thought his illness was by the physician, Nanak replied in the following manner:

`I first feel the pain of separation from God, then a pang of hunger for contemplation on Him.

I also fear the pain which Death's powerful myrmidons may inflict.

I feel pain that my body shall perish by disease.

O ignorant physician, give me no medicine.'

Thoroughly disgusted with his son, Kalu became despondent until a ray of hope shone in the form of a proposal from Jai Ram, husband of Nanaki, elder sister of Nanak. The proposal was that Nanak should be sent to Sultanpur and enter Government service there. It was at Sultanpur that Jai Ram was employed in the revenue department and resided with Nanaki. So Kalu agreed to the proposal and Nanak went to Sultanpur to join his sister and brother-in-law.

Work and Worship in Sultanpur

Sultanpur is cherished in the hearts of seekers after Truth as the seat of the great turning-point in Guru Nanak's life, which we shall relate shortly. To continue the narrative, on Jai Ram's recommendation the Governor Daulat Khan Lodi appointed Nanak as a store-keeper. Surprisingly enough, Nanak discharged his duties to the entire satisfaction of his employer, who was much pleased with his new servant. Out of the provisions which Guru Nanak was allowed, he devoted only a small portion to his own maintenance and gave the rest to the poor. He used continually to spend his nights singing hymns to his Creator. The minstrel Mardana subsequently joined Nanak in Sultanpur and became his private servant. Other friends too came, whom Nanak introduced to the Governor and procured employment. Their daily routine was as follows: `At dinner-time they came and sat down with him, and every night there was continual singing. A watch before day, Nanak used to go to the neighbouring Bein river and perform his ablutions. When day dawned, he went to discharge the duties of his office.'

Divine Vision and Mission

Now we come to the blessed moment which changed the course of Nanak's career and charged him with the authority to preach. One morning, as was customary with him, he bathed in the waters of the Bein. After bath he disappeared from view and was therefore considered drowned. According to the biographers, he was taken in a vision to God's presence and God said to him, 'I am with thee. I have made thee happy and also those who shall take thy name. Go and repeat Mine, and cause others to do likewise. Abide uncontaminated by the world. Practise the repetition of My name, charity, ablutions, worship, and meditation.' At that time, Guru Nanak uttered the following words:

'There is but one God whose name is True, the Creator, devoid of fear and enmity, immortal, unborn, self-existent, great, and bountiful.

The True One was in the beginning; the True One was in the primal age.

The True One is, was, O Nanak, and the True One also shall be.'

Immediately a voice was heard: 'O Nanak, to him upon whom My look of kindness resteth, be thou merciful, as I too shall be merciful. My name is God, the primal Brahm, and thou art the divine Guru.' This mystical experience of God, the primal Brahm, decided the mission of Nanak as Guru, the divinely ordained teacher. The illumination is said to have taken place in the year 1499 when he was in his 29th year.

'There is no Hindu, no Musalman'

After the lapse of three days and nights, Guru Nanak came out of the river. He then went home and gave all that he had to the poor. After observing silence for one day, he uttered the pregnant announcement, 'There is no Hindu and no Musalman'. The Sikhs interpret this to mean generally that both Hindus and Mohammedans had forgotten the precepts of their religions. When the Governor questioned him as to the meaning of the announcement, the Guru uttered the following:

'To be a Musalman is difficult; if one be really so, then one may be called a Musalman. Let one first love the religion of saints, and put aside pride and pelf as the file removeth rust.

Let him accept the religion of his pilots, and dismiss anxiety regarding death or life;

Let him heartily obey the will of God, worship the Creator, and efface himself -- When he is kind to all men, then Nanak, shall he be indeed a Musalman.'

In reply to further questions, the Guru sang the following songs suited to Mohammedans :

'Make kindness thy mosque, sincerity thy prayer-carpet, what is just and lawful thy Quran,

Modesty thy circumcision, civility thy fasting, so shalt thou be a Musalman.

Make right conduct thy Kaaba, truth thy spiritual guide, good works thy creed and thy prayer,

The will of God thy rosary, and God will preserve thine honour.'

His words carried so much conviction that everybody present there was amazed and saluted him. As there was no Hindu present, his songs did not refer to Hinduism.

However, his significant utterance, 'There is no Hindu, there is no Musalman', brought him to the forefront and created a great stir in Sultanpur.

Beginning of Travels

The next part of Guru Nanak's life was spent in travelling as a preacher. He finally resigned his post, abandoned worldly life, and after a short stay with some Fakirs, set out in the garb of an Udasi (monk) with Mardana as his companion. His travels abounded in instructive incidents. We shall mention two of them which illustrate his keen insight into the character of persons and his saving power. In Saiyidpur of the Punjab, the Guru accepted the poor food prepared by Lalo, a carpenter, in preference to the rich feast of Malik Bhago, steward of the Pathan who owned Saiyidpur. When Malik Bhago, feeling insulted at Nanak's action, charged him with dining with a low-caste carpenter, it is said that Nanak squeezed the coarse bread of Lalo in his right hand and milk came out of it, whereas blood issued from the dainty bread when squeezed by Nanak in his left hand. The meaning was that Lalo's bread had been obtained by honest labour and was pure, while Malik Bhago's bread had been obtained by bribery and oppression and was therefore impure. Guru Nanak met his first notable adventure when he came upon Shaikh Sajjan, a notorious robber. The robber had built a temple and a mosque for his Hindu and Mohammedan guests respectively, and provided every comfort for them. When darkness set in, he dismissed his guests and then threw them into a well in which they perished. In this way he robbed them of their belongings. But next morning he appeared religious with a pilgrim's staff and rosary in the true spirit of an ancient Pharisee. He tried the same trick with Nanak, but failed miserably. It was his good fortune to have contacted the Guru, for he admitted in a mood of open confession a long catalogue of his most heinous crimes and ultimately turned over a new leaf. On the Guru's instruction he

distributed all the property of his victims to the poor and became a follower of the Guru. It is said that the first Sikh temple was constructed on the spot where this transformation had taken place. (to be continued)

Spiritual Training of the Mind (continued)

Swami Swahananda

Control is necessary. That is the training of all the religions of the world. The mind has to be controlled. The yogis argue that the more mastery you have over yourself, over the vagaries of your own mind, the better you are placed for enjoying even this normal world - even if you don't have any spiritual hankering. Of course, without a little spiritual hankering, it will be difficult to control the mind. If all the time you pursue your desires, to bring the mind to a quiet position is difficult. That is why the mastery of the mind is necessary, for gaining enjoyable experiences from the world, and also the later spiritual experience which is the ultimate goal of life. Many of our problems arise because of a sense of boredom, monotony, pressure, unfulfilled desires. These are some of the basic causes why the mind is often thrown off its balance, even if there is no major external situation. A major external situation can be there, but temporary in effect. You are going along the road, somebody comes and insults you, and you become very agitated, become angry, and probably fight. But that is a temporary experience -- you recover soon. But if you are a very touchy man, it may take a longer time to recover. There are many people, especially introverts, who go on suffering within. Extroverts are in that way better. For a few minutes they react and then regain the

balance. Children are good in that respect. They become upset very easily, but they are also pacified very easily. They don't have the after effects of the painful experience that they passed through. A change of attitude is necessary to get a grip over the mind. If the attitude is changed, you get better results. You are going down the road. A man comes and insults you -- says some bad things, unnecessarily. You become angry. Then a friend of his comes up behind him, and indicates that the man is not all right mentally or emotionally. Immediately you cool down. That man may go on reviling you, but the moment you know that this is not a normal man, your anger vanishes -- you feel pity for him. That effect has happened by your change of attitude.

Suffering cannot be avoided, painful experiences cannot be avoided -- even a Buddha can be scolded. Even a Socrates can have enemies. Even if you are a sage, there may be revilers. In an objective situation you cannot expect that there will be no bad experiences in life. So the minimal thing a man has to learn is how not to be too much affected by these experiences. In normal life, any average man will be affected a little. But we are trying to go above the average. We must have a technique available by which we can learn to recover from these experiences as quickly as possible. Ideally speaking, we should be able not to react at all, to possess inner calmness. Now many people say that if you do this you will become inert. Somebody comes and scolds you, or gives you a blow, and you don't do anything. The religious training is there: if you are slapped on one cheek, you are to give the other cheek -- that attitude. Normal people feel that it is too much. True, it is too much. But if you feel that you have to fight for something, fight for it. The yogis have no objection. The Gita had no objection -- go and fight. If the objective situation requires that you must be angry, that you must fight, then go and fight. But why should you be internally angry? You are to control an objective situation, which requires a little harshness, a little firmness, but internally why should you get upset? You know it is the external situation which demands this behaviour. You do it as a

witness, as an onlooker. Deal with the situation without getting emotionally involved. That is the ideal state -- to react without getting emotionally upset. Of course, the modern explanation is there, the physiological explanation: if you get upset, your blood pressure will shoot up, your heart beat will increase; then you will have to go back to your medicines, or to the modern method of meditation -- quieting the nerves, creating the alpha waves and all that. Very good, but the whole idea is, that if you have a grip over yourself -- if you don't become internally agitated, then none of these effects will come. The mind will remain calm, and at the same time you can work.

Swami Brahmananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, used to say that even activities which require much effort can be done with 25% of our energies. Most of us spend much of our energy in fretting and fuming. To make decisions we take days and days. When we work we have our worries, our anxieties. The actual effort that we give for a purpose is very little. Thinking about pros and cons is all right, but uselessly we waste away much of our energy.

So that is the idea. A calm, quiet man, once he decides something, can quietly do it without losing his mental poise and balance. And the more poise he has, the better will be his work. A man who is not agitated, a man who is not thrown off his balance easily, and keeps his mind clear, can do a thing more easily. At the same time he is not mentally affected. Many people feel that unless they have got some special zeal, or special love for their work, how can they have energy to do the work? Our work will not be good if we are not dedicated to our work with great zeal. Swami Vivekananda said that he also used to think like that when he was young, that without great excitement and zeal we cannot do things. But how can we utilize our zeal often when we waste the major portion of our zeal in unnecessary things? A directed zeal will produce a much better result. Then he said that as the days went by, he learned this lesson: that the

calmer a man is, the more turnout there will be of his efforts. A determined, calm kind of work will come, because he is not agitated by situations; more calmly, quietly, and doggedly he can do the work. We are not talking here about detail work, but there also, lack of planning and other factors can lead to a waste of time.

For this type of mind, which can control the vagaries of the moods, which can keep one in a very controlled, peaceful condition, some practice is necessary. This explains why the idea of meditation is so popular. Most of the Indian children, from early age, are given one training, called Gayatri japa. The Gayatri mantra is given to them for recitation, along with certain things to do. The mantra means: "May my intelligence be directed towards the Good." Which man will object to that type of training? It is not a doctrinaire method of training. It is the basic training for making the mind purer, along with sitting quietly and calmly daily, and trying to think that thought. Now if a boy learns from his early days how to sit quietly, compared to a man who has never controlled himself, he will be much better placed. A certain grip over himself will automatically come. And that is how a character is formed, by daily practice. What is a character? If a man is good today, and the next day he is bad, he is not a good man. If he is good most of the time, he is a good man. Or if we say he is a very sweet man, then he is sweet most of the time. If most of the time he has an outburst, or even every now and then, we don't call him a sweet man. Swami Vivekananda said that character is known by the continued expression of our behaviour. Character is formed by repeated habits. An action is ethical when you opt for the right course. Instinctive behaviour doesn't involve moral struggle. All the spiritual teachers have stressed the idea that when a man has progressed spiritually, these troubles fade away. The conscious moral struggle at every turn is the preliminary stage. Then a stage comes when he instinctively behaves in the right way. Somebody comes and asks him something, and a truthful man instinctively replies truthfully. He is not face to face with the problem of whether he

ought to tell the truth or not tell the truth. He instinctively does it. As they often say, that instinctive goodness is there in people who live with nature. And that is why it is said that people in the farmlands are simpler. So all the humane qualities are more germane to the people in agricultural societies compared with people in industrialized societies. Probably the industrialized society is more artificial; man acquires or is exposed to bad influences more easily.

Life will bring varieties of experience -- good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant. We want to avoid the unpleasant and the bad experiences. The good and the pleasant experiences don't require any philosophy or training. You just enjoy them. But a bad experience we don't want. If we don't want the bad experience, if we can change the external situation, that is best, but it is not easy. The best thing to do is to strengthen the mind itself. By this process external situations cannot throw us off our balance. Training of the mind is necessary. With what attitude do you take the painful experiences in life? The devotees try to believe that God has given them this suffering. For them, God does everything, good and bad. They say, "God has given me this suffering to test me, to strengthen me." Or, they think, "Better days will be coming later." The devotee tries to put his trust in God, and accept that the experience was necessary for him.

For every bad situation you later find some explanation, some good side. It ceases to be a suffering in comparison with a greater suffering, probably. The spiritual attitude is, to find a meaning for every suffering. The moment you have found some explanation, some meaning, that suffering becomes less.

Take the example of a person behaving wrongly. You feel uncomfortable, but you analyze his situation. Probably he has got some trouble, physical trouble, or trouble with his family. Immediately you become sympathetic, and know that the way he is behaving

is really not his nature, but because of external conditions. You become more sympathetic. As a result, your suffering also lessens. These are varieties of the mental technique in life situations. But the main purpose of the whole training of the mind, is to take the person, stage by stage, towards higher realization. For increasing the happiness in the world, there are so many agencies. Religions need not be a particular agency for that. Religion's special field is to show man the way towards higher realization, which will give an enduring meaning to his life. Once you have got control over your mind, you can then go into the deeper experiences. But for bringing in that control, and for peace of mind, in which real meditation is possible, practice this: controlling the vagaries of the moods -- by developing certain attitudes, by developing certain techniques of concentration and one-pointedness. And then, if you have a final metaphysical conviction, the best results will be achieved, which will pave the way for your highest realization.

A conviction about the real nature of man, the attempt to find meaning in all experience, the development of certain attitudes, control of the moods, and giving direction to the moods are ways in which to face the problems of the mind. This way, in the earlier stage, we acquire efficiency. A fund of energy is there, and a desire must be there to do a certain thing, a strong will to pursue it and that strong will ought to be a good will for the good of society -- along with that, if the spiritual awareness of the divine nature of man is there, he is a well-rounded, practical, efficient, spiritual man. That is the ideal type of person often referred to by Swami Vivekananda.

Suffering and Spirituality

Swami Dayatmananda

Vedanta tells us that the world we live in is a world of duality; life and death, light and darkness, pleasure and pain, good and evil constitute the very fabric of life. But when we look at the world it seems an embodiment of evil.

The suffering is unimaginable. Pestilence, famines, floods, earthquakes, cyclones, and other natural calamities take away untold lives, and leave millions doomed to a living death, especially in the developing countries. These, however, pale into insignificance before modern wars. The terrible devastation of fields and cities, the cruel murder or maiming of thousands of innocent men, women and children, whose only fault is that they are poor and helpless, dragged into war, the unwilling victims of war-lords! Is it possible to find a sensible reason for the miseries and sufferings of these innocent people? Neither Hinduism, nor Christianity nor Buddhism nor any other 'ism' has been able to stem the suffering that has deluged and is still deluging poor humans, struggling to live their lives in a world into which they seem to have been thrust willy-nilly. No wonder that millions in modern times are losing faith in God or any Supreme Being ruling the world. If God cannot allow us to live a happy life here, what guarantee is there that in heaven life is going to be happier?

Suffering has always evoked an outburst of protest from men since time immemorial. In a world created and controlled by a just and merciful Creator, why so much of suffering? Why should there be suffering and sorrow at all? Many religions promise that after death good people will land in heaven and enjoy long-time happiness. But why should a compassionate and omnipotent God create this earth for humans and other beings with its fleeting joys and sorrows and its interminable sufferings?

Vedanta says that man's suffering stems from three sources: adhyatmic or resulting from one's inner nature; adhibhautic or resulting from causes traceable to the outside and visible world; and adhidaivic or resulting from causes supramundane. The adhyatmic suffering results from our identification of ourselves with our physical bodies and minds. This is the root of all suffering.

Suffering is the lot of every creature, especially the saints. Buddha gave suffering a metaphysical status and made it the corner-stone of his philosophy. He taught that all is suffering in the world to a discerning and sensitive soul. He said :

“This, O monks, is the sacred truth of suffering. Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, death is suffering, to be united with the unloved or unloving is suffering, to be separated from the loved one is suffering, not to obtain what one desires is suffering; in short the fivefold clinging to the earthly is suffering.”

Holy Mother says: “Do you notice this human body? Today it is and tomorrow it is not. And the world is full of misery and pain.”

So also Swami Vivekananda: “That we are all miserable, that this world is really a prison, that even our so-called trailing beauty is but a prison-house, and that even our intellects and minds are a prison-house have been known for ages upon ages. There has not been a man, there has not been a human soul, who has not felt it some time or other, however he may talk...”

A question that crops up often, especially among devotees, is why should good people suffer and evil doers thrive? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do devotees and spiritual people suffer? Have they not surrendered themselves to Him and are they not trying their best to lead good and unselfish lives? Look, for instance, at the lives of Christ, Buddha, Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Swami Vivekananda, St Francis, St Teresa,

St John and a host of others. How much suffering and persecution they had to undergo!
Many good people do not find any cause, at least, in this life that justifies this suffering.

Pain and suffering is a great mystery. There is no rational answer to this question. Like it or not suffering is a fact of life.

Yet man's mind does not rest satisfied and longs to have some sort of an answer. Here are some of the views:

The sceptic believes that all life is accidental, there really is no answer, so do your best to cope with it. A materialist says life is a splendid opportunity to test our mettle. A stoic says good and evil are woven into the very fabric of life, so enjoy it while it lasts and when sorrows befall bear them all with gritted teeth -- it is a test of your manhood. A devotee claims that everything happens by the will of God with a purpose, and it must surely be a good one, and so cheerfully carry on with total faith in Him. A jnani believes that he is Brahman, God Himself, and disdains this world as an illusion, a mere appearance without substance.

We may choose any of these explanations that reasonably satisfy our minds. Yet the pain, the suffering remains. Every creature longs to avoid misery by all means and strives to obtain unending happiness. Is there a way out of this dukkha or suffering? Is it possible to transcend suffering and obtain eternal happiness? If so what can we do about it? All religions, in fact, provide solutions to these questions.

Here are some of the solutions that can help us.

First, awareness and acceptance of suffering. The first step in coping with evil, pain and suffering is to be aware of it and accept it whole heartedly. Though suffering is our common lot, yet surprisingly few of us are aware of its nature. This world is a world of

duality, there cannot be life without death, good without evil.

There are some who believe we are all progressing towards a better life and eventually all evil will be eliminated and only good remain -- a veritable paradise on earth! It is a noble albeit an irrational wish. The world will always be as it is, a world of duality. According to Vedanta it is neither good nor bad. But according to our Karma we experience pleasure or pain. Only when we are aware of this dualistic nature of the world are we really in the position of accepting it. So long as we are in the world, identified with body and mind, so long we have to undergo both pain and pleasure. It is useless to seek only one side of a coin.

Awareness does not mean mere recognition of pain and suffering. It means accepting it and actively seeking ways and means of coping with it cheerfully, and then transcending it by taking to spiritual life. Again when we accept pain and suffering with equanimity we begin to see another, brighter side to it. Pain is not all bad. In fact, many embrace it willingly in order to attain a higher purpose in life.

Often pain is a great teacher instilling in us noble lessons of life. It sometimes acts as a catalytic agent turning us to a higher life. If only we are open we can discern a higher purpose behind it. When we look at history we find that almost without exception people became noble or spiritual as the direct result of intense pain and suffering. Experience of suffering also makes us kind and sympathetic and prompts us to serve others. Pain is a great benefactor. Hence Swami Vivekananda writes:

`Then sorrow came - and Wealth and Power went Ð And made him kinship find with all the human race In groans and tears, and though his friends would laugh, His lips would speak in grateful accents Ð `O Blessed Misery!' (Angels Unawares)

Then there is the law of Karma and self-effort. Many Eastern religions firmly believe in

the law of Karma. Buddha never talked about God but believed in the law of Karma and its corollary rebirth. He said that the result of one's past Karma inevitably follows one as a cart follows the foot-steps of oxen. One way of coping with Karma, then, is to accept responsibility for one's happiness or suffering. Though often the belief in Karma degenerates into fatalism, it really gives hope and courage, for if my suffering is of my own making then I can through my present actions build a heaven in future. Says Swami Vivekananda:

`Therefore, blame none for your own faults, stand upon your own feet, and take the whole responsibility upon yourselves. Say, `This misery that I am suffering is of my own doing, and that very thing proves that it will have to be undone by me alone.' That which I created, I can demolish; that which is created by some one else I shall never be able to destroy. Therefore, stand up, be bold, be strong."

For those who do not have faith in God this philosophy of life is very suitable. The aspirant who treads the path of knowledge cultivates tranquillity and equanimity in the midst of trials and tribulations. The last verses of the second chapter of the Bhagavad Gita enumerates the virtues of equanimity. The jnani considers this world an illusion, the reality being Brahman. Hence this life is a mere passing phase to be lived peacefully and undisturbed. We find in the life of Swami Turiyananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna this attitude fully illustrated. So too in the life of Sri Ramana Maharshi and others.

We can be helped by the way of devotion. A devotee believes firmly that all happens by the will of God. He accepts (or ought to accept) joyfully both pleasure and pain as the grace of God. If God is allowing him to suffer then it must be good. Perhaps it is to purify him and make him fit to attain a higher state of life. The devotee does not blame God. On the contrary it gives him joy to suffer. Many Christian saints joyfully meditated on the Passion of Jesus and voluntarily embraced His Cross in the form of self-affliction,

torture and martyrdom. We find all over the world people who practised super-human austerities.

We said earlier that according to Vedanta suffering stems from three sources. Then there is a fourth source from which only a devotee suffers. This suffering is not due to past Karma. Paradoxical though it may seem, the source is God Himself. When God is pleased with a devotee and wants to bestow His grace He sends a special type of suffering to uplift the devotee. There is a verse where Lord Vishnu says to Brahma, the creator: "O Brahma! Whomever I really wish to bless, I first take away his wealth. For wealth makes a man proud and arrogant, as a result of which he is led to insult the world and myself." (Bhagavatam 8.22.24) It is difficult to understand this play of God. One usually expects God to reduce the suffering, especially of His devotees, and not to create more! A true devotee surrenders himself fully to God. Like Job, whatever happens to him is accepted as `prasada' i.e., a gift from God.

Once a disciple asked Holy Mother: `If there is a God, why is there so much misery in this world? Does He not see? Or hasn't He the power to remove these evils?"

Holy Mother replied: `The creation itself is full of grief. How can one understand joy if there is no sorrow? People complain about their griefs and sorrows and how they pray to God but find no relief from pain. But grief itself is a gift from God. It is the symbol of His compassion. ... Tell me, who is there in the world who has not had to bear sorrow?

Vrinda once said to Krishna, `Who said you are merciful? As Rama you filled Sita's life with sorrow; as Krishna you fill Radha's life with sorrow. In Kamsa's prison your parents weep for you night and day. Yet we call upon you, because he who takes your Name has no fear of death."

A devotee has unshakable faith that God has accepted his responsibility and He knows

what is good for him, and will lead him in the shortest possible route to His Feet. Often the shorter route might be rough. But never mind, God will give him the needed strength and courage. In the end the devotee finds himself with God.

Lastly there is the way of a knower of God for whom this world is nothing but God's joyous sport. Realising full well that God only has become this world the sage lives out his life fully participating in the Lila (the game). Sri Ramakrishna used to call this the state of a Vijnani.

Swami Vivekananda once met a wandering monk who appeared to be mad. Street urchins were pelting him with stones. Chasing away the boys, the Swami while washing the monk asked him why he did not drive the boys away. 'Thus plays the Father', replied the monk all the while laughing uproariously.

Blessed are the souls upon whom God bestows the gift of misery. It is a sure sign of His grace.

A Visit to Russia's Northernmost Monasteries

John Phillips

As one of a group of pilgrims, I recently visited two monasteries in the far north of Russia.

The first of these monasteries is located on some islands about four hours sea journey from Kem, on the shores of the White Sea. These islands are called the Solovetski archipelago. The Solovetski monastery is located on one of these islands. During the

winter months it is isolated amid the frozen waters of the surrounding sea and is thus a perfect location for pursuing the monastic ideal of withdrawal from the world.

The monastery was founded in the first half of the 15th century by the monks St. Zosimas, St. Sabbatius and St. Herman. In the course of the following century the monastery became, under the abbot St. Phillip, one of the best-known monasteries in the Muscovite kingdom.

With the church reforms of Peter the Great in the seventeenth century the Solovetski monastery found itself in opposition, but nevertheless the brotherhood were able to live exemplary spiritual lives in the peaceful island surroundings.

By the beginning of the 20th century the monastery possessed 6 hermitages, 3 monastic retreats, 19 churches and 30 chapels, schools and many other facilities. It received and fed up to 20,000 pilgrims a year.

Then in 1920, after the Russian revolution, the Soviet authorities closed the monastery and organised a special prison camp there, to which priests in particular were sent. The conditions were so harsh, the food so scarce, that to be sent there was equivalent to a death sentence. Not content with starving the prisoners to death, the prison guards devised refined tortures to hasten their deaths. As the Patriarch has described it, "Many new martyrs and witnesses to their faith, so many that the exact number is not yet known, were confined here and put to death. The very ground in Solovetski is red with blood and tears."

In August 2001 the Patriarch once again consecrated the monastery cathedral, and monastic life has now begun there again. Many volunteers are working to reconstruct the buildings and refurbish the churches. A steady flow of pilgrims has once again begun to

make the four-hour voyage by ferry from the mainland to visit this holy monastery.

After leaving the Solevetski archipelago, we proceeded to Lake Ladoga to visit the second monastery on Valaam islands. The Valaam archipelago is located in the midst of Lake Ladoga in the Karelian Republic of the Russian Federation, to the Northeast of St. Petersburg. Lake Ladoga is an immense stretch of water. The archipelago is about thirty miles from the shore.

Tradition has it that the monastery was founded in the twelfth century by St. Sergius and St Herman. In subsequent centuries wars between Sweden and Russia brought devastation to that part of Karelia and the monks were sometimes forced to flee. In the 18th century monastic life revived, and the rebuilding of Valaam monastery began in 1715. Its proximity to the Russian capital, St. Petersburg, helped the monastery to develop, as it was in a position to gain support from the court of the Tsar and from State authorities. Monastic life has never been able to flourish without spiritual growth, and it was with the appointment of Abbot Nazary in 1781 that a long period of inner building and stabilisation began in Valaam. Abbot Nazary established in Valaam the tradition of hesychastic prayer as well as the strict cenobitic style of monastic life, which lays strong emphasis on community living.

Valaam became officially a part of Finland when Karelia was joined to the rest of Finland in 1812. During the nineteenth century monastic life flourished throughout Russia. Valaam monastery was one of the communities that expanded most. It became a great centre of pilgrimage. In 1840, for instance, it had more than 8,000 visitors, including 4,612 pilgrims and 3,862 beggars.

The war between Finland and Russia, known as the Winter War, in 1940 led to the evacuation of the monastery and the long hard journey began to Kannonkoski in central

Finland. As soon as possible a search was begun for a new location, and in June 1940 the leaders of the monastery acquired land at Heinšvesi and the whole brotherhood was able to move to its new location in the autumn of 1940. At this new location a monastery was founded and called New Valaam (Uusi Valamo in Finnish).

When Lake Ladoga came into Finnish hands again during the second phase of the war in 1941-1944, the brotherhood did not move back to the old Valaam monastery. Only a few monks went there to look after the monastery buildings and make the necessary repairs after the damage done in the war. During the war the buildings had been bombed several times. Among the things that were removed from the monastery was a miraculous icon. In 1992 a copy of this missing icon was solemnly brought from St. Petersburg to Valaam for installation in the monastery cathedral.

Today work is continuing on the rebuilding and renovation of the damaged and neglected monastery buildings. Monks can be seen going about their duties and there is once again a flow of pilgrims visiting the holy shrines. An atmosphere of peace and spirituality once more envelopes this island retreat.

To visit these monasteries, our party of pilgrims flew first from London-Heathrow to Helsinki in Finland. From there we had a very long drive by minibus to the New Valaam monastery in Heinšvesi. The monastery, which is now entirely Finnish, supports itself by, among other things, running a Lay Academy where iconography, theology and environmental studies are taught. After our stay there, we proceeded by minibus to the Russian frontier, driving on to Kalevala, famous for its association with the Finnish national epic. On the next day we reached Kem on the White Sea coast. The journey from there to Solovetski was by boat, fortunately on a very calm sea. We reached the islands in the evening, to be greeted by a wonderful view of the fortress, with its walls six yards thick and thirty feet high -- a formidable prison for the unfortunate victims of

Soviet rule. I could not help being reminded of Solzhenitsyn's "Gulag Archipelago", which took its name from the Solovetski archipelago. After our stay on the islands, we returned to Kem and then proceeded by minibus down through Karelia, visiting churches and monasteries on the way, until we eventually arrived in Sortavala, from where we sent off by boat on Lake Ladoga for the Old Valaam monastery. The final stage of the pilgrimage was to go on to St Petersburg and from there back to Helsinki and home.

The life of the monks in these northern monasteries is particularly hard. During the winter months the temperature falls to minus 40 degrees Centigrade, the lakes and even the sea are frozen -- the monasteries become almost inaccessible. No wonder therefore that there is no piped water supply. How could normal plumbing resist such temperatures, given that there is no central heating? Living conditions are also of the simplest. I was a little taken aback, when, as a guest in one monastery, I was shown to my sleeping-place -- a narrow plank bed without a mattress.

The monks have very simple food. Even as guests, we were given only a small piece of bread and a cup of tea (without milk or sugar) for breakfast. The monks get no better, you can be sure. Many of the monks live away from the main monastery buildings, in what are called sketes or hermitages. The All Saints Skete on Valaam Island, for instance, is well known for its strict regime. Women are allowed to go there only once a year, for the feast of the patron saint. Another skete is located on a separate island, forming part of the Valaam archipelago. There the monks do not drink milk and do not eat fish, although fish are plentiful in the surrounding lake. Women are not allowed on the island. This skete is famous for being the hermitage where the Elder Ioann was abbot, who later migrated to Finland to found the New Valaam monastery there.

The Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, along with the Russian Government, have acknowledged the importance of these northern monasteries for the spiritual life of the

whole of Russia. In August 2001 the Patriarch for the third time visited the Solovetski monastery and carried out the re-consecration of the St Philip Church. Another visitor to the Solovetski monastery was the President of the Russian Federation, V.V. Putin. In a speech on 20 August 2001 he spoke of the role adopted by Russia in assuming the title of `Holy Russia". He said that in the very assumption of this title Russia voluntarily took upon itself the role of custodian of true Christian values. The rebirth of these formerly abandoned monasteries is a witness to Russia's continuing commitment of the maintenance of those values.

The most encouraging sign of this is the ever increasing number of young men, who feel drawn to join these monasteries, where all that awaits them on a physical level is hard work and harsh conditions. They are prepared to endure these for the sake of their spiritual awakening and the re-awakening of Russian spirituality after seventy barren years of Communist rule.

These monasteries are located in beautiful surroundings. The primordial view of nature, the beauty of the locations and the peace and quiet of the surroundings have always attracted writers, artists and composers. Among those visiting Valaam in times past were the painters Shishkin, Kuindzhi, Gine and Jogin; the Finnish scientist and poet Elias Lennrott; the poets Tyuchev and Apuchtin; and the writers Muravyev, Nemirovich-Danchenko, Leskov, Shmelev and Zaitsev. Besides these intellectuals there have been a large number of ordinary pilgrims. As a result of this, the monasteries have provided guesthouses to accommodate visitors. It must also have created an enormous amount of extra work for monks and volunteer workers.

In recent times the flow of pilgrims has grown, so that now there are even cruises on Lake Ladoga, visiting the various monasteries and hermitages. Although the devotional, religious aspect is well provided for, this great influx of visitors is beginning to become

more like tourism. In this connection museums have been established at the Solovetski and New Valaam monasteries. Other facilities are libraries and, in the case of New Valaam, a "summer shop", where souvenirs may be bought. It is a far cry from the days of the Russian pilgrim, proceeding on foot and carrying a bag of rusks to provide minimum sustenance.

The monasteries are, however, not just staging posts for pilgrims. They also provide work for the local population, not only in the maintenance and running of the buildings and services, but also in the provision of agricultural land. Local peasants can work these monastery lands and sell the produce on a co-operative basis. In this way the monasteries form part of the country's agricultural industry. With the end of soviet rule, many collective farmers have gone over to working these lands as they find this work more profitable than seeking to own their own plots of agricultural land. The main task of the monasteries nevertheless remains that of providing spiritual support in the gradual revival of Russian religious life.

The Limitations of Mental Models

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The ability to form mental models is perhaps a defining milestone in the development of human consciousness, although it is not an exclusive human trait; it has also been demonstrated in other higher primates as well. It's my conclusion that mental models help form worldviews, and thereby govern what people believe and how they should lead their lives. However, I also believe that mental models are limited -- and the

impact of those limitations, if not recognized, can lead to narrow and erroneous worldviews.

But before embarking further, let's define some terms:

A mental model is the ability to picture situations in the mind and predict outcomes. I saw a graphic demonstration of this in an experiment to show exactly when, in normal human development, this ability arises. Young children under age 4 are shown a scale model of a room with furniture. They are shown a miniature Coca cola can, and the researcher "hides" it in a miniature cupboard. The child watches carefully, and seems to understand the game. The child is then taken into the real room, and is asked to find the real can of Coca cola, which has been hidden in the cupboard. The child looks everywhere, under cushions, behind chairs, and eventually finds it in the cupboard. A 7-year-old, equipped with a mental model of the room, will look in the cupboard first -- so will a mature chimpanzee. Mental models are the mind's way of analogizing the world, but a word of caution here, it is said that an analogy is like a leaky bucket: it can carry water, but only so far.

A worldview has been defined as the overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world or a collection of beliefs about life and the universe held by an individual or a group. Most people acquire their worldview through their formative environment. A person's family or community will usually instill it in them as a part of growing up. A few people will form their own independent worldview through analyzing their personal experiences.

In a biography of Neils Bohr, one of the founders of quantum physics, I was surprised to learn that he had a great deal of difficulty accepting the implications of his own discoveries, specifically the wave-particle dual nature of matter. He struggled for nearly

twenty years trying to find a satisfactory mental model that would help him fully understand and accept it. He finally came to acknowledge that it was just true and that there was a fundamental reason why he could never find an appropriate mental model: reality on the Newtonian physics level does not provide us with any experience of quantum reality.

The biggest conceptual obstacle that Bohr had to overcome was that Newtonian physics works so well in explaining how the observable universe operates. It seemed unlikely to him that it would have to be abandoned at the quantum level. But, higher truth is built upon lower truth. Aristotelian worldview was replaced by Newtonian physics, which was then replaced by Quantum physics. Aristotle and Newton weren't wrong, but they only carried truth to a certain level.

Our mental models can only be formed by the experiences gathered on the plane of existence that our minds and bodies inhabit. Consider a mathematical point: we have difficulty thinking about a thing having no size, yet it exists. Or try to think of the universe in total; it must be very large, but what is outside of it? Our experiences in day-to-day life do not provide us with the proper tools to form a competent mental model of certain things that are beyond what we perceived from birth through our senses. Aldous Huxley put it this way, "Man is an intelligence, not served by, but in servitude to his organs". Shakespeare said it more succinctly in Henry IV, Part One, "Thought is the slave of life."

Materialistic scientists (those who believe only in the observable universe) and dogmatic religious fundamentalists both have a common failing in that their mental models work so well to explain and support their worldviews that they extend the interpretations to extremes that are beyond reasonable limits. They carry the leaky bucket long after the

water has completely run out.

The dogmatically religious typically come to believe that since their faith is rewarded and confirmed by their subjective experiences, their way must be the one true path for all people. If they are literal fundamentalists, they will ignore and even resent all evidence that seems to contradict their dogmatic beliefs. Their worldview will often lead them to see science as the enemy of religion. The purely materialist scientist will find such comfort in the predictive power of the scientific method and its great discoveries that he will believe that all questions about the universe and its origin can be explained by his worldview.

But, if we only rely on our normal senses, mental capacity, experiences, and beliefs, what can we logically make of questions like, "Since the universe exists, who or what created it?" To a mystic, the question does not arise because God is defined as the Uncaused Cause, but on a Newtonian level, it's just the final question in a string of causes and effects going back to the moment before the Big Bang.

It is an understandable failure of all humans that we cannot form a competent mental model for God. Nothing we experience in normal consciousness provides information about what mystics call the transcendental state. It is beyond the material plane of existence, the senses, and the mind. We are told that it is ineffable, and yet we hear from mystics of every age, from every religion, the analogies they use to describe it. Here is but one example from Hinduism (which names that part of God who dwells in the body Atman; Christians call it the Soul; and the name used for God is Brahman):

Beyond the senses is the mind, beyond the mind is the intellect.

Higher than the intellect is Atman. Higher than Atman is Brahman.

Katha Upanishad 2.3.7-8

Like the levels of physics -- going from Aristotelian to Newton to Quantum -- the mystics report their rise in consciousness from the material senses, to the human mind, to the individual Soul, and finally to the ultimate source. And what analogies do the mystics give us of the actual experience of the highest level of reality? Here is one report, again from Hinduism:

As rivers flow into the sea, and in so doing lose name and form, so even the wise man freed from name and form, attains the Supreme Being, the Self-luminous, the Infinite. He who knows Brahman becomes Brahman.

Mundaka Upanishad 3.2.8-9

Lacking the foundation for a proper mental model for God, some people may scoff at all this as just unfounded speculation or self-deception. However, as richly documented in Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*, the fact that by so many different paths, a person can arrive at the same mystical state should at least give some credence to the idea of a universal and absolute transcendental experience. Plus, there is a unique advantage of mysticism over theoretical quantum physics or cosmology (or dogmatic religion for that matter) -- mystics do not have to settle for mere acceptance of beliefs or theories. They insist that each of us can experience it for ourselves -- verify the truth of it through personal experience. The controlled experiment is going on everyday, here and now, all over the world.

Religion and Life (continued)

Swami Bhuteshananda

Are Atman and Brahman one and the same?

When you say that the atmanama escaped from the cage of the body, you mean something about the Reality. That refers to the Atman. Brahman, again, is ever-existent and omnipresent. He or It cannot go anywhere. For He or It alone exists. Now, He who pervades your true 'I' is your Atman, your mind, and everything. That which is saying 'I', 'I' is in truth the Atman.

They say that it is the jivatma or the limited soul that says 'I', 'I'. Can we call that also Brahman?

The thing-in-itself is not something different. It is all the same. When jivatma becomes pure, it becomes paramatman. That paramatman is Brahman.

Maharaj, I have a question. If the knowledge of Brahman is everyone's right, cannot we women have that?

Have women come flowing along with the tide-water? I have heard that the law has allowed the right to property to women also. Brahma-jnana or the knowledge of Brahman is everyone's right. This is your personal property from birth to birth.

Are Brahman and Sakti one and the same?

By 'Brahman' Vedanta means the formless (nirakara) and without attributes (nirguna). 'Sakti', on the other hand, is that through which everything is controlled.

What is Brahman?

`Brahman' means all-pervading. All-pervasiveness implies self-revealed. Brahman has no form. It is the ultimate Reality. The universe has been superimposed (adhyasa) on Brahman. To the knower of Brahman, all that he sees is Brahman itself. Who is a brahmin? He who knows Brahman is a brahmin. However, he who walks along the path of knowing Brahman is also a brahmin. Again, the son of a brahmin is a brahmin.

Who controls human beings?

Who else but the Lord Himself? The fruits of actions (karma-phala) are inert, how can they control us? Who gives the fruits of your actions when you die? It is the Lord Himself. He is the Controller and Ruler.

We have innumerable objects of enjoyment all around us. Is this the reason for our running after them?

Enjoyment does not need objects. It is not that the mind is becoming restless because there is enjoyment. Samskaras are there in the mind and they remind about pleasures. A beggar, who does not have anything at all, also dreams of numerous pleasures.

What is mahat?

Mahat is the gross material (upadana) of creation. Akasa and prana are the subtle elements (tattvas). But know that akasa too is Brahman, prana too is Brahman, and

mahat too is Brahman.

Maharaj, today is Sri Sankara's birth anniversary (pancami). What shall we learn from his life?

The attainment of brahmajnana, the knowledge of Brahman! God Himself is the jagadguru. Why then is Sri Sankaracarya called jagadguru? This is because Sri Sankaracarya was an incarnation of God.

Why is Sankaracarya referred to as a crypto-Buddhist?

Sri Sankaracarya was a monist and not a mayavadin -- a propounder of the theory of illusion. Critics of Sankara refer to him as a mayavadin. And it is these people who call him a crypto-Buddhist or pracchanna bauddha. The followers of Sankara do not refer to him thus. Like the Buddhists, Sankara also believed in the nirguna aspect of Reality. Sankara was the propounder of the reality of Brahman, he was a brahma-vadin. Brahman is not air, not space, not gross, not subtle, not long, not short, not shadow, not smell -- all these are the ways of explaining Brahman.

We read in the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad [3.8.8.]: 'Brahman is neither gross nor minute, neither short nor long, neither red colour nor oiliness, neither shadow nor darkness, neither air nor ether, neither savour nor odour. It is unattached, and without eyes, ears, voice or mind. It is non-luminous, without the vital force or mouth. It is without inside or outside. It is not a measure. It does not eat anything.'

This is the explanation of Brahman. But this conforms with the Buddhist nihilism. The

Buddhist nirvana and Hindu brahma-svarupata are almost similar. There is no duality anywhere in both. So critics call Sankara a crypto-Buddhist.

Sankara says that duality melts in supreme Reality, while the Buddhist approach is that everything gets eliminated (laya). Sankara, however, does not speak of the elimination of everything; he only speaks of the elimination of duality. That is, he speaks only of pure knowledge -- the knowledge of non-duality. He says everything gets merged in That through which we have knowledge. The Buddhists on the other hand say that all knowledge is annihilated.

Though Sankara was the propounder of non-duality, why did he retain the ego of knowledge?

He did so in order to teach us. Sankara says [cf. Carpata-panjarika-stotram]: 'People visit Ganga-Sagar, perform various rituals and good deeds like almsgiving. Such things may give everything. But unless one has knowledge, one can never be liberated.' Sankara also gives an illustration. Both sand and the sesame seed are Brahman. But you do not get oil by pressing sand -- you will have to press the sesame seed. When we are in the relative plane, we have accepted this duality and difference. Please keep this in mind.

Swami Vivekananda has spoken about Sankara's brain. What does he mean?

By 'Sankara's brain' is meant the philosopher's brain. He was the propounder of such a grand and unique philosophy. He was the establisher of the theory of Brahman, the adorer of non-duality. Sankara says that by depending on the body, there is only misery.

Hold on, therefore, to the Self.

Sankaracarya has not given any teaching for women. Were women low in his estimation?

How much Sankara respected and revered his mother. His mother was a woman!

Maharaj, if I consider myself to be the eternally pure, immortal, and ever-blissful Self (nitya-suddha-mukta-atma) can I have the knowledge of Brahman?

Oh yes, you can! If you can think of yourself as nitya-suddha-mukta-atma you can certainly attain the knowledge of Brahman. Whatever you wish, you can get.

Maharaj, today is the sacred Aksaya Trtiya day. There are many trtiyas; but why is this one aksaya?

This is because, they say if you perform some meritorious act on this trtiya day, that is, the third day of the month of Vaisakha, the fruit of that act will become everlasting. The scriptures ordain that the fruit of good deeds done on this day are all stored up.

What is svadharma?

A householder's svadharma or natural and customary duty is the garhasthya dharma, the duties of the householder ordained by scriptures. For a monk, however, holding firmly to the vow of renunciation is the duty or svadharma. That is, in whatever station of life you may be, you should follow the rules of that particular way of life strictly; this is the

following of one's dharma.

What is dvaita or dualism?

To accept philosophically Isvara and the universe as real is dualism.

Are Visistadvaitins (qualified dualists) devotees?

Of course! They are most certainly devotees. And they are also jnani-bhaktas. That is, since they have a philosophy (vada), they think and discuss; so they are also jnanis.

What is Samkhya?

Sam, that is, 'perfectly'; khya, that is, 'to know', to know the Reality or Truth perfectly. According to the followers of Sankhya, the tattva or reality or philosophy is called samkhya.

What are the catur-vimsati tattvas?

By catur-vimsati tattvas the twenty-four cosmic principles are meant. According to the Sankhya philosophy, the materials of creation are meant. In the Tattva-samasa [1-3], it is said Mahat, buddhi, ahamkara and the five tanmatras -- these are the eight prakrtis. The five organs of action (karmendriyas), the five sense organs (jnanendriyas), the five elements (mahabhutas), the mind, and the eight prakrtis go to form the 24 cosmic principles or catur-vimsati tattvas. Tattva means the fundamental elements of the

universe.

Maharaj, what is adhyasa?

To superimpose the qualities or dharmas of one thing on another is called adhyasa. Or to see something which is not there is called adhyasa. It is like seeing a piece of rope and saying that there is a snake. But there is no snake there. Though there is no snake, I am seeing the snake. This is adhyasa.

We hear so much about superimposing a snake on the rope. But we confuse a rope for a snake only because there is a snake. Is it not?

You see, there is no snake at all where you confuse rope for snake. Even though you see a rope as a snake, there is no snake there -- let there be a thousand snakes elsewhere. The universe has no existence though we see it as the universe.

If what we are seeing is not the universe, what is it then?

Brahman! There is a rope, and you are superimposing a snake upon it. Similarly you are superimposing the universe on Brahman.

What is susupti?

When the mind stops functioning naturally, it is called the state of susupti. They say the mind is without function in that state.

Maharaj, what is the Veda?

Veda is the ocean of eternal knowledge.

What do the Vedas teach?

The Vedas primarily teach you about your true nature. You can see a conglomeration of different kinds of thoughts in the Vedas. But the uniqueness of Vedic thought is this: it tells us that the Reality is one and It is manifesting as the universe and jivas. So Brahman resides within every jiva or individual soul as that fundamental Reality. This is the speciality of the Vedas. The Vedas also contain numerous rituals and sacrifices; these are useful to sadhakas at different stages of their evolution. In fact, you will find everything -- dharma, artha, kama and moksa ideals -- in the Vedas. Whatever suits your temperament, that you can accept and follow.

In the Vedas there is mention of many gods and goddesses. Again, it is said there: 'Ekam sat, vipra bahudha vadanti, Truth is one, sages call it by different names.' In the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad there is a remarkable statement. How many gods are there? 'Thirty-three thousand three hundred and thirty-three.' Again, how many gods are there? Three thousand three hundred and thirty-three.' In this way, it comes to one alone.

Maharaj, is the Gita also a Veda?

No, it is not. God incarnated and broadcast the eternal Vedic truths through the Gita. These truths are called smrti and not Veda.

Is the idea of smarana, manana, and nididhyasana found in the Vedas?

Oh yes, it is! The Self is 'to be heard about, thought about, and meditated upon'. You must hear about the Atman, think and cogitate about it, and then contemplate on it.

In the Gita, Bhagavan Sri Krishna says that he has created everything through his maya. Is such an idea there in the Vedas too?

Yes, it is. `Indra appears to have numerous forms owing to maya'[Rg Veda, 6.47.18]. In the Vedas, it is said: `I am Manu, I am Surya,' and so on. Much of the Vedas is lost. We must check to see if any statement is against the Vedas.

Sri Krishna says that he makes every soul perform action. If so, why is each individual different from the other?

He may be making each one of us act in a different way. It is all his sport. God is like a little child; as Sri Ramakrishna says, he does not give to one even though the latter begs, but gives to one who does not want it. He is beyond all rules; he is not bound by any condition. (to be continued)

